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CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY BOOKSHOP  
TRAVEL SHORT STORY AWARD

# South Asia by Crutch

*Anne Fitzpatrick*

---

I stood next to my backpack on the trolley and realised I was stuck. Looking at things positively, *I had* made it to my target destination; the forecourt of the Dhaka International Airport. And *I was* on the less stressful side of the security fences, judging from the hopeful shouts of the taxi and rickshaw drivers behind the armed guards. I was also relieved to be avoiding the requests and stretched-out palms of the tired looking children hanging onto the bars of the gates. No wonder they looked tired; it was just after midnight in Bangladesh and no matter how destitute a kid is, they still need their sleep.

However, right side of the fence and target destination achievement aside, I was still stuck. With my leg in a cast, crutches in hand, and heavy backpack at foot, I wasn't going anywhere. The staff at the airport had been so horrified to see me get myself off the plane unaided, they had chased me down the corridor with a wheelchair, ordered me in it, and rushed me through the diplomatic lane of immigration and outside so fast I had no chance to look for a public phone. Not that it would have done me much good, since I had no local currency.

Not only Taka-less, I was mobility-less, and after a decreasingly optimistic 30 minute wait, seemingly friend-less. At least this last one can usually be remedied. I inched over to a Bengali girl my age using a complex pattern of nudging my trolley with my shoulder then crutching myself forward at a painstakingly slow pace. This girl had been rushing around with a sign asking for a Sarah Riese as long as I had been waiting for my friend to arrive and pick me up. In that time I had worked up a reasonable amount of hope that maybe I was actually Sarah and she was really my friend.

Neither of us were, but she listened to my predicament and led me (and Sarah who had miraculously appeared) through the persistent drivers and yawning young beggars to a waiting car. Twenty minutes later I was delivered safely to the front door of my embarrassed friend who has a different view than me when it comes to which day midnight belongs to.

It was a challenging few weeks' stay in the country's capital for me and my broken ankle. I developed the art of hopping into cycle rickshaws. I worked up a fine sweat navigating the crowded streets lined with inconsistent footpaths, piles of rubbish and small businesses selling fruit or snacks. I got all sorts of questions and curious looks from Bangladeshis on the street. In a country where young women out by themselves are rare and people with disabilities aren't really seen outside their homes (unless the street *is* their home) I was quite the novelty. I have a feeling that the general consensus was that I must have terribly irresponsible parents to be letting me out, not just to walk the streets, but walk the streets in a foreign country with a broken ankle.

My fellow crutch-mates who were living on the street were generally delighted to see me. They would ignore whoever I was with and hobble over to me with either a big grin or a pitiful grimace depending on the angle they were going to take with me. We would go through the motions; them indicating in broken English or gestures that "You have problem, I have problem, please help me". You can't really argue with that logic. If I break my leg, I can still jet off and go sightseeing on the other side of the world. Their infirmity probably meant they couldn't work and earn money for their family anymore, carrying them down the road of poverty and begging. Fair enough. The times I had no change were really horrible. Sitting in the open back of an auto rickshaw, I had the choice to either stare straight ahead trying to block out the person pleading next to me and feel grossly inhumane, or maintain eye contact and regretfully shake my head, shrug and feel grossly human.

Outside the country's capital, the attention was quite different. If we stopped for any period of time in the street, an audience would soon congregate. The cricket game would stop and the lads would troop over. Shopkeepers would leave their stalls, rickshaw cyclists would pedal over and join the ring around me. Children on the way home from school would drop their school bags and we would all solemnly watch each other until the time came for me to move on.

Leaving Bangladesh for India I was a lot more prepared at the airport compared to my arrival. I'd consolidated my belongings into one manageable bag which I could slowly hoist onto my shoulders while balancing between my crutches. With slow but steady progression I could slide myself along the shiny airport floor towards the check-in desk. In the five minutes it took to cover the few dozen metres, I could feel the tingling of my travel bug

awakening inside. My travel bug stretches its wings and flexes its muscles when we are travelling under our own steam. For me, the thrill of travel is when I am relying solely on myself. I love the feeling of self sufficiency; that knowledge that I will have to negotiate whatever challenges arise: getting directions, communicating, figuring out the local way of eating, finding the right bus, organising somewhere to stay, packing my bag and starting it all again. Somehow in Dhaka Airport, the fact that I could carry my own bag gave me back that sense of independence that I had lost that moment in the judo class in Japan when my foot bent back in a way it shouldn't and my tibia snapped with an audible crack.

The down side of my love of self sufficiency is an aversion to accepting help. I have disproportionate feelings of guilt when people take the time or trouble to assist me, which gets magnified when I'm in a situation where my plane ticket to the country cost more than the annual wage of the person helping me.

Knowing that these few hours of bag-toting self sufficiency may be my last for a long time, I presented myself to the customs officer to get my passport checked and stamped. The elderly official paid my documents minimal notice and focused his attention on my leg. After a few concerned questions about how the break happened, he informed me that he and his family would pray for me, and pushed my passport back over the counter.

Having friends in Tamil Nadu, Southern India, meant that the chances of looking after myself were non-existent. Hospitality is something Tamils do terrifyingly well, even when broken bones aren't involved. A home awaited me with the family of a friend in the suburbs of Chennai. My arrival, late at night, was met by the matriarch of the family, a round, smiling woman anxious to give me some hot milk. I sat sipping it, alternating between smiling back at Auntie and watching the row of sleeping family members lined up on the straw mat on the living room floor. With the special privileges that come with broken bones I was given a fold-out cot in a small room off to the side to fall into, wondering how my time with this family would pan out and how I would handle accepting two weeks of help, kindness and dependency.

We found our routine soon enough. I would get up around 7 o'clock; hours after Auntie had started the day's chores, been for a walk with Uncle and seen her granddaughter onto the school bus. I would sit on a stool in the kitchen and watch as she cooked for the day; splitting and grating coconuts, chopping

strange-looking vegetables, choosing spices from a huge platter of colourful powders, generously adding oil to her son's lunch of rice and fried plantain, shaking her head sadly as she prepared her husband's diabetes-friendly oil-less, salt-less, sugar-less food. She plied me with samples of every new dish which was a fine way to pass the time, waiting for her son, daughter, husband and little grandson to take their turn in the bathroom next door.

Nibbling my pre-breakfast snacks I tried to identify all the processes taking place in that noisy, wet room. There was much running of water the entire time, sometimes from the small electric water heater mounted near the ceiling but mostly from the cold tap into buckets. There was the disturbing clearing of phlegm from the throat, a South Asian skill that has always made me cringe. The flushing of toilets was there. This family was rather spoiled for choice, having both the standard Indian squat toilet and to my ankle's absolute relief, a western sit down one as well. There were pauses when water wasn't being thrown around the room, when the jar of tongue scrapers and tooth brushes was probably been used, and finally, after one last bucket of water had been tipped over the floor, the family member would appear, shining, combed and squeaky clean. All except Ajay, the littlest and most indulged member of the household. He would exit stark naked, and run around the house until he had been coerced into his school uniform and had his breakfast firmly pushed into his resisting mouth by his mother's right hand.

While I was too old to be fed like Ajay, I had a similar battle on my hands. Every meal time I made my way through a small mountain of delectable south Indian cuisine while spouting compliments to beaming Auntie. As soon as I could almost see the bottom of my plate, she would be reaching to give me some more rice or sambar curry or omelette or dosa pancake. With my limited Tamil I would resist, saying "Poodum! Poodum!". "Enough! I've had enough!" and spread my palm out above my plate to block off the incoming spoon. Auntie had a few tactics at this juncture; sometimes she would dodge my hand and land the second or third or fourth helping on the plate anyway. If she was particularly passionate about a certain dish she would use her free hand to hold me forcibly at the table while she spooned me another serving. She occasionally weakened my resolve by giving me a look of such sadness that I would reach for the bowl of curry myself and meekly take the extra spoonful. If all else failed she would bring out her favourite new English phrase: "Just a taste?" However she managed it, that last serving would

be the precipitating factor in my need to join in on the household's mid-afternoon nap.

On my first day in the family I'd woken from my nap in dire need of some exercise to deal with the pile of food I'd consumed at lunch (and breakfast, and before breakfast and morning tea). I told Auntie that I would take myself downstairs to the street to go up and down the road with my crutches for some fresh air. A worried look came over Auntie's face and she motioned for me to sit in a nearby chair and wait. She re-emerged changed into her sari and sneakers ready to escort me on my walk.

By this stage of my injury I had developed some quite impressive upper body strength, but generally kept my crutch-based exercise to just a few hundred metres. Auntie had other ideas though and led me on a tour of the entire neighbourhood. We dodged motorcycles, greeted neighbours as we raced past, checked out the local shanty town, went around the lumps covered with sheets that had people sleeping under them, while I willed my arms to keep moving. I wrangled a few stops under the pretence of rearranging the shawl that needs to be strategically placed to float in front of one's chest for modesty and virtue. It also does a really good job of mopping up the litres of sweat that pour off your face when you're going on a marathon hike through muggy Indian streets.

I made it back to the apartment block, up the three flights of stairs, into a chair and vowed to never again ask for a walk. I didn't need to, as every afternoon Auntie would be waiting for me at 4 o'clock with her sari and walking shoes on, ready for another march around the suburb.

The evenings were much less demanding on my biceps as I spent them chatting with 11 year old Sheena over her homework. She attended an English-medium school and regaled me with stories of the nuns who taught her, the pranks her school friends got up to and what she'd learnt in school, the most intriguing of all when she informed me that in Australia we have a lot more gravity than they do in India.

Part-way through my stay I had an appointment at the local hospital for my leg. Uncle was my escort for the day and we had use of the family motorbike, or 'two-wheeler' to get us there. In India, the way people manage in traffic is quite amazing. You see bicycles loaded with a family of six and a few dozen chickens tied by their ankles to get to market. You see scooters with a mum on the back using both hands to nurse her baby as she balances behind her

husband. The movement of traffic has no rules to the Australian observer, spoilt by traffic lights and white lines back home. Instead it all flows, with the cars and the three-wheeled auto rickshaws and the bicycles and the hand carts all ringing their bells and dodging each other in a terrifying yet efficient synergy.

The first challenge was getting on the motorbike. I would have felt safest straddling the back and clinging onto Uncle's waist for dear life, but that's not how dignified people of the opposite sex travel in the subcontinent. A dignified young lady will sit side-saddle on the back of the two-wheeler with at least 20 centimetres between her and her dignified chaperone at the front. And in my case, balancing her dignified crutches over the handlebars and juggling a shoulder bag full of x-rays and her dignified chest-covering shawl as well. I could almost manage this when we were stationary, but once Uncle had revved the engine to life and pulled away from the kerb, I realised I may not be able to coordinate it all for very long. To make matters worse, comments from the front indicated that Uncle's balance was also a bit out, due to the fat Australian on the back who probably weighed double anyone else he had carried before. I think the blame can only lie with Auntie who had bulked me up with her over-zealous feeding regime and the daily walks that had added to my bicep muscle mass.

I felt slightly more relaxed the closer we got to the hospital, mainly because I knew that the closer we were, the faster medical attention would be able to reach me if I flew off the back of the bike going around a corner.

We eventually arrived, one of us rather ashen and shaky and the other wondering if his two-wheeler would ever be the same again. Inside the hospital it was bustling with patients and their families, orderlies and nurses rushing around and queuing up in a system as chaotic as the road outside. There was method to it though, and Uncle solemnly guided me through the lines and forms and various fees I had to pay. He escorted me to the x-rays and into the consultation I had with the doctor. I was informed that the Japanese doctors should have operated on my ankle, the cast they gave me was no good, and instead of having it removed as I expected would happen today, I would need it on for another two weeks. At least.

I nodded and hauled myself to my foot while Uncle smiled and brought his palms together in front of his chest to show his appreciation to the doctor. We made our way home in demoralised silence, the return trip considerably less

frightening. Upon arrival Uncle ushered me into a chair and filled Auntie in on the appointment.

Back when I first arrived in Auntie and Uncle's little home, they sat me down and informed me that I was to think of them as my own mother and father. To not be afraid to ask for anything I need, and to consider myself as family. At the time, I took it as a kind but token gesture. However, a week and a half later, feeling free enough to let my disappointment and frustration show and with Auntie and Uncle fussing around me, they suddenly did feel like family. My need for self sufficiency had vanished and the feeling that I was accumulating some sort of hospitality debt had changed. I could still be just as grateful for the way this family had cared for me, but without the guilt or feeling of indebtedness. They had given me not just a home, food, exercise regime, high speed taxi service and good company. They also gave me the grace to accept what they gave me in the open-hearted spirit it was bestowed.

A few days later the auto-rickshaw arrived downstairs to take me to the next friend who was going to look after me. Before I left the seven of us stood together for an Indian family portrait. Little Ajay was the only one grinning. Those of us with Tamil blood flowing in our veins tend to opt for a solemn pose in photos. Those with Australian blood were just sad to be leaving family.

---

*Anne is a teacher based in Darwin. In the past her travels have been enjoyed by bus through South-East Asia, train across China and bicycle around Australia.*

# Outside

*Kim Aikman*

---

The fan is still. Another power cut. Lizzie lies in bed beneath the clammy sheets, sweat trickling over her skin. It is only five o'clock. Half an hour more in bed and they must both get up. She lets her mind float, imagining another kind of dawn: the cold mornings in Norfolk, pounding on her horse across the frozen, churned earth of the fields. The glare of the white sunlight making silhouettes of the nodding branches and the cloudless sky, so perfect, it is as if a swath of blue paint has been swept above her. Lizzie can even feel the sting of the sharp air as it hits her face, filling her eyes with tears.

The alarm cries out and she is back in India, lying in a hard bed in a cramped apartment with her husband's hot body stirring next to her. The electricity is on – the fan creaks towards its jolting set speed – but the air is still velvety thick. Turning her head to glance at the sleek shoulders of Vikram, she wants to run kisses up the back of his neck, but knows better than to disturb his early morning rituals. He mumbles something like good morning and shuffles across the room and into the bathroom. Lizzie pauses for a moment, flat as a stingray beneath the threadbare sheet, listening to him filling up the wash buckets and splashing water over his hot skin. She must get up and get on. There is so much to do.

\* \* \*

They have been married for a month. It was a simple wedding in a registry office near her parents' house. Vikram was insistent that he did not want a big religious service, knowing that if they were married in India, it would be unavoidable. Lizzie wore a green and gold sari, acquired long ago by her grandmother during a tour of colonial Rajesthan. When they unpacked it from a darkly stained trunk, pungent with the smell of mothballs, all the stories of her grandparents' adventures came stampeding back. She could hardly breathe when she thought about how she, Lizzie, was now going to India. Any worries suddenly seemed ridiculous. That beautiful stretch of shimmering fabric, wound around and around her body, enveloped her with all the exoticism and promise of this strange and wonderful, new life.

\* \* \*

She must get breakfast ready – he will be finished washing soon. Lizzie pads barefoot across the matted floor to the other side of the room, where the kitchen is set out. They live in one modestly sized room that is divided by screens into a bedroom, living area and kitchen. A small tiled room leads off this main space, functioning as both a bathroom and a laundry room. The kitchen is basic, with only a small Calor gas stove: the idea of eating a roast dinner has already become a faintly ridiculous notion.

For breakfast, Lizzie decides to make porridge. She fills a pan with a little purified water and then adds just enough oats to make two small bowls of porridge. She needs to be stricter about her housekeeping allowance. The matches feel damp – the monsoon leaves everything veiled with a residue of moisture. Lizzie manages to light the stove after three attempts and slowly brings the mixture to a simmer. The oats soon lose their solidarity, blurring into a lumpy, anaemic paste. The steam that wafts up over her face feels surprisingly refreshing. Lizzie is determined not to dwell on the breakfasts of her pre-India life: boiled eggs and bread and butter soldiers, milky tea and home made marmalade. She wonders if her life will always be divided in this way: before India and afterwards.

\* \* \*

When they were at university, they had often eaten breakfast in bed. Vikram would sneak out to the kitchen, careful not to wake the other girls in the house. He would return with a pile of buttered toast, a pot of tea, two mugs and a little, blue jug of milk. Tucked under the hood of the bed, they would talk about what they had to do that day, if they were meeting anyone, whether they would see each other that evening and, if so, what they would do. Vikram's lips would inevitably begin to flutter against her cheeks, ears, neck, mouth. His hands would dance over her stomach and breasts, until he was kneading her flesh with an insistence that left little doubt as to his intentions. Lizzie would protest that she needed to get up, that there was no time. It was only a façade and they both knew it. Breakfast in bed had nearly always lasted until the middle of the morning.

\* \* \*

"So what are you doing today, my darling?"

"This porridge is cold."

He thrusts the bowl towards her without turning his head.

"Oh no, is it? I'm sorry. I'll heat it up again. It won't take a minute."

"Don't bother."

"Oh. Well, would you like something else, perhaps? Fruit? Curd? I might have some bread somewhere."

She frantically rummages around, throwing open various containers.

"I have to go Lizzie. I've no time for this dilly-dallying in the morning."

He is already by the front door.

"Bye darling. I hope you have a nice day."

He mumbles something inaudible, while struggling with the buckles on his sandals.

"Shall I?" she says, moving quickly across the room and crouching to flick the other buckle securely into place.

"Thanks. Oh, I won't be back for lunch."

"Well, I'll see you this evening then."

His kiss grazes her cheek and the door slams shut behind him. Lizzie stares at the dusty, old umbrella stand. He's taken it; their only one. She'll have to wait until the rain stops before she can go shopping.

\* \* \*

Vikram has changed since they arrived in India. When they were at his sister's house in Bombay, Lizzie put this down to being with his family. She could not expect him to be exactly the same in the company of his father, sister and brother-in-law. Still, the transformation had been so startling that she actually caught her breath at some of his remarks. At university, he was 'Vik' – forthright, political, and radical. He liked to drink and talk all night about everything, from art to economics to religion. He was willing to embrace anything and everything. Now Vikram was serious, subdued and ritualized, almost rigid in his ways. He was five years older, but until recently, she had never noticed any disparity in their ages. Over the last week, he seemed almost middle-aged at times. He barely spoke to her anymore.

\* \* \*

Lizzie liked that he was smaller than her. His hands were so elegant with their tapered fingers and neat round nails, while her hands were large and capable. She loved the dark, even consistency of his skin, so unlike her own, pale as

milk and speckled like an egg. She didn't want to marry a man who in any way resembled her father, such a boisterous, loud, dominating figure. Over the years, her mother had sunk further and further into the background, as if to allow for her father's ever expanding presence. When Lizzie pictured of her mother, she saw her gracefully poised on the edge of an armchair, the epitome of politeness, elegance and good taste, sipping away at her fourth G & T before lunch. Yet, she never seemed to be drunk; she just sat there with a mask of utter serenity and self-control etched upon her face. Lizzie was determined that this wouldn't happen to her.

\* \* \*

At last, she is ready to leave. The rain has stopped, although not, Lizzie suspects, for long. Even after a month, she is still petrified every time she has to leave the apartment. Standing in their walled garden, no more than a narrow strip of patchy grass and weeds, Lizzie cannot help thinking about the stories she has heard of rats the size of cats and poisonous insects with fatal kisses.

\* \* \*

She misses their garden in England: the wide stretch of grass with the field at the back and the stables over to the side, tucked behind the house. There is a grumpy donkey in the neighbouring field and pheasants in the woodland at the far end. The long, gravel driveway winds up past the house and then circles round in front of the outhouses. It was here that her father had first allowed her to drive the Morris Minor he bought her for her twenty-first birthday. As children, they'd named the tangle of silver birch trees down by the gate the 'Wildwoods', and spent hours there hiding and pretending. She craves the sound of the trees swishing in the wind and the springiness of the grass beneath her bare feet in the summer. Lizzie defies anyone to be unhappy when the glorious yellow of the daffodils bloom in spring; she cannot even contemplate how many hours of her life have been spent lying on the lawn, threading daisy chains.

In India, she is afraid of everything beyond the confines of their apartment. Every time she ventures out into the jeering, leering, beeping confusion of the street, it is as if all her senses are being assaulted at once. She tries to remain focused, but from every direction there come people, noises, bikes, cars, rickshaws, voices, smells, all competing for her attention. Every time is as disorientating as the last.

\* \* \*

Making her way along the street, pushing through the bustling people, she is acutely aware that she does not blend in. Despite dressing in a *salwar kameez* and draping a *dupatta* over her head, she is still so obviously not Indian. As she pushes her way through the hordes of haggling shoppers, she feels awkward and clumsy. The market is pulsating with kaleidoscopic colours: pinks, reds, blues and greens, all jumping out at her. Silver and gold wink at her in the bold sunlight. The cacophony of the bargaining competes with the booming Bollywood ballads and, on every side, little melodramas are being played out. A festering swamp of rubbish billows out over the pavement and into the traffic. The clouds of jasmine and swirls of smoky incense collide with the sickly sweet smell of fruit softening in the heat. A beggar, with his limbs twisting like a contortionist, screams out at her for mercy and money, and a haggle of dusty street children burrow their fingers into the fabric of her clothes.

“Memsahib! Memsahib!”

Clenching tightly in her knotted fist the leather purse in which she keeps her housekeeping allowance, Lizzie tries to uncurl their little fingers. They will not let go, so she trails them around after her as she moves from stall to stall. The piles of grains, pulses, vegetables and fruit leave her confounded. She seeks out the few things she recognises: cabbages, cauliflower, onions, tomatoes and sweet potatoes. Also a bunch of coriander, a few green chillies, and some small sugary bananas that she knows Vikram likes. Finally, unable to resist its intoxicating scent, she treats herself to a garland of jasmine.

\* \* \*

Back in the sanctuary of the apartment, Lizzie rests the side of her face on the smooth, cool wood of the kitchen table. Never in all her life has she thought about food so much. Food, food, food! She will never have time for a job if she spends this long in agonies over every meal. Right, it is decided. She will make palak aloo, dal makhani, vegetable biryani and missi roti. There is mango chutney and curd too, and that will have to do. She gathers together the ingredients for each dish, forming little heaps ready to be transformed. They sit before her, waiting. She can't face it. Not now. She will read a book for a few hours. There is time. She'll cook all afternoon and then the apartment will be full of delicious aromatic smells when Vikram comes home.

\* \* \*

Lizzie curls up in the armchair with her books piled onto her lap. It is too hot to sit folded up, so she stretches out to let the air circle around her limbs and dry the sweat that clings incessantly to her skin. She attempts to focus on the book, to get caught up in another world, but cannot stop dissecting what happened yesterday evening. She was chatting away to Vikram about her plans for the future, when he abruptly told her to be quiet. Stopping what she was doing in the kitchen, Lizzie turned to look at him. He was sitting in their only armchair, his back turned to her, reading the paper. She had thought, how pompous you look, how sad and small and silly. Sitting there like an old man, grumpy and insolent. And then he had stirred and tilted his head halfway towards her:

“Oh, and please stop calling me ‘Vik’. It’s embarrassing. Vikram is my name, Elizabeth.”

She felt a tightening deep down inside her, as if the ties of a corset were being drawn around her ribs. He never called her Elizabeth. She swallowed deeply and tried to disperse her anger, to let it crawl over her and slide away.

“Fine,” she said, and carried on wiping plates and stacking them up, one on top of the other.

\* \* \*

Vikram brings with him all the dust and heat and chaos of the street. He shouts and paces around the room, putting down things, moving others, and searching out this and that item. She stands in the corner, a sentry, astounded by the resentment she feels at this invasion of noise and speed. He speaks so quickly that she can hardly clutch onto a word he is saying. He has had a ‘very profitable meeting’ with the Head of Department. He is extremely excited about the work Vikram wants to undertake. It is a call for celebration – he has bought beer. They must drink one now. Where is the bottle opener? Oh no need, no need! He will open them against the table edge. Who needs these gadgetry things?

“Where is dinner my Maharani? Let us dine, sweet Lizzie! Let us dine!”

\* \* \*

Afterwards, they sit, quietly satiated, sipping another beer. She revisits their conversation and lets her eyes roam over the contours of his face and the thick sooty hair. She stretches out a hand and runs her fingertips along the curve of his ear, down the firm arc to the soft pad of the lobe. Squeezing it

between her thumb and forefinger, she pushes down against its silky surface. Vikram jerks away.

"I hate it when you do that! It makes me squirm. Please don't."

Her hand lingers, hovering for a moment, before she lowers it slowly to the table. She clasps her beer and takes a swig of the sour tepid liquid.

"You've never mentioned that before. I thought you liked it."

"Well I don't.... Sorry."

Lizzie plays with the brown glass bottle, studying the script she does not understand. She has ruined the mood and now she must turn it around. During the meal, he was animated, like the old Vik, full of ideas and plans. He is completely enraptured by his work and the mechanisms of the university. She wants to feel that way herself. To feel so alive, invigorated and impassioned. She will not grow acclimatised to all of India's strange ways by sitting here, worrying about food and what name her husband chooses to use, and whether he likes to be touched in a certain way.

"Vik", she says, "Vikram, I mean, I really think it's time that I went back to work. I need something to do. My brain is getting lazy being here all day... What do you think? Shall I contact the English Department again?"

He very slowly and meticulously peels the label from his beer. It comes off in one long curl of green and gold. He sighs.

"I think that you would make a fool of yourself...and of me. You are not ready to work yet. You do not understand anything about this country. You...you, can barely even make a decent chappati!"

Lizzie is silent, still as a stone relic. She feels his words creep coldly over her, a snake slithering over her skin.

"They would laugh at you. Married to an Indian man and not knowing the customs. You are not even wearing your *dupatta* correctly! Look at you! A white woman mocking their dress. You are not ready to work, to join the workforce. Oh no!"

Only her lowered eyelids display the slightest flicker.

"You have your books. That is enough for now. Read, learn, and practise your cooking. That is for the best."

Her mouth is dry. Vikram stretches out, feet lifting from the floor, arms reaching up above his head, face distorted with a yawn.

"I'm going to bed. What a day it has been!"

Lizzie listens to the whoosh of the taps and the splashing of water; then the soft thudding of his feet and the squeaking of the bed springs as he makes himself comfortable.

She sits in the darkness. Above her head, the fan stops whirring. Another power cut. She listens to the chorus of the frenzied crickets outside, to the rhythm of her husband's breathing, to the distant drone of the city. The air grows thicker. After a while, Lizzie walks out into the garden, where amongst the strange plants, there lurk rats the size of cats and poisonous insects with fatal kisses. The grass is cool beneath her bare feet and the black sky, so perfect, she can feel tears stinging her eyes.

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*Kim Aikman is a writer, currently working on her second novel. She lives in Darwin with her husband and baby daughter.*

# Java Magic

*Robbie Wesley*

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The bus driver was crazy. Surely anyone could see that. Or he was high as a kite on something illegal. The conductor was just as happy, but the cause of his joy was more apparent and sitting directly in front of me. She looked very demure, hair pulled back into a neat chignon clasped with a mother-of-pearl butterfly. Long skirt and long lacy sleeves for modesty. But the conductor's every spare moment was spent squeezing her shoulder and standing so close that the lurching of the bus provided abundant physical contact.

The bus careered at high speed onward and upward, honking round bends, passing on blind crests. Road rules in Java are feudal. There is only one immutable law of the road. The small and slow must give way to the large and fast. Every cyclist forced into a ditch, every smaller vehicle run off the road is seen as a conquest. Every time we had a near miss, the driver and conductor would cheer and throw their hats in the air.

Such ebullience is catching. Snatches of song were sung. Peanuts were shared. Everyone on the bus was in a very good mood. Everyone, that is, except my travelling companion, who became so relaxed, in these dangerous circumstances, that he fell asleep. His head bumped against our conductor, who was positively leaning against the chignoned lady in front. This gave rise to further hilarity. The conductor, with obviously only one thing on his mind, became convinced it was the same thing on ours. All kinds of ribald suggestions were made as to what Reinhart had been doing all night to make him so sleepy now. The conductor pushed Reinhart's leg against mine saying "*Kasih. Kasih*". (Love. Love.)

After this extraordinary journey it was a relief to lie down, miraculously still intact. Our hotel room was directly opposite the bus depot, and the loudspeaker of a mosque was not far away, but it seemed quiet enough by contrast. We would have liked an early night before the walking expedition we planned for next day, but the karaoke downstairs was too much either to ignore or resist. All I have to do, to be a star in Indonesia, is join in.

The Dieng Plateau is a strange and magical place. The sleeping earth dreams fitfully close to the surface in this volcanic cauldron. Every so often she jolts awake and spurts a geyser into the air. Steam vents hiss. Pits of boiling mud

bubble ominously. You could vanish right through the thin crust and never be seen again, if you weren't careful.

We set out before the morning mist had lifted. Ancient temples, well over a thousand years old, loomed eerily through low swirling cloud. In the first, weak sunlight we warmed ourselves with coffee from a street stall, and bought fresh mushrooms for dinner that night.

By midday we had wandered far and the day turned hot. We came to a mountain village with a forked road at its beginning. Being, by this time, tired and thirsty, we naturally took the lower route. Soon we noticed a commotion from above. A group had gathered. People were gesticulating and calling out to us. At first we couldn't work out what the problem was. Then we realized there was no problem. Probably not many visitors to the plateau were such consistent walkers as we were (which was to get us into trouble, later in the day.) *Tuan* and *Ibu* were unusual looking guests. As such, we were being invited to stop by and pay a visit. The road was steep but the effort was worth it.

At the top of our climb, it turned out, was the village community centre. People with a bit of spare time, or taking a break from tending their potato crops in the heat of the day, would wander in, make themselves a drink, grab a handful of peanuts or a rice crispie from a jar on one of the wooden benches and hang out together until it was time to do something else. We were a welcome diversion, and very welcome we were made to feel. The fact that we had a degree of proficiency in *Bahasa Indonesia* was a huge bonus, as their knowledge of English was limited to the usual few questions. Cup of tea in one hand, biscuit in the other, we were able to exchange details of our very different lives.

These were people who had more than what they regarded as sufficient. They were very proud of their community centre, with its painted blue walls, its solid benches and its fantastic view across the valley. Probably few of them would ever venture further afield than the local market, although I did notice one gentleman was wearing the *haji* hat which indicated that he had taken the pilgrimage to Mecca. Potato growing seemed quite profitable. Even so, their backs were bent and their faces wrinkled from their outdoor work in the fields. They found it impossible to believe that I, coming from the pampered existence I often find myself complaining about, was already almost fifty years of age. They patted my face and squeezed my arms, shook their heads

and laughed in simple disbelief. Surely the foreign woman was having a funny joke with them. Fifty was old in their village.

They insisted we take photos of all of us together, before we left. We promised to send them copies. To my utter shame, when we got back to Australia, our busy lives took over, and we never got round to it. We waved our new-found friends goodbye and vanished down the hill and out of their lives.

We walked on. We rested, for a while, near a lake which could have come straight from the legend of King Arthur. Had a hand bearing the sword, Excalibur, broken through its startling emerald surface, we would barely have been surprised. The ill-smelling fumes wafting across were not the mists of Avalon, however, and my Western mind has drifted into the wrong legend here. If I want swords manifesting out of thin air in remote natural surroundings, it would have to be the sword of Krishna's charioteer, Arjuna, from the Bhagavad-Gita.

In spite of its Islamic overlay, there is still strong collective memory, in Central Java, of the earlier Hindu/Buddhist religion, and even earlier animist beliefs in the power of spirits and magic. For example, the sultans of Yogya and Solo still scatter their palace grounds with the black sand from Parangtritis beach, so that their mutual consort, Nyai Loro Kidul, goddess of the southern ocean, will feel at home when she pays a call.

Reinhart and I spent a week at Parangtritis. It is a wild and usually lonely stretch of coast. Periodically, busloads of good Muslim tourists would travel overnight from Jakarta to arrive at the beach around sunrise. I can only imagine this was a kind of pilgrimage in acknowledgement of older gods. They would plunge, fully clad, into the waves and sit in their wet clothes all the way back. If we were on the beach during the influx, we felt like movie stars. Cameras clicked frantically in our direction. Several times I found myself to be the star of a group photo I didn't even realize was being taken until a little cluster of young people shook my hand and thanked me. An hour later they were gone, and the beach was deserted again.

The nights before the arrival of the tourist buses were quite special. Our visit coincided with the last phase of the moon, and sea mists obscured the stars, so most nights, if we were caught on the beach after sunset, a darkness fell around us so thick that we could almost feel it. It was rather frightening and rather thrilling. Was that motion of air a slight breeze, or one of the spirits of

ancient Java swooping past? Was Nyai Loro Kidul observing these intruders with nocturnal eyes? On nights before the tourist buses, scattered flickerings winked above the high tide mark as sweet corn or noodle soup was prepared for the morning hordes. We always ate on the beach those evenings.

In a rough shelter in the hills above Parangtritis, we came upon public servants who were using their annual leave to fast and meditate in that place of power. Presidents and princes, mystics and fugitives have used the caves which riddle the cliffs around the south coast for the same purpose. A well known cave is *Gua Langse*. One afternoon, we climbed down to that surf-lashed hideaway. It was a steep and difficult climb. Without a guide, I would have found it impossible. Poor Reinhart did not enjoy the exercise. An experienced climber himself, he could not overcome mental images of my smashed remains on the rocks below. All the way down, he kept up the refrain. "That's enough, Robbie. This is really enough. We go back now." And the guide quietly showed me my next foothold, my next grasp of a tree root, the next cleft in the cliff where I could squeeze a toe. Half way down, he paused long enough to double our original agreed price. Needless to say, I was in no position to quibble.

Nearly two hundred years earlier *Pangeran* (Prince) Diponegoro spent time meditating in the caves around this coast. As in the story of King Arthur, he regarded himself as the *Ratu Adil*, or Just King, who would liberate his people from the oppressive rule of the Dutch. Legend has it that he meditated so deeply that he manifested the sword of Arjuna. Through the power of this weapon, during the Java Wars of 1825 to 1830, he kept the Dutch at bay. As in the legend of King Arthur, it was betrayal which was his undoing. In 1830, the Dutch offered to negotiate, but when Diponegoro came to discuss a treaty, he was captured and sent into exile.

By the steaming green lake on the Dieng Plateau, Reinhart and I must have allowed our reveries to lull us into a doze. A huge clap of thunder echoing round the valley brought us to our senses. Not only did it look like rain, it was suddenly late, we were about ten kilometres from our hotel and we had no idea if there were any buses. We stumbled over loose rock, through scrubby grass, down a dip and up a hillside to the road. A very empty looking road. There was nothing for it but to start walking.

Towards sunset, a mini bus came honking towards us. It was already jam packed and there was not a centimetre for us to squeeze into. There would be

no more transport that day. It was the last bus. What to do? Tidak apa apa. No problem. Four young men gave us their seats at the back so Reinhart could stretch his astonishingly long legs down the aisle. Laughing and cracking jokes all the way, these four young men clung to the outside windows with their fingertips and toes. Their good deed was repaid sooner than expected. Dropping off a family, complete with massive basket of produce, down a back lane, the bus sank in the mud and refused to budge. Our four heroes pushed and strained to no avail. Reinhart eventually realized he could help out here. With his much larger frame, he only seemed to lean casually on the back of the bus with one arm, and we were on our very merry way again. Of course it may have been our extra weight which caused the problem in the first place. But the whole enterprise was undertaken with immense good humour. Who could not love these people? Against all odds, we were delivered safely back to our hotel in time to have our mushrooms cooked for dinner. A bit of Java magic in itself.

# The Way of the Pundit

*Barbara Eather*

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It was not busy at The Tibet Lhasa Kitchen. Donna and I were its only customers. Thrown together as roommates on a journey from China, across Tibet and down into Nepal, we had known each other for less than a week, but in that time we had laughed at each others' jokes until our insides hurt. Conscious that our tour group had metamorphosed into thirteen people thinking with one head, we now avoided eating with them.

The waitress stood patiently while we read the menu. Our tour leader had forbidden us to eat at places that were poorly patronized. If we got food poisoning our recklessness would be held up as an example, but it was a risk that I was prepared to take. I had just recovered from being hammered by high altitude on arrival in Tibet two days ago. I couldn't be unlucky with the dysentery demons as well.

Outside, as the day expired, an angry sky looked ready to snow. Inside it was serene – until I tried to order the tandoori chicken and naan bread.

"Ah sorry," responded the waitress. "No Indian food tonight. The Indian cook, he not back from Nepal. Six day the border closed."

"The border? Closed?" Donna and I spluttered.

"How come?" I queried. "We're meant to be going there next week. Is it trouble with the Maoist terrorists?"

The Maoist terrorists, not happy with the government, had been active in Nepal for the last decade. In that time they had reportedly killed ten thousand people. I had stopped reading about them when I realised that, if I knew too much, I'd be too gutless to travel through Nepal. Sometimes ignorance *is* bliss.

"Maybe," replied the bearer of bad tidings. "Riots in Kathmandu."

This was serious and not just because my heart had been set on something out of the traditional Tandoor oven. Donna and I pondered solutions.

"We shouldn't tell the others," I said. "They'll only worry. They'll want to fly straight back to China. This way we get to see some of Tibet and if we get to

the border and a man with a gun turns us back, well, we can deal with that then. Tomorrow I'll try to find out more, but for now let's say nothing."

With that resolved we tucked into our pancakes and tried not to look as though we harboured secrets when we returned to our lodgings.

Tibet thrusts experiences on you. Overnight it came to me, during bouts of High Altitude Insomnia, that by promising to 'find out more' I had agreed to become a pundit. The pundit is part of the tattered prayer flag that is Tibetan history. The title itself is an adulteration of *pandit*, a Hindi word meaning an educated or holy man. Recruited from the Indian Education Service by the Survey of India, pundits were, from 1866 onwards, sent on covert missions to Tibet. In an era when India was part of the British Empire and Britain and Russia were vying for domination in central Asia, their key role was to measure the topography so that uncharted regions could be mapped. Some, when unmasked as spies, had their heads chopped off. Others, like Sarat Chandra Das, became immortalised as Huree Chandra Mookerje in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*.

In the morning I returned to The Tibet Lhasa Kitchen where I combined eating *and* punditry. I was the only patron. This made it hard for me to blend in, but like any nonchalant pundit, I scanned the menu while keeping one ear to the ground. The waitress from the night before kept me company. She told me about Benjamin, the 'nice man from Norway' who had paid for her English lessons. I told her about kangaroos. I found out also that tour groups from the south had cancelled and that there was no immediate prospect of a Tandoori anything for me.

Outside the streets of the holy city of Lhasa were muffled by snow. My post-breakfast feelings of wellbeing were quelled when I nearly trod on a one-armed beggar, naked from the waist up, who lay shuddering on a tattered blanket laid on the slushy ground. I had found that there were two types of beggars in Tibet, the pesky ones that got in your face and the supplicating pilgrim. The former could either be shunned or paid to go away. The latter, and there were many of these, were on long journeys to sacred places. Giving to them was a civic duty in their quest to accumulate merit for an upgrade in their next incarnation. But the fellow on the ground was in a class of his own, his pulsating torso and truncated limb a sick shade of red and his face contorted – too much wretch and not enough humanity. I reeled away, compassion stunned out of me. I told myself that I would have to toughen

up or I would have no hope of being even a pundit's second cousin twice removed.

A pundit has to use the tools available to them. I found an internet café. A world news service site corroborated my only other source. There *had* been demonstrations in Kathmandu. A thousand people had been arrested, but they had now been released. There was no word on whether Nepal had become a closed kingdom. World news services were not concerned about what would happen to this little pundit when she arrived at the Kodari border crossing next week. This was either good news – or proof that I was insignificant.

The way of the pundit is not easy. The Chinese, in their occupation of what is now called the Tibet Autonomous Region, had not opened a Pundit Information Bureau. A career as an accountant had not equipped me for the life of espionage that I embraced now. I wandered aimlessly, more lost than found, more tourist than traveller, more traveller than pilgrim, more pilgrim than pundit – in fact, disguised perfectly.

The pundits of old had masqueraded as holy men on pilgrimages. Their tools of trade had included sextants concealed in false bottoms of suitcases and telescopes hidden up sleeves. Water boils at a lower temperature the higher the altitude. Thermometers secreted in walking staffs had been used to take readings surreptitiously as the billy boiled. The Buddhist rosary, normally one hundred and eight beads, had been shortened to one hundred. Trained to take paces of identical length regardless of the terrain, the pundits slipped a bead at every hundredth step. Data gathered by these means was scribbled on scraps of paper placed inside hand-held prayer wheels. These instruments of worship contain scrolls of block-painted prayers which, when spun in an anti-clockwise direction, release incantations. For the devout an essential accoutrement – a Tibetan pilgrim is naked without their prayer wheel – but in the hands of the clandestine a perfect secret chamber.

I blended into the landscape, as best as the obvious tourist does. No one would ever suspect that I was a pundit. If any of the Chinese soldiers that patrolled the streets examined me too closely all I had to do was whip out my camera and start photographing monuments, passing monks, prayer flags, cobalt skies and snowcapped mountains – the usual suspects. I had my cover nailed.

Caught up in a throng of pilgrims I was swept into a *kora*, a circumambulation of Tibet's Holy of Holies, the Jokang Temple, a two-storey white building with gilded spires on its roof. Men with brown wizened faces and clothes made of roughly tanned sheepskin and women with rosy cheeks and long black plaits greeted me as though I was one of their own.

"Tashi Dele, Tashi Dele."

"Tashi Dele," I whispered in reply, not sure if I had the pronunciation correct. No one seemed to take offence or roll around on the ground laughing, so it seemed that I had mastered one phrase of the local language – a critical step on the road to successful punditry.

The streets surrounding the Jokang and the adjacent Barkhor Square were filled with traders. Against a backdrop of pilgrims prostrating themselves, I spent hours looking at yak butter candle holders, prayer flags and necklaces of coloured stones. I bought jewellery that I didn't want, along with a snuff box and a brass horse. Without a prayer wheel a pundit is nothing, so, to be sure, I bought two. I haggled with the ineptitude of a tourist with women who, after we had struck a deal, hugged me and patted my back as though I was the greatest of philanthropists. It was a sacrifice that had to be made. To insist on pundit prices would have exposed me for what I was trying to be. I fended off artwork that I didn't want to lug across the Tibetan plateau and when the sun came out I soaked up its warmth. About the Nepalese border situation – I found out absolutely nothing. Eventually I declared myself a failure and with cold nose and weary body, I wended my way back to my accommodation.

The dining room at the guesthouse was occupied by three staff and a traveller of handsome proportions, a Nordic god crossed with Canadian ski-instructor – the type of man that finds me invisible. I made him talk to me.

"How long have you been in Tibet?"

"Six weeks."

"Six weeks! What have you been doing?"

"Working."

"Working! Who for?"

The Nordic god Canadian ski-instructor looked around as though he had a secret that he wanted to share with me. The staff hovered. I waited. He tilted

his head toward a book on the table, the Lonely Planet guide to Tibet and, when I could scarcely bear it any longer, he whispered,

“These guys.”

“Oh,” said I. This revelation called for secret signals – of which I knew none. I had stumbled across a real live pundit and I could ask him nothing more. He had a cover to maintain or else he’d get the best deals, the nicest rooms and the fluffiest pillows and his guide book would end up as a work of fiction. I figured that as I was speechless now any marriage proposals were probably out of the question too.

The sun, chased by the chill of the night to come, slid down the sky. The pundit examined charts, consulted reference books and typed diligently into a notebook computer. I concentrated on my afternoon tea, a hot lemon drink – stirred not shaken – and a piece of orange cake – large enough to conceal secret gadgets. I had not achieved what I had set out to do today, but I had discovered that there are three classes of beggars in Tibet. I had become aware also that there are three types of pundits, those of old, those of now and those who are best suited to eating cake. As I pondered my inadequacies Donna bounced into the room.

“I couldn’t help myself,” she announced. “I’ve just told one of our gang that the border with Nepal is closed. She’s in a flap and spreading the word. Let’s watch it hit the fan.”

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*Barbara lives with a small black dog who communicates adroitly with his teeth while she struggles with a pen. Barbara travels to places that some people describe as obscure but when she gets there she finds that they aren’t.*

# It's Tea Towels for Me

*Barbara Eather*

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I was born into an Australia at the end of a succession of political eras where governments had fought and won elections on the basis of such notions as the yellow peril, the White Australia policy, reds under the bed and the domino theory. It was shortly after I slid into the world that the United States of America sent its first ground forces into Vietnam, landing at Danang on the 8th of March 1965. Australia, in echoes reminiscent of 'to the last man and the last shilling' went 'all the way with LBJ' committing an increasing number of Australian troops to the conflict in Vietnam.

As a child, however, I knew and heard little about the war in Vietnam. Vietnam may have been called the television war, but we didn't have a television. We had a wireless, which we sat around and through the static, listened to a steady media diet consisting of the ABC News, the Country Hour, Singers of Renown and if we were being frivolous, Blue Hills.

In terms of print media we had access to a couple of parochial rural newspapers, not the type of publications to feature 'ratbag' ideas such as 'moratorium,' conscientious objectors' or 'defeat of US Forces'. Not that it mattered to me. I wasn't old enough to read.

My only tangible memory that all was not well in Indochina was when my mother slaved to make floral dresses for some aid organisation. When I was told that the dresses were not for me, but for the little girls in Vietnam, I wept bitter tears. When I was told to eat my vegetables because of the little girls in Vietnam, I ate my vegetables. I quite liked vegetables, just as I quite liked dresses.

I vaguely remember the fall of Saigon, not because of what I heard in the media, but because my mother knew a Church of England minister in Saigon. I remember hearing her talk to other women from her church. The general gist of what they were saying was, "I hope the commies haven't got him," accompanied by lots of 'tut-tutting' and the muttering of words such as 'dreadful' and 'terrible' along with much head shaking, hand wringing and frowning of brows.

So it was strange to me, some twenty-five years almost to the day that Saigon had fallen to the North Vietnamese forces, that I took complete leave of my senses, jumped on a plane and went to Vietnam for a holiday. Life had got a bit tedious.

By the time I arrived at the now renamed Ho Chi Minh City I felt that this holiday destination was not a good idea. I had transited through Singapore. One taxi driver there was not a cheerful soul. When I told him I was going to Vietnam he had exclaimed in tones of dread, "In Saigon they will kill you and they will rob you," which was just about as amusing as his question, "Are you going to Vietnam to meet your husband?"

As the plane taxied to the terminal I saw a long line of aircraft hangars, stained concrete igloos, a reminder that this was once one of the busiest airports in the world during a war fought in my lifetime. I survived the tedium of customs and immigration and fought off a number of taxi drivers. I only needed one! On the way to my hotel I saw one of the sights that Ho Chi Minh City is infamous for – a man urinating in the street.

That afternoon I went on a cyclo tour to have a look at the city. It was a hot day and the cyclo driver huffed and puffed. The chain of his bicycle creaked as he propelled the pram-like conveyance that I sat in. Negotiating Saigon traffic is all a matter of timing. I tried not to look at anything heading toward me. My theory was that it was better not to see the truck that killed me.

We turned into a large wide boulevard decorated with colourful red and yellow bunting. My cyclo driver indicated that we were approaching the American Embassy. I had no real intention of coming to look at this. I knew that Vietnam had a history far beyond those grubby years of what is generally known as the Vietnam War but to the Vietnamese is the American War.

The old embassy had been demolished. Gone was the tall building from the roof of which the last helicopters had left, along with the American Ambassador, the stars and stripes purportedly tucked safely under his arm. The new building was inconspicuous. A part of the old wall had been retained however. As I stared at it, memories came back to me of every still picture and every bit of television footage I had ever seen of that last ugly day when mothers pleaded with soldiers and tried to pass their babies over the fence to an uncertain future more palatable than the present being forced upon them.

Now that I was in combat mode I hooked up on a tour to the Cu Chi tunnels. These were the warrens that were used by the Viet Cong to hide in, and to live in, during the Vietnam War. Construction of the tunnels commenced in the 1940s during the war against the French colonial powers. It was during the 1960s that these underground corridors were extended so that the Viet Cong could infiltrate a large area only thirty kilometres from Saigon. This clandestine network stretched from Saigon to the Cambodian border. In the Cu Chi district there were more than two hundred and fifty kilometres of tunnels. In this hidden society, where construction sometimes extended several stories deep, there were hospitals and weapons factories. Entrances were hidden, sometimes underwater and they were booby-trapped. Kitchens had specially designed chimneys to avoid detection of campfire smoke. Some tunnels went under, and consequently into, US bases. It was the Cu Chi area that was subject to massive US bombardment in an effort to destroy the peril that seethed underfoot.

On the way to Cu Chi, I impressed my travel companions because I knew the difference between defoliant and napalm. Australians on holiday in a foreign country like a laugh. In hushed tones we spluttered to each other, "Don't mention the war. I did it once but I think I got away with it."

I also held my travel buddies' attention with my knowledge of A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh stories. I recounted the tale of how Pooh visited Rabbit in his warren and ate too much honey. When he tried to leave he became stuck in the burrow entrance. While the immobile Pooh waited for Rabbit's friends and relations to pull him out, Rabbit hung his wet tea towels on Pooh's legs, for they protruded into his living space. My trapped friends listened in bemused silence.

On arrival at Cu Chi we were shown a video and a display including a map and cross-section diagrams of the tunnels. Our guide purported to be a former Viet Cong guerrilla. He showed us a display of man traps. He explained how these operated to repel invading soldiers. Known as tunnel rats, it was their gruesome job to infiltrate the network. The traps could best be described as effective.

Under the dappled light of the rainforest canopy we were led to the tunnels. We were taken into a segment enlarged for western tourists. Although this was relatively spacious and equipped with electric lights, as we crawled the short distance through the dank belly of the earth, I felt my sanity slipping

away. Which may explain what I did next. We were shown a Viet Cong sized hole that you could lower yourself into feet first. Which I did. As I levered myself into the ant-sized aperture, I thought that it was a tight squeeze. I didn't mean to go right in, but I slipped and when I tried to get out, life as I knew it had ceased to exist. I was stuck!

What was to become of me? Were they going to leave me there and bring me food to eat, or worse still were they going to leave me there and *not* bring me food until I lost weight? People I didn't know, Japanese tourists I suspect, took photos of me. As three people struggled to free me, my cellulite reverberated against the timber framework around the hole. Oh no I thought, it's tea towels for me! I could almost feel cold, damp dish cloths being draped across my indefensible calves. Gripped by pain and a dread that behind me lurked spirits more nefarious than the bunny population of the hundred acre wood, fear drove my flailing feet. With much giggling, grunting, huffing, puffing and voices inside my head yelling "you've got to destroy the village to save the village" out I popped like a champagne cork. What a relief. None of this tunnel rat business for me!

There was no live entertainment in Ho Chi Minh City that night. Someone important had died. We made up for it however. We had pocketfuls of Vietnamese Dong, the night was young and so were we. As tropical rain storms buffeted the flashing neon lights of the Saigon that was once known as the pearl of the orient, we bonded over a few stiff drinks. Harsh words were said about history and the stories from our childhood repeating. Late into the night the margaritas flowed like napalm. I confessed that I still loved Winnie the Pooh as together we blithered, "I didn't think I was going to get out of 'Nam."

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*Barbara lives with a small black dog that communicates adroitly with his teeth while she struggles with a pen. Barbara travels to places that some people describe as obscure but when she gets there she finds that they aren't.*



# Psyche and the Crocodile

*Dael Allison*

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## Synopsis

*Crocodiles are an intrinsic part of Top End life. This essay examines attitudes to the crocodile, from the respect embodied in Dennis Nona's 2007 Telstra NAATSIA Award winning Ubirikubiri, to the apparently wilful disregard shown by some individuals, including fishermen.*

*The essay aims to provoke deeper thinking about human responses to the wild.*

*Beautiful Psyche drifts on the underworld river in her frail canoe. She leans gracefully to dip her fingers in the water's dull gleam. The river erupts ...*

The man's body arcs achingly backwards, shoulders, buttocks and mer-tail barely touching the reptile's armoured hide. He is a bridge. A human rainbow. A body arrested in the extremis of an electric shock. Beneath him the crocodile's huge open-jawed head and army tank body are the embodiment of death.

This life-size bronze sculpture titled *Ubirikubiri* by Denis Nona, a young Badu Islander artist from Torres Strait with a swag of exhibitions, commissions and awards over his shoulder, took out the 2007, 24<sup>th</sup> Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. A mere stone's throw away is another exhibit at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the massive taxidermied crocodile Sweetheart, a larger-than life reminder of what lurks in the Top End's unfathomable waters. Sweetheart is one of the museum's most popular exhibits, viewed by the throngs of visitors to the MAGNT each year with an awe approaching mysticism.

The prospect of a human being killed, even eaten by some giant, predatory wild beast occupies a strange niche in the human psyche. Witness the explosion of monster movies since Spielberg's *Jaws* became America's highest grossing box-office hit of 1975/76. As audiences continue to flock to cinematic dismemberments by beasts ranging from cloned Jurassic raptors to digitally reconstituted apes, crocodiles chomp a share of the horror feast. 2007 birthed two new Australian croc movies: *Rogue* (billed as 'Welcome to

the *Territory*' and substantially filmed here) and *Blackwater*. The enthusiastic response in Australian cinemas, particularly in the Top End, underscores the reality that the movie-viewing population is generically titillated by the terror of crocodile attack. As long as it remains vicarious. As long as it happens to someone else.

It does happen to someone else. The Northern Territory News has a penchant for crocs, hardly a day passes without a crocodile story: *Jailhouse Croc*, *How I escaped from the jaws of a croc*, *Crocs attack drunk locals*, *Crocs just love harbour views*, *Man shoots mate while saving him from saltie*, and *Crocodile Undie: croc hunter catches saltie with jocks*.<sup>1</sup> A visit by Sir Elton John crocodile-rocks up another set of headlines. In a seven-issue historical picture souvenir published in May 2008 the newspaper documents, among endless pictures of saurians both dead and alive, the twenty-one fatalities resulting from crocodile attack in Australia since 1975. Two thirds of the deaths occurred in the Northern Territory. Most of the victims were fishing or swimming in waters well known, and often signposted, as crocodile habitat.

Dennis Nona's monumental *Ubirikubiri* sculpture taps into that elemental horror of a human being taken by a crocodile. But Nona's work is beyond sensationalism, examining in concept, form and decoration, the symbiotic relationship of man and beast. The accompanying narrative invokes, and teaches, respect.

Nona recreates a legend from *Mai Kusa*, a river on the west coast of Papua New Guinea: a man, trying to reconcile his young daughter with the death of her mother, looks for a pet. She rejects a puppy and a piglet but accepts a baby crocodile, naming it Ubirikubiri. As the daughter grows, so does the crocodile and the father has to keep enlarging its pen. At a time when his daughter is away, the father leaves to visit friends in another village, leaving the crocodile without food. When he returns the crocodile kills him. Finding the pen empty the daughter follows the crocodile's tracks. Nona relates: *At ziba ziba (dusk), Ubirikubiri appeared on the river bank with the girl's father on his back. She pleaded with the crocodile to give up her father but, shaking his huge body, the crocodile refused and headed back into the river. There is a moral to part of this story that instructs us that if animals are taken from their natural environment they must be looked after and treated and cared for properly.*<sup>2</sup>

Nona's bronze prompts not one sharply appreciative intake of breath but many. A dawning recognition of the work's physical, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual importance.

An extraordinary effort is needed to produce a bronze of this size and complexity. It is formed first in wax, cast in sections and these are welded into an entity before being ground-back and polished. Then there are the logistics of transporting the sculpture from Queensland, where it was fabricated by Urban Art Projects, and finally manoeuvring that cumbersome size and weight into place in the gallery.

There is an exquisite aptness in Nona's use of bronze to portray both the metal-like hide of a crocodile and the vulnerability of human skin. Sculptures in bronze, one of the longest lasting of all metals, have survived millennia. The earliest finds date beyond 3000 BCE. The Greek empire, the first civilization known to create life-size sculptures, worshipped a crocodile god named Sobek. Both the Greeks and the ancient Egyptians used bronze to portray both crocodiles and kings. The sculpture's form is created in a malleable material like clay or directly in wax, materials so receptive that once molten bronze is poured into the mould or investment you may find, if you look closely enough, perfect impressions of the artist's fingerprints.

Nona's two-dimensional works, mostly linocuts and etchings, feature intricately patterned representations of oral traditions. The designs decorating the surface of *Ubirikubiri* are reminiscent of traditional pearl-shell carving. Leaves and roots, patterns and tracks, the piglet, the puppy, are all embossed like three dimensional tattoos, creating a visual narrative on both man and crocodile. Against the enduring medium of bronze, the father's ephemeral pearl-shell neck plate glows with an iridescent, almost unearthly, delicacy.

Nona's sculpture is powerfully spiritual. The physical reality of two corporeal forms, dead man and living crocodile, convey life's transience and mutability, the transition from matter to spirit. The beauty of the man arched on the back of a crocodile is symbolic of the link between the living world and underworld/otherworld, the symbiosis of life and death. It is not the arch of the empyrean, there is no westernised view of heaven, but more a recycling, a pantheistic transmutation, man transforming from human, becoming the other, merging with the animal world. The horny flanges erupting from the man's skull, ears and limbs echo the scales of the crocodile. His nose extends into a snout. He

lies in state atop the beast, his dead hands holding the shafts of three spears. Nona evokes both natural and ceremonial worlds, and the burial rituals for pharaohs, Viking warriors, aboriginal elders, ordinary people. The beast bearing the dead man is noble and the man he carries, a humble, imperfect human who forgot the basic law of respect, is also noble.

Crocodiles feature prominently in the pantheon of northern Aboriginal ancestor spirits. The complex civilization of Australia's indigenous people, generally acknowledged as the world's oldest continuing culture, traditionally used and still uses, pictograms, stories and dance to pass on knowledge. Knowledge of genealogy, relationships, survival, law and social mores, including an embedded respect for each element of nature and an understanding of how to coexist with animals like crocodiles.

Nona's bronze crocodile is young, muscular and lean. At 3.5 metres in length the sculpture weighs 650 kilograms (beast and man combined) yet this doesn't approach the monumentality of Sweetheart, the 5.1 metre fifty year-old croc captured in 1979 in the Finnis River, weighing 780 kilograms. Sweetheart was the boss-croc of Sweets Billabong. An aggressive, territory-defending male, he made mince-meat of boat propellers. As he became increasingly threatening to fishermen it seemed a good idea to relocate him. Wildlife rangers baited a snare with a dead dingo, caught Sweetheart, and managed to bind his massive jaws.

Crocodiles are way out front in the strongest-bite stakes. With a bite of up to 5,000 psi (pounds per square inch) they make a Rottweiler look like a pussy with 335 psi, while a great white shark's 400 psi seems relatively gentle. The hyena, closest contender for the crown, is KO'd at a mere 1000 psi.<sup>3</sup> Crocodiles rely on this force to snap shut on large prey and hold it until somewhere more congenial can be found to either stash or eat it. But while the jaw-closing muscles have evolved with phenomenal strength, the jaw-opening muscles are weak. That's why the idea of catching the giant crocodile of Sweet's Lagoon wasn't as suicidal as it sounded. Sedated, with its noosed jaws bound, even a large live crocodile is transportable.

But Sweetheart's captors had no real concept of how to handle such a huge, unwieldy weight. As they towed the anaesthetised animal across the billabong to where he could be dragged up a boat-ramp, the ropes binding the crocodile became entangled with a submerged log. What they didn't realise was that crocodiles have a rigid flap at the back of the palate which

blocks the nasal passages when they submerge. Drugged and unable to instinctively close the palatal flap, Sweetheart drowned.

Go on a croc cruise or to a feeding session at a Top End tourist park and you'll witness the spectacle of large crocodiles hurling their entire bodies out of the water to snatch flaccid portions of raw chook, strung along a wire or dangled from feeding rods, with jaws that can snap a grown man's femur like a toothpick, or crush a skull as easily as an egg. The sound of those jaws clashing is the clang of the iron door on death-row, the slamming of the metaphorical gates of hell. Imagine that crushing force. Imagine that sound.

People have survived both. We are regularly regaled with media images of croc-scarred victims and breathless stories of attacking crocodiles repulsed with sticks and paddles, or repelled by individuals brave enough to gouge their eyes. The death of noted Australian eco-feminist Val Plumwood, ironically from snake bite, recently featured prominently. Ironic because Plumwood survived the jaws of different reptile in Kakadu twenty-three years ago, in a bizarre attack that was the archetype of horror. Assured that crocodiles didn't attack boats, she found her canoe stalked, then repeatedly rammed from behind. As she attempted to climb into an overhanging tree, Plumwood's thighs and pelvis were clamped in what she later described as a 'red-hot pincer grip'. Then she was dragged into the water. Her account is graphic:

*Few of those who have experienced the crocodile's death roll have lived to describe it. It is, essentially, an experience beyond words of total terror. The crocodile's breathing and heart metabolism are not suited to prolonged struggle, so the roll is an intense burst of power designed to overcome the victim's resistance quickly. The crocodile then holds the feebly struggling prey underwater until it drowns. The roll was a centrifuge of boiling blackness that lasted for an eternity, beyond endurance, but when I seemed all but finished, the rolling suddenly stopped. My feet touched bottom, my head broke the surface, and, coughing, I sucked at air, amazed to be alive. The crocodile still had me in its pincer grip between the legs. I had just begun to weep for the prospects of my mangled body when the crocodile pitched me suddenly into a second death roll. <sup>4</sup>*

Plumwood experienced a third death roll before the crocodile released her. She dragged herself up a muddy, two-metre high bank and with her gaping wounds profusely bleeding, walked for several hours before she collapsed.

Found during the night by a search party, she survived the thirteen-hour trip to Darwin hospital and an infection-fraught recovery.

I recently travelled through Kakadu in the company of a man returning to visit Milingimbi and Ramingining where he'd spent years as a missionary, a journey of reminiscences. One memory the man related was of a funeral he conducted for a fisherman taken at by a crocodile at Ubirr. Only the lower half of the man was left for burial.

On the way home we stopped at Border Crossing to stretch our legs and check out the river. The water was muddy and swift. Upstream three men fished with rods on a partly submerged rock shoal, one immersed to his thighs. I chatted to two young, tanned European women who had parked their Wicked van near the boat ramp. They were agog at the size of the crocodile they'd just seen drift past, down the river. The tall Austrian, her white-blond hair tatted by hours of open-window travel, described in strongly accented English how the crocodile had passed within metres of the thigh-deep fisherman.

Upstream the three men looked neither alert nor alarmed – in fact they look extremely relaxed. 'What did they do? How did they react?' I asked. The smaller woman, an olive-skinned Finlander, shrugged and grinned. 'They did nothing. They stayed in the water. They laughed and they pointed.'

Never smile at a crocodile

I called the missionary over and the girls repeated their story. He stared upstream, his faded blue eyes incredulous, and said, 'The man I buried was taken right there, from those very rocks'.

Back in Darwin I related this incident to a friend, an ex-teacher, who shook her head and told me the story about the burial was wrong. She said the man wasn't at Ubirr and the croc didn't take the top half of the body, only the head. She told me that the attack, recorded on home video, later appeared in crocodile documentaries shown in schools.

My friend was right about Jabiru storeman Kerry McLoughlin, decapitated in 1987, but the missionary wasn't wrong: different years, different crocodiles, different deaths. In fact 1987 was a big year for the crocs. Twelve days after McLoughlin died, young American Ginger Meadows, was killed when she dived from a yacht in the Kimberleys. Less than a month later another man was taken in North Queensland. The indifference to the threat of crocodile attack continues. '*Stupid' fishos are croc bait* headlines another NT News

article,<sup>5</sup> accompanied by a photograph of four fishermen in the river, one waist deep, at Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River. The same crossing where wading McLoughlin was attacked.

In March this year NT News readers were galvanized by a hair-raising photograph of a young Israeli taunting a crocodile from a small aluminium boat. Novon Mashiah, a 27 year-old tourist-come-fisherman, struck a pose evocative of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel depiction of Adam reaching, and almost touching, the fingertip of God. But while Adam reaches for eternity Mashiah reached for death. The four-metre croc a metre behind the boat was interested in one thing – meat. A second photograph, of the Israeli leaping for his life as the croc hurled itself at the side of the tinny, was so sensational the newspaper printed it as a give-away postcard. 'I was shocked – the animal clearly wanted to kill me,' the Israeli is reported to have said.<sup>6</sup> Isn't that what predators do? There is no nicety in the crocodile world regarding the value of the tourist dollar, no respecting a fisherman as master of all he surveys.

Ever since seventeenth-century French rationalist philosopher and mathematician René Descartes declaimed *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), his dualistic view of the world as separate and independent realms, *res cogitans* (the essentially human realm of the mind) and *res extensa* (the other realm, that of nature), has been used to justify the belief that humans are rightly the 'masters and possessors of nature.'<sup>7</sup>

The ancient Greeks believed that the soul or *psyche* was responsible for behaviour. In their traditional stories Psyche, youngest daughter of a Greek king, was so beautiful the people stopped worshipping the goddess Aphrodite. When her son Eros fell in love with Psyche, resentful Aphrodite forced the young woman to undertake a series of impossible tasks to redeem herself, including travelling to the underworld. Sigmund Freud may have equated the underworld with the unconscious when he adopted Psyche's name to describe mind, thought and personality – how we act and behave. He determined the mind had three components: the id, governing instinct, the ego or functional self, and the superego – the moral and ethical self.

Descartes viewed nature as a mechanism. Speaking of the 'architecture of their structure' he claimed animals were unfeeling machines, indifferent to pain.<sup>8</sup> No animal more graphically realizes this misconception than that armoured reptile the crocodile, with its clashing doomsday jaws and legs like steel stanchions, its seemingly impermeable hide and limbs which can

be ripped off entire yet the animal still functions. It is possible to see such an animal as *other*, and therefore dismissible in terms of respect. But Descartes' view sidestepped 'the intrusion of values',<sup>9</sup> the morality and ethics which encompass the necessity of coexistence and respect for the natural world and animals like the crocodile. Values so clearly and beautifully articulated by Dennis Nona in *Ubirikubiri*.

The Cartesian view also engenders the delusion that humans, being superior to beasts, are somehow invincible. A drunk miner was recently reported to have complained to the police, who shot at the two crocodiles closing in on him as he swam out to a crocodile trap off Groote Eylandt, 'What are you shooting at the croc for? I've lived in the Territory for 28 years and I've swum with heaps of crocs. I know crocs'.<sup>10</sup>

So fishermen continue to recklessly tempt fate, drunks flounder in crocodile infested waters, and unwary tourists sometimes get a bigger crocodile experience than they bargained for. I look forward to swimming in Darwin's turquoise sea during the Dry Season, as many do, because it is apparently the time when crocodiles present less of a threat. When I mention this to an employee at a Top End crocodile park she laughs. 'Crocodiles don't observe seasons,' she says. 'Crocodiles are always there.'

## Endnotes

- 1 Northern Territory News [http://www.ntnews.com.au/Jailhouse\\_croc](http://www.ntnews.com.au/Jailhouse_croc), Nigel Adlam 03Nov07; *How I escaped from the jaws of a CROC*, Nadja Hainke 04Apr08; *Crocs attack drunk locals* Rebekah Cavanagh 15Mar08; *Crocs just love harbour views*, Kasey Brunt 18Jan08; *Man shoots mate while saving him from saltie*, Matt Cunningham 23Jan08; *Crocodile Undie: Croc hunter catches saltie with jocks*, Rebekah Cavanagh 15Nov07
- 2 <http://www.nga.gov.au/Exhibition/NIAT07/Detail.cfm?IRN=163806>
- 3 <http://wapedia.mobi/en/Crocodile>
- 4 <http://www.aislingmagazine.com/aislingmagazine/articles/TAM30/ValPlumwood.html>
- 5 Northern Territory News <http://www.ntnews.com.au/'Stupid' fishos are croc bait>, Nick Calacourous 21May08
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- 8 Ibid
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- 10 Northern Territory News [http://www.ntnews.com.au/Cop\\_shots\\_save\\_drunk\\_swimmer\\_from\\_crocs](http://www.ntnews.com.au/Cop_shots_save_drunk_swimmer_from_crocs), Rebekah Cavanagh 28Mar08

# Bogged Policies and Barefoot Mayors

*Charlie Ward*

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A barefoot mayor. They don't make civic leaders like him down south. Sitting under a shady tree playing cards, driving Palumpa's roads in a battered land cruiser with kids hanging happy out the windows after school. Not for Old Man Wodidj a circuit of fund raisers and functions, nor presentations in collar and tie. Rather than speeches, he drafted cattle, and after a long life of hard work, he would lean on the rails and watch his grandsons working cleanskins in the yards, followed at day's end by a slab of the family station's beef over the fire. He lived in his simple home as he had lived for years in the stock camps, with a row of saddles hung between trees. Elsewhere, they would have lauded, decorated and celebrated him. Covered him in gowns, pins and medals, surrounded him with certificates and awards, tokens of esteem and appreciation. Named a school, a park or even a park bench after him.

Fighting between clans was rife on the Moyle River floodplain in the Top End of the 1930s. One night as a boy he had woken to chaos, movement and shouting in an unfamiliar tongue. In the darkness, the first things he realized clearly were that his stepfather was sporting the long shaft of a spear between his ribs, and that his life would change forever as a result. Soon afterwards his mother led the family – refugees within their own country – on a journey that today would be hailed as an incredible feat of survival. They walked several hundred kilometres to the south, crossing the huge crocodile-infested Fitzmaurice and Victoria rivers on paperbark rafts. They settled on Auvergne cattle station where the Old Man, surrounded by dust and horses, was to learn the cattle skills that propelled him all over the Northern Territory. He wasn't to see his own country again until he was a full grown man.

Old Man Wodidj, postcolonial pioneer. He cut his path not while the bloody spot-fire mess of first contact was raging with missionaries, pastoralists and police, but during the second wave, the accidental conquest delivered via the industrial and welfare reforms that reshaped the northern pastoral industry of the early 1970s. The images, hence, aren't sepia-tinted. They're colour negatives, with expectations reversed, inks bled and sticky in the way

that only the high humidity of the tropics can achieve, turning the activities of recent years into melted glimpses of a distant past. His was a delightfully inverted moment on the frontier. His single wheel ruts ran at cross purposes through the fray, a drover drawn by a private vision, headed for a point now known, thirty five years of hard work later, as Palumpa community.

When everyone else was moving off the stations, hanging up the saddle and subsiding towards the fortnightly drudge of 'sitdown money', Wodidj led his own return to country. It wasn't the lure of whitemans' nicky-nicky tobacco or flour that enticed him back onto his ancestral land. There wasn't anyone there to offer him anything at all. Nor were there any buildings, power or piped water. There was a dirt track to Darwin that was cut off half the year, the stories and songs that he had to learn, and grass, plenty of grass. His closest neighbours were the on the missions, fifty miles to the west and one hundred and twenty to the east

He explored the traditional country of his boyhood on horseback, looking for tracks into the back pockets, assessing his homeland for its cattle-bearing capability. He sought and received some sponsorship from the missionaries in Port Keats in the form of half a dozen head of cattle, a couple of horses and a white offsider, going on to stage a biblical return of sorts, not to a Garden of Eden but to one of prime steak.

They lived under a canvas sheet, with old men cooking for the workers. The ladies looked after the kids, and kept a steady stream of yams, goanna, fish and bush tucker coming into the camp. When the fences and yards were done, they built an abattoir, and bought a truck. They started supplying communities with beef and sending cattle to Darwin for export. They built a couple of houses. Old Man Wodidj not only proved himself as a stockman but also as a diplomat and politician. He negotiated with all tiers of Government and oversaw the development of a local government body administering municipal services to a small community that today features its own school, clinic, shop and abattoir.

In the build-up last year, I saw a handful of the Murin-kura men working in the yards yet, sitting high in a backhoe, or bringing in a mob of cleanskins from the bush. The old men of Mr Wodidj's generation are retired from stock work now, attending to their cultural obligations, the station they established providing them with a steady income stream to distribute to their families.

Mal Brough, I couldn't help thinking, he of the private enterprise panacea, eat your heart out.

Then the news came circuitously and twisted, unexpectedly from an unexpected source. As always, it came. A call to confirm. Old Man Wodidj had died – funeral on Tuesday.

In the end, the founding father of Palumpa Station and Palumpa community was buried in his own backyard under a huge mound of bright plastic flowers at the start of the Wet Season. They could have taken him full circle, laid him to rest a mile away in the patch of pandanus by Palumpa billabong where he was born. Too far for the family though, to leave him out there. Thirty feet from his back door, another door has now been closed on a life that was a long and distinguished testament to return.

There were no gongs or whistles from politicians, no awards in the mail for the Wodidj family upon his death. Sadly, there aren't many congratulatory emails, accolades for good governance, or 'citizen of the year' awards flying around the Thamarrurr region these days. Mr Wodidj is unlikely to make the news posthumously either. His traditional country, community and cattle station fall in the shadow cast by a much larger and notorious neighbour: Port Keats, or Wadeye. Wadeye, to those attuned to the barometric pressure of Australia's intercultural tensions, has earned itself a sorry infamy.

Put Palm Island up a peg, Wadeye down. Reports of a town terrorized by its own young men combined in gangs with garish death-metal monikers like 'Evil Warriors' or 'Judas Priest' emerge reliably often to make fillers in the national press. One could laugh at these eighties-inspired Iron Maiden aesthetes in a tropical time warp, though it wouldn't be anything like funny when your power cuts out in the middle of the night and your home is attacked by men on a revolving roster from jail in Darwin wielding machetes and baseball bats. Early in 2006, one particularly eventful weekend resulted in the evacuation by the local authorities of a large number of women and children to Darwin.

If, as could conceivably happen, a roving hack were to rise above the sure headlines that constitute Wadeye's troubling public profile – *gang violence, police shootings, unemployment, evacuated women and children* – it remains a place where even the political machinations and statistical data can cause an audible drawing of breath. In 2004, Dr John Taylor of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy and Research found of Wadeye that:

- One hundred people were aged over 50; five hundred people were aged 25-50; and fifteen hundred people were aged less than 25
- There were 144 habitable homes with an occupancy rate of 16 persons per dwelling.
- If a rate of 7 persons per dwelling was to be achieved, an additional 465 houses would be required by 2023.
- 82% of Aboriginal income was attributable to welfare sources (90% if CDEP is included).

Lying on a mattress night after night in a room with half a dozen young family members waiting for a gang raid would provide ample opportunity to contemplate Wadeye's housing shortage. With the high cost of freight, materials and travel costs for certified contractors, the *construction* price of a new, nondescript brick house in the remote NT is in the vicinity of a quarter of a million dollars. If the kids of Wadeye today are going to have the luxury of living in housing 'only' three times as crowded as the national average in twenty years time, now would be an excellent time to start ploughing six million dollars a year into Wadeye's housing construction.

Those wanting a tree-change from the high pressure lifestyle bred of Wadeye's salt-heavy, overcrowded backstreets could consider a move to Palumpa, a quaint country acreage down the road. Since Old Man Wodidj and his brothers led the charge to the open green of the Moyle River floodplain, they have been joined by a couple of hundred others, mostly from Wadeye, seeking a quieter life closer to country; a goal which has not disappointed them. In Palumpa, the quiet achiever, the legacy of Mr Wodidj lives and life goes on as normal. Perhaps it is his highest achievement that Palumpa never makes the news. There is the odd bit of strife when hell-raisers en route from the club at Peppimenarti drop in with a skinful on their way home, mostly to Wadeye, but the most common sound of an evening is the persistent whack of beetles hitting the flyscreen. The closest police are the ridiculously under-resourced officers in Wadeye. Per head of population, Wadeye has ten times fewer police than in other towns of equivalent size in the NT. Like the American staff of the multinationals currently eyeing off the Blacktip gasfield one hundred kilometres off Wadeye's coast might say, go figure.

If Wadeye has problems now, they are going to look fairly embryonic with hindsight, unless someone comes up with some answers – hence, we presume, its selection as the Northern Territory site of the Council of

Australian Governments (COAG) trial. COAG, formed in light of the obvious fact that between the three layers of government, Aboriginal communities are falling between the cracks, was launched via a 2002 gabfest of tub-thumping and big bureau-talk in Canberra and Darwin. The thinking behind COAG was that it should streamline access to funding and services and minimize the 'double handling' and proliferation of red tape and onerous reporting requirements generated by three tiers of government. In Wadeye, the story went, the federal, NT and local government bodies would form an effective, tripartite, responsive service provider that would focus on priorities agreed by the local people, represented by the Thamarrurr Council. At the trial's inception, these were agreed to be women and families, youth, and housing and construction.

Four years later, according to its own evaluators, senior public servants and the Thamarrurr Council, the trial had, well, gone to shit, at least temporarily. Far from streamlining the provision of services, the whole of government approach had COAG-ulated them into a bloody deadlock. Whereas the local government body was acquitting funding for no less than sixty agencies at the trial's inception, it now had to jump through the hoops of ninety, or one every four days. Not only that, but the acrobatic policy regressions performed in Canberra – think ATSIC abolition, 'practical reconciliation', Shared Responsibility Agreements, the handballing of Indigenous affairs from DIMIA (which became DIC) to FACS (which became FACSIA) – had led to a bureaucratic vertigo that culminated with the trial lying ignored, upside down and smoking in the long grass. Combined with the usual merry-go-round of short term and aborted appointments in the north, the re-branding of both policies and their purveyors meant that at times the Thamarrurr Council had been hard pressed to even identify with whom – or with whom they were *meant* to be – 'equal partners'. Which if anyone hadn't noticed, just reinforced the deafening message that has come from the bush for several decades – stay the course, don't change hats or shift the goals. If something is worth doing, and we want systemic, long-term change, fund it for a decade, not a year.

In this instance, the best efforts of Canberra and Darwin's most senior henchmen ran off the rails so badly that its wild malfunctioning successfully cut a swathe through the dense fog of jargon and management-speak that usually obfuscates high level parliamentary activity. When the fog cleared temporarily through the release of a Trial evaluation report in 2006, the view

was not good. Even the dry transcript of Hansard provided a clear idea of how wrong things had gone. In an animated and candid exchange that would have turned a few heads had it taken place on Wadey's barge ramp rather than in parliament, respected public servants and senators on both sides of politics castigated each other and even themselves. For a moment, at least, it was safe to call a spade a spade, and the federal government was said to have 'buggered it up', while a spokesman for the ALP made the salient point that the Government had 'kicked ATSIC to death and then, quite frankly, the performance level (of COAG) was worse than anything ATSIC ever did'. In a rare moment of clarity, a government minister countered that 'this blame bullshit that goes on all the time – it's not getting us anywhere'. The teenagers of Wadey were said to be 'bored shitless'. The high theatrics, while entertaining, fed sadly on failure rather than success.

In the NT, a haven for much that is fractious, mediocre and parochial as well as wild and wondrous, it seems notable that Indigenous people hold public attention more for criminality than community work. If they are lucky they are accorded a less soul-destroying role in the public eye, wheeled in for a few seconds of prime time to offer 'the opposing point of view'. Until the achievement and law-abiding normality of many Indigenous people and communities is accorded a place proportional to their demographic in the media, we will be subject to the distortions and shock value of a contest in which dysfunctionality is the currency of achievement. While this is so, places like Wadey will continue to make the news for the wrong reasons, and the profound victories of the many 'Palumpas' will go unheralded.

In Murrinh-kura country, the achievers and community leaders of the bush sit quiet under gum trees in old stock hats, and play cards on their lawns of an evening. Walking repositories of culture and local knowledge on community governance, they take their grandchildren out in beaten-up Toyotas doubling as mobile classrooms, educating them in their own way and own time after school. They pull over to let traffic pass. It's mostly people they don't know anyway, often public servants or consultants in new four wheel drives, zooming in or out of Wadey, the hotspot down the track. Experts with heads full of reporting deadlines and performance indicators, rushing to sort out the woes of Wadey, too busy to pull over for a chat.

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# Darwin Dreaming

*Rohan Wightman*

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Oh poor Darwin, what has become of you? Once a frontier town, a unique architectural triumph of tropical style and Austalian resourcefulness; now the Gold COast's slatternly sister a spreadubg tragedy of cloned apartments spreading like lesions over the land.

Five years I've been in Darwin and lived in three houses, all close to the city. The first was an old fibro oven owned by the CWA in Packard Place, Larrakeyah; dwarfed by flats and not a tree to offer any shade. In that first year, four old Darwin houses within one block of our house were cut up and carted away or demolished. Once they were gone the early morning quiet was savaged by dynamite and jack hammers that harried the ground well after nightfall; soon followed by trucks, re-enforcing, concrete and metal as yet another apartment block grew into the sky and blotted out the sun.

Since then I've seen numerous other old houses disappear, trundling down the Stuart Highway like banished queens to end their days in a paddock in Virginia or Humpty Doo. Speaking of old queens, let's not forget the famous 'train', that glamorous piece of history regally reclining amongst the dense rainforest garden with the ubiquitous chorus of frogs singing its praises. (I was never sure if the frogs were real or recorded, they croaked at the same level through the wet and dry, which I've never heard anywhere else in Darwin.). Sitting there late at night over a beer was to be in a timeless oasis but one that was inherently tropical Darwin. Now of course the 'train' has gone and Darwin is poorer for it.

Darwin is fast becoming a collection of characterless tower blocks, each new one leap-frogging over the last to catch that harbor view. Where have our members of parliament, our councillors and town planning authorities been while construction companies are doing what two cyclones and a world war failed to do? Thinking about revenue, re-elections and dreaming of the Gold Coast no doubt.

This is not a diatribe against development and a plea to place Darwin in a time capsule, a sort of tropical Sovereign Hill; such a stance is unrealistic and naively romantic. Rather let me share with you what Darwin could be if those in power looked to Darwin's history, geography and environment

rather than stuck to their blinkered view that re-imagines Darwin as a soulless representation of any city anywhere in the world.

Darwin and the NT generally have always occupied a unique position within the Australian psyche and the demographic history of occupation/settlement. Henry Reynolds in *North of Capricorn*<sup>1</sup> paints a picture of a 'mulatto colony', where Indigenous Australians, Europeans and Asians mixed and procreated without the social taboos, and despite the legal taboos, that were more prevalent in the Southern States, so much so that the Southern States feared a 'mongrel invasion,' from the North. Similarly the Northern Territory's under-appreciated writer, Xavier Herbert in *Capricornia*<sup>2</sup>, details a Darwin, then called Palmerston, that was a multicultural blend of Indigenous Australians, Europeans, Chinese, Japanese and Macassans. Peta Stephenson, in her book *The Outsiders Within*<sup>3</sup>, charts the historic relationship between Indigenous Australians and Asians that in part preceded the appearance of Captain Cook or the Portuguese. This relationship saw intermarriage and extended travel between the Macassans and Yolngu people. Often Yolngu men would return to what is now Indonesia with the Macassans for a season, and some would take Macassan wives, as would the Macassans take Yolngu wives.

The Northern Territory has always been a place where Caucasians have been in the minority. Firstly outnumbered by Indigenous people and then by the Chinese who outnumbered Europeans 4 to 1 in the late 1800s.<sup>4</sup> Europeans were unable to work in the harsh tropical conditions of the Northern Territory and Darwin has always been a city of racial and cultural congregation, in part because of this and also because of the slow rate of white settlement in the far north of Australia and the proximity of Darwin to SE Asia. The link between the Northern Territory and SE Asia has always been strong, both before and after the appearance of Europeans. It is this unique historical reality that has made Darwin an oddity within the discourse of occupation and settlement. It was never able to succumb to the European aesthetic that dominated other Australian cities.

This link with SE Asia has been further enhanced more recently with the advent of low cost airlines, Tiger Air and Jetstar flying from Darwin to Singapore. It is now cheaper and faster to fly to most cities in SE Asia than it is to fly to any southern Australian city. It is these factors that should be making

Darwin Australia's only Asian city, thereby acknowledging both the historic links between the Northern Territory and SE Asia and the geographical reality that makes Darwin Australia's gateway to Asia.

\* \* \*

It is with this in mind that I envisage Darwin as once again becoming a unique city, rather than a stop on the way to Kakadu where tourists go to experience the other major cultural/historical signifier of the Northern Territory.

As it stands, Darwin city is nothing more than a couple of restaurants and an ugly nightclub strip, where no one in their right mind (that is, not drunk) would go after midnight. Darwin needs to become a city people go to because it's Darwin and there's nothing else like it in Australia. At the moment, Mitchell Street is a smaller version of King Street, Melbourne or Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, and aside from the markets there's not much that distinguishes Darwin from any other city. Let me share then my vision of Darwin, a vision that springs from having travelled throughout SE Asia and lived in or visited at length most of Australia's major cities.

\* \* \*

Markets in Darwin are hugely popular and a huge drawcard for the tourists who flock here in the dry. Mindil Beach market is so crowded that after 6:00 pm on a Thursday all you can do is shuffle with the crowd. Parap market isn't much better after 10:00 am on any Saturday, and Rapid Creek, Darwin's truly Asian market, is congested to the point of immovability on Sundays after 9:00 am.

Markets are the predominant shopping experience in SE Asia. In Thailand, nearly every half empty piece of street is either a day or night market, sometimes even both. Just about every city and suburb in SE Asia seems to have a market at least once a week, where people eat and socialise.

Darwin has some ideal places to hold markets – The Esplanade, Nightcliff foreshore and East Point to name a few. Darwin needs to expand its markets. A rotating night market that alternates between these three sites weekly (which is how the markets work in Northern New South Wales) and holds markets three times a week would be a boon to Darwin. A market at The Esplanade would increase public use after dark and reduce the number of violent bashings that seem to occur there regularly. Nightcliff becomes a desolate wasteland after dark and a market would give that picturesque suburb a few more eating options than the poor choice currently available.

All three sites have beautiful waterfront views and plenty of room, ideal for holding a market. Doubters may scoff at the suggestion, claiming there are not enough people in Darwin to make so many markets financially viable. My experience eating out during the Dry proves the opposite. Every restaurant in the CBD is generally full, often booked out, during the peak tourist season. Obviously people like to eat out in Darwin, and why not – the climate is ideal. I'm sure the people of Nightcliff would like a few more dining options than the pub, Chinese, Indian and Thai. In fact the popularity of the markets is proof enough that there is a demand for more.

Imagine going to the foreshore on a Friday night to see a strip of bright lights, crowds of people, smoke and fragrant smells drifting through the cool night air and buskers belting out tunes. Darwin would then become a town really known for its markets. The myriad of locals whose income either partially or wholly is supported by market culture would be better off, as would the support staff who make markets work.

Admittedly so many markets may not be viable during the Wet when Darwin's population plummets but I'm sure it would be viable during the Dry.

\* \* \*

Darwin's skyline is an abomination of featureless towers, the same towers that can be seen anywhere in Australia. If we must have apartment blocks, at least make them distinguishable from every other tower block in the country; that way people can look at the Darwin skyline and know they're in Darwin. Even the much mooted 'new Chinatown' in Cavenagh Street is lacking any real sense of being Asian, aside from a few Chinese characters embedded on one wall. Let's acknowledge our non-European heritage and embrace our Asian heritage by giving Darwin an Asian aesthetic such as this picture.

Darwin will then look truly unique and identifiable. After all, Sydney has the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, Brisbane the Story Bridge, Melbourne the Yarra River and Flinders Street Station. Darwin needs to be readily identifiable as Darwin, rather than any city, anywhere, any place; a sort of nowhere city.

\* \* \*

Darwin has a taxi shortage. The *NT News* has regular articles about the lack of taxis, leading to fights on Mitchell Street, a fact also supported by letters and texts to the editor about the same issue. I have waited for over half an hour for a taxi at the airport and have often been told no taxis are available when ringing to make a booking.

The ubiquitous motorised rickshaw has long been associated with SE Asia. Its unique design and colourful appearance distinguishes it wherever it is seen. Motorised rickshaws would alleviate the taxi shortage and would become a unique feature of Darwin. They would need to have a limited operating area, ten kilometers from the CBD and not on Tiger Brennan Drive, for example, but they would work well ferrying people to and from nightclubs, restaurants and markets and are ideally suited to the Darwin climate in the Dry season. Neither would these motorised rickshaws have to be the more famous Thai style Tuk-Tuk, for instance – Cambodia has a version that's like a carriage of old towed by a motorcycle.

Darwin streets buzzing with motorised rickshaws would be a tourist drawcard. People wouldn't come to Darwin for the rickshaws, but having a ride in one would form one of their Darwin experiences, much as it does for travelers in SE Asia. It would also make Darwin a distinguishable city as it would be the only city in Australia where you could ride on motorised rickshaws.

\* \* \*

Darwin Harbour is highly under-utilised. If you don't own a boat, your opportunity to see the harbour is limited to rental or friends. Darwin city from the harbour is spectacular, offering a vista of views that greet the lucky few who can get out on the water. From the sheer cliffs of East Point to the white sands of Casuarina to the Wharf. Much of Darwin's social life occurs close to the harbour – from the clubs that dot the foreshore to Mindil Beach market and the Wharf, Darwinites and tourists can be seen congregating at these and other spots.

It makes sense to have water taxis plying their trade on the harbour, not just any taxis but long-tail boats, a form of transport in Asia that is as ubiquitous as the motorised rickshaw. Long-tailed boats are wooden boats that sit up to twenty people; they are long and thin and are propelled by a long drive shaft with propeller attached to a car motor, with the operator having the ability to easily swing the shaft out of the water. Long-tailed boats are usually decorated in bright colours and in SE Asia they ply their trade up and down rivers as well as the sea.

A fleet of long-tailed boats operating as water taxis would change the way Darwin Harbour is used. Instead of being something most of us look at, it would become something we could really experience. They could work from

Dinah Beach to the Darwin Life Saving Club, enabling people to drop into the Ski Club, Mindil Beach, the Wharf and Deck Chair Cinema and all the places in between that people frequent, as well as going to Mandorah and Wagait Beach.

Darwin Harbour is calm most of the time, especially in the Dry, when such a service would be most utilised, so there would be no risk of capsizing. Such a service could make Darwin Harbour rival Sydney Harbour in terms of harbour culture and by extension the nature of life in Darwin.

\* \* \*

So dear reader I ask you to close your eyes and imagine all that I have mentioned as a coalescence of images; Darwin distinguished by apartment blocks with sloping Asian roofs, foreshore crammed with a vibrant, noisy markets almost every night, colourful motorised rickshaws plying their trade around the streets and elaborately decorated long-tailed boats darting around the harbour taking people from foreshore club to market to home, all on a classic Dry season day or cool night.

We could finally break out of the beer, crocodile and cyclone obsession that underpins the Northern Territory's id<sup>s</sup> and become unique without being a parody of the past. An element of our past, one that is exceptional within the discourse of Australian history, would become embodied within the fabric of the Darwin. Darwin never has and never will be a European city and what better way to state this than by making Darwin Australia's only Asian city. It certainly has more appeal than a dismal convention centre, more indistinguishable apartment blocks, and a main street full of angry drunks every night, which seems to be Darwin's future at the moment.

Now is the time for this to happen. Darwin is developing rapidly and the mineral boom and the water shortages down south have made Darwin a sought after place. The tragedy is that this opportunity to transform Darwin (and it is going to be change, no matter how much people don't want it to) into something unique is being lost because those in power, who steer development and progress, who are supposed to have some sort of vision, have turned south for their inspiration rather than north, where Darwin has always looked to for its future and where so much of its past is located.

Maybe your vision of Darwin isn't like mine, maybe it's similar. Whatever the case, take some time and think about what Darwin could be and what it's

becoming. Go and nail your thesis on the doors of Parliament House, on the foreheads of our MPs and the BMWs of the town planners. Demand some action and some vision before Darwin does become the slatternly sister of the Gold Coast and we're left to suffer in the shadows made by visionless fools.

### Endnotes

1. Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, Allen and Unwin 2004
2. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, Angus and Robertson 1987
3. Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* UNSW Press 2007
4. Ibid Reynolds
5. As in the Freudian term, not the acronym for identification.

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*Rohan writes in between teaching and getting to know his young daughter.  
He has a study full of unpublished manuscripts.*

# Finding Lorna

*Margaret Gargan*

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Lorna is my Aboriginal nanny who cared for me in my early childhood. I grew up on a farm in Atherton in North Queensland. My mother was very ill and Lorna was employed to do the domestic work and care my two brothers and I.

Lorna was 17 years old and this was her first job since leaving Mona Mona Mission in Kuranda. She had soft brown skin the colour of bush honey, lovely curly brown hair and brown eyes that were full of mischief and forever smiling. She was a little taller than I am now, probably about 5ft 5ins and what is often described as 'pleasantly plump', which was lovely for me because she used to cuddle me so much and I felt safe and loved. I spent more time with Lorna than my brothers because I was the youngest and she adopted me as her daughter.

Lorna lived in *The Hut* which was the place that all our hired help lived in over the years. The hut looked out of place because it was an add-on to the rest of our buildings. Our home was really quite modern for its day. It even had a septic system and an inside loo next to the bathroom. This was in the 1950s. We were part of only a few homes that were so sophisticated. Nearly every one else had a thunderbox out the back.

The buildings consisted of the main house, a laundry and garage. The hut was next to the garage. The hut was makeshift as it was put together hurriedly and very basic. It was made of a mixture of timber and iron, only one bedroom and had the type of windows that were unique at the time. They were made of roofing iron and were held open with a stick. All that was in there was an old metal bed with a horsehair mattress on it. It had an old cupboard and a small wooden table.

There were no cooking or washing-up facilities. That was all done in the main house. The laundry had a shower room for hired staff. Lorna's job was to do all the housework. She had been trained well at the mission. To do our washing we had a huge copper that had a fire under it to keep it boiling. All the washing went in there, and was then removed by a long stick and rinsed in a tub and put through the wringer of our very modern Simpson washing machine. What a scary thing the wringer was. It was so new in those days and

so many people had nasty accidents from forgetting to remove their fingers or hands when the washing was going through.

We had lovely polished floors throughout the house and it was Lorna's job to put on the polish and use the electric polisher to buff it up. I used to stand on the machine and go around with her but the best part was when she had finished and the floors were nice and slippery. Lorna was full of mischief and would put me on the end of a blanket, make me hold on for dear life and then whizz me through all the rooms in the house, with me squealing with delight.

Lorna made my life magical. We had such wondrous adventures like going down to Mazlin Creek which meandered its way through our farm. She taught me how to pull out the seaweed and spread it on the bank and pick out the shrimps. Then we would lift rocks gently and catch the yabbies hiding there. When we had a feed, which often took a long time, we would go up to the house and 'cook em up'. It was a painstakingly tedious task peeling the tiny shrimps and yabbies once they were cooked but the result was worth it. They were deliciously sweet and succulent.

Lorna introduced me to bush tucker. Our farm was dotted with guava trees and bush lemons. I learnt to know which guavas didn't have maggots in them. They had to be a certain ripeness just before they became infested otherwise it was too late. The bush lemons also had to be ripe enough so we could eat the flesh inside as well as the skin. As a treat we would take the lemons back to the house and eat the flesh with salt. I find myself salivating every time I think about them.

Mulberries were one of my favourites. I would go home with my feet, hands and tongue purple so there was no mistaking where I had been. Lorna taught me how to eat the fruit of the wild lillypillies. I always sample them to this day. We also ate pigweed and Chinese cabbage which I wasn't particularly fond of, and of course yams. I used to love finding them on the banks of the creek, pulling them out and cooking them.

Fortunately my father had the foresight to plant lots of fruit and nut trees. We had several Queensland nut and one pecan nut tree which always had an abundance of nuts on the ground. Dad had a vice in his workshop in the laundry. We learnt just how far to go to squeeze the Queensland nuts so you could have a whole nut and not a squashed one. The fresh nuts were so delicious. Sometimes we baked them in the oven with salt as a special treat.

We were always raiding some sort of fruit tree which was in season whether it be navel oranges, mandarins, avocados, custard apples, figs or the lovely china flat peaches. Lorna was the centre of my universe and I adored her. Whenever I could I would go into the hut and she would cuddle me while I slept.

Lorna loved her job with us. One day she just disappeared! My life could never be the same. I was eight years of age. At about the same time, my mother told me that my father had said it was up to her to rear me and he would rear my brothers. I felt so frightened, alone and abandoned. Lorna had been my world and now she was gone. I became a registered nurse and worked in different parts of Australia so was away from the tablelands for most of my adult life.

I reconnected with my grass roots in Alice Springs. It was the year 2000 and I was there on a spiritual retreat with Aboriginal elders from Alice Springs and a group of holistic nurses from America and Australia. As a registered nurse I specialised in caring for people with cancer and people who are dying and the spiritual side of my life was as vital as my breath. I was attracted to this particular retreat because of the involvement of the traditional Aboriginal elders including 'Uncle' Bob Randal. We were introduced to the elders.

I felt such joy to be there. It was like a homecoming for me. To be in the presence of these wise beings was spine-chilling. After introductions, the elders started singing welcome songs in their language. They went to the very core of my being and I was overwhelmed with grief and couldn't stop sobbing. A friend who was also on the retreat and knew me well was looking at me strangely. I realised that I had been grieving for my Nanny for all of this time. This was the first time since Lorna had left that I had heard what to me was the beautiful, haunting sound of the music and the words even though I had never been able to understand them. I told them about Lorna and the elders understood perfectly because if you have been involved with them so intimately you are one of them. You are their daughter. They sang healing songs to me. One of the participants also played a very unusual instrument that had a mystical and haunting sound that was also healing.

While on the retreat we went with Bob Randal to see where he had spent his childhood as part of the Stolen Generation. He sang the song he wrote about his experience – *"Why did you take my black baby away from me?"* The song was so poignant and moving that it set me off again. I sobbed and sobbed

and didn't know how or when it would happen, but I was determined to become part of the reconciliation process. I also vowed right then and there that I wouldn't rest until I found Lorna again or at least found out what had happened to her and why she just disappeared.

I reflected on all of the wonderful things Lorna taught me and the unconditional love she gave. It was the only way she knew. I believe that it was her influence that created the person that I became. I have always been someone who genuinely cares and has compassion for my fellow human beings. I believe that I inherited her *generosity of spirit*. After she left, my life was dismal for me. Lorna had been my protector! When she left I was open to abuse from my oldest brother and was really like an orphan within my family, apart from my youngest brother who was always there for me and still is my best friend and confidante.

Shortly after I had been on the retreat I returned to North Queensland. It was time for me to reconnect with my home country and hopefully reconnect with Lorna. I was on the Skyrail going from Cairns to Kuranda. We stopped off to listen to an Aboriginal guide who explained about the flora and fauna of the region. My intuition kicked in. I knew that Lorna came from near Kuranda so I went up to him and said: "You are going to think I am quite strange but I am looking for my Aboriginal nanny and all I know is that her name is Lorna." He asked me where she came from and I said Mona Mona Mission. He said that would be Lorna Mitchell and she lives in Mareeba.

I couldn't believe that she had been so close to me all those years and I didn't know it. He told me where she lived in Mareeba. I went straight there with my partner at that time but she wasn't home. One of the neighbours told me that even though she didn't drink herself she would be at a certain hotel with her friends. We went there and were waiting outside. All of a sudden this lady walked past and the hair on the back of my neck stood up and I got goose bumps all over me. I whispered to my partner, "I'm sure that is Lorna." I didn't have the courage to ask her just in case I was wrong but I knew in my heart and soul that it was her. After 43 years I recognised her!

When we went around to her home it was her! She recognised me immediately and we both cried and hugged and laughed and cried again because she had been looking for me also. As far as she was concerned I was and always would be her daughter. It was wonderful to be able to thank her for all the love and devotion she had given me when I was so young and

vulnerable. I had limited time then, but I was able to return several times and met more of my family.

The second time I saw her she was living in a different place and I met my brother Lexton. We acknowledged each other as brother and sister. In 2004 I made sure I had enough time to spend with Lorna and two of her granddaughters, Valeeta and Jodi. Lorna was experiencing the early stages of dementia so they were able to help me clarify some points. I was able to find out more about Lorna's life and why she had disappeared.

Lorna was born in Port Douglas. Her father was from Mosman. She was one of two children but her parents had lost a lot of children and sadly Lorna's mother died giving birth to one of those children. Lorna grew up in the Molbray River area near Port Douglas, where she remembered hunting and gathering bush food. She especially loved to eat fish.

The authorities came and Lorna's dad had to make a decision whether to send his children to Yarrabah or Mona Mona Mission. He chose Mona Mona Mission. At seven years of age Lorna became one of the lost generation. Her brother went with her. He was four years old. They worked in the paddocks ploughing and doing all sorts of chores. Lorna could only speak her own language. Her tribe was Kukyalangi and her language was Yalangi. She was not allowed to speak anything except English.

I can't help thinking just how traumatic it must have been. To be taken away from her father who she had a loving and close relationship with and then to be even more isolated because she couldn't speak her own language. Luckily there was one older girl who spoke her language and helped her learn English. I felt so traumatised for Lorna and felt rather ashamed that she had to endure this but also extremely grateful that she had been chosen to come into my family as my nanny.

I found out on this visit why she had just disappeared. She had become involved with a white neighbour and had become pregnant so had to go back to the mission. She showed me a photo of her son from that relationship. He was the father of some of her grandchildren and she was so proud of him. Sadly he was no longer alive. I would have loved to meet him. It was wonderful to be able to spend time with some of Lorna's grandchildren and great grandchildren and feel so connected to them. I was also able to tell them that I was writing a story about the time I spent with Lorna and would make sure they had a copy.

I didn't see Lorna again. I was aware that she wasn't well but didn't get the opportunity to visit her. A friend of mine who worked in the Mareeba Hospital informed me that Lorna had died. I contacted the family and found out when her funeral was on. I visited her at the funeral home prior to the service. Because I have worked in the area of palliative care for so many years these places don't scare me one bit. They are like an old friend to me. I know how important it is to say goodbye.

I was able to spend some precious and intimate time with Lorna alone. I caressed her beloved face and hair. I gave thanks for having the opportunity to reconnect with her again. I would have been so full of regrets if I hadn't. I thanked her from my heart again and told her how much I loved her. She looked so peaceful and had a faint smile on her lips. Lorna was religious and had great faith in her god. To see her you would have to believe she was in a better place.

When the family came we hugged and cried. I stayed for a little while and then let them have private time. I went to the church for the celebration of her life. I discussed with the minister when the timing would be appropriate for me to pay my tribute to Lorna. The church was packed to the rafters and people were milling both sides and at the back of the church. She only knew unconditional love and it was returned to her. When it was time for me to participate I spoke from my heart and told everyone how much I loved Lorna, how I had found her again by asking the guide on the Skyrail. I told them what an influence she had on my life and how grateful I was. I acknowledged my brother Lexton and gave him a kiss on the cheek when I returned to my seat.

After the service a gentleman came up to me and told me he was the guide from the Skyrail. At the cemetery I was acknowledged as one of the family and was offered condolences. I felt so proud and so honoured to be included with the family. We were sitting on seats beside Lorna's coffin and everyone filed past and dropped flowers into her grave. The brown hands of all different shades that held mine, touched me deeply. Some were light brown, some white and some really black, all different sizes with degrees of gentleness or firmness. I was overwhelmed at the outpouring of love I received. Afterwards we went back to the KuKu Djungan community centre for refreshments. Lorna had spent a lot of time there in her later years. I met some of the people who Lorna had shared her dormitory with and so many people whose lives she had touched.

I was asked to say the grace before the celebratory meal. I looked around at the legacy Lorna had left behind. Her nineteen grandchildren and seventeen great grandchildren. The tributes written by her family were testimony to the love and devotion she had given everyone of them. All the beautiful young people who had always been Lorna's world. One of Lorna's family members said: "You have to be one in a million. I haven't heard of anyone else going out of their way to find their nanny." My reply was that Lorna had been my *shining light* and to find her again was one of the most important things I could do in my life.

I am now back in the Northern Territory caring for elders in a nursing home in Katherine as well as concentrating on my passion for writing. I love what I am able to do and feel in some ways that I am contributing towards reconciliation and even though I couldn't care for Lorna, I am able to give back some of the love she gave to me.

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*I am a registered nurse. My grand passion is caring for the dying. I have developed four models of care. My nanny Lorna was a major influence in my life. It is important to me to share my experiences.*

# The Belles of Saint Mary's

## Memories of growing up Catholic in Darwin during the sixties

Jane Clancy

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### Synopsis

*As the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart journey back to Darwin for their Centenary Celebration, they will rekindle for many locals, memories of their own journey into womanhood. This essay will entertain and is inspired by the oral histories of a group of women now in their fifties, who grew up Catholic, in Darwin during the sixties.*

Women in the sixties were not allowed to enter church without a mantilla or a hat, and gentlemen would not enter rooms without removing theirs. No one questioned the double standard, so when Saint John's boys and Saint Mary's girls celebrated Mass at the Cathedral, the nuns insisted on proper headwear. While the temptation to catch the boys' eyes was almost irresistible, few maidens dared break the mantilla rule, for the nuns had ways of ensuring girls conformed. Lucy recalls:

*Lucy: Ohhhhh! When you knew Saint John's was coming! I decided to leave my mantilla at home. So I had to wear a newspaper and I sat through Mass, with the Saint John's boys there and a newspaper on my head! I didn't forget my mantilla again! That was, I think, one day that I was going to be an obnoxious madam. They had a way of making sure you didn't do it again. Embarrass you once; that was it!<sup>1</sup>*

Segregated from boys and entering puberty, the focus on the body and sexuality was prominent in the girls' schooling but strict discipline and constant warnings sometimes had unintended outcomes.

*Amanda: I remember all the boys would sit on one side and all the girls on the other and sister used to say to us: 'You're not allowed to turn your head to the left' and you know, we'd be looking at the boys. Ohhh! And we used to send messages, you know, jot little notes!<sup>2</sup>*

Discipline and rigorous training were part of Catholic schooling and Convent girls put their *personal stamp* on all performances. Sports days were no exception.

Sister Francine (now Anne Gardener) was instrumental in teaching figure marching. It took time but she firmly and warmly encouraged the girls to develop a *sense of mastery*. She inspired them and they practised till it was perfect, as Amanda recalled:

*Amanda: That sort of marching was excellent, 'ey? Yeah, for hours we used to practise! And those nuns used to be really strict and, well I wish they were here teaching the kids now, because the kids nowadays got no respect for elders!<sup>13</sup>*

Sports days involved positive discipline and inspired much respect for the nuns and everyone had fun, as Colleen remembers:

*Colleen: It was over on that bloody tennis court! Hot! Yeah! Marching with a drum and American music! You used to wear this white dress but we were all gammon and proud to be there, though! Oh! It was fun! You'd go home the end of the day. Hot! Tired! Bloody Paddle Pop all down ya white dress!<sup>4</sup>*

Christmas concerts and Eisteddfods were also performances requiring practice and dedication.

*Joan: Ohhhh! It was a major thing! And we'd practise for months and months! Yeah they were just really exciting times because parent participation was huge! I mean the whole Palais would be full with all the parents and you know it would be just really exciting!<sup>15</sup>*

When it came to performances, the nuns were truly inspirational and the most perfect performances remaining in my memory are the Christmas concerts.

*We used to practise in the Palais, an old Sydney Williams hut; a tin shed with push-out windows on sticks and a stage. Those concerts were polished performances culminating in a wonderful Nativity Scene that came at considerable sacrifice, as we practised in the stifling heat of the Build Up. No air conditioning! It was like an oven!*

*Perspiration poured out of us and we kept practising until it was perfect. We practised often; we practised hard; we sometimes practised until someone fainted and then we took a break. We accepted the discipline as normal for us; it was what was expected and any discomforts were offered up to God as small sacrifices. It was just accepted that if we were going to put on a concert, then we had to do it well. That sense of perfection is still with me today.*

*Despite all the sacrifices, I loved those concerts. The final night was always fantastic; the costumes, the lights; the sense of awe you felt performing the Nativity; and the hush that fell as we sang Silent Night. It really meant something. It was a wonderful and exciting sense of spirit. We learnt a lot about performing, from the nuns and to this day, I still love concerts, the theatre and most of all, performing.<sup>6</sup>*

Amanda and Maggie recall the joys of singing, and hearing songs from that era only conjures up positive memories.

*Amanda: I go to the Aboriginal mass and they always sing hymns we used to sing at school. That's why I really enjoy going. It just brings back all the old memories.<sup>7</sup>*

*Maggie: When they started the guitar and the music was jazzed up, it gave you the incentive and I mean you used to think that you were the most beautiful singer! The sound just traveled and you had a sense of satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>*

The excitement of participating in processions and the hymn singing accompanied by the magnificent Cathedral organ, all conjure up well-practised performances. These rituals played to our senses, capturing in our minds *a union of performance and pleasure*. What happened is unimportant but the emotion evoked is something else: it is *what makes up the performance*.<sup>9</sup>

Excellence extended to bookwork. Some of the women despair of their children's efforts today:

*Colleen: I always remember having to rule your book up and write 'SHJ'. You always had to rule off. And it's funny but my own kids, I've looked at their work saying: "For God sake! You can't just go all over the bloody world with this book! How come you Mob don't rule it off after each day's work?" You just would not dare move to another page! Even in Grade Two, we had to ask to take a new page!<sup>10</sup>*

Maria believes that what is missing today is the influence of the nuns and priests.

*Maria: YEAH! I got a lot of respect for the convent, because there wasn't peer pressure. These days, they got no nuns and I don't give a shit what anyone can tell me, I reckon if they're going to a Catholic school, they should be taught by the nuns and the priests..<sup>11</sup>*

Corporal punishment kept everyone in line. The 'strap' or a 'cane' was used and was described as *'getting the cuts'*. I remember it well!

*I was sent to Sister Florence. Everyone feared 'getting the cuts' from her. Techniques to lesson the blow were tried and a favourite myth that went around was that, if you licked your hands first, or rubbed chalk into them, then 'the cuts' wouldn't hurt as much. I didn't try it; I was too scared to, in case I got found out. Thankfully, I only ever got 'the cuts' once from Sr. Florence. She got out the cane and I got six of the best and returned to class biting my bottom lip. The red welts across my hands made it quite clear why it was called, 'getting the cuts'!*<sup>12</sup>

Amanda remembers getting 'the cuts' but not the reason why.

*Amanda: I got 'the cuts'. You had to go to the year 7 class and Sister Florence had this big cane. It looked like a big liquorice! Then she'd give ya one, two or three 'cuts'. It depends on how bad you been. I can't remember what I did. Maybe I didn't do my homework. I dunno.*<sup>13</sup>

An ingenious method of discipline was devised by the Year 4 nun. If students talked too much, a peg was put on their tongues:

*Having a wooden peg clipped on the tongue for talking in class was physically and emotionally painful. Apart from the fact that the peg hurt, the fear of further punishment prevented me from releasing the peg in order to swallow. Ultimately, the saliva ended up dribbling out onto the page and I was painfully aware that others would notice!*<sup>14</sup>

It did not deter my talking, for I received the 'peg treatment' numerous times that year.

For Joan, strict discipline and maths lessons filled her with fear.

*Joan: I wasn't good at maths and every day we'd start with maths! Ohhhh! I'd be so sick because I knew she'd call me up to do those pounds, shillings and pence sums and I didn't know my tables, so she'd ridicule me. Then I'd have to sit out on the verandah and learn my times tables, which of course, I didn't do, did I?*<sup>15</sup>

Banishment had a sobering effect on students. That *Jiminy Cricket* voice, called the 'conscience' played your guilty transgressions back over in your head, like a broken record. There was no escape and rules micro-managed every part of your life:

1. *Always speak in a pleasant tone of voice. Avoid shouting, rough laughter and coarse language in public as well as on the school premises.*
2. *The full school uniform is to be worn each day. It is to be clean and neat and must be the proper length - not more than 4 inches above the knee.*

10. *Girls must come direct to school and return home on the school bus. Loitering in milk bars or on the streets before and after school is forbidden.*<sup>16</sup>

In shaping our bodies and souls, all aspects of our person were scrutinised, even our hemlines! On Monday mornings, Sister sometimes measured our skirts to ensure uniforms were no shorter than 4 inches above the knee when kneeling. Girls with skirts too short had to unpick their hemlines, so Maggie found ways around it!

*Maggie: I was told to go to the toilets and unpick it and I thought: 'Right! I'll sprag them!' So I took it up around the waist, so that there was no tampering with the bottom. It wasn't really short but it was a reasonable length. I mean, we didn't want to go around like old maids so if we walked up town, we hitched it up with the belt!*<sup>17</sup>

The Star and the Parap Theatres played a significant role in the lives of Darwin youngsters growing up in the sixties. Stories about Friday and Saturday nights not only exposed the racism and class structures of the time; they also exposed the rituals of Darwin adolescents and the expectations placed upon them.

The Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 finally legislated that it was illegal to discriminate by refusing people access to places or services on the basis of race.<sup>18</sup>

But this was the sixties and the civil rights movement was still gaining momentum. Access to facilities and services were denied to sections of the populace across the country. Discrimination and segregation were the norm and in places like the Star and Parap Theatres, colour bars operated.

*Amanda: I remember we had to line up to sit in different areas and they used to have all the Aboriginals sitting in the front near the screen, where you got to look up. They had to sit on the concrete and there was no protection, like if it rained, they got wet and I remember a wire fence there and that was their boundary. The next lot of seats were canvas and that was more our style. The rich white people had seating up above and because we're not white. We didn't know what sort of seats but we knew they were very comfortable. They used to sit on the top, so they can look down to get a better view.*<sup>19</sup>

Amanda never went up to the balcony because there were different entrances:

*Amanda: They'd have people standing out there asking for your tickets and only white people could go on top and all the black ones weren't allowed*

*to walk in the same area. They had to walk outside and there was another entrance for them, right near the screen.<sup>20</sup>*

Joan, an Anglo-Australian remembers the class and racial barriers associated with going to the theatres and the entertainment this arrangement unwittingly provided.

Joan: You went and paid your money. I don't ever remember going to that downstairs part because it was just for the Aboriginals and we'd sit up there and look down and there seemed to be a fence that divided them 'cause it was sort of half roofed, so the Aboriginals had to sit in the half that wasn't roofed. I think that's how it worked and most of the time, there was fights and carrying on with the Aboriginals, so the entertainment would be in watching them down there, having their blues and so finally, someone would come and usher them out, or tell them to shut up.<sup>21</sup>

The theatres provided the social highlight of the week for youngsters living in an era prior to television and mobile phones. The pictures attracted a colourful spectrum of youth. There were the bikies hovering around the milk bars, listening to the jukeboxes, the young girls looking for excitement and loitering around the street, and the Greeks driving up and down Smith Street in their souped-up cars. Stories about the theatres tell of racism, ritual and the entrepreneurial spirit of youngsters trying to make a quick few bob!

For Joan, loitering in milk bars was just part of the excitement of going to the 'flicks'.

*Joan: Well Friday nights, we'd go to the pictures and hang around outside first and see the Greeks driving up and down the main street doing their Wog whistles at everybody. You'd tease the life out of them and parade up and down and always walk down to Woolworths and back a few times. Then finally, you'd get into the pictures.<sup>22</sup>*

*Maria liked parading up and down too, and while the theatre provided a suitable rendezvous, dating Greek boys in that era had its price.*

*Maria: Every Wednesday was Ranch Night and I used to tell my grandmother we liked to go and see the cowboy movies but we really didn't go to see the movies, we went to see the guys! I went with the Greeks but my uncle got cheesed off. Like, the Greeks were called 'Wogs' and it was a heavy name and I suppose my uncle was just really watching out for me and being thirteen, I was sort of fully developed.<sup>23</sup>*

The derogatory name for Greeks was 'Wogs'; it was a 'heavy name'. Some said it stood for '*Workers on Government Service*' but the stigma still remained and 'Wog' could be even more derogatory, if prefaced with '*Greasy*'.

Name calling is a part of the Australian psyche and labels abound. The label for girls who dated Greek boys in Darwin during the sixties was 'Wog Bait'. Arranged marriages were the Greek way of doing things, so if a non-Greek girl went steady with a Greek boy, it was unlikely to lead to something respectable, like marriage. Australian girls who dated Greek boys risked eventual rejection and unhappiness, as well as community scorn from both sides.

Entrepreneurial skills were part of the adolescent way of life at the picture theatres. Some spent time devising ways of getting good cheap seats, while others vied for the empty, refundable, Coca Cola bottles. Joan recalls the havoc this must have caused to the budget of an Aboriginal family who cleaned the Parap Theatre.

*Joan: When the pictures finished they'd do the cleaning and back then, everything was in bottles and you got refunds. So part of their payment was, they'd get the bottles and the 3c refund on each one but we thought that was a really good lark, so we'd spend half the night crawling on our hands and knees underneath people's seats getting their bottles! At the end of the night, we'd go into the little fish and chip shop and cash in the bottles and end up with a fortune! More than what we'd been given to go to the pictures with! Then the lady operating the theatre cottoned on to this, didn't she. Of course the cleaners weren't getting as many bottles either, [so after that], we were only allowed so many.<sup>24</sup>*

With little money, some of the girls discovered the joys of upward mobility. Like Maria, they paid for cheap seats and worked their way up, as the night wore on:

*Maria: We'd line up with the Aborigines to pay really cheap fares and stay right up the front and pretend we were with them, because those days, the Aborigines were really good. Then before interval, you'd go to the back and sort of say, 'I'm just going to the loo', and you see the bloke was at the door thinking you'd come from the chairs? So we'd get our pass out and come back before interval, and we'd use that pass out to go upstairs! And that's when we hit the box! There was more of a luxury area upstairs and there was a girls' box and boys' box. The girls were this side and the boys [the other] and ninety-five percent it was boys and girls together! So when the lights went on, we were ducking!<sup>25</sup>*

To know a past is beyond our immediate capacity. We can only know a past through the histories made of it, by the past becoming in some way a text which we must read not just for the story it tells but also for the occasion of its telling.<sup>26</sup> Whenever I recall these stories and the occasion of their telling, I will remember the Sisters and the girls. They are the beautiful women and will always be the *Belles of Saint Mary's*.

## Endnotes

- 1 Transcript: Lucy's Story, 1997, pp.6-7.
- 2 Transcript: Amanda's Story, 1997, p.12.
- 3 Transcript: Amanda's Story, 1997, p.2.
- 4 Transcript: Colleen's Story, 1997, pp.11-12.
- 5 Transcript: Joan's Story, 1997, p.9.
- 6 Author's Personal Narratives: Sacrifices in the Old Palais, 1996.
- 7 Amanda's Story, 1997, p.5.
- 8 Maggie's Story, 1997, p.12.
- 9 G. Denning, Performances, Melbourne University Press, 1996, p.60.
- 10 Colleen's Story, 1997, p.13.
- 11 Maria's Story, 1997, p 13-15.
- 12 Author's Personal Narratives: Getting 'The Cuts', 1996.
- 13 Amanda's Story, 1997, p.3.
- 14 Author's Personal Narratives: A peg on the Tongue, 1996.
- 15 Joan's Story, 1997, p. 7-8
- 16 Joan's Artifact: Saint Mary's School Rules.1968
- 17 Maggie's story, 1997, pp. 10-11.
- 18 K. Healey, Issues for the Nineties: Racism and Reconciliation, Vol. 28, Spinney Press, NSW.1994, p1.
- 19 Amanda's Story, 1997, p.15.
- 20 Amanda's Story, 1997, p.14.
- 21 Joan's Story, 1997, p.14.
- 22 Joan's Story, 1997, p.14.
- 23 Maria's Story, 1997, p.14.
- 24 Joan's Story, 1997, p.15.
- 25 Maria's Story, 1997, p.14
- 26 Denning, 1996, p.17.

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*Jane has lived in the NT since 1968. She loves the Territory and particularly Darwin and is inspired by the characters who live here and the wonderful stories they tell. Jan is an avid writer.*

# Bird Watching

*Helen Smyth*

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## Synopsis

*Bird Watching is a narrative essay and has been written both to entertain and to inform. It is written in a slightly humorous, self effacing style with the ultimate point being made by the author that all life is connected and the final act of death is universal.*

Bird watching is an interesting pastime; it is available freely to all, both young and old, requires little equipment and is a healthy outdoor leisure activity offering the opportunity to view spectacular countryside and discover new friends. It also offers a world of mystery, to be discovered in virtually all climactic zones on earth, including the desert, as illustrated by the following experience.

\* \* \*

Sunday, traditionally a lie-in day: a day to wander aimlessly at the edge of waking, a day to glance gloatingly at the silent bedside clock before turning to retreat into a pleasant dream. But on a bird watching Sunday it's different. At five thirty, the alarm clock is slammed into submission and one could find oneself wondering, "Why do I do these things, why do I commit myself to such foolishness?" But it does no good to procrastinate. If late, they'll start without you and waking at such a ridiculous hour will have been wasted.

The streets are almost deserted at that hour; a lone camp dog, its withered dugs and collarless neck proclaiming its freedom to wander aimlessly crosses the railway tracks bordering the road. The thrum of the tyres on the tarmac numbs any thoughts or reminiscences of the warm bed recently vacated. Thankfully the sun, low on the horizon, is kind to early risers, its warm rays a welcoming reward for effort; a sharp contrast to the wrath it exerts on those late sleepers who are instead thrust into the day by a fierce glaring light which at its zenith sends man and beast in desperate search of any meagre dappling of shade.

A few people are milling about the gates, one or two heads rise to acknowledge the new arrival. "Morning!" they might mumble, it's too early

to speak clearly or in full sentences. Most are office workers, accustomed to civilized hours and practices that involve a rejuvenating hot cup of tea or coffee that starts the day sometime between eight and nine, maybe ten on a Sunday.

“Okay!” A voice of authority rises like the breaking dawn. The source, a tall thin grey-bearded man stands confidently in scuffed walking boots, well kitted with binoculars hanging from a weathered neck and wearing bulging, many pocketed pants. “All here!” A man of few words, he quickly glances around to confirm his opinion before stepping through the open gate.

Inside, a lush grass verge lies alongside a series of coarse grey gravel paths that divide pools of shimmering water into an enormous waffle like grid. The group straggles along the path, a band of hunters in single file stealthily searching out their prey. At first glance the water on either side of the path appears still and lifeless. It glistens in the early light like the solar panels on the roofs of the town but it lies flat in this desert landscape; the gusting hot breeze off the parched arid plains has not yet risen to disturb its ethereal veneer. Peering at its surface, for it is impossible to see into its dark depths, the water palpitates and throbs like an immense quivering jelly. On closer inspection it is alive; pulsing with life. A faint humming resonating in the air reveals wisps of insects skimming across the water, then hovering. Here, then there, from one indefinable location to another.

Its time to begin. Binoculars raised, one scans the water, searching. Bird watching in the desert might seem incongruous but it proves worthwhile when the first sighting, always memorable, is made. On this occasion – black swans, gliding gracefully as only swans can, with barely a ripple to mark their path. They are magnificent birds, ebony black feathers glisten smoothly on their heads, their necks majestically incline, as if generously consenting to your gazing upon them.

Suddenly, in response to some unheard command, the birds stretch their wings, raise themselves onto their stump-like legs and churn across the water searching for the momentum to propel them into the air where they glide imperiously. The momentary ungainliness of the struggle for flight is forgotten; a haughty fanning of white-tipped wings propels them across the ocean of outback sky.

“Wow!” One might be tempted to murmur in appreciation but true veterans lowers their heads, not in reverence, but to meticulously record the first

sighting in their notebooks. The bulging pockets of a birdwatcher contain the 'essentials' – a notebook and pen and a pocket edition of the birdwatchers' book of choice.

To the south of these ponds, voluminous curves rise from the earth; their slopes are patterned with grey-green shrubs and split by splashes of ochre water courses carved out over the centuries. Sprawling beneath them, the monotony of flat scrubby plain is broken by the occasional dead tree, erect and newly reinvigorated by the constant stirring of flocks of Fairy Martins. It's sometimes impossible to focus on a single bird and this is one such occasion. They each constantly dart between branches noisily chirping to one another, constantly forming and re-forming into cohorts that sortie into the surrounding bushes or swoop across the waters before returning to headquarters.

Bird watchers tend to cluster too, the Fairy Wrens, identified and duly recorded, we now gather around a telescope that belongs to one member of the group. Having set it up on the path it's focused on the wading birds in the shallows. At times, some debate regarding the correct name of the birds being watched takes place, for example: is red-legged or red-kneed most accurate?

As an amateur, one might be forgiven if unable to make a distinction between the knee and the leg of a bird or maybe not even having the imagination to consider that birds had knees, especially in light of the general usage of the word knee: 'knead in the groin, knee high socks, knee length skirts, on your knees, kneeling, knee high,' none of which inspires images of birds.

A sense of mystery too, is not lacking in bird watchers. One might ponder on why might those wily 'Twitchers' focus on this small part of a bird's anatomy when searching for a name anyway? Clearly, this poor bird must have little else to offer in the way of identifying features but no, the bird in question, a red-kneed dotterel, is a handsome, well groomed bird distinctly marked in white, black, and light brown, with a touch of ochre beneath its wings, an ambiguity indeed.

Another sighting, this time the focus is on a Hoary-headed Grebe but unfortunately the bird plunges its head into the water in search of a meal and suspense prevails until it eventually emerges, allowing verification as a quick glimpse of a silver grey skull appears before submerging again. Ducks, both black and brown, black-winged stilts, spotted sandpipers, terns and red-

capped plovers are all, in their turn added to the growing lists. It is indeed a marvel to realize that one does not even have to venture far from home to compile a quite extensive collection of names.

Infrequently wandering entirely aimlessly, the bird watchers have reached their goal, in this instance, a bird hide, a cleverly disguised row of bound sticks with a timber bench inside. There is ample opportunity for socializing and discussing the sightings while continuing to watch for different birds to add to the growing list. The initial monosyllabic morning greeting is not a true reflection of the affable nature of the average bird watcher and with the commonality of the shared experiences of the events of the morning to discuss, a rich bonhomie prevails which generously embraces the novice, making it the ideal pastime for meeting new friends.

Unlike mad dogs and Englishmen, the encroaching heat of the midday sun signals the retirement of most bird watchers but, on this occasion, not before the warm thermals tempt a Black Kite to soar effortlessly towards the hide, its distinctive fork tail twisting as it manoeuvres its flight path.

It is refreshing to note that, despite the constant encroachment of human development, here, amidst the torpid water of the sewage ponds, there exists a different world, one frequented by another species of indomitable creatures. Here, the long drawn-out 'toot, toot', the haunting cry of an Avocet, radiates across the water and bids farewell as it echoes around the arid valley carved beneath the escarpments of the stark, deep rich hues of the spectacular McDonnell Ranges, a sentinel blind to the breath of life and the sigh of death across the millennium.

Tired now, but exhilarated by an interesting morning, the last sighting almost went unnoticed. The sense of mystery previously alluded to also pervade the birdwatchers' 'big picture' view of life in that they sometimes reflect on how many people are like birds. They are often drawn together from places across the world, places as isolated as Alice Springs, where some might only rest a while before continuing their journey, while others stay longer. The final sighting that day lay at the side of the gravel path, the corpse of a swan, an ignominious end for a magnificent creature, at the edge of a sewage pond in the middle of a desert. The death of the swan went unrecorded.

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*A lifetime traveller, originally from Tasmania, recently from Brisbane via two and half years in Alice Springs. Currently twitching in Darwin and loving it.*

# DYMOCKS ABORIGINAL TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WRITERS' AWARD

## What a Fright

*David Curtis*

---

It was close to midday and the scorching sun beat down, but the shade of the small gum tree provided sanctuary. The young Aboriginal man stood on the spur of the ridge and his gaze searched far into the distance. He could hear it, a strange sound that carried in the air to him. He could not make it out. There! A movement. In the shimmering of the unrelenting heat it appeared ethereal and fleeting.

Louder the sound grew and again there was movement through the trees. Louder and louder the sound grew until it was very clear. It was a growling. Finally the young man could see it clearly. It was not a horse or a bullock. It was an animal unlike anything he had ever seen. It was large and dark the creature and moved it quickly. It had huge, ugly eyes and its teeth were bared. Quickly he ducked behind the base of the tree. Had it seen him?

His pulse began to quicken. The creature was coming straight at him, weaving through the trees. Could it smell him? Slowly he began to back away to get below the skyline of the ridge. Suddenly the creature stopped in the shade of a large tree some distance away. It must be resting for it was a hot day and it must have been thirsty, as it had even stopped growling. Then, to his disbelief, the beast spat out what seemed to be two men. The strange, regurgitated men seem to break open part of the creature and took out some of its guts. Perhaps the beast had died and they were going to eat it?

If the strange creature was dead, now was his chance to get a closer look. The young man came down off the ridge and began to sneak up on the creature and the two strange men. As he crept closer he could see that the animal was not dead because it was still standing up on all fours and those big ugly eyes were looking at him. His heart raced. Slowly but surely he went from bush to bush and each time he stole a little distance, his heart quickened. Those eyes, those big, ugly eyes of the beast, were always watching. Looking straight at him they were and those teeth, they were still bared viciously.

He was quite close now. He could hear the murmuring of the two strange men. Suddenly the men put the guts of the creature back inside it and then

they climbed in themselves. This must have stirred the beast up because it roared to life and growled loudly. The beast then suddenly charged at the Aboriginal man. Its eyes were enormous and bright this close and its long bared teeth were frightening.

WHAAA!!! The young man jumped up from his hiding place and ran into the bush, terrified. His bare feet flew over the sandy ground and spinifex as fast as they could carry him. Hundreds of yards away he stopped and hid behind a conker-berry bush. Wide eyed and heart thumping he searched for the monster to see what it was doing. To his relief, it had not seen him and now it was heading away from him. He did not want to risk it possibly sniffing him out, so he continued to run in the other direction.

\* \* \*

The old Aboriginal man sat at the table in his kitchen, a hot panikin of tea in front of him. He gave a little chuckle to himself and shook his head as he reflected on the memory of that experience. He felt a little foolish at the fear he had felt that day so long ago. However, he did not beat himself up about it too much. After all, at the time, it was the first one he had ever seen. Bloody motorcar!

# A Recipe for Now

*Keisha Palmer*

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The sun sears my brain. I wish there was a pool. It's so stinking hot here that within one minute after my shower I start to sweat. Hot. Humid. Get me out of here, I scream in my head.

I crave an ice cream like the ones I had in Darwin, but it would only melt in this heat. The sun looks like it's dancing on the ground, but that's just an illusion. A bit like this life of mine.

I live in a nothing town, north of Tennant Creek. Five hundred people exist out here. Small place. Barren. Ugly. I've lived here for the last ten years with my mum Olga and dad Frederic, Fred to his drinking mates. I have an older brother, Dave, and a sister, Shellie. My not-getting-any-younger Grandpa, John, also lives here with us.

The closest water is in the bottle in my hand. The dams have long dried up, leaving great cracks you can stick your feet in. This place is so hot and dry that we can't have a garden or grow any trees; nothing wants to live here, including me. No green anywhere except a few tenacious leaves gripping the old gnarled ghost gums around our house. They provide a bit of shade for the parched ground and the odd cockatoos that accidentally stray into this desiccated hellhole. I wish it would rain. Fat chance.

We get our food from the store up the road. The old fellas around here always have a few beers, or more, at the pub down the road from the store. My Grandpa John says he loves that pub. "Beer's refreshing on a hot day," Pop says. "Nice and cold. Just what a hard working bloke needs when he's finished trawling the fence lines."

Grandpa can tell you lots about this place; he's been hanging around here forever.

I ask him, "Why are you still living here?"

"I love this place," Grandpa explains. "It's my country and will always be my country."

He is at peace with himself and with the country. He is the country.

"I didn't always live here you know. No, there was other places. Big stations. Cattle. Windmills and good tucker too." He rubs his skinny stomach. He tells me he had been a worker down at the Mount Isa mines. "You grandpa? You a miner?" Grandpa pulls up his shirt sleeves and displays skinny arms.

"Back in them days girl, I was a strong man. Look at these muscles, they prove it." Grandpa poses like a bodybuilder, flexing his arms. All I see is wrinkled skin over empty flesh and I giggle. Grandpa says in a small, tight voice, "Don't laugh, it's true you know."

"But why did you come back here to this place?" Grandpa stares at the nothingness. "Look around, what can you see?" I glance around then back at Grandpa.

"Nothing to see. That's the trouble, Grandpa. A blazing hot sun and red sand as far as the horizon."

"But don't you see it?" he asks again. "Are you sure you're looking at the right place? Come and I'll show you, girl."

We walk towards a group of scraggly saplings, our feet kicking up little clouds of dust, powdery red sand.

"See that old gum tree over there? That's where we camped, back before there were any houses here."

"No houses? How primitive."

"You little bugger! You're too damn spoilt." I feel my cheeks flush. I've shamed myself in front of Grandpa.

"You want to know something special?" He points to the old gum tree. "That's where we buried her, your grandma Ruby."

I have never heard him mention Grandma before. It's like she's been a mystery, or so far in his past he forgot to remember her.

"Your Gran did everything under that tree. She used to do paintings and make necklaces before she died. We buried her there because that was the right place for her. She loved that tree."

I close my eyes to visualise what he is talking about. A cold shiver runs down my back, but it is still hot.

"Can you feel anything?" he asks me again. "Can you see how it was?"

I don't see a thing but I feel exposed and vulnerable.

"That's what keeps me here."

"Tell me more Grandpa, about the land and how it was."

We sit in the red dirt together under what little shade the old tree gives.

"Every morning we walked to the waterholes out that way." He points into the distance. "There's precious water out there. We used to bring it back to our camp in our billycan and you know what, we weren't allowed to spill it, not even a drop. It was so precious." He travels his memory some more.

"They taught us to dig for it you know, in the dry times."

I look at him and he looks younger somehow, different, strong and the way I always imagined him.

"I used to walk for miles and miles," Grandpa continues, "just to get to the creeks to go fishing with my mates. We didn't come back till dusk and we always caught fish. It's not there. Not anymore. Gone. Dried up. Like me."

"Those must have been good times for you, Grandpa."

I am shocked to see Grandpa crying. I want to put my arms around him and comfort him but I feel embarrassed.

"Don't mind me, my girl, I cry for lots of things these days. I cry for my mates who passed away or moved away. I cry for the future and what it will bring. Sometimes I cry and I don't know why... just happens." Then he laughs and the moment is gone but I still feel like I want to put my arms around him.

"You never knew Grandma Ruby; she was gone before you were born. But she gave me four beautiful children. Your mum was one of them. The youngest one, Billy, was killed when he was fourteen. A mongrel horse kicked him. The other two, I don't know where they are. When I look at you and your mother, you both remind me of my Ruby. She had this thing for loving her children, bringing them up with their culture. She took great care of me."

It's hard to imagine anyone taking care of Grandpa, loving him in that way.

"There was this woman in Isa at the pub who tried to give me ideas of settling down again. I nearly did, but I remembered loving Ruby. That woman could never take my Ruby's place."

"Did you and Grandma travel to other places besides the old red dirt?"

"Yeah, we went to Broome. I thought I could get a job on the pearling boats. Beautiful place...white sand, water as far as you could see. Not like this place,

all dust and heat haze. You know, I missed it here. Three months and we were back."

"Do you have a pearl to show me that you really went to Broome?"

"No, all the pearls are in here." he points to his head, and then goes all quiet.

Grandpa picks up a stick and begins drawing in the sand; drawing lines, circles and symbols that only have meaning to him. I wait for what seems like ages. I know there is more to tell, but I don't want to be rude and break the moment. The sun is burning me. It is getting hotter but I wait patiently.

Grandpa tells me to go and make him a cup of hot tea and bring along a bikkie.

Grandpa sits there, sucking on a cigarette, smoke wisping from the corner of his mouth. Between sips of tea he talks about Grandma's cooking, especially the yummy scones Grandma whipped up for the family.

"Your Grandma always used the finest ingredients to make them taste just beautiful. I loved them with her homemade jam. Once when we ran out of jam I robbed that old beehive bush for the best honeycomb you ever tasted." I can almost taste it on my tongue. Grandpa reads my thoughts.

"One day I'll find that recipe for you. It's hidden somewhere."

"Yeah, well that's if I'm still here Grandpa."

"I know you hate this place but you should cherish it, girl, the things you've got and what surrounds you."

I finally do it. I put my arms around his bony frame and give him a hug.

Grandpa whispers, "I missed that when you was growing up."

I squeeze harder. I feel his heart beating through his flannelette shirt.

"Promise you won't ever leave this place girl," he begs me. "This land is yours too; so is this story."

The sun burns into my back as Grandpa and I walk towards the house.

His words seem more important now than the stinking hot sun and the ice cream I wanted. I guess I can stay here for a bit longer. It's like Grandpa has given me hope and a future, as well as the past.

# In Whose Best Interest?

*Veronica Pierik*

---

From these people coming we've lost everything,  
our language, our land and our culture.  
We've lost it, to the violent white man,  
who took everything, they were nothing but vultures.  
Most of them of a convict family,  
sent away from their own home land.  
Why did they come to Australia,  
have they come to kill our women and men?  
Took away the women had a child to the white man,  
stole them away and took them to a mission.  
Took away our culture by not letting us pass it on,  
taught us about Jesus and made us into Christians.  
Took away our colour, everything based on skin,  
skin of our foreign fathers, dictating our lives.  
Took away our blood, 'European Blood' easier to train,  
'Half-Castes' who were separated from the kinship.  
Took away our language, 500 down to 100,  
yet only 20 of these remain to be spoken strong.  
Kriol a new language was formed,  
Djuk Djuk Wha language, now only English spoken.  
Took away our land our Mother,  
they tried to make us forget what our elders believed.  
Beliefs are what we live for  
our land is sacred, water precious and air fresh.  
we learnt to take only what we need.  
Took away our land for granted, ruining it,  
introduced new animals, sheep, cattle, pigs, destroyed habitats.  
Brought more people to the country, led to land being cleared,

took away hunting, gathering and totems.  
 Took away our rights, no permission asked,  
 none given, no respect for sacred customs.  
 Ancestors resting places destroyed,  
 Land, people sold, bought and conquered.  
 Took away our children because the government said  
 decimating us, more than they could see.  
 If our people refused to leave we got into trouble,  
 never again to see their family unless they escaped to be free.  
 Took away our lives, Myall Creek and Coniston,  
 massacres of the innocent some still untold today.  
 ¿What is the use of a wounded blackfella a hundred miles from civilisation?¿  
 They had cried across the land.  
 Took away our law, no justice,  
 just injustice we've received.  
 200 years on, yet citizens only 40 years,  
 but are natives of this land for over 40,000 years.  
 Took away our health, rations sugar, tea and flour,  
 rum by the barrel, alcohol to pacify.  
 Chicken pox, measles, whooping cough,  
 Now diabetes, heart disease and pneumonia.  
 Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008,  
 Prime Minister marked a day in History.  
 An apology to all Indigenous Australians,  
 Still, some didn't understand what it was for.  
 This historic day now known as 'Sorry Day',  
 bringing Australia one step closer to reconciliation.  
 When people start to understand history of the Indigenous people,  
 then healing can begin, sooner or later Australia needs to reconcile.

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*Being taught about our history and what I have missed out on. It makes me very angry*

# Plain Indians

*Jennifer Mills*

---

They are right on the edge of my vision. I can hear them scattering into the scrub. I stand up, my hands full of scraps. The hands let the scraps fall and are empty. Something rattles in my skull. What is trapped inside my head is like what they are after: a mess of blood and sovereignty.

"Get away," I whisper into the trees, but there is no answer, only the swish of the branches. I remember my horse and I curse. I take a deep breath. I listen out for the horse's distinctive gait, but there is nothing. They must have taken her.

A branch snaps behind me. My ears prick up but I don't swivel. Sudden movement could spell my death. I rotate my eyes as far to the left as they will go, and then my head. Only then do my shoulders twist until I find the corner of my vision with the Indian in it. He is standing in the scrub, hardly camouflaged, staring.

"Wayne," he says. "It's lunchtime."

It's not an Indian. It's Geoff. Geoff is carrying a white bag weighted with scraps. It drips watery slime onto his shoes.

How can they sit down to eat when the enemy are hovering? The people of the plains surround us. We are so weak, so few now. But we need nourishment. I think of my horse with her belly sliced open, the ribs exposed, and I feel sick.

"They've taken Georgia," I say.

"Who?"

"Georgia. My horse."

"Right-o," he says, glancing into the scrub. He approaches me, dragging his bag. He puts a hand on my shoulder and I step back, one finger to my lips.

"Listen," I whisper. Under the rustling leaves the feet tread, shod in bark to hide their tracks. The trees disguise the murmuring, the sounds of strategies formed in the language of the plains. I feel abruptly cold. We might already be marked out.

"Wayne." He glances over his shoulder. I can see the others congregating through the trees, each weighed down by a white bag full to the brim. Uprooted children hauling damaged goods. This land is already gutted, the Indians are fighting for a corpse. But if that's the case, then so are we.

"They're here," I whisper.

"Eh?" Geoff is going to draw arrows with his noise. I put my hand heavily on his shoulder and shove him into a crouch. He lands on his palms and grunts.

"Is this all you got?" he asks, gesturing at my white bag which lies forgotten on the ground, a few scraps suffocating inside. I am breathing hard.

"All around," I manage. "Took horse. Gone to ground."

"Oh great," Geoff mutters, then adds, louder, "You want to come and have a steak sandwich? With the rest of us?" I shake my head, hold his shoulder as he tries to move. I signal again to silence him but he keeps talking.

"Look Wayne, there aren't any Indians, okay?"

"I've *seen* them," I hiss.

"There aren't any, trust me." He pats my shoulder. "Maybe your, ah, horse just wandered off. Went for a walk."

"Native tribes," I explain. "The people of the plains."

"I'm the only native tribe around here," Geoff says. "This is my mother's country. If there were any Indians or whatever out here, I'd know about it, okay?"

I unclench my hands. Geoff takes the chance to spring out of my grip and lope off toward the others, shaking his head. He moves slowly but with force, like a much larger man.

I can see him through the trees, conferring with the team leader. Joe will come looking for me. I should hide, I know what is coming, but I can't move. It is the bush around me, the weeds that clamour. On each side the bush is keening. The sound of its defeat hangs in the air and clatters together like rusty chain mail. I can't move.

"Far out," says Joe, pushing his way through the branches towards me. He gets his phone out and shakes it. Then he puts it back in his pocket. No signal here, only smoke and satellites. He glances back at where his Troopy squats in the shade, contact with the outside world held by it like a pebble in a fist.

Joe comes close and kneels on the ground beside me.

"Wayne mate, are you right?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Do you want me to ring the social worker?"

"Yeah."

The chatter in the bush seems to intensify, but then resolves itself.

\* \* \*

Mary drives up to the carpark in her little red car. By the time she gets here I'm eating a chewy steak sandwich with the others. The back of the truck is full of everyone's weed bags, piled high. We've cleared a little space in the bush which will probably grow back overnight, like a beard.

Joe is talking about the company whose mess we're cleaning up.

"They come in and take what they want then piss off," he says.

"Cowboys," Lucy agrees, and everyone looks at me.

I look at Mary walking up the track.

"You all right Wayne?" She comes over, her cheerful smile barely hiding her exhaustion. Mary's the one who got me into this volunteer work and at the time I must have agreed it would be good to get out in the bush and do something useful. I didn't have much choice. Now CDEP's gone they have to make people like me do the shit jobs. Basket cases.

"They got to you," I say.

"Yeah, Joe rang me," she answers. "Are you right? Do you want to come back with me?"

"Yeah, okay." I know what she'll say if I argue. I go quietly.

\* \* \*

In the car we don't talk about anything for the first ten minutes and then she starts asking questions.

"Do you remember what you were doing this morning, Wayne?"

"Weeding," I reply.

"After that."

"Had a steak sandwich." I shuffle in my seat. The air conditioning is too cold. I play with the vent. She smiles on the other side of her mouth, the side she thinks I can't see.

If I tell her about the horse she will only ask difficult questions. Like in a movie, it is best to give them information in little pieces. If you tell too much at the start they will get bored and if you don't tell them anything they will get annoyed with you. Unlike a movie, if you tell them everything at once they make an appointment for you to see someone at the ward.

"I was hiding from the Indians," I say, trying to sound sheepish.

"Really? What kind were they?"

"The plains kind."

"How many of them?" Mary must be tired, because she doesn't make the joke she usually makes about plain or self-raising Indians.

"I'm not sure. More than a dozen."

She does an impressed whistle.

"I didn't get as many weeds as everyone else because of them. Do I have to go back next week?"

"No, Wayne. You don't have to go back." She rustles in the tray between the front seats until she finds a small, flat box.

"Here, I borrowed this for you." The box has my name on the front in yellow letters.

When we get back to my flat we have cups of tea and watch the DVD. She asks questions, but not too many. I tell her things, but not too much.

When the credits roll, Mary does the washing up even though I tell her I will do it later, and then she lets herself out.

\* \* \*

At night, after Mary's gone, I can hear them charging past my flat. They are there on the edge, outside in the dusty plains. Perhaps they're riding Georgia, waving the scalps of the captured aloft on their spears. The image runs across the inside of my eyelids like a tiny projection. I squeeze them shut to stop them from burning, these miniature screens of negative space.

After a while I can't hear them anymore, only the cars on the highway. After a while I centre myself. I know they are right there, on the edge of things,

but I'm not scared. Let them make their circle around me, let them dance and holler. Without them, there are no edges, no frontiers; just the bush chattering, leaf against leaf. With nothing left to fight against but itself.

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*Jennifer writes fiction and poetry and is a regular contributor to New Matilda. Her debut novel, The Diamond Anchor, will be published by UQP in 2009. She lives in Alice Springs.*

# Privacy

*David Jagger*

---

I live where the rivers of grog flow. The latest report coins the phrase and confirms what we know but dismiss because it offends the right to drink: the rivers sustain unspeakable crimes. A reluctant wowser, I do my bit to limit the flow. Closer to the source, at the alcoholic headwaters, a trickle by comparison is killing my brother.

His ex calls, says he's been calling her, incoherent, throughout the night. She's loath to leave their kid with him, a little afraid herself. Will I talk to him, she wonders, calm him down.

I catch him half stung, but with a skinful before long, his slurred words delayed as he sips and swallows. He's joking and morose by turns, loving his ex and angrily blaming her for the breakup and that big break that just eluded him. Then claiming he's most creative when drunk. That old chestnut.

For the first time, I find myself questioning how much we ever had in common. But blood's thicker than water, isn't it? Thicker than wine? I book and pay for the first available flight to pre-empt second thoughts.

He's surly but sober when I arrive unannounced mid afternoon at his ramshackle place in the suburbs. We all value our privacy, he says by way of welcome.

It's six years since I've seen him. You're looking good, I say, a deep denial surfacing. It might have been sixteen years, he's aged so much.

He's recently lost his licence DUI and his courier job with it. I was just nipping around the corner, he explains with his own bit of denial. I help him install a rainwater tank. And together we erect a fence – for his privacy – of materials he's scavenged from skip bins and building sites. The result is more like a sculpture than a barrier, only partly by design. He's back and forth inside, purposeful, throughout but returns empty-handed each time. I follow him in and find him squirting a half glass of cheap red from a four-litre cask on the fridge, downing it like medicine and hiding the glass under a hat. Don't tell, he teases when he sees me watching. Want one?

It's eleven a.m., but to get close to him again, I guess, I accept and we end up sloshed on the nasty stuff. Then he cries, a cry that seems to creep up from his feet and culminates in a body-shaking but strangely tearless bellow.

Against my much better judgment, all things considered, and without expecting to see it again, I offer to lend him a grand. I'm surprised he takes it, as much as he needs it. Use it to come north, I suggest. Come and stay with me.

We'll see, he says when he's calmed down. I could find some work along the way. I'll pay you back. Fencing, that sort of thing, he adds with a grin. We hug awkwardly. I think how many pubs there might be between his place and mine.

Thanks to a kamikaze cabbie, I'm at the airport early and easily secure a window seat for my return flight. Below, the big rivers I'd seen on my first flight north quite sharply separating the desert from more productive land lie string-thin and still. The separation is now gradual, desert by degrees. Occasionally the rivers widen slightly into pools where I see my brother's eyes, sunken in what's become a dark line that extends across his face to splay into deep crows' feet, dry tributaries. Down there, billabongs, like the bags under his eyes, are all dry now too.

The land itself is both red and a grey that I suppose is what's left of the pasture. This grey, leached-looking, brittle more than anything recalls my brother's face, flushed only when he's full drunk. From the suburbs to the river banks, it's country that has long over-indulged, downed far too much. Only now are we weighing what is private here with the damage, the right to drink unrestrained against the impact on neighbours, kin and country.

Soon we're over the dunes, the furrows on my brother's forehead. And the haze, like the stale grog fog about his once handsome and clever head, thickens into cloud.

I've barely touched the tarmac and his ex calls again. She asks if I've seen him. I guess she thinks I'm still there.

Yes, I say, I've seen him, but I can't anymore. And I don't necessarily expect to again.

She's not listening. He said he's leaving, she tells me. She says he told her to look out for the kid. She took that as a threat.

I don't take it that way, and I tell her.

He'll have his own private interpretation.

I say she and the kid should call me any time.

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*David Jagger's stories have appeared in Mattooid, Island, Tirra Lirra, True North: Contemporary writing from the NT and the Milk in the sky: writing from the centre. They have twice been shortlisted in the NT Literary Awards Short Story category.*

# Nell

*Bruce Hocking*

---

"Nell! It's dinner time!"

"Me 'n Rainbow are out here catching toads."

Aunt and Uncle are always grizzling about cane toads, how millions of them are hopping across the country and taking over the land. They say the toads are poisonous and kill lots of animals that try to eat them so I want to save the animals. Bashing the toads with a cricket bat works, but that's only one at a time and Aunt got mad with me when she saw me doing that. She said there was a much kinder way to kill them, so now I collect them in a bucket and give them to her to freeze.

Having your last breath freeze solid in your lungs doesn't sound very kind to me but she knows...or so she thinks.

Aunt is standing outside the back door of the house with her hands on her hips. Her hair is a frizzy ginger colour with pink streaks like the fairy floss Dad buys me at the Easter show every year. Her hips are lumpy, just like Mama's. It's like they have cushions in their tights in case they fall over. So far I've got the red hair and freckles but I hope I don't get their hips when I get old.

"C'mon Rainbow, it's time to go."

I pick up the bucket with one hand and Rainbow in the other. She rests her head on my arm and her purple mane strokes my skin soft like breath and we start across the paddock towards the house. The sun is a golden circle resting on the treetops and I can feel it glowing at the back of my head. Frogs are starting to gollop their songs, trying to sing up the rain again. We walk between ant nests, red dirt skyscrapers with long shadows like fingers that point the way home. There must be millions of ants in every one. I wonder if they go hunting in the middle of the night. I am so lucky that Rainbow stays awake to watch out for anything that might try to come into my room when I'm asleep.

Dinner is the same as last night. Chops and vegies. Every night without fail Uncle has a beer with his meal and afterwards, while Aunt makes me wash the dishes with her, he sits in front of the TV, drinks his stubby and between gulps he sits it on top of his fat guts. After a while he falls asleep and snores,

still clutching his bottle. When I first got here I would wait for him to get drunk like Dad, but he didn't and so Aunt didn't have to tell him over and over how he had had too much to drink and he didn't have to shout back at her until she cried.

I take Rainbow to my room with its bare floorboards, torn wallpaper and a single globe in the middle of the ceiling. It feels dirty so I keep the light off and pretend I'm home in my own room, full of Rainbow's brothers and sisters. I talk to her about what we are going to do tomorrow.

We'll catch more toads. They're so ugly. When I first got here I tried to pick one up but it was slimy, like snot and when I dropped it, the toad just sat there with its mouth blowing, watching me with swollen, indifferent eyes. We'll chase goannas too because it's so much fun to watch them run. Their legs pump like the pistons in the racing car that Dad and I are fixing up. Or were, till Mama sent us away. These goannas even have yellow stripes down their sides.

Maybe we'll see that blackfella kid who sometimes walks through Uncle's paddocks. His teeth are toothpaste white and his skin is black, like turning the light off. He doesn't have to wear shoes, even in the bush and he can get as dirty as he wants 'cos you don't notice. When I told aunt about him being on our land she just said it's his land too, since the beginning of time.

The fan on the ceiling creaks as it rustles the air and it reminds me of Dad sobbing when Mama told him he had to go. When I was little he used to tell me bed-time stories about Ned Kelly and he would whisper into my ear that we were related to Ned. He always said we had to stick together, just like the Kellys. I held on to him as tight as I could but I wasn't strong enough and neither was he. Mama broke us up. He could have taken me. If he'd wanted to. I turn my pillow over to the dry side and put Rainbow down next to me. Even if I can't see her I know she is watching out for toads or ants or drunks with smelly goodnight kisses. Yuk.

I listen to the rain drumming on the roof and I wonder if that same rain is falling on Dad.

Mornings are so warm here I've almost forgotten what it's like to shiver or have foggy breath. Uncle is eating eggs for breakfast and sauce slides out one corner of his mouth and down to his chin where red drops hang waiting to fall back onto his plate. Dad wouldn't ever eat anything for breakfast. He always had a headache in the morning and Mama would tell him about all the bad

things he had said to her last night. It's like she would pile layers of words on him and I would watch him screw up his face and slump over his coffee under the weight. I could see he wanted to hit her and make her stop talking but he tried not to because we both knew she'd cry if he did and her tears were heavier than her words.

After Uncle has gone to work I take Rainbow outside to play. Heavy grey clouds sit just out of reach. Rusty puddles have filled with the overnight rain and I can smell clean gum leaves hanging in glistening families and held tight by ghost-white arms. Strips of orange bark hang from their trunks like skin peeling after a burn. The toads must still be sleeping so I'll try to find a goanna and make it run. We hunt among the sticks and leaves and small bushes. They are trying to grow up too but their mothers stand over them and tell them to stop fidgeting and keep quiet. Stand still and straight and you'll grow tall like me they say. Angry voices are everywhere.

Footsteps rustle the fallen leaves close behind us and I turn around to see the blackfella boy. My chest bangs hard. The boy's legs are skinny like burnt sticks and they poke out from under big blue shorts. On top he wears a blue basketball singlet with a white number 66 on his chest. I want to run but he's between me and the house so I just stand still and wait. When he finally opens his mouth to speak what come out are noises like a creek splashing over rocks. Then he smiles at me.

"You lookin' for goanna, little fast one, eh?"

His words have no gaps between them and so I just nod, hoping that's right. I smile back. It's funny but smiling is like measles. It spreads.

So do tears.

Suddenly he is staring past me. I follow his eyes and he's looking right at Rainbow, standing tall and purple next to the bucket. I can tell he's never seen a horse as beautiful as her before. He looks into her big blue eyes that hide beneath graceful lashes. He steps towards her but I move quickly and get between them.

"No. Mine!"

I sound just like Mama and for once I don't mind. He stops and looks right at me, right into my eyes like he's trying to cast a spell. I feel sweat creep out onto my forehead and inside I'm shaking. Perhaps blackfellas can turn people into toads. What if all the cane toads up here are really people turned into

toads by blackfellas? The more I think about it the quicker the sweat trickles down my cheeks. I want my Daddy.

Why did she nag him so much and make him hit her? Why did she have to send me away?

Tears and sweat feel like small waterfalls that flow down my neck into my t-shirt. The blackfella boy keeps looking into me, his eyes like pools of tar. I have to ask.

“Are...you going... to make me a... toad?”

There, I said it.

Suddenly he opens his mouth wide and lets out a howl of laughter. A crow squawks and flies off irritated. It’s too hot to be flying about. The boy slaps his knee and drops to the ground and rolls around in the red dirt. He won’t stop laughing. Tears pour from his eyes and his body shakes. I turn my back on him, pick up Rainbow and hold her under my shirt where he can’t see her, just in case. I’m about to walk home but it’s been so long since I heard someone laugh. So I just listen. When he finally stops he stands up and says, “My camp, eh?” and starts to run.

I hear my Aunt and Mama. Do not follow him.

What do they know? So I do because it feels good to be around someone who can laugh. I run as fast as I can until we come to ‘The End of the Property’, the fence Uncle said I should never, ever cross. The blackfella boy slides under the wires without stopping but I have to hold onto a post for a minute and catch my breath. Maybe I should stop now and go back home like the voices in my head tell me to?

Then I hear Mama again. She’s screaming at Dad after he hit her, ordering him out of the house. He and I were both crying so hard and he was saying how sorry he was. It won’t happen again. Mama just stared at him. Cold. As he closed the front door behind him I thought that only one step out there in any direction and he’s already lost.

The boy runs away from me so I climb between the strands of wire and follow. There are a lot more trees on this side of the fence and spear grass that’s as tall as me and still growing. It sticks to my skin as I run through it, like fingers grabbing. There’s no wind in the grass and my clothes are soaked. As I follow the blackfella boy’s track a small wallaby jumps across in front of me and I

nearly trip over myself. It's gone and all it leaves behind is a soft thumping sound. I keep running until finally I stop next to the boy who is waiting for me. In front of us is a big red dirt circle where the trees and spear grass have been cut down. Around the circle are sheds that people live in. A blue shed with a white cross on its roof stands in the middle of everything. Scattered around the camp are a few broken down cars, old bits of furniture under some of the veranda roofs and dirty piles of toys all tumbled together. In the shade of some of the sheds are circles of people sitting in the dirt and watching. White eyes stare from black faces, like torches pointed straight at me. I want to run but I can't. I've got no more energy left. Maybe together they will turn me into a toad? I hold Rainbow beneath my t-shirt. Her body is smooth and strong. The boy points to one of the sheds.

"Over there," he says, but my legs don't work.

Mama just stared at the door with empty eyes when Dad had gone. Then she stared at me. "Go to bed," she said but my legs refused and my stomach wanted to throw up my fear.

My guts churn and all I can think about are glaring eyes and toads. The boy grabs my free hand and pulls me towards his shed. We come close to some women sitting in the grass and playing cards. They smile at me and then a houseful of kids pour out of the shed squealing and laughing. One boy, about five or six, kicks an old furry soccer ball towards me and I kick it back but too hard and it flies into his stomach. He doubles over with a 'whoof'. I hold my hand over my mouth. What have I done? I hold my breath and wait to become a toad.

Suddenly the kid laughs and then everyone is laughing like a tree full of cockatoos and he kicks the ball back to me and soon all of us kids are kicking the ball all around the camp. It is so much fun. I need both hands to play, so I put Rainbow against the wall of the blue shed so she can watch. We are all kicking and chasing and falling and laughing.

We play till we can't run anymore and then we sit with the adults and I listen to them talking, soft and gentle. One woman holds a plastic bottle of water out to me and I drink. I lie down in the dirt and look up at the clouds.

Someone's shaking me. I can smell food cooking and when I sit up the others are eating stew. Another woman gives me a plate and I eat with my fingers. The sun is hiding behind the trees by now so Aunt will be calling for me. It's

time to go. I look over to the blue shed where I left Rainbow and she's gone. My heart runs like a horse race. Where is she? I can't leave without her. I stand up and run around the camp looking among the toys, behind bushes and under cars. She is nowhere. In the end I just stand and bawl...and bawl...and bawl.

I can see Dad stretched out on a bench with newspaper for blankets, like drunks I have seen before. I can't see if he's breathing.

I fill the camp with my screams. My legs give way and I lie down in the dirt and kick till my feet hurt.

I see Mama sitting in the kitchen with the morning sunlight streaming into her face as she stares out the window into the garden.

My body shakes and throbs because there are more tears inside me than can get out. They bank up behind my eyes and I can't see a thing.

A warm hand rests on my shoulder. "You be right, little girl," she says.

Through the flow of tears I see her white smile and her soft eyes. Her hair tumbles around her face and her dress touches my cheek. It smells like the land. Then I see kids all around watching me and a little girl holding Rainbow close to her chest. The mother touches the little girl's head and says something. The girl just looks at me, frowns and clutches Rainbow even tighter. The mother growls softly like she's clearing her throat. Slowly the girl holds Rainbow out to me and I take her, smother my face in her silky mane and cry some more. I thought I'd lost you.

Later when all the tears have gone I walk across the camp towards the track home. The blackfella boy quietly slips alongside and walks with me. At the edge of the camp I turn around and the people are all watching. I feel them hug me with their eyes and something warm fills my chest. There are no more tears left, only the laughter of playing ball. Maybe I can take that home and share it with Mama. Suddenly I get a strange idea.

I stop and put Rainbow down on the ground. She can look after that little girl now.

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*I am a GP in an Aboriginal Medical Centre in Katherine. I thoroughly enjoy the support of the local writers' group.*

# Min Min

*Rebecca Nelson*

---

I saw her first when she was still a child. The family was camped on the edge of a stringy-bark forest, complete with tent and gas-lanterns and all the stupid paraphernalia city-folk bring to the wilderness. She was a scrawny toddler in a bulky, hand-knit jumper, meandering around the campsite unsupervised. She was fearless – regardless of her small bird-skull, her soft, fragile bones. She wandered away from the fire, distracted first by a wren, then a monitor-lizard. Those colleagues of mine drew her gaze into the gloaming, out into the forest. She saw me – not as myself, but as a cool white light between the trees. I saw an ungainly child, like an ochre painting of a spirit. I saw a vessel of bitter liquor.

She followed me into the stringybarks. At times I stood upright, like a pillar, like the trees around us. She paused and drew herself tall, as though we were friends playing a mimicking game. At other times I crouched and raced ahead, leaping from tree to branch to leaf. She straggled along. I felt my lip curl as she contended with fallen beams and knots of sharp bushes. Little fool.

\* \* \*

We walked all night; she followed hypnotised, without frustration. She crossed a creek in which she could easily have been swept away. Luck – or benevolent spirits – put rocks and deadfall under her grasping hands. Only one foot went into the water; she came on. I hissed. If she had fallen, I could have approached, sucked her fluids. She stumbled and grew tired, but she did not whimper or complain.

Dawn defeated me. Aggie emerged from the forest onto a granite peak; the gully below her was precipitate, lethal. I stood beyond the drop, in the haze above the horizon. She raised a finger, as if to touch me, to point me out to the audience of forest-creatures. But it was already growing light, and the illusion of solid earth ahead was fading. My beauty, my lure weakened. She sat down – plop – and stared after me as I dissolved.

“Min,” she said quietly, pointing again. “Min.” At four – ridiculously late – this was her first word.

\* \* \*

She fell asleep where she sat. I stayed, watching, hoping that the parents crashing around in the scrub would not find her. I fretted and waited for night. I waited to drink the white-hot fuel of her blood, her essence, like a draught of kerosene. She slept, oblivious to my hatred.

The story was reported in the morning paper; *Toddler Missing on Camping Trip!* That evening came the resolution; *Toddler Found Safe!* Aggie was photographed being carried from the trees – a filthy, sweaty bundle in a tartan blanket. The parents were weeping, clumsy with relief, clutching her between them. By contrast, her eyes were wide and dry, fascinated by the emotional up-welling in the adults around her. The search-and-rescue men whooped.

After that, I was always on her horizon. Sometimes at night, she would notice a cold-burning streetlight without a pole. On school camps a silent plane might appear in the sky *sans* red-green wing-lights. I glared at her – glared at her with all my disgust and desire, as she walked through the years of childhood and adolescence. Oh! she was a daydreamer, that one. Always staring at something in the distance, she walked alone through gossiping school crowds, then humming city crowds, through heaving night-club presses. She was staring at me.

As she grew older, I found her gaze disconcerting. She could turn to me like a needle to a compass point, even during the day. She would smile, subtly, and I knew she was scheming something. Our roles were reversed. She was the tormentor now, and I could not look away.

She was lean and fit; she ran in half-marathons, then marathons. She learned to dance but gave it up; she cared less how she looked than how the movements *felt*, and her performances were oddly disjointed, arrhythmic. She studied botany and ecology in the first years of university, seeming to focus for the first time in her life. Her parents – prematurely grey after that disastrous camping trip – relaxed. I wasn't fooled. I knew she had something in mind.

I found out soon enough. She took herself off to some southern frontier town, just a few months after graduation. There she spent her savings on a bull-camel named Troll, on crates of supplies, on permits to travel through the reserves. That camel took her weeks to find. He was a hard worker; strong, tenacious, not too temperamental. And his owner, unlike most, was willing to sell. She bought GPS and satellite phones, but she did not turn them on. She

sent bland postcards to friends and family, hiding the real magnitude of what she intended. A desert ramble. A safari.

Finally, in mid-May, she strapped a swag, a sack of supplies, and a massive skin of water onto Troll. They stood together, facing a long, flat plain; facing the interior. Her face was shining, and though it was midday she looked at me and smiled.

"Now, Min," she said. "Just you try and out-run me."

\* \* \*

No Min has ever been out-run. It's our nature to be always a long way from living things, whilst appearing tantalisingly close. And somehow, humans are always a long way from *us*; desperately, tantalisingly close. We call to them and they come, though never far enough, only ever to the shore of death, where we can creep up to them like the tide creeps up on sheaves of limp weed. Their bodies are intoxicating and disgusting. What do they see in us? A pot of gold? An angel? What did I see in Aggie?

\* \* \*

Aggie came on. She crossed the continent, each day drawing infinitesimally closer to the horizon. In the wavering heat of the red sands, the distance between us narrowed. We kept up a conversation of mute challenges. Just when I thought she was on the verge of collapse, she would look up from under the brim of her sagging felt hat and smile, lovingly. I would snarl and spit, retreat.

Troll smelt me. In the early days, he turned away from me like I was a negative pole. Aggie had to shout at him and slap his flanks with a canvas strap to keep him moving – a battle of wills that mirrored our own. When they walked, her hand was always on the guide-rope tied to her hip. While he grazed she would often stand to check on him, afraid he might have fled.

Quite the contrary. We conversed too, Troll and I. I would sneak close and smile at him – a smile that could curdle milk, a smile that in the old days would send warriors clawing for fire-brands and spears. Troll would jigger and spit; he would bellow and put himself between me and her. When leading Aggie away from me didn't work, that ridiculous beast made itself her body-guard.

Thus the three of us walked – over the sand-pans, over the fractured clay-pans and dry-spit lakes, in and out of sheltered riverbeds. We spent months

navigating ranges. I don't believe she opened a map. Summer returned, and Aggie refilled her water-skins at prearranged stations, learned where to dig when her supplies ran low. She hunted. She hummed songs and mumbled poems. Sometimes she spoke the same word over and over for days at a time; "sun-set, sun-set, sun-set," or "spin-i-fex, spin-i-fex," or sometimes, eerily "min-min-min-min-min." She rocked from side to side when we paused to rest, as though the pace was a metronome in her clockwork – as though if it stopped she would stop for good.

There was nowhere a precipice I could tempt her to now. If I stood on top of a sudden mountain, she would bypass the mesa, forcing me ahead of her. If I waited in a narrow chasm, she would take her time, testing each rock, tugging Troll away from unstable overhangs. And every night she moved closer.

Eventually, we were so close that she could begin to see me through my light, through my dazzle. 'Min,' she said, smiling, one evening, when the stars were beginning to appear in a velvet-blue sky. "You're a woman."

\* \* \*

Long ago, I was a woman. Long, long ago. I had nursed a hunger, back then, a hunger that could not be sated on honey, or on sweet grub-meat. I became a spindle in the heart of a perpetual fire. Later, I thirsted. I wanted to drink Aggie down to *her* spindle of bones.

\* \* \*

That night, we were finally close enough to touch. Troll became skittish through the afternoon, and finally went berserk as shadows collected blue under the ranges. Sensing that I was in range, he abruptly charged. He thundered forward on his splayed hooves, kicking and splattering the sand with gobbets of spittle, with his foul breath. He lashed with his neck, as though fighting another bull. I retreated. Even a min fears a mad giant like Troll.

Aggie went to him where he capered, asserting his dominance. The sand-coloured curls of his pelt glistened, foam splashed on his chin and throat. She talked to him. She talked and talked into his smelly ear until he sank, reluctantly, to his knees. Then she drew water from the massive skin he carried, and drank. I remember that moment clearly; Troll's head lolling on the snake of his neck, turning to watch her; Aggie drinking, her face in the silver starlight inscrutable, her throat bobbing, cobweb threads sewn around her sunburnt eyes.

She made a fire from wood as old and dry as bones, using buffalo grass for kindling, adding clods of Troll's dung. She did not look at me again. She lay down and slept, just as she had that first dawn. The hours stretched. Slowly, slowly, Troll's long lashes closed.

I crept up and touched her ear. Her flesh was warm as only the newly-dead are warm, yet where her heat dissipated there was more heat made; she did not cool. She burnt like a little furnace, like the dry bones in the fire. I could warm my hands by holding them over her. I lay down next to her, looking at her closed face – it was like the map of a country; here a mountain, here a path, here two dry pools. I slept.

When I woke, Troll was standing over me, sniffing suspiciously. For a moment I froze. His rubbery lips pushed at my shoulder. He could have bitten dinner-plates out of me, had he wished. Then I knew.

"Troll?" I croaked. "Troll..." I was terribly, terribly thirsty, my lips paper-dry. The sun lanced my skin. I struggled upright and looked for Aggie.

She was on the horizon. With the dawn rising behind her, she became a pillar of white phosphorous fire, a pirouette amongst the haze of heat. She seemed close and yet eternally far away. I remembered dancing, long ago, as she danced then; free of body, free of thought, not yet thirsty. She turned and looked back at me, raising her arms within her corona.

"Min," I said, quietly, pointing her out to the audience of desert-creatures. Her miles-off face smiled and nodded. I turned to Troll and drew a bottle of water from the skin. He looked at the dawn and turned away from it, back south-west, the way from which we had come. I drank and drank, until my membranes were moist and my kidneys ached. I packed, and tied the guide-rope to my hip, giving the camel his head home.

For the first time in a very long time, I was satisfied. So, I hope, was Aggie.

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*I acknowledge the adventures of Esther Nunn and Robyn Davidson as inspiring parts of this story, and Jack Pettigrew, who didn't let a good legend get in the way of level-headed curiosity.*

# Josh's Story

*Leni Shilton*

---

The first time Dad went to prison I was four. I didn't know where he was then, Mum said he'd gone away working 'up north' for a few months.

Up north was a place I thought all Dads went to. Dale's Dad was a truck driver up north and Jake's Dad was forever going fishing up there. It all made sense to me and to be honest, I was ok about Dad going away because when he was back he yelled at Mum and last time he had a go at me. I took off to Dale's house to hide until I knew Dad had gone to the pub. We got used to being without him and I think he hated that. Our life went along more quietly when he was away, Mum made gourmet cakes in a local café, doing the early shift so she'd be home for tea, and I went to school, played footy and mucked around with my mates on the weekends.

When Dad came back from 'up north' last time, I was thirteen. He had a big party with his mates. They were outside drinking and talking. His mate Joe was cooking the meat on the BBQ. He waved the tongs around as he told jokes to Frank who always looked like he wasn't getting them, but would laugh anyway. It was a Friday night and my mates came over for a laugh. We sat out behind the back shed on the bench seat from Dad's old HR Holden drinking cans of rum and coke. We knew the mothers would lose it if they knew what we were doing but the dads didn't seem to notice much so we figured we were pretty safe.

I went inside for a leak and heard Mum and Dad in the kitchen.

"You know what the judge said this time Bob, you have to stay clean or it's going to be a longer time."

She was talking to him leaning against the kitchen bench. She had her hands on each side of the sink. Her hands were pressing into the chipped timber bench top and I could see the white of her knuckles. Dad looked up at her and then before she could move he got up from the table real quick and punched her hard on the side of her head. She fell down along the side of the cupboards onto the floor. I don't know why she didn't run, why she just stood there. It was like she was waiting for him. He had hit her before but not like this.

“You bitch!” he yelled standing over her, the whole of him shaking. “What would you know? That prick of a judge wouldn’t know anything either. Are you siding with him now?”

He stood there looking down at Mum, his face red and ugly. He raised his arm again, his other hand pulling her head back by her hair.

“Don’t ever tell me what to do!” he yelled, let go and turned away from her.

I tried to look real small as he walked out of the kitchen right past me. The anger in him was a smell. A mixture of man, beer and cigarettes.

Mum got up slowly and sat in a chair.

“Mum?” I went to her. “Mum are you ok? I’ll take you over to Josie’s. She’ll look after you.” I was shitting myself he would come back in and I kept looking at the door.

Mum looked up at me her eyes staring, she wasn’t crying but her eyes looked empty and tired.

“You’ve been drinking,” she said and put her head in her hands. Now she was crying.

\* \* \*

I hate this story already. I can’t remember why I’m telling you. You have heard it so many times – what is the point of telling you again? The truth is though, you will see it on TV and read it in books but you won’t hear it from your mates, they won’t tell you what is really going on. None of us talk about it to each other even when it goes on all the time.

\* \* \*

I’m coming back to that dark time, to make myself remember. Do you want to hear how my Dad spent time in prison and each time he went away my life was fine and normal, how every time he came back my life was shit. Will telling you make it better? Will it stop me from hating him?

\* \* \*

My name is Josh and I’m part Eskimo. That’s what my granddad told me anyway. The proper name is Inuit, but Granddad called us ‘Eskimo’ so it sort of stuck. He said my great, great grandfather went over to Canada to look for gold years ago. I can’t remember the dates he told me.

“He went because of the gold.” (This is how Granddad talks,) “And he met a woman there.”

He said great, great grandfather met a woman and one thing lead to another and great grandfather William was born and he was part Eskimo.

I liked it how Grandad told stories. I'd go and sit on a stool in his shed while he was working away at fixing something for Mum. I liked the idea of being part Eskimo because a few of my mates are Maori and Fijian. It meant I'm from somewhere – that I had 'culture'.

There were some black kids too who we mucked about with but they're pretty wild and some of the stuff they're into would've turned Mum's hair grey. You might think that sounds strange when you think our family was totally screwed but I have found there is a scale for screwed families and we're somewhere around the middle.

\* \* \*

It's my Mum's family that is part Eskimo. My Mum says that's why our eyes are soft and curved and beautiful. I think Mum's eyes are like that, but mine are crap because they look off in different directions and I've had to learn how to fight and punch the shit out of anyone who says anything about it.

\* \* \*

Before I knew everything, I asked Mum where she and Dad met and why we lived in a shit hole like Melbourne when Dad had such a nice time up north where it was warm and tropical. She said she really wanted to, but we lived in Melbourne because Grandad was here and she wasn't going to live anywhere that wasn't a short train ride from his place. I thought maybe we could go on a holiday and visit Dad at his work and said this to her, but she just shook her head and when I looked again she was crying and the tears were running down her face into the dish water. I never did find out how they met.

When I was ten, three years before he came back for the last time, I found out that Dad wasn't up north. Mum was out the back when the phone rang and she called for me to answer it. She didn't like me answering the phone but lately she must have thought I was older or something.

I answered it and it was this bloke, I can't remember his name, he said he was a friend of Dad's and could he talk to him? I said Dad was away working up north and the bloke on the other end just started laughing with a mean laugh. "Working?" he said like that was a joke in itself. "Is that what they call it now?"

"Call what?" I said, confused.

Then this bastard on the other end of the phone told me where Dad was.

"He's probably in prison again, you little prick. You need to know the truth because you'll end up in there too! I see Janet is busy trying to protect you from the truth!" and he laughed and hung up. I stood there listening to the empty phone beeping at me.

Mum was still out the back and I could see her through the window. She was gardening. I hated the bastard at the end of the phone for telling me and I hated Mum for not telling me.

Mum was walking back in the house when I yelled at her.

"Bitch!" I yelled. (I'd heard Dad calling Mum that when he was angry about something and it just came out of my mouth.) I knew I was out of line but I could feel the blood pounding in my head bashing at my brain like a drum.

She stopped halfway up the stairs stunned. I felt bad, I could feel that in me but at the same time I wanted to keep going.

"Why did you lie to me? I hate you! You never told me where he was, you lied...you made out he was working!"

She stood still, and the look in her eyes was almost fear.

"Josh – I'm sorry," she started towards me up the steps, her hands reaching out to me but I was still doing the tough, angry thing.

"I hate you!" I screamed as I ran down the hall through the open door, out the front yard and down the street.

My mate Dale was always ready to take off from his place so I went there.

He dinked me up the road to the car park by Target and we smashed bottles against the wall until my chest was heaving with the effort and my arms ached.

I must have smashed about a hundred bottles against the wall before Dale yelled at me that he was pissing off to Jake's house.

"Fuck off then!" I yelled.

He looked surprised then swore back at me and took off. My friends were like that, they were in for a bit of fun but pissed off if you were freaking out. We didn't really look out for each other, I don't think we knew how. I hadn't said anything to Dale about Dad so he didn't know what was wrong, but he didn't ask either.

It was dark when I got back home. Mum was in the kitchen writing something in a notebook, her journal.

"Josh please sit down, we need to talk," she looked old, and her eyes were red from crying.

I got a drink of water from the tap and stood by the sink, resisting.

"Josh, your father is in prison, he's been going in and out of prison for years. He is in Melbourne not up north."

I felt the dream of warm tropical nights and palm trees smash into a million bits and something crushed inside me, my chest hurt from the effort of not crying.

"Please Josh." Mum was reaching out to me but not getting up. We both knew I had to go to her.

"Mum, why? Why did you lie? Why is he there? Why could I never visit him? Why didn't Grandad tell me? Why did I have to hear it from that bastard!" I could feel the pain inside my chest. I put my fist there to stop it but I couldn't get air.

Then Mum was there holding me up, helping me to breathe. She murmured in my hair, "My darling boy."

I don't know how long it was before I could breath properly again but Mum took me in the lounge and she made a cup of tea and then we talked about it. I was only ten, nearly eleven, but now I'm older I know why she didn't want to tell me. Dad was in prison for aggravated assault. She cried when she told me about my father, a man I didn't know. I was always a bit frightened of him but I thought it was because he was never around.

Dad had beaten up a bloke at his work because he owned Dad money. Mum said there was more to it than that. There always is.

\* \* \*

Things were better between Mum and I after the secret came out but things were worse between me and my mates because I didn't know if they knew.

I got into heaps of fights and got sent home from school. The headmaster rang Mum and there were meetings at the school. Mum was cool at the meetings, then cried at home. Knowing Dad was a criminal changed me. I felt like I had to be tougher and meaner than ever and if anyone said anything I had to smash them.

\* \* \*

One year turned into the next, I went to high school and started to hang out with a girl called Jess. She moved to my school from a posh girls' school when her parents split up. We'd hang out and smoke at the back of the school and talk for hours. Everyone thought we were going out but we weren't. She was pretty messed up too and I didn't have to be tough around her, so it was ok. Being with her was easy, much easier than being with my so-called mates. Jess could sing and was good at drama so she starred in all the school musicals. I was her tough little friend that couldn't act except to act mean but I got a part in a play as a bouncer. At the time I thought was pretty funny. I had about three words to say in the play and Mum was over the moon thinking I was settling down at last. It did seem as though things were getting better, maybe I was happier, but it was all too good to be true, because only a week later I heard the rumour that Dad was coming home for good.

\* \* \*

Dad was tall with a tattoo of a dragon on his left shoulder. He had a shaved head and when his beard grew it was ginger. Fine lines appeared around his eyes when he smiled but they vanished when he got angry. When I was really little I remember playing cricket in the backyard using the garage door as the backstop. He even painted stumps there. I'm not sure when it stopped but one time he came back and looked at me like he'd never seen me before. He had black eyes that stared at me when I came in to ask Mum something.

"Don't interrupt!" he roared at me and I ran from the room like I'd been burnt.

I hid in my room listening to Mum's voice as she tried to calm him down. I wondered who had taken my Dad.

I started having nightmares waking up and calling out. I don't need to go to a psych to have the dreams explained. It's always me and Mum and Dad in a storm and there is nothing anyone can do to save us.

Grandad didn't visit much when Dad came home. On Friday nights Dad had his mates around and me and my mates hid from Mum and got drunk. I was wary of Dad and stayed out of his way.

It was a strange existence we had. Mum and I, like the parents going out each day to work and school, and Dad was the grumpy teenager hanging around on the couch drinking, smoking and generally behaving like a pig. I stayed away as much as I could. Jess and I caught the train into the city and hung

around on the steps at Swanston Street Station watching the dealers and the mess of users who tried to look normal. One time, for a joke, Jess asked a dealer how much for a hit. We did it for a laugh, and the noise and madness of the city was better than the silent suburbs.

Night after night I'd hear Mum and Dad arguing. Voices raised behind two closed doors still sounds like people fighting. I could never understand why Mum even bothered with him. He was nothing but trouble, like Grandad said.

On a cold night in August it all turned to shit. I woke to screaming and ran to Mum and Dad's room. I'm not sure if I was frightened. Now, I feel like I'm going to throw up, but then all I could think about was Mum. Pulled from sleep my eyes were fuzzy and my bare feet freezing on the cold floor. Mum was on the bed not moving or talking and there was blood on the pillow.

"Mum!" I ran to her. "Mum! Answer me!" but she just lay there and some part of me thought that she doesn't have to worry anymore. The cold travelled up my legs until all of me was shaking and then I remembered Dad.

Outside were flashing blue lights, uniforms and neighbours standing in the rain, their arms folded tight across their chests.

\* \* \*

I have had to wait a long time to tell this story. I dropped into a space I hadn't even heard of after Mum died. That space I will tell of another time, in some other way. For now you need to know that when I came out of that black space, I went up north, like I had always wanted to with Mum. I took Grandad with me. He was pretty old by then but being such a tough old nut I had started to think he would live forever. We travelled up by train, taking in days of endless red desert before the country dropped away into flat green sea that mixed with the horizon. We took the journey by train to keep our feet on the ground, to travel through each valley and sand dune to a place where no one in my family had ever lived.

It was the wet season in Darwin and the mouldy air was thick and sucked at my lungs. The harbour lay like wet concrete, still and silent inside the curve of the bay. On a grey dawn I poured Mum's ashes into that still water and said goodbye. Grandad sang a song for her in an old language and dropped frangipanis over the ash. We watched them drift in the smudge of ash as the sun came up yellow and blinding behind heavy cloud.

We had her journal with us and I read one of her poems to the air and hoped she could hear me.

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*Leni is a writer of poetry and prose. She is currently studying a Master of Letters in Creative Writing and teaching at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.*



## DYMOCKS RED EARTH POETRY AWARD

# Intervention Pay Day

*Ali Cobby Eckerman*

---

I love my wife she right skin for me pretty one my wife young one  
found her at the next community over across the hills little bit long way  
not far

and from there she give me good kids funny kids mine we always laughing  
all together and that wife she real good mother make our wali real nice  
flowers and grass patch and chickens I like staying home with my kids

and from there I build cubby house yard for the horse see I make them  
things from left overs from the dump all the left overs from fixing the  
houses and all the left overs I build cubby house and chicken house

and in the house we teach the kids don't make mess go to school learn  
good so you can work round here later good job good life and the  
government will leave you alone

and from there tjamu and nana tell them the story when the government  
was worse rations government make up all the rules but don't know  
culture can't sit in the sand oh tjamu and nana they got the best story  
we always laughing us mob

and from there night time when we all asleep all together on the grass  
patch dog and cat and kids my wife and me them kids they ask really  
good questions about the olden days about today them real ninti them  
kids they gunna be right

and from there come intervention John Howard he make new rules he  
never even come to see us how good we was doing already Mal Brough  
he come with the army we got real frightened true thought he was gonna  
take the kids away just like tjamu and nana bin tell us

I run my kids in the sand hills took my rifle up there and sat but they was  
all just lying changing their words all the time wanting meeting today and  
meeting tomorrow we was getting sick of looking at them so everyone  
put their eyes down and some even shut their ears

and from there I didn't care too much just kept working fixing the  
housing being happy working hard kids go to school wife working hard

too didn't care too much we was right we always laughing us mob all together

but then my wife she come home crying says the money in quarantine but I didn't know why they do that we was happy not drinking and fighting why they do that we ask the council *to stop the drinking and protect the children* hey you know me ya bloody mongrel I don't drink and I look after my kids I bloody fight ya you say that again *hey settle down we not saying that Mal Brough saying that don't you watch the television he making the rules for all the mobs every place Northern Territory he real cheeky whitefella but he's the boss we gotta do it*

and from there I tell my wife she gets paid half half in hand half in the store her money in the store now half and half me too all us building mob but I can't buy tobacco or work boots you only get the meat and bread just like the mission days just like tjamu and nana tell us

and from there I went to the store to get meat for our supper but the store run out only tin food left so I asked for some bullets I'll go shoot my own meat but sorry they said you gotta buy food that night I slept hungry and I slept by myself thinking about it

and from there the government told us our job was finish the government been give us the sack we couldn't believe it we been working CDEP for years slow way park the truck at the shed just waiting for something for someone with tobacco

the other men's reckon fuck this drive to town for the grog but I stayed with my kids started watching the television trying to laugh not to worry just to be like yesterday

and from there the politician man says *I give you real job* tells me to work again but different only half time sixteen hours but I couldn't understand it was the same job as before but more little less pay and my kids can't understand when they come home from school why I can't buy the lolly for them like I used to before I didn't want to tell them I get less money for us now

and from there they say my wife earns too much money I gonna miss out again I'm getting sick of it don't worry she says I'll look after you but I know that's not right way I'm getting shame my brother he shame too he goes to town drinking leaves his wife behind leaves his kids

and from there I drive round to see tjamu he says his money in the store too poor bloke he can't even walk that far and I don't smile I look at the old man he lost his smile too but nana she cook the damper and tail she trying to smile she always like that

and from there when I get home my wife gone to town with the sister in law she gone look for my brother he might be stupid on the grog he not used to it she gotta find him might catch him with another woman make him bleed drag him home

and from there my wife she come back real quiet tells me she went to casino them others took her taught her the machines she lost all the money she lost her laughing

and from there all the kids bin watching us quiet way not laughing around so we all go swimming down the creek all the families there together we happy again them boys we take them shooting chasing the malu in the car we real careful with the gun not gonna hurt my kids no way

and from there my wife she sorry she back working hard save the money kids gonna get new clothes I gonna get my tobacco and them bullets but she gone change again getting her pay forgetting her family forget yesterday only thinking for town with the sister in law

and my wife she got real smart now drive for miles all dressed up going to the casino with them other kungkas for the Wednesday night draw

I ready told you I love my kids I only got five two pass away already and I not complaining bout looking after my kids no way but when my wife gets home if she spent all the money not gonna share with me and the kids

I might hit her first time

*wali – house*

*tjamu – grandfather*

*ninti – clever*

*malu – kangaroo*

*kungkas – women*

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*Ali is an Aboriginal writer who lives in Central Australia. She has two children and an energetic and gorgeous grand-daughter. Over the past decade Ali has shared many journeys with her faithful red dog.*

# The Shooting Gallery

after Sidney Nolan's 'First-class Marksman' from the Ned Kelly series

*Michael Giacometti*

---

1.

dusk squeal of parrots  
muzzled by whipbird cracks  
under leaden sky

2.

in ironbark rise  
black Cúchulainn with three blue  
shot gun arms blazing

3.

black egg yolk eyes aim  
black nailed finger squeezes tight  
the tireless trigger

4.

blackwood scarred by shot  
red gum ring-barked at head height  
stringybark splintered

5.

in the slaughtered scrub  
silhouetted by gunfire  
walking black tombstone

---

*Michael works as a project officer for the NT Writers' Centre. His written output is inversely proportional to the number of hours and days he works. His latest work is an attempt to cross the Simpson Desert on foot.*

# Unlikely Honeymoon

*Michael Watts*

---

It was never going to be an easy pregnancy.  
But when my two ex-wives found out about it,  
All hell broke loose.  
I couldn't see my kids anymore.  
They weren't going to be exposed to 'that woman'.

Naturally she took it pretty personally,  
And with all the stuff being said about her,  
She found it pretty stressful,  
And the baby died.  
She was seventeen weeks pregnant.

It had been raining for three days in Alice  
Not those wild storms that quicken the senses,  
But that sad desert rain that dulls the light.

She had to fly to Adelaide for an operation.  
We took her six year old son with us,  
And he was confused and a bit hurt  
Because he couldn't see my kids anymore and didn't know why his mother  
was so upset.  
And then there was her father who was in intensive care down there because  
he had just had a heart attack

And as soon as we got to Adelaide we visited him and he told us how he  
had just watched the bloke next to him die in a pool of blood on the floor and  
you could see he was still suffering from shock, and it was all that bip-bip of  
monitors and laboured breathing and God he just wanted to be out of there.

We were his first visitors in three weeks.

It was raining that sad rain in Adelaide too,  
And we're stuck in this one bedroom apartment  
And I'm writing affidavits to my lawyer about my kids and my ex wives and

my new partner and her pregnancy and all the time she's got this dead baby inside of her.

and like we had discussed back in Alice this was never going to be a fun trip.

But we took her father out for lunch,  
Against all the hospital regulations,  
And he wanted Italian,  
So we did that,  
He ate lasagne  
And drank good wine,  
And you should have the seen the smile on his face.

Later I grabbed a taxi and took the kid to the museum.  
He wanted to see the dinosaur bones  
And even though I was missing my kids like hell, it was fun,  
And we showed each other lots of stuff  
And he read the Egyptian hieroglyphs and made up a story  
And I thought he was pretty good at it.

The kid and I caught a cab back to the apartment  
And she was lying in bed,  
I put a DVD on for him and lay down beside her,  
She was worried that this would be the end of us,  
That tomorrow, after the operation, we would drift apart,  
"I don't want to lose you," she said.  
"I don't want to lose you either," I answered,  
And I was surprised how easy it was to say.

We lay there, talking some more then we decided to go for a walk.  
Down to the local cricket ground,  
The outfield was cut perfectly, and in the low evening clouds and the light  
It looked even greener.

We started talking about stuff we liked doing,  
There was a soft rain falling, but it was all good  
And we found ourselves tap-dancing on the sidewalk,  
While the kid chased sea-gulls across the ground.  
We decided to take tango lessons when we got back to Alice.

We walked past all those starchy houses of North Adelaide  
Stole roses from the church and the gardens, big bunches of them,  
But not white because they represent death,  
We filled the apartment with them.

All the time neither of us wanting to believe the baby was dead,  
Even though the gynecologist and the ultra-sound couldn't pick up a heart  
beat.

We were hoping for some sort of medical miracle,  
She said it just didn't feel right,  
Her breasts were still sore,  
Perhaps there was another baby hidden behind the dead one,  
After all she had an inverted uterus,  
And she was sure she had felt some sort of movement.

We went out to the pub for dinner, and she drank doubles because I guess she  
needed to,  
And we played pool and darts, until we had to take the kid home.

We showered in the dark, washed each other's hair, held each other,  
And later, making love not out of sadness, but still with this dead baby  
between us,  
We knew now for sure it was dead, and that it had all just been wishful  
thinking,  
Maybe this is its gift to us, I said.  
That is has somehow brought us together.  
And we had completely fallen in love

And we realized that this was our most unlikely of honeymoons.

---

*Michael is a poet and playwright and lives in Alice Springs.*

# Defining Scarlet

*Dael Allison*

---

I drive the Stuart Highway  
through a heavy-lidded Darwin night  
the poets slumped dozing on the back seat.

Through the open windows  
warm air bathes us with the scent  
of cinnamon from trees I still can't name.

Ondaatje farts and mumbles  
*I am the cinnamon peeler's wife. Smell me.*

Our headlights shaft the night,  
green is the only colour:  
the dashboard, the flashing neon  
palm trees at the Free Spirit resort,  
traffic lights on Go Go Go.

But luck changes. As I slow for amber  
Neruda shouts (his Spanish accent  
salt as anchovies): *Such yellow!*  
*For years I search lemons, suns  
and autumn's costly leaves ñ  
this Darwin night provides a definition!*

Ondaatje struggles upright. They both  
hunch forward, nostrils flared  
on what the night is hiding. Tomorrow  
I'll show them how dragonflies  
crown the tips of each pandanus fan  
along East Point Road, and the bay  
will be as blue as the day  
Ricky Bigfoot hurtled spear-straight  
into life's obstacles.

The traffic lights bloom crimson  
in the felted dark.  
*What about red?* I ask the poets.

*Can you define scarlet?*

*You tell us, they say in unison.*

So I describe the way Ricky Bigfoot ran  
from another world's long-time  
long-grass, onto the seething highway  
and turned too late.

How he twisted through the traffic  
like a wallaby fleeing hunters along a dry creekbed,  
his dusty dreaming on collision course  
with the chrome and plastic certainty  
initiating here and now.

How I sat with him on broken glass  
waiting for the sirens,  
and watched scarlet's neon beauty  
bloom on his midnight skin  
and crown his head  
with flowers.

*I have no definition, I tell the poets.  
Just the blood-blank gaze of traffic lights  
that stop the eyeless night.*

We wait for the lights to change.  
Ondaatje tells me how  
the cinnamon peeler's wife  
demanded that her husband's scent  
should mark her.

*What good is it, he asks, to be wounded  
without the pleasure of a scar?*

Neruda stares down blackness  
through the windscreen. His voice  
booms sadly, *Yellow can only be perfect*  
on this one, still night.

---

*Dael writes poetry, essays and novels.*

# Who's Turning the Kaleidoscope?

Kaleidoscopic fragments of your war-time years

*Helen Pavlin*

---

spin through my mind:

starting Medicine at the Sorbonne,  
 black-marketed nylons and cigarettes,  
 Mercedes hidden in haystacks,  
 people hidden in haystacks  
 poked by bayonets,  
 men in a boat, you amongst them,  
 betrayed by a girl one of them slept with...

"One of them" must really have been

"one of you," I see now

when I study on this page

the occupants of the boat:

I see too that I have preserved your discreet telling,

knowing it has never been my business

to wonder about such a detail –

not that this means I never have,

of course, in the boring way that lovers

sometimes stoop to,

casting their net and inspecting the contents...

The mouth of a cave

blackened by gun-powder –

yours or your enemy's?

Someone's ambush.

Having to dig a trench – or was it a pit?

then line up, all of you, along the edge,

machine-guns at your backs:

shrapnel in your legs saw you fall

with the others, but the miracle was  
you did not suffocate  
before the guerrillas found you  
and one other out of all that lot.

Someone has pointed out  
that you don't get shrapnel from machine-guns.  
That's right, I realise.  
Don't know any more if it's your kaleidoscope  
or mine that has mingled the fragments,  
but I do remember those unusual scars on your shins.  
I remember that word  
and I have watched your tormented sleep.

---

*Helen writes short stories and poetry. She is also a counsellor and family therapist. Her work often explores the different ways all of us try to make sense of our lives.*

# Faiku

*Ali Cobby Eckermann*

---

I drink in the street  
Ask for money each day  
Intolerance is free.

When I pass away  
Alone under the bridge  
Weeds grow in your mouth.

Lips quiver silent  
Church hymns restore memory  
Childhood fame retold.

A pauper's grave site  
Dead flowers bent backward  
Broken by neglect.  
Red dust and blue sky  
Who painted the cross white?  
I prefer black please.

---

*Ali is an Aboriginal writer living in Central Australia. Her poems and short stories are influenced by her journey to reconnect with Yankunytjatjara Family. She travels everywhere with her red dog Merlin.*

## KATH MANZIE YOUTH LITERARY AWARD

# Caught

*Rosanna Cameron*

---

It is still, today. No noises penetrate the still morning air apart from the birds and gentle swish of the trees as the wind caresses them. I've always wondered about the wind. You can't see it, but you always feel it. Even on the stillest of nights it will always be there. Either blowing away the dust from under my brown feet or whipping up huge storms which torment the carefully-tended rice fields.

I lie in bed as I listen. It's not much of a bed, mind you. Just rags as sheets and a scraggly old mattress that my father, who we call *Bapak*, found on the side of the road. My room isn't much either. I share it with the rest of my brothers. Ever since the war started it's been much harder to get any building materials to finish the house properly.

Ah, the war.

Over the last few months, I've woken up on five occasions with gunshots ripping through the sky and piercing screams ruling the terror ridden air. The last time I was left with a scar.

It was my best friend. He'd been down at his family's kiosk and he'd been shot. No one's quite sure why. He'd probably just said the wrong thing at the wrong time.

I've been living in a darkness since then. It has seemed to envelop me, body and soul, until I just sit down and cry, not even knowing why. I think it's the fighting. I live in the heart of the East Timorese turmoil. The centre of Dili, the so called 'capital'. I wish. Like the Indonesian militia will ever let us be independent. There's other countries helping us but I have mixed feelings about them. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for us. But even I have to admit we need help for our independence.

I live in a family of eight. I love my siblings but we create problems - money, especially. *Bapak* can hardly support us at all. And Mama has the tough part. She has to clean, cook, sweep, and buy things, wash the clothes and look after her children all at the same time. I'm the third eldest at ten. I'm three years older than my younger sister and one year younger than my older brother. There are three girls in our family and three boys. I'm particularly

attached to my eldest sister, Mariah. We just...I don't know...*click*, I suppose. We've been taught to be brave, honest and kind by *Bapak* who shows us these things. We're deep thinkers and very unlike my older brother. All he cares about is 'freedom' and 'justice'. Not like everyone else doesn't, but all he seems to do is run around the whole city causing trouble with the soldiers. I shouldn't think about him, though. Mama is calling me. And I'm crying again.

I watch the delicate petals dance in the sunrays, twisting and flitting about each other. Rivulets of lava colour wind through the fragile, snow white ovals, creating curious red patterns. It's a beautiful flower. Pure white, about the size of my thumb with more red splotches painted in the centre. I haven't seen it before, which is surprising. But my attention is seized by shouts coming from the end of the street. My eyes dart from the delicate flora and my heart goes to my mouth.

*Riot!*

I stumble to my feet and start to run. I run the fastest I ever think I will in my life. Feet pounding against the dirt road, my breath coming in short gasps, I risk a glance over my left shoulder. A sea of men lurches through the street behind me, destroying everything in their path. I run for minutes longer. I turn my head around again and see that they have gained on me. I swing my head back around and a full patrol of men clad in green uniforms suddenly turns the corner in front of me.

Machetes and shields are in their hands along with batons and who knows what else, snugly tucked in their belts. Through the terror that clouds my mind, I notice a small alleyway between two buildings. My stomach churns as gunshots started to whiz past my head. I do a sharp turn to the right and stumble into the alleyway. I stop to catch my breath and throw up on the pavement. Wiping my mouth, I dare to look around the corner. I see a man about sixteen years of age, pushed up against the wall by several other young men in military type uniform. They all look about eighteen. The boy's stony features give him a rebellious appearance. The militia surrounding him say something. He struggles for a second then spits in their faces. I notice drops of blood running down his leg and marvel at his bravery, but I also acknowledge that his bravery would be the reason for his death. I watch as one of the men holds a gun up to his head. A deep chuckle drifts over to where I stand. The blood on the boy's leg turns into a steady trickle which forms a crimson puddle around his feet.

I want to look away but I can't, the horrifying image keeps my eyes locked on the helpless figure. I hear a shot ring out, and blood spatters across the wall behind the boy's head. The men release their grip and the boy slumps to the ground. I swallow bile as it rises threateningly. I duck around back into the alleyway and crouch in shadows as I wait for the soldiers to pass. I look back around the corner to survey the damage once again.

A tiny white flower lies on the ground, surrounded by a pool of blood.

I walk home in the shadows of houses. Stifling my sobs and putting my head down so passers-by won't see my tear-streaked face. When I arrive home I see Mariah is sitting at the table. She glances up when I walk in.

"Hey, where've you been?" She asks. I mumble something about going to the markets and hurry into my room. But Mariah doesn't let it go that quickly. She peeks around the corner of the curtain that covers my doorframe and says nothing. I lie on my bed, facing the wall.

"You know Mama's already been to the markets, don't you?" I hear her step inside my room and come to the side of the bed. She sits down and the cot creaks dangerously. She pretends not to notice. I realize I am still crying, and that she has seen. She places her hand on mine.

"I heard the shots from here." My body tenses. The silence fills the room like a heavy fog. I stop crying and hold my breath. I wish she would go away, though another part of me wants her to take me in her arms. All she does is lean down and kiss me on the top of my forehead.

That riot was on television the next day, Sunday. I heard it even made the news in other counties. Thankfully I wasn't filmed. It was all the after-effects, a couple of burnt shops, etc. We watched it at our neighbours' house after church. The hot, stuffy room was filled with people from nearby houses. Our neighbours are one of five families in our neighbourhood to have a working television.

Lunch after that is awkward. My family seems to sense a layer of despair whose tendrils didn't usually creep around the door and in the windows like it is today. Most of the time, this feeling is forced aside by my parents in an attempt to make us children happier. I don't think my parents know what to say to me after yesterday. Mariah offers a small bowl of chilli paste to me. I shake my head and continue shifting my food around my plate. Meanwhile, my brother Jose blabs about what his militia friends did the day before.

Great. My brother's friends tried to shoot me.

Jose is completely oblivious to my unusual loss of appetite. He tells over-exaggerated stories about how his friends kill rival militia and how he 'respects' all his friends so much. I can't believe he can be so shallow, but I still love him. It's just that he doesn't...listen. My parents stare icily at him. Finally my father speaks up.

"Jose, you're not doing the right thing," he says. Jose just stares blankly at his father. But he continues. "Riots won't do much to the militia. All it does is get people killed. It's immature, stupid and immoral. Why can't you understand that?" By now I see my father is getting angry, his voice has risen and his jaw is set.

"Well, you're not doing a thing, are you?" Jose replies heatedly. "You just sit back and let them go about shooting people and taking our country. You're useless. You don't care about these people that kill innocent people every day. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to be your son."

My father stands up. His face slowly registers the emotions.

Not one of his children has ever spoken like that to my father. We all know how hard he works each day to get food on the table. We *all* respect him, or so I thought.

His expression freezes, unfortunately. There is only one thing there. One emotion. And never in my life have I seen it in his face.

It is the essence of rage. But he controls it. I wait for him to say something. Father leans forward and stares into the eyes of my brother. Jose stares back resolutely.

"*You will never speak like that to me again!* You call yourself a man. You're a coward. What you're doing is getting *our* people massacred. You murder our innocent children and women by encouraging the riots. We have to find a way to find peace and this isn't it! Why do you think that killing is courageous? Why does violence always have to be the answer? No one ever thinks that it can be worked out using our heads and without any bloodshed. You don't think they will fight back when you try to shoot them? No man would ever, ever do that. I hope you are ridden with guilt for what you have caused. You should be grateful to me because I have mercy on you. I am not ashamed to be your father and I still love you. Any other would throw you out of the house and disown you for what you do." My father's voice was like ice. So were his

eyes. His face was stone and posture unmoving. He suddenly straightened up and left the room. I see my mother, rivers of tears flowing down her face.

Will this conflict never end? Can I have just one day of peace?

---

*This story was influenced by my experiences of living in Indonesia from age 8.*

# Black Friday

Based on the Victoria bushfires of January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1939

*Abbey R. Bradhurst*

---

The air was still and dry. The heat pressed in on him through the air, drying out his eyes and his sore throat. A few sleepy-sounding birds were sitting dazedly in the trees; there had never been a day as hot as this.

Suddenly, a crack in the deathly silence caught his attention. Wiping a drop of sweat from his brow, Constable Charlian peered cautiously around the trunk of the gum tree. He raised his gun, hardly daring to breathe. Whipping around, he fired a shot into the bush.

"Damn," Charlie muttered to himself, disappearing behind the tree again. That blasted convict would be half way across the bush by now; there was no chance of catching him.

"*Charlie! Time for afternoon tea!*" called a voice in the distance.

Sighing, Charlie dropped his slingshot in the leaf-litter in defeat. He longed to shout back "*Five more minutes, Mum!*" as he had been doing for the past fifteen minutes, but he had a feeling that if he did, he would end up in bed early with no tea that night. As he trudged through the ankle-deep leaves back to the house, he suddenly realised how hungry he was – he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Jogging, he ran uphill, past the water well, past the crate of empty milk bottles, and along the gravel driveway.

His face was now dripping with sweat, so he slowed to a walk, panting as he approached their wood and brick house on the edge of the bush. He skirted their thirsty-looking plants, and noticing the smoke billowing out of their chimney, burst through the door with enthusiasm – he could smell soup!

The moment Charlie entered the kitchen, his mother began to fuss over him, dusting off his tie, and commenting on the stains on his white shirt.

"Your Father won't be happy about this, and Uncle Herb only bought you this tie for your ninth birthday two months ago! I'll have to get John to pick some gasoline up from work so I can get these grease stains off," Charlie's mother muttered to herself.

Charlie seated himself at the wooden table, as his mother placed a piping hot bowl of soup down in front of him – cream of mushroom, his favourite. As he fumbled and clattered with the spoon, his mother busied herself with the dishes, occasionally coming over to straighten the red-checked tablecloth or adjust the volume on the wireless. She was vaguely singing along to 'Down on Melody Farm', which had just begun to play.

Suddenly, the peaceful atmosphere was disrupted by a loud series of hollow 'thumps'. After one final 'crash', the patter of small footsteps came creeping through the hall. In a flash of scarlet, Charlie's young sister Sophia came careening into the kitchen and upset his soup as she crashed into the table. Their mother was *not* happy.

"You're in your *evening dress*! And be careful when you're in the kitchen, Sophia, how many times have I told you?! Now – *get away from the soup!* You had your afternoon tea *ten minutes* ago, I don't know *what* you're thinking; and will you please remember to put your dolls away next time you play in the drawing room?"

"Sorry Mother," Sophia mumbled as she sat herself on the seat next to Charlie, eyeing her brother's soup. She scrunched up her nose as she smiled as widely as she could. Charlie, however, had just had soup spilt all down his front, and was not in the mood to share anything.

"Please? I'm *starving*..." she hissed, shooting a meaningful glance at their mother's turned back. "I have something *really interesting* to show you!"

"Alright..."

Five minutes later, Charlie and Sophia were making their way over the hill, down towards the forest edge. Charlie had been ordered to change his shirt in case the neighbours saw him, and a reluctant Sophia had been forced into a more suitable dress for play (after picking her dolls up off the floor in the drawing room, of course). Sophia seemed unusually excited.

"Where are we going?" Charlie asked, scratching his head. "You'll see," Sophia said, her blue eyes sparkling.

They had been walking for at least twenty minutes, when Sophia stopped in a small clearing, next to a heap of leaves.

"What are you showing me?" Charlie asked suspiciously for the umpteenth time. "There!" his sister shrieked, pointing over his shoulder with a stubby finger.

Charlie whirled around, and suddenly felt something large and papery collide with his head. Yelling wildly, he heard Sophia's cackling laughter and saw a large piece of paperbark on the forest floor next to him.

"You little...!"

His sister smashed a handful of dead leaves in his ginger hair, and she squealed as he chased her around the clearing. Finally, they stopped, panting, next to a blackened stump.

"Is that what you wanted to show me?" Charlie asked, slightly annoyed, as he blinked sweat out of his eyes. Sophia's face was glowing, and her forehead glistening.

"No – it's this."

Charlie gasped. Through the trees, he could make out a large black patch spreading through the bush. The leaf-litter had been sizzled away and left stains of ash – trees were scarred with deep, black gashes, and bushes had been cleared out.

"How far are we into the forest?" he asked in wonder, examining a deep burn mark in a eucalyptus.

"About half-way. And it looks like a fire's come through here," Sophia added knowingly, as if Charlie didn't know what the aftermath of a fire looked like.

As they were walking back, Sophia stopped on the edge of the hill to roll up her socks and pick leaves out of her hair. Knowing what their mother would say if she saw them looking like scarecrows, Charlie began to do the same. Suddenly, his sister gave an audible gasp. Looking up, he saw what she was looking at. An enormous cloud of thick, gray smoke was hanging in the air, in the direction of town.

The fire was close.

\* \* \*

Charlie awoke next day to the sounds of men shouting, Sophia crying loudly, and the wireless booming downstairs. Confused, he sat bolt upright, his back drenched in sweat. Shoving the covers back, he glanced at the clock on the wall. It was half-past seven, but the room was sweltering hot.

When Charlie crept down the stairs into the kitchen, he found his mother holding a shaking, tear-stained Sophia.

"Mother, what's happening?" he asked, fighting to keep the panic out of his voice. The wireless had been turned up to the maximum volume.

*"And it's 7:30, today on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of January. The heat has reached 45.6° C, which breaks the record for the hottest day in Melbourne history to date! And now here's Michael Donoworth with the weather. How are the skies today, Mick?"*

*"Well, Howard, nothing much in the skies today except for some large smoke clouds. The fires we talked about yesterday and this morning are still blazing throughout the country, and currently they are heading out from town into the more rural areas of our state. I suggest you pack up your belongings, fireproof what you can, and leave as soon as possible to some of the towns near the sea."*

Charlie's eyes widened. *Fire!* He dropped into the seat next to Sophia and his mother. She was sweating beneath her perfectly shaped blonde curls, and her eyes were alight with fear.

"Uncle Herb and some friends are outside, fire-proofing the house. I think you should go upstairs and pack some of your things; we're leaving in twenty minutes, sweetheart."

"And... where's Father?" Charlie asked hesitantly. His father hadn't been home for tea the night before.

"He's out with Uncle Herb," she said shortly.

After what seemed like forever, Charlie, Sophia and their mother were finally being escorted to Uncle Herb's house near the sea in his old, rusty motor-car. Herb was the only one who didn't seem too worried.

"Yeh see, kids," he began, veering to the right to avoid a stray cat on the road. "When ye'r at my place, you know nothin's gonna go wrong. It's safe there."

\* \* \*

Charlie had just finished unpacking the few belongings he had taken with him, when Sophia came in and sat down on the bed.

"It's still hot," she said. "When are we going back?"

Charlie shrugged his shoulders as he stared around the blue-painted room. A faint breeze was blowing in through the window, but it made no difference to the excruciating heat.

"I'm sure the fires won't cause too much damage," he said uncertainly, reassuring himself more than anyone else.

"Is Daddy at the house? Is he making it safe so we can go back soon? Can we go back for tea? Can we go back *now*?"

Charlie stared at Sophia, her tear-stained face and welling eyes. He wanted to be able to comfort her and tell her that they could go back this very instant, and play in the bush the moment they got home, but he had a dark, creeping suspicion in his gut that they wouldn't be returning home any time soon.

It wasn't long before Uncle Herb came stumping up the stairs, holding two glasses of lemonade. Charlie and Sophia accepted them gratefully, and sipped them in dead silence.

"Why the long faces, eh?" he asked, roughly clapping them both on the back and ruffling Charlie's hair.

"Nothin's gonna get to my Princess Sophia and Constable Charlian if I can 'elp it," he assured them. Charlie and Sophia exchanged worried glances.

\* \* \*

"Mother?"

"Yes, Charlie?"

"Will we be going back anytime soon?"

"I don't know, dear."

"Mother?" he asked again.

"What is it, sweetheart?" she replied wearily.

"Is the house going to be okay?"

"I don't know, darling."

Sophia sniffed loudly from the next room. At least four hours had passed since they had left their house on the hill, and the confusion and lack of knowing what was going on did not help anyone's mood. The men had only just returned, and their father was in the study, talking with Uncle Herb in hushed tones.

Herb lowered the volume on the mini wireless.

"That's it... it's gone."

"I just can't bring myself to tell them..."

"But yeh 'aff to! I know it'll break them little hearts, but... they're gonna 'aff to know," Uncle Herb rasped.

"And what about Meredith?"

"Yeh've got a beautiful, understandin' wife who'll know that yeh did yer very best."

"But I've let everyone down..."

"If yeh'd been listenin' to me, you'd know that it's not your fault! We all tried, but it's gone now. It's a... chance to rebuild yer life, I suppose."

"I..."

"John, listen 'ere. You go in there and tell 'em. And yeh be proud of what yeh did to save the house."

John sighed heavily as he lifted himself out of his chair.

"Meredith, Charlie, Sophia... I've got something very important to tell you."

Charlie sat up immediately. Neither of the children noticed their parents exchanging significant looks. Their mother nodded, and hurried over to prepare some tea. Their father kneeled down so he was level with Sophia and Charlie.

"Children, I'm afraid we won't be going back home for a while."

"Did the house get hurt?" Sophia asked thickly.

He nodded. Sophia burst into a fresh set of tears. Charlie felt shell-shocked. Their house? *Gone*? Forever...? It seemed too hard to believe.

"What about the bush?" he asked quickly. He somehow felt as though he knew the answer already.

His father shook his head. "It didn't make it."

Charlie felt a stab at his heart, and it sunk in. They were never going back. The home that he had grown up in, through all nine years and two months of his life, was gone. He would never be able to play convicts again in the forest, to chase the birds and climb the trees.

Uncle Herb came in on the scene, looking grave. He sat down in the chair beside Charlie.

"We found this," he said in his gravelly voice.

Uncle Herb withdrew something long and charred from his back pocket. It was Charlie's slingshot.

"I 'ave no idea why it didn't get eaten' up with the rest, but... all the same, I thought yeh might like to 'ave it back. Things are gonna be alright, though, Charlie boy. Things are gonna be alright." Charlie nodded, blinking back tears.

"Thanks," he muttered, stowing the sling-shot in his pocket.

\* \* \*

That night, Uncle Herb invited all the relatives and friends over to his house, and they shared their stories over the dinner table. Aunty Marjory was one of the few who had point-blank refused to leave their homes- She was far too attached to her sixteen cats. Luckily, the fires hadn't reached her part of town before they were stopped.

Cousin Deidre's house had been completely engulfed by the flames, but oddly enough she wasn't affected *at all* by the loss.

"The location, I could deal with," she said in her high, tittery voice, delicately dissecting her potatoes. Charlie nodded politely.

"But it was the neighbours," she said knowingly, leaning forward and peering over her eye-glasses. "Terrible, terrible people. Always letting their dogs out after dark – not the sort of people I would associate with." Deidre sipped her sherry with raised eyebrows as she nodded towards the two men across from her.

Uncle Rodney and Uncle Herb were downing more beer by the minute, and singing louder after every one, until finally Aunty Marjory gave in and they began to sing around the piano. Rodney and Herb were completely out of tune.

That night, Charlie found it hard to smile and make conversation with every relative that wanted to chat. He was still shocked over the loss of his home, but he was beginning to feel that maybe everything *would* be alright.

They would stay with Uncle Herb until they found a new house. Father's workplace was untouched by the fire, so they really were in no big dilemma. He smiled to himself as he listened to Uncle Rodney's drunken singing.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

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*I am a year 8 student at Kormilda College, and my interests include writing, acting and music.*





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