

GriffithREVIEW47

Looking West

Edited by Julianne Schultz & Anna Haebich.

Ashley Hay, Carmen Lawrence, Shaun Tan, David

Whish-Wilson. Exclusive interview with Tim Winton.



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Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city's second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

Like Sir Samuel Griffith, Griffith Review is iconoclastic and non-partisan, with a sceptical eye and a pragmatically reforming heart and a commitment to public discussion. Personal, political and unpredictable, it is Australia's best conversation.

GriffithReview47
Looking West

Edited by Julianne Schultz and Anna Haebich

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Double self-portrait 1959
Oil on composition board 71.8 x 84 cm
State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia
Purchased 1985
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Curtin University

INTRODUCTION

Land, glorious land

New horizons, new perspectives

Julianne Schultz

IN THE BEGINNING it is about land: enjoying, aggregating, owning, using, preserving, developing and selling land.

Land is, and always has been, a fulcrum of wealth and meaning. For millennia emperors and kings, colonial powers and trading companies have undertaken perilous journeys and embarked on epic battles to secure land and the resources and mysteries it holds – staking claim at home and abroad, often sweeping aside those who were there previously, and in the process redrawing maps and redistributing power.

Modern Australia is built on this principle and, within the Federation, Western Australia demonstrates it best.

With a third of the nation's landmass, it is the single biggest entity. If its residents were evenly spread across the more than 2.5 million square kilometres that make up the state, each would have a patch just under a square kilometre to call their own – three times that available nationally, and vastly more than in the smaller, more densely populated states.

On this basis alone, it should not be surprising that WA is central to national prosperity.

When the Indian Ocean-facing territory became a colony, there was little understanding of the riches that lay beneath its ancient soil, or the tens of thousands of years of human settlement that had prevailed in what included vast tracts of apparently inhospitable terrain. It did not take long for gold to be discovered and dug out, for forests to be felled, dams sunk, water pipes laid and land to be distributed to the new arrivals.

It took much longer to realise the extent of the resources embedded in the geology, to appreciate the unique ecosystems, and even longer to realise the richness of the cultures that had developed and been maintained for millennia.

The legacies of these discoveries are now impossible to ignore, and illustrate another principle: that wealth aggregates across generations. Generally, the rich get richer.

Western Australia is small enough and blessed with enough resources to produce family dynasties in the way that has not been seen since the days of squatters on the fertile plains of the east coast colonies. That some of the richest people in the world should derive from WA is a testament to the land – as well as determination and ingenuity. But it begins with the land.

So the mineral wealth that has accreted over millions of years in the vast plains of the state has underwritten national economic wellbeing for the past decade – bringing unimaginable fortunes to those whose forebears staked claims, and a substantial trickle to the rest of us.

Those who were dispossessed and put under the control of the state have not done so well. They have weathered the consequences and survived, but with only a fraction of the embedded capital, making it unreasonably hard for many to move beyond the starting block.

The profound challenge for the twenty-first century is to ensure that the land can continue to give, and that this bounty is distributed fairly. Plunder might have made sense in another age; now we know better. It would be a tragedy if the legacy of the recent boom years was just more ghost towns.

AUSTRALIA IS ONE of a handful of countries to face two great oceans, and like Canada and the US, the dream of travelling west in search of a fortune is deeply embedded in the national psyche. Over the past few years, WA has won the population race. Although its absolute numbers are still small, the rate of increase has been remarkable – well over the thousand people a week that Queensland clocked up when it was growing at a clip a decade ago. Not all of those who moved west for well-paid jobs in the mining industry will stay, but many will, and it will be up to them to create a sustainable twenty-first century society.

Just as the gold rushes of the nineteenth century provided the means and ambition to establish Melbourne as an exemplar of a solid Victorian-era city, the mining boom of recent years has provided a unique opportunity to establish Perth as a sustainable twenty-first century city.

Such an ambition would suit the times and may have traction. From the big cities on the Pacific coast this seems improbable, but the picture up close suggests it is plausible. It could even provide a template. WA is one of the canaries in the mine of climate change in Australia. Community activism has pushed policy makers to respond seriously.

Just as the Pacific coast states of North America emerged from the bloodshed of the wars of settlement and the devastation of droughts and earthquakes to fashion the epicentre of twentieth century cool, Western Australia is on the cusp of reconciling the past and creating a new future.

This is important for the state and for the nation. As the push to re-examine the nature of the Federation gathers momentum, with economic, social and cultural consequences, it is essential that there is a deeper understanding of the impulses that underpin the positions that will be put on the negotiating table. A resilient, sustainable, reconciled WA is important for Australia.

The portrait of the state and its people, challenges and opportunities that emerges from the contributors to *Looking West* will confound many preconceptions. These stories provide rich insights into the history, geology, environment, politics and creative impulses that inform the state.

This edition of *Griffith Review* has been produced in partnership with Curtin University. Professor Anna Haebich, who has written extensively for *Griffith Review* in the past, has been an inspired co-editor. She has worked closely with associate editor Rosemary Stevens and a team of distinguished Curtin academics to identify the best writers, the interesting subjects and the important issues.

It has been a rewarding collaboration, which we hope will be as productive, informative and joyful as *Pacific Highways*, our New Zealand edition, and the bestseller *Tasmania: The Tipping Point?*

25 November 2014

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ESSAY

From the edge of the edge

Some observations

Anna Haebich

Game on Prime Minister. See you out west!

Scott Ludlum, 2014

GOING HOME FROM work on late afternoons in summer, I drive west between lines of flat grey bush straight into the glaring red sun that hangs just above the horizon. I'm driving to the edge. As the crow flies, I live five minutes from where the land ends and the Indian Ocean takes over. On scorching days the Fremantle Doctor, gusting up from the south across near-deserted sand hills, rouses us from the torpor of a forty-degree-plus day. With our extreme new summer temperatures this is a definite plus for living on the edge of Australia. I live on a good cultural edge with my partner, Darryl Kickett, a local Noongar man with a strong culture, lots of relatives and an ancient family lineage stretching back forty-five thousand years. He doesn't have to look anywhere else for Home – he's right in its heart. Not like me, still looking back after twenty-five years, along with the hundreds of thousands of other immigrants looking every which way for Home.

Immigration to the west has been overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic, bestowing an enduring legacy of looking back west to Britain as Home, like those colonists described by visiting Austrian botanist Baron von Huegel in 1833, who 'gazed westward over the vast and stormy sea in the direction of their homeland, so far away and out of reach'.

Distance and isolation from the other Australian colonies cultivated an inward-looking attitude, expressed in periodic calls for the Cinderella state

to secede from the nation and make its own way in the world. Cutting across the stagnation were mining booms that brought 't'othersiders' west with new ideas and connections back east.

Among prospectors in the 1890s gold rushes were radicals from the union strikes in Queensland, who laid the foundations for a new progressive politics in WA and the nation's second state Labor government in 1904.

The story goes that in 1900, the conservative Premier John Forrest granted women the vote to circumvent such an outcome. His plan clearly failed him, but it empowered women in WA with a new socio-political voice. Tragically, they didn't raise it in defence of Martha Rendell, who was hanged in 1909 (the third and last woman in WA) on the grounds of specious evidence for the murder of her stepson. Instead, they filled out the crowds baying for her death, leaving it to a small group of professional men to call for mercy. But WA can be proud of its milestones for women in politics: first woman elected to any Australian Parliament (Edith Cowan, 1921), first woman state premier (Carmen Lawrence, 1990) and first Aboriginal woman elected to any Australian parliament (Carol Martin, 2001).

Demographically, WA is out of kilter, with Perth home to 98 per cent of the state's population of two and a half million, and growing. In his article for *The Conversation*, 'Australian census: booming Western Australia must embrace its new diversity', academic Paul Maginn cites the 2011 national census in describing the 'rise and rise' of Perth as Australia's fastest growing capital city. New Zealand, South Africa and the UK might top the list, but the increase in newcomers to WA from China, the Philippines, Korea, India and Thailand convinces Maginn that the 'Asian Century is gathering demographic and economic momentum' here. Walking around Perth, I can't see this new ethnic diversity. Instead I see Perth striving for a glamorous US West Coast look, picked up in a February 2014 travel piece by Baz Dreisinger for the *New York Times*:

...multiple parks and waterfronts; spotless subways and free public buses; restaurant menus with organic, locally sourced food and wine; cool bars in heritage buildings; and pop-up everything, from farmers' markets to cinema and yoga. Welcome to Perth.

Forget stories of cashed-up bogans. Perth's beautiful people – models, actors, sports stars, musicians, foodies – also emulate the tanned West Coast style. I admit to the 'Asian Century' manifesting in some Perth universities with large enrolments of mainly overseas, fee-paying students. Curtin University alone has around nine thousand enrolments and a purpose-built mosque. I like to think the students are building scholarly and professional networks and knowledge that will endure when they *too* go back home. After all, as the universities point out, Perth and Asia share the same time zone.

THE PILBARA IS another edge where sand plain and red outcrops meet the sea. In the recent mining boom, vast resources of gas and iron ore made it the economic powerhouse of the nation and temporary home for some of the world's largest mining corporations. The rich got richer – two-thirds of the wealth went to the state's richest households – and more famous, with mining magnates Twiggy Forrest and Lang Hancock becoming national celebrities. Perth's skylines grew ever higher, into shimmering glass temples of praise to wealth and progress. Cashed-up, fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers crowded out airports, stretched services to the limit and pushed local property prices sky high.

After the boom comes the bust, and with a 40 per cent slump in iron ore prices the state was left counting the costs: huge investments in infrastructure; a dramatic drop in state revenue, forcing cuts in state expenditure and employment; local economies and workers – geared to soaring wages and booming sales – left hanging, irreparable damage to the environment and Aboriginal lands, and priceless Aboriginal art sites destroyed.

Only now is there public disclosure of the toll for FIFO workers of compression shifts: long hours of hard, repetitive work, isolation and family disconnect manifesting in suicide and violence in the mining camps and conflicts back home. Little wonder that people power in the Kimberley opposed the James Price Point gas hub in their midst, despite the promise of vast new wealth.

In early 2011, Darryl and I arrived in Halls Creek in the East Kimberley. We were on the edge of desert lands in Kidja and Jaru country, which suddenly transformed into the edge of a vast inland sea that covered the Kimberley. The rains had come, in abundance, rivers rose to record-breaking heights, bridges were destroyed, towns isolated and all communications

stopped – no mobile, no email and no credit card – with electricity cuts in temperatures over 40 degrees and high humidity. We all just had to stay put.

Overnight came the shocking news that the Warmun community village up the highway towards Kununurra had been washed away: seventy-six houses destroyed, along with the art centre and its priceless collection of Aboriginal art, and five hundred people evacuated by helicopter. How easily the rest of Australia can forget a remote corner of WA. Aboriginal ladies from the art centre in Halls Creek, who spent long nights watching the catastrophe of the Brisbane floods, saw no mention of *their* tribulations on TV.

And then, how suddenly the destructive forces of nature put paid to my plans.

Crazy as it seems, I was trying to orchestrate the sale of our dad's house in flooded Brisbane from this flood disaster in the west. The sale papers had travelled from Brisbane to Sydney to Perth to Halls Creek. I had tramped around in the heat getting them stamped and signed and parceled up and then had finally waved them off in the post office truck travelling to Kununurra. Such exquisite timing! The truck drove into Warmun just as the raging floodwaters swept through, taking with them the truck and my precious documents, never to be seen again.

BEING ON THE western edge of the continent, away from the centre of action, has encouraged a national amnesia about political activism here and a stereotyping of WA as a naively conservative state.

There are numerous examples to counteract this view. Protests in the 1990s stopped the clearing of old-growth karri forests for wood chipping. The rage spread across all classes, and in February 1999 three hundred professional business people 'in suits' assembled in front of Premier Richard Court's office in St Georges Terrace and used their mobiles to jam the phones. In February 2014, six and a half thousand people protested at Cottesloe Beach against the Barnett government's shark cull. It was finally dumped – but only after sixty-eight sharks had been killed. Opposition by environmentalists and Aboriginal custodians contributed to Woodside's decision in 2013 to withdraw from its \$45 billion liquefied gas project at James Price Point, and helped delay Buru Energy's plans to start shale fracking at sites in the Kimberley.

Aboriginal activists punch well above their weight, whether in concert with other groups or alone. Pilbara Aboriginal pastoral workers were the first to go out on strike when they walked off twenty-five stations in March 1945, to protest for fair wages and living conditions. Eight hundred left over the next three years: some were forced back to work by the police, but most stayed out and supported themselves by selling pearl shell, grass seeds, animal skins and tin, which the men mined and the women yan dyed in coolamons to shake out the dirt.

In the late 1970s, the Kimberley Land Council-led protest against mining exploration on Noonkanbah Station, and the bullying tactics of then Premier Sir Charles Court, attracted national attention. At the height of the dispute, Jimmy Chi and Broome band Knuckles performed the now-iconic song *Bran Nue Dae* from the back of a ute as a convoy of huge mining trucks, with their strike-busting masked drivers, rumbled past. The song went on to become an unofficial anthem for Aboriginal rights, a celebration of Aboriginal culture and identity and, finally, the hit song from Jimmy Chi's ground-breaking Aboriginal musical *Bran Nue Dae*.

In the 1980s, Aboriginal deaths in custody became an international issue following the death of sixteen-year-old John Pat in Roebourne jail. Helen Ulli Corbett, a Yamadji–Noongar woman, began a national 'listening tour' that gathered information about 'something like a hundred deaths', which she took in 'an old second-hand suitcase' to Amnesty International in London. In 1986 she addressed the United Nations in Geneva, and recalls that 'within four hours of delivering the speech the Hawke Labor government, well Hawke himself, got on TV and was crying and said we need to hold a Royal Commission into deaths in custody'.

Appointed in 1988, the Royal Commission was led in WA by Yawuru man Pat Dodson, who covered the thirty-two WA deaths out of the national total of ninety-nine. Tabled in Parliament in 1991, the report made 339 recommendations. One was for a custody notification service for police to call an Aboriginal Legal Service hotline whenever they arrested Aboriginal people. Adopted in NSW but not in WA, this could have saved the life of twenty-two-year-old Yamadji woman Ms Dhu, who died in August 2014 after being locked up in South Hedland police station for non-payment of

finer. Then in Perth, on the eve of a National Day of Action in October to protest the death of Ms Dhu, came the news that an Aboriginal man had been found dead at Casuarina Prison.

Dry statistics hint at the pain Aboriginal communities experience. While they are only 2 per cent of the state's population, they make up two-fifths of the adult prison population, three-quarters of juveniles in detention and more than half of children in state care. What can be done to prevent this continuing anguish?

THE THIRTY THOUSAND strong Noongar nation stands poised on the edge of a momentous decision that many believe might help to remedy these statistics. In early 2015, Noongar people will vote on a proposed Native Title Settlement that promises, in exchange for the 'surrender of all native title', to provide 'a long-term cultural, social and economic development package [with] appropriate recognition of traditional ownership, provision of a significant land base, specific housing initiatives and indexed monetary compensation and support for regional management corporations'.

With the community divided, the outcome of the vote remains uncertain. A spreading grassroots movement believes that healing is the way to shift the statistics. Red Dust Healing is one such program that is having a powerful impact. It sets out to heal spirits broken by generations of dispossession, powerlessness and rejection and to restore dignity, integrity, love and respect. As my partner Darryl explains, it is based on Aboriginal philosophies of healing as 'spiritual understanding of self, identity, love, belonging, family, security, hurt, heartache, good times, laughter and our connection to land. But mostly healing is a grasp for hope and acceptance based on love and respect, of understanding our supports and being able to tell "our" stories. Red Dust Healing offers tools for people to fix up their own broken lives and then take on the bigger issues around them.'

WESTERN AUSTRALIA IS the only Australian state on the Indian Ocean rim. I've travelled the length of its coastline – fishing, camping, swimming, sunbaking, walking on reefs – but had never looked out very far from that liminal space of the shoreline.

That changed on 24 March 2014, when I heard the announcement that Malaysian Airlines flight 370 had crashed into the ‘middle of the Indian Ocean, west of Perth. This is a remote location, far from any possible landing sites.’ I vaguely remembered names of sites below the Indian Ocean – Exmouth Plateau, Broken Ridge, Perth Basin, Nikitin Seamount – and wondered if the plane might have landed there, and thought how the eyes of the world would once again be trained on us, so many years after the America’s Cup and ‘Perth, the City of Lights’.

The next day, on my way to the Indian Ocean Futures Conference in Fremantle, I glimpsed US servicemen personnel here to search for MH370. At the conference my mind was peeled open by papers about exotic Indian Ocean trade, slavery, architecture and pearling, then contemporary issues of defence, food security, asylum seekers, piracy, migration, poverty, sustainability, climate change – all the rich complexities of a world opening up for me just beyond the horizon.

A keynote paper by Isabel Hofmeyr brought me back to earth. It demonstrated to me how peripheral Western Australia is to the tight mesh of stories that make up the Indian Ocean, and how irrelevant Perth and the west coast are to the extremes of poverty and extravagance of the Global South.

To add to my disillusion I saw *Those Final Hours*, the apocalyptic film set in Perth that wallops our wealthy city and its overblown suburban homes built out of mining money. It shows the rich and glamorous west coast set sinking into ‘debauchery, crime and madness’ in some sort of global punishment for all their hyper-conspicuous consumption. All waiting to be blasted to ash.

The director’s final cut cruelly transforms the azure-blue Indian Ocean of my summer reveries, with its cooling Fremantle Doctor and beautiful western sunsets, into a scorching skyscraper-high wall of flames. It advances from the horizon as the end of the world closes in at the edge where the Indian Ocean ends and Australia takes over, just five minutes as the crow flies from my little jarrah cottage.

Anna Haebich is a multi award-winning author known for her innovative histories of Aboriginal peoples, ethnic minorities and visual and performing arts. She is a John Curtin distinguished professor at Curtin University in Perth, and co-editor of *Looking West*.

ESSAY

Open ground

Trespassing on the mining boom

Rebecca Giggs

EVERY FEW MONTHS my mother flies north from Perth to Karratha with a prosthetic penis in her carry-on luggage. At check-in, she says, she watches the x-ray operator closely, anticipating their double-take. She suspects that one day her case will be pulled from the queue and publicly unpacked, so she keeps a letter of explanation from her employer folded in her handbag. To date, the airport staff have always been too busy screening the mineworkers boarding at that early hour – swabbing their bags and jackets for explosives, making provision for the transportation of industrial detonators – to react to one rubberised phallus, flashing across their monitors with the slapstick punctuality of a prank. My mother's case coasts through unopened, flanked by pairs of steel-capped boots that pile in a clunking tangle on the end of the conveyor belt. In thick socks, their owners shuffle through the metal detector.

Once I got a kick out of the idea of the plastic penis sailing through the luggage scanners, a little feminist rush from that incursion into the coercively masculine space of the mines. But one way to explain what my mother is doing with the plastic parts of a man she is conveying up north is that she is participating in a symbolic order whereby the worker is unembodied. The other contraption she sometimes carries with her is a single latex arm with peristaltic veins that pulse, packed in a violin case. Who is this person, I used to wonder? Is she is putting him together on the plane?

It is blood that is my mother's trade – she works for a pathology company.

In the 2011–12 financial year, around 33,100 men and women flew to the Pilbara region of Western Australia, following the financial inducements of the minerals and energy boom. A continent ensconced within a continent, the Pilbara's rocks are some of the earth's oldest. Iron ore, hematite – the valuable plate-rock of the Pilbara – is named after the Greek αἷμα (haima) – 'blood' – for its rufous colour. The poet Mark O'Connor notes in his book *Pilbara* (John Leonard Press, 2009) that the red lava flows near Roebourne date 3.2 billion years, birthdaying with minerals on the moon. The WA Local Government Association estimates that in the last twenty years the number of non-resident employees in the region has increased 400 per cent. Most work at mining these ancient repositories.

My mother helps to train the phlebotomists and collectors who handle drug and alcohol testing on site. The transnational corporations that dominate the region are invested in a few key components of their workers' physical bodies. Every major mining operation conducts routine, randomised blood and urine testing for stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens and alcohol – a requirement enshrined in legislation. My mother's mother was also a blood collector and she worked the Wheatbelt, taking and transporting warm or cold vials, haemoglobin-red (often testing them for iron). My grandmother is still known by those in the business for her steady hands and her local knowledge – even after she retired she was sometimes called out to bleed patients with small or ailing veins. 'Getting blood from a stone' might make a good family motto.

Urine samples, by mandate of the companies in the Pilbara, are to be taken under observation. The plastic penis is a dummy (available online), which is attached to a bag of 'clean' urine hidden somewhere underneath the clothes. The decoy my mother shows to her trainees is an example of how far men have been known to go to dodge a positive result. The arm in the violin case meanwhile is a practice apparatus, so that trainee collectors don't begin by bruising real people. So my family is involved with another kind of extractive industry: drawing a tributary of blood – millilitre by millilitre – from under so many skins and ferrying it back to laboratories in Perth.

YOU HEAR ABOUT the lock-ins when the cyclones come through the north-west, suspending on-site operations for days at a time. Bent Xbox marathons and hard drinking sessions in stuffy rooms. But the most infamous benders happen during the weeks away from site – entire pay packets put down on red or black. Studies show boredom, fatigue, stress, low levels of social attachment and high disposable income foster conditions conducive to drug use and hard drinking among the mineworkers. Frequent seizures of legal highs such as Kronik, K2 and Karma (all synthetic cannabis), and the on-site banning of body building supplements such as Jack3d, have curtailed the use of recreational stimulants but there are many tactics for avoiding a positive result on a drug test. Such ingenuities thrive in the Pilbara. One story I was told described how tests are randomly assigned by drawing a white marble out of a pouch of coloured marbles. Before passing around the pouch, the site-manager puts the white marble in a pot of boiling water so that, by touch, workers who are confident of giving a positive result can identify and avoid it.

Being ‘on the swing’, it used to be called. They come from Busselton, Broome, Perth, Sydney, Auckland, Bali and further yet. Now known as FIFO – fly-in fly-out (pronounced as in fee-fie-fo-fum, *fie-fo*) – it’s arguably Australia’s most extensive, expensive and recurrent internal migration. Arguably, because no national authority collects reliable, impartial data on the region’s transient workforce. Mineworkers don’t register a second address, change their electoral enrolment or claim Medicare benefits apropos their on-site residence. Rates are paid on property owned in feeder communities and driver’s licences are listed to primary residential addresses, so it’s difficult to track the flow of employment into, out of and around the north-west. The paucity of hard data on how many people work FIFO stints and for what duration led a February 2013 Parliamentary report, *Cancer of our Bush or the Salvation of our Cities?*, to deem such workforces ‘shadow populations’. Yet for many established regional towns the shadow is anything but a nebulous, shifting presence. FIFO labour forces are literally high visibility: a permanent presence in the streets, the shops and on the roads that attend the subterranean boluses of ore found there.

THE REGISTERED NAMES of mining operations give something away that the recruitment brochures do not. A quick scan of the MINEDEX

database of deposits and prospects, maintained by the WA Department of Mines and Petroleum, reveals past and present proposals lodged under jokey phrases like ‘Chunderloo’, ‘Snottygobble’, ‘Three Boys–Golden Pig Underground’, ‘Electric Dingo’, ‘The Big Bell Gold Crown Great Waste Dump’, ‘Hope for the Best Tailings Disposal’ and ‘The Silver Swan Crushing Circuit’. (The last two are, perhaps, inadvertently humorous, being extensions of established mine-names. ‘Hope for the Best’ makes more sense pegging out an unexplored tenement.) Other names are quips of a different sort: ‘The Golden Shower (at Kitty’s Gap)’, ‘Blink Models Ltd., Wet Dream at North Star’, ‘Mount Pleasant Black Lady Pit (Tailings Disposal)’, ‘Barbara’s Surprise Underground’, ‘Big Dick Prospecting: Scrape and Detect’.

Today’s boom – which is waning – is the third to glean from WA, and the largest in a series of Australian economic explosions led by mineral extraction and exportation. The first entailed the great gold and copper rushes of the late 1800s, a time of renegade prospectors. I was born during the dog days of the second boom – nickel, gold, petroleum, bauxite, alumina and iron ore in the late ’70s, early ’80s. My father, a young electrician, emigrated from the United Kingdom and found work on the excavation of Newman’s Mount Whaleback. The workplace safety regimes that prevail in the sector now were then no more than perfunctory, and he left that job after one too many close calls with electrocution. As he tells it, he leapt from a turbine with seconds to spare when a workmate inadvertently began powering up the grid. While he was shaken enough to quit and retrain in another industry, many of Dad’s mates still worked in mining (or associated trades) throughout my childhood. Blundstones lined up by the front door in Perth, reflective vests slung over the chair backs. Argyle, Hamersley, Robe River and the Super Pit, distantly disgorging rocks, metal, water. Men’s shorts from that time showed their legs, matted with nubs of plaster or grease and as strong as if they’d waded back through the ground itself.

My stories about the Pilbara began then, but not as stories about remoteness or heavy industry; they were personal stories about bodies, about family and about connection.

I WAS NINE when my uncle Terry, then a geologist for Western Mining, gifted me a lapidary kit of stones from the region. The ’87 crash was behind

us and the market was ramping up again by dint of international energy prices. ‘Lapidary’, an old, alchemic word, does not belong in the lexicon of mining. The term derives from a mystic age when stonecutting, chemistry and philosophy were one trade and certain minerals were believed to have metaphysical properties. In the modern sense, lapidary designates the polishing, carving and display of decorative gemstones – a pastime of hobbyists and new-agers, who sometimes refer to themselves as ‘rockhounds’. My uncle wasn’t a rockhound, but I was a collector. More specifically, I was drawn to collecting objects for which elaborate backstories could be created, things like old coins and driftwood. Uncle Terry thought the stones might fit that description.

In the lapidary kit, each rock was set into a divot on a foam mounting. The case contained twelve different minerals. One was rippled red and white like ossified lasagne. Another was so delicately fretted it looked as if it had been left out in the cold to crust with frost. I would have worn the fool’s gold on a chain around my neck, had I owned a chain thick enough. It was an exceptional thing for a nine-year-old to own, matched to the schoolyard craze for ‘mood stones’ (rings set with plastic opals that were meant to change colour according to the wearer’s emotions). At show-and-tell I proudly laid out my rocks one by one for the class, naming *chert*, *dolerite*, *quartz*, *sandstone*, *agate*, *hematite*, *pyrite*, *marble*, *gelnignite*. I hovered over that last rock; black, faceted in small battens that caught the light.

‘I don’t think that is gelnignite,’ said my teacher warily, standing up behind her desk. Thereafter, my lapidary set was confiscated for examination by the principal and the class was turned out for a brisk run on the oval.

I have thought about the lapidary kit often since, and have dreamt about it on and off again for the past twenty years. Nothing that so captivates is lost to the unconscious mind, even if spelunking to deep memory is required to retrieve it. I am turning the shining rocks, explaining each for an unseen listener. What I called gelnignite was likely to have been rough black tourmaline or volcanic obsidian (although the rocks drew a mesmerising charge from Pilbara, it is possible not all of them were actually from there). Semiprecious, the gems’ greatest worth was as eye-catchers. Cold to touch and gratifying to gauge in a palm or a pocket, they were variously heavier or lighter than they

appeared. How had these objects surfaced in such rough country? Tiny feats discharged by immense systems, from primordial time. They seemed to have undergone otherworldly transformations – acts of accretion and compression beyond scientific knowledge. The hearts of mountains seized. Part of their appeal was an imaginative disjunction with the scale, ferocity and fierce monotony of the environment in which they had been forged.

In my dreams, I've forgotten the names. Or I remember the names, but the case is only full of dun river stones or no stones at all. What were those rocks ever meant for, but to evoke an unobtainable terrain? A *terra incognita* brought to life in the mind of myself at nine, a place I still reach for.

EACH OF US has within us a formative landscape, and I think of those people I know now who grew up on the hematite ground and have never been able to wash the red off their feet – even after so many decades of living in cities where they rarely, if ever, go barefoot. Few of us so palpably evince the places we have been shaped by, though our lines of thought may also betray us, propagated over topography as surely as plants grow up an espalier. In an essay titled 'Raw Material', written for *Westerly* in 1961, the author Randolph Stow described his conviction that solid terrain is assimilated into our mental country, rumpling our ideas and creative impulses in ways we're not always alert to:

When one thinks of it closer at hand, 'environment' as the artist meets it, is almost too complex a thing to be written about at all. The boundary between an individual and his environment is not his skin... The external factors, geographical and sociological, are so mingled with his ways of seeing and states of mind that he may find it impossible to say what he means by his environment, except in the most personal and introspective terms... The environment of a writer is as much inside him, as in what he observes.

Stow, more so than any other Australian writer I can think of, mined his internal stratigraphy for the substance of his novels and poems. His work domesticates the kinetic energy of Western Australia's vastness to human

relationships, with devastating effect. But what happens when the defining quality of the geology that orientates your creative navigations is its *instability*? When the ground figuratively ‘beneath your feet’ is not there – is not even where you fling your imagination out to – for it flows onto computer-driven trains and off the edge of Australia, is carried by bulk cargo ships across the ocean, is changed through hot alchemy in foreign steel mills, to come to brace great municipal buildings, make monuments, make money.

The Pilbara landscape that undergirded my imagination was both fugitive and, like its workforce, constantly mobile. An imaginative shadow-lands. Homogenous and strange. The rocks in the lapidary set didn’t just speak of a place far away, they *were* that place; their presence testified to its continued plundering and erasure. If I ever got to visit the Pilbara myself (which didn’t happen until I was in my twenties) I suspected that the minerals I knew from their samples might already have disappeared, shipped wholesale to China, Japan or South Korea. At the very least, they’d be harder to find. The Pilbara of my youth, which the kit betokened, was to remain unreal and unreachable – littered with luminous, lunar stones. It was an environment I might have as readily arrived at as Lilliput or Middle Earth. Everything taken from there could not be put back.

Yet, it could be transformed. As if by some strange force of transubstantiation, what was hauled out of the earth in the Pilbara turned up in Perth as slithery heaps of blue metal and yellow builder’s sand. Everyone’s family was renovating, pressing out, turning their wages into structures. We flung *boondies* at each other (hard pellets of sand: a Noongar word and the snowballs of the west) in the vacant lots of new developments, running through roofless houses and dry swimming pools. The outer suburbs wore an apron of land, ironed smooth in anticipation of future growth.

People, too, were changed by working in and travelling through the Pilbara – they returned wealthy, injured, muscular or drunk. They came back with new and unnameable ambitions. Tall shadows stayed behind them when they were on site and some remained shadows when they returned, possessed by an idea, a conviction or new habits. At the very beginning of that boom, the journalist Osmar White called it a ‘journey through the land of I-believe’ in *Under the Iron Rainbow* (Heinemann, 1969). Faith that

the ground would keep on relinquishing, and faith in the companies that turned it over.

There was a generative restlessness to the era of the second boom that I probably internalised – the idea that motion itself could be a moral conviction. All that exploratory pegging of the earth, the tunnelling down for fresh finds – that felt like expansion, like progress. Virtues like rigour, tenacity, even a feral kind of patriotism, underpinned that ceaseless exertion – men’s labour plying loose the land. But those values were already beginning to fossilise. Advances in technology and mechatronics, coupled with increased capital costs, had long since collapsed the pioneering, individualist persona of the Australian miner and replaced it with foreign investment and the corporate superintendence of the region. Shrewdly, the ‘Big Miners’ colonised the myth and repackaged it. They still do.

NOSTALGIA HOLDS THAT the Pilbara used to be place of big personalities and unorthodox ideas. Where the self-made man was not just an economic category, but a civic one. Back then, it was always men. In the landscape they saw their inscrutability reflected. All that untrammelled, geologic tyranny, the scale of their success. Capitalism has relied on a roving class of workers pulled to manual labour, in agriculture and mining in particular. Historically, their living conditions were arduous. The Australian Bureau of Statistics might find it challenging to track FIFO workers through their residencies now, but consider that in the gold rush era of the mid to late 1800s most workers lived in temporary dugouts, shanties and burrows – actual burrows – which were hollowed into the banks of rivers and flooded regularly, fostering waterborne disease. They ate a scurvy diet. Backed into their dens and wrapped in oilskins, the dreams that drifted up to those men from the silted riverbeds were of twenty-three carat nuggets. It was a frontier and, as on all frontiers, hope was the main resource they mined.

The iron ore export embargo, put in place to reserve resources for national industry, was lifted in 1960. As Jennie Hardie recounts it in her 1981 report *Nor’Westers of the Pilbara Breed*, the initial celebrations in Port Hedland were lavish. At Poons’ Mess on Spinifex Hill, locals were sumptuously wooed:

[T]here were stewards at every elbow, handing out drinks and fancy *hors d'oeuvres*, chefs in tall hats...behind great long tables, serving guests from trays loaded with prawns, fresh lobster, oysters sitting in ice, smoked ham, roast suckling pig, sides of beef and a mass of mouth-watering salads.

There the British directors of Goldsworthy Mining Associates disarmed residents with the promise of lush times ahead. *Fee-fi, here come the giants*. The construction crew that poured the first tennis court in the town consisted of Hungarian, Italian, German, Spanish, Latvian and Thursday Island labourers – the forefathers of the modern FIFO workforce. These were the men to become the lumpers, the graders, the drivers, the winders, the skippers and the miners. Later, a residual purple dust kicked up by the mine settled over everything in the town. White birds turned red and the mood changed.

Better the red air though, than the blue air of Wittenoom and Port Sampson, where fibrous asbestos was extracted and shipped. Workers, including George Aitchison, would later describe airborne asbestos ‘like a field of snow’ on the jetty heads and ‘hanging like stalactites’ from the rafters of storage sheds (*I've Had a Good Life*, Hesperian Press, 2010). Sad irony that this fibrillate mineral, touted for its life-preserving properties in proofing buildings against bushfire, should become the source of Australia’s most savage, capricious and enduring industrial disaster. In Wittenoom, the boom slowed to a clotted rattling in the chest. Records show that, to date, the lung cancer mesothelioma, triggered by inhaling asbestos filaments, has taken the lives of more than ten thousand people Australia-wide.

By the 1970s, Lang Hancock wanted the country opened out along its north-west edge with nuclear bombs. The region was already haunted by mushroom clouds: in the 1950s the peace of the labyrinthine Montebello Islands, 130 kilometres off the Pilbara coast, was shattered by British nuclear tests. ‘I’d cheerfully eat lunch in an atomic crater,’ Hancock said. Later came financial scandals. The Lalor brothers, Peter and Chris, descendants of Eureka Stockade bloodstock, whose first mine was engineered by the thirty-first President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, are still remembered with bitterness in the region. Under their stewardship, Sons of Gwalia was

described by Alan Kohler in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (August, 2005) as running ‘a sort of movie set township, with painted facades of profitability propped up by rickety hedging deals that were destined to fail’.

THAT THE DECOY penis, which suggested to me transgression, turns out to be an apparatus of control is emblematic of a lot of what’s going on in the Pilbara now. Those japing mine names and the blood test dodging might be the last flickers of subversive spirit from a former age. What the FIFO workforces inhabit now is, to borrow from American author Rebecca Solnit’s *Storming the Gates* (University of California Press, 2007), a ‘postcommunal, postrural, posturban, postplace’. Economic personhood has supplanted frontierism and civic notoriety (let alone civic engagement). The idea of ‘the public’ has been whittled back to its barest passible elements. People and machines are treated as interchangeable. Neither have a deep connection to the places they unearth or to the communities that are built there; that is, the communities that will *remain* there after the mines are depleted. The wages are colossal and the knock-on effects, in terms of local property prices, are extreme. Salaries in the north-west are, on average, two-thirds higher than the national median. Though there have been marginal decreases in line with the boom’s decline, in 2011 an entry-level truck driver without mining experience was being paid \$120,000 per annum, while a supervisor or foreman was earning anything between \$135,000 to \$230,000. It’s still cheaper to fly cut sandwiches up from Perth than it is for a baker to live in Karratha. McDonald’s decided not to open a store in Newman because of the lack of affordable housing for their employees. Meanwhile, in Perth garages, jet-skis and quad-bikes grown dusty from abandonment indicate the high-water mark of the boom.

Though the conditions in the camps have improved (air-conditioning, pay TV and ‘lifestyle consultants’ all feature in the pitch), the hours are harder and the work is more isolating. Overseas staff from client companies can be on-site for the duration of long projects, working twenty-four days straight followed by three days ‘R&R’ in Perth; they go back to their home country once every four months, for a week. There are more women working the mines today than in the 1970s and ’80s – on site and in the engineering offices

(though gender parity still doesn't extend to the boardrooms). I'm told by my female friends that the FIFO sites remain gruff in mood and vernacular, that it's hard to strike up sociable banter. When we get together they show me the explicit and uninvited texts received after dark – advice that if they hope to be 'sorted out' they should leave \$50 in the fridge for a cleaner. They recount sex-splashed stories from the wet mess, where the weak beer does little to water down the violence of fantasies retold. And each wonders aloud how much longer they will endure it.

The unions have won recent court battles, but the *modus operandi* of the big multinationals – which they aggressively pursue – is to negotiate individualised contracts with their workforce. Five-day weeks broken into eight-hour shifts have given way to back-to-back twelve-hour rosters, in a constant twenty-four hour, seven-days-a-week output cycle. After such shifts, it would be reasonable to expect that getting a drink with your workmates – even sharing a conversation – might be a struggle. In early 2011, a fifty-four-year-old man died in his donga in Karratha's Gap Ridge Village. No one noticed his disappearance for four days. This is the upshot of destroying connections between people and places: the connections of people to people are likewise loosened. Eventually they break.

On the streets in Perth now you see less of those T-shirts people used to wear that said something like 'No Stop Work Injury Time: 112 Days!'. Workplace safety is the new dogma. Hearing booths, hydration assessments, three points of contact on a structure at all times. Carry clear, safety and sunglasses. But in a suburban Woolworths last Christmas I queued behind a man carrying five turkey rolls and wearing a shirt that read 'FIFO – Fit In or Fuck Off'. The ubiquitous fluorescent gear that distinguishes mineworkers is banned in some Pilbara pubs as tantamount to gang colours, while the media links community perceptions of public safety in the region to the presence of FIFO workers (as do many community members). So the distance between the mine-site and the world beyond it grows longer. Who looks at the ore tumbling from the conveyor belt into the hold of the ship and wonders, *whose country is that anyway?*

MINING'S CORPORATE HISTORY is long, but the world's oldest continuing mine, in the north of WA, was not dug for ore, gold or diamonds.

Indeed, the mine sought no financial profit at all. At Wilgie Mia the commodity obtained was ochre. Wilgie Mia, in the Weld Ranges near Cue, is an eerie place where stopovers are ill-advised without the observance of strict cultural protocols. Long subterranean galleries follow dark red, yellow and green coloured seams. It is a 'stop and pillar' mine, where the ceiling is supported by struts and scaffolding made from the rock. Some fourteen thousand cubic metres of stone and earth have been removed through careful engineering. The kangaroo, *Marlu*, was speared nearby in the Dreamtime. The ochre at Wilgie Mia is tri-coloured for Marlu's blood, his liver and his gall, which all leached out when he fell onto the ground there. These minerals are called 'sparkling' ochres because of their density and colour, and the fact that they do not aggravate the skin on application as a pulverised paste. The Wajarri Yamatji people, whose custody extends to the mine, have law practices involving the pigments that stretch back at least thirty thousand years. The ochre was dispersed in pieces out to groups in the Kimberley, to the south as far as Ravensthorpe, and east into Queensland.

Yet, although Aboriginal people were this country's first working miners, the boom has consistently toppled, broken and unfastened their land from its original stories and storytellers. All that motion, all that transformation. Flying in, flying out. Even as digging tells a fresh story, it disrupts storied ground in ways that mean the telling can't be the same. What feels like progress in Perth can look a lot more like destruction on country. While the commercial and cultural inflections of the mineral industries are a part of the city's texture, our working images of mined spaces are few and limited. Those images are themselves carefully refined.

The most visible landscapes of the Pilbara now appear in art sponsored by the mining companies – photographic shows and publications like Edward Burtynsky's *Minescapes* (2008); the many design projects of FORM; and movies like *Red Dog* (2011) and *Japanese Story* (2003). These are the pictures that have rushed in to fill the hole called 'Pilbara' that exists in the public's imagination. From far out, the sheer scale of development is sublime (as Burtynsky's photos, in particular, illustrate). Mount Whaleback, named in the 1950s for its rolling shape, today designates not merely the absence of a mountain but a mountain inverted: its five kilometre ziggurat walls descend to a slot

of olive-grey ground. As human activity digs deeper into that country, human imagination settles so lightly upon it – for these are places that are meant to be flown over, into and out of. To allow your mind to dwell on the meaning and history of the many alternative stories that emanate from the Pilbara is, in a way, politically radical. Such gestures refuse the corporatisation of our imagination.

‘The ore being ground, they divide it in several heaps and then begin to essay,’ wrote an ‘unnamed scientist’ in 1368 – the oldest usage of the word ‘essay’, identified by John D’Agata in his edited anthology *The Next American Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2003). Etymologically, to essay once specified the weighing of metals. Weighing is contemplating, both palms up. Before that, ‘unearthing’. Turning things over to examine their underside (and the inching discoveries beneath). To essay then, is to dig the valuable material out of the mullock and set it on the scales. There is so much digging going on in this state; some of it gives, but what it gives isn’t always fortuitous. Most of it takes. Here I am too, tiny pickaxe in hand, raking through the past.

MY UNCLE TOLD us other types of stories. Stories about alluvial gulches of red rubble that ran over dead watercourses, and how the stones clinked like spoons when you walked on them as they were made of so much iron. The sparse trees, he said, were glossy on one side of their trunks from the rubbing of cattle being driven past. I read of Dampier’s great solar salt flats, which are periodically mowed. The mowing machines shave a thin crust of salt crystals off for sale to chemical factories. Those wet salt flats are inhabited by milkfish, introduced to control algae, and birds sometimes come to prey upon them – though they must not taste as mild as their name suggests, for all their lives the fish occupy the bitterns and brines and they are full of Y-shaped bones. Hardly any other animals can tolerate it. There are salt ‘gardens’ too: smaller-scale operations, tended by salt gardeners who must feel a certain enviable pride when the light hits their immaculate paddocks in the morning, like so much unmarked paper.

Folklore has it that fossickers and small-claims prospectors once believed the Pilbara’s buried metals could be read upside down in the sky. They’d scan incoming storms for ‘lightning nests’ – electrical clusters towed around the

low-hanging cloud cover by the polarity of minerals below ground. Where lightning lingered, or struck the ground repetitively, a lode was thought to lie folded between sedimentary layers. *Earthing* – a word from my electrician father’s argot. Compasses flicked, uncertainly magnetised. This was a compelling idea, and for me it rhymed with the American ‘thunder eggs’ that Perth Museum displayed under spotlights on the second floor. Thunder eggs are geodes, the granite exterior of which divulges nothing of the glittering yolk within – starry crystals, formed in a cavity called a ‘vug’, which are only revealed when the stone is halved. They are remarkable objects. You could buy smaller thunder eggs at the Subiaco Markets on Rokeby Road and of course, I did. Last year, as if to verify the faith of those early prospectors who scanned the clouds, the moon was found buried under Eel Creek. Researchers from the University of Western Australia and Curtin University were surprised to identify ‘tranquillityite’, a lunar basalt with fox-red crystals, in their rock wafer scans.

From those formative days of imagining a landscape in abeyance, the Pilbara taught me how places are compiled from reticulated systems as much as by discrete objects. The pull between geology and sky, the pull between the south and the north, the pull of the past on the present. Flying in, flying out. To understand a landscape as a series of stories, energetically tugged between voices, means no place can be entirely isolated, nowhere is amnesiac. The ground is opened here, here, again here, always as it is there.

Rebecca Giggs writes about ecology and environmental imagination, animals, landscape, politics and memory. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Aeon*, *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Australian Book Review* and the *Guardian*, while her stories have been widely published and anthologised in collections including *The Best Australian Stories 2011* (Black Inc.) and *The Best of the Lifted Brow* (Hunter Publishers, 2013). Her first non-fiction book, *The Whale in the Room*, is forthcoming from Scribe.

ESSAY

The limits of dominion

Custodians on the edge

Carmen Lawrence

*...We are, we often feel, living
on the edge of something good.*

Nothing disturbs us.

*Winds from Africa and Indian waves
bear each day to our long white shore
only what we most admire: fashions,
technology, and rich strangers, as neat as
beetles who smile at our
simple friendliness.*

Yes, we like it here.

‘The Way We Live Now’
Bill Grono

ON CUE, IRON prices are falling off a cliff and small, locally owned mining companies, along with those that service them, are collapsing. A story from the *Business News* afternoon wrap of 8 September 2014, tells us that ‘mining services company Ausdrill may be \$8 million out of pocket after Western Desert Resources announced it had fallen into the hands of administrators on Friday’. The company blamed its collapse on recent substantial falls in the iron ore price (at a five-year low) and the high Australian dollar. The very

next day, a more comprehensive story in the *Financial Review* reported that ‘a raft of high-cost junior miners face a battle to stay afloat amid a sustained decline in the iron ore price’. More flamboyantly, one of their columnists wrote the next day that ‘the smell of burning cash is wafting over the smaller players in the industry’.

According to a contemporaneous ABC report, the unemployment rate among professional workers in the minerals industry (geologists and mining engineers) is now 12.2 per cent, double the national average. And the effects on the Western Australian government’s finances are already disastrous, as royalties tied to the volumes of ore extracted fall in response to slowing Chinese demand.

All according to script.

It also seems clear that the large, mainly foreign-owned companies that dominate the sector are partly responsible, having increased production massively in the last few years. They can hardly be surprised that prices are down; nonetheless, they seem to be. This surprise may be feigned, since some insiders suggest that the apparently paradoxical strategy of the big players to continue to increase production when prices are down is designed to drive out their higher-cost competitors. For the moment, the big boys are still making record profits to ship off to their international shareholders while the state, despite its straitened circumstances, continues to supply industry assistance on a scale that takes a significant bite out of the royalties it does receive.

Despite the evident risks – the predictable cycles of boom and bust – this fixation with mining has marked WA since the first mining boom on the Goldfields, which rescued the state from penury. In his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (MUP, 1981) entry, FK Cowley observes:

The Forrest government was extraordinarily lucky. While the eastern colonies were suffering from droughts, depression, unemployment, financial crises and bank crashes, one new goldfield after another was discovered in Western Australia, especially after the discovery of Coolgardie (1892) and Kalgoorlie (1893). Hundreds of companies were formed in the eastern colonies and in London to exploit the gold deposits and much capital flowed in for investment

in mines, business and property... The increased demand for foodstuffs on the goldfields greatly benefited the farmers and pastoralists. In fact Forrest rode on the crest of the boom and took the political credit for it.

This is a familiar Western Australian story that governments of all stripes have sought to exploit, grabbing the glory and claiming that political virtue, rather than dumb luck, is being rewarded. But these are different times. What our forebears saw was a land of plenty, with no apparent limit to what human ingenuity could achieve in pursuit of 'progress'.

What they triggered and what we have inherited, alongside material prosperity, are serious problems: a burgeoning city where services have not kept up with growth (traffic congestion is a daily nightmare); income inequality as wide as Portugal's; a rising cost-of-living burden on the least well-off; pressures on families imposed by the 'fly-in fly-out' lifestyle; fewer kids finishing school; environmental degradation and the destruction of Aboriginal heritage. There is a downside to our collective obsession with mining.

I DON'T KNOW exactly when it happened, but I fell in love with this land. Perhaps it was when, as a little kid, I went picking wildflowers with my mother from the great swathes of everlastings that smothered the woodlands; or it may have been when I got the first heady, unforgettable whiff of the coastal heathland on the approach to the boarding school I was exiled to. Perhaps it was the first time I craned my neck in the flickering light to gaze at the stately karris of the southern forests; or when I paddled up Windjana Gorge, wondering at the ancient rock paintings and the towering remnants of the Devonian reefs; or maybe it was when I squinted into the harsh midday sun to watch Ngaanyatjarra women dance solemnly through the spinifex of the Gibson Desert.

Whenever it happened, the feeling has only intensified, making me more than a little protective of my home state. Perhaps that is why I am less than enthusiastic about the siren call of 'economic growth' which looks, too often, like wanton destruction – destruction that occurs out of sight of most Australians in this remote part of the continent. We are, for the most part,

city dwellers who rarely lift our gaze above the ramparts of our ordered, suburban security.

Living in Western Australia does sometimes feel like living on the edge of the world, facing nothingness: west over the vast Indian Ocean and east to the unimaginable expanse of the Nullarbor; south to the raging waters of the Southern Ocean; north to Indonesia, its sprawling, populous presence obscured by the holiday fog of Bali. Even the plane trips within the state's 2.5 million square kilometres can seem interminable. How could anyone ever have imagined making this place home?

There are times when this feeling is unsettling, others when it is intoxicating. As the quote from Grono's wry poem suggests, we can often feel that we are 'living on the edge of something good'. Even the speedy flow of images and chatter in cyberspace can't really dispel the sense of sitting on the edge: Perth, a place some have dubbed 'the most remote capital city in the world', is over three thousand kilometres from Canberra and almost the same distance from Jakarta, perched on the ocean's rim of this third of the continent. The fact that the rest of Australia seems not to understand how little connection our story of European settlement has with the official national narratives around 'discovery' and the First Fleet seems to reinforce the feeling of isolation. Far from being obliterated by the steady flow of newcomers from all parts of the world, the responses to this unknowing – a suspicion of 'the eastern states' bordering on paranoia and the popular political habit of 'Canberra bashing' – seem to be adopted almost as a rite of passage.

When travelling, I often encounter people's perplexity about why anyone would choose to live here. They wonder aloud why I stay, as they see it, so far from places of urban sophistication and excitement, in a place where the only preoccupations appear to be mining and money. And it is true that both the geography and the history of the state have contrived to create a provisional, material attachment among many who live here. Ingrained in our economy and our state of mind is the image of the fly-in fly-out workers: here, but not here; exposed to (but insulated from) the harshness of the remote, desert regions; making money in the mines, but often at the expense of what they really care about. I recently heard a story that may be apocryphal but which captures this sense of impermanence. Apparently a bunch of Perth's business

types were noting with regret the fact that there had been little long-term investment of the state's mining wealth in architectural and cultural establishments (unlike 'Marvellous Melbourne'). After a little speculation, someone offered a definitive explanation: 'Well, we don't know how long we're going to be here.'

So many people who live in Western Australia are new to the place, imbued with the 'just get on with it' attitude that has permeated all the mining booms. The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that in 2013, almost a third were born overseas – the highest proportion of any state. Add to this those who've come from other parts of Australia and it would seem that every second person was born somewhere else.

On top of this, Western Australians are, like many of their compatriots, essentially urbanites, many venturing only nervously into the bush and then usually within the confines of manicured resorts away from the snakes and spiders – and don't mention the sharks.

This matters. It means that many people have not been here long enough, or do not stay long enough or move about enough, to see or care about the impact we're having (and have already had) on the place: the loss of habitat for our unique wildlife, the species loss, the degradation of arable land, the tree deaths, the decline in stream flows, the great drying out. And there's not really an easy way for them to come to understand these problems. The government doesn't want to talk about them, the media largely ignores them, and the pressure to expand the urban footprint by clearing remnant bushland to accommodate the newcomers adds to the problems. And developers and mining companies alike appear to see the land only as a resource that will yield profits and wealth – at least for some. Those who arrived yesterday – mainly from the UK, New Zealand and South Africa – can't be expected to see where we've come from or to appreciate the scale of the havoc we're causing.

Nor are they likely to easily understand the continued fallout for Aboriginal people over the European expropriation of their country. The exploitative mindset, the Christian idea that we are entitled, indeed expected, to have dominion over all the Earth has consequences: riches beyond imagining for many, devastation for others. There is a wonderful caricature in the National Gallery by nineteenth-century satirist Robert Seymour. It is a

pungent commentary on the early British settlement of Western Australia. Titled *Plucking and Peeling*, it shows a smirking Thomas Peel, cousin of then Home Secretary Robert Peel, plucking a squawking white swan. The image and the subtitle – *Cousin Thomas, or the Swan River Job* – conjure up both nepotism (even corruption) and a greedy enthusiasm for plundering the place that is not likely to end well – neither for the swan nor the plucker. Whether it was Seymour's intention or not, it is tempting to see the depiction of the swan as white rather than as WA's famously *black* swan as indicative of a failure by Peel to appreciate that this new land might overturn all his settled perceptions.

PEEL WAS ENTICED to the Swan River Colony by Captain James Stirling's campaign to attract investors to fund the establishment of the colony, a proposal that had the imprimatur of a British government seeking to forestall French interests in the far reaches of the Australian land mass, but wishing to avoid any significant financial obligations. Stirling's pitch to potential investors and migrants exaggerated the opportunities and minimised the risks, fuelling a frenzy that seems to anticipate a defining character of WA's economy: the 'irrational exuberance' of the booms and the inevitable, gloom-laden, busts. Thomas Peel was an early enthusiast and organised a syndicate of financiers to invest in the colony, devising 'grandiose plans to acquire land, purchase ships and finance the transfer of up to ten thousand people over four years. These he hoped would be employed on grazing operations and the large-scale cultivation of tobacco, cotton, sugar and flax.' In any event, Peel and his co-investors received less land and in poorer locations than had been promised. Forced onto land seventy-two kilometres south of the settlement that is now Perth, the Peel migrants were beset with dysentery and scurvy. Within twelve months of their arrival in 1829–30, at least thirty of the original four hundred were dead, while Peel lived on to become a bitter recluse, but not before being instrumental in the death of at least thirty Bindjareb warriors and an unknown number of women and children in a payback massacre at Pinjarra – the first of many in the state – on the land he had taken from them.

These images of the early years of colonisation in Western Australia seem prophetic. Since then, many have come, and still come, expecting to use the land as a right to make a fortune, with little regard for the place or the people

already in residence for forty thousand years or more and without any apparent consideration of the costs. Many, especially in the minerals and resources sector, today treat WA as the fly-in fly-out state – a mindset that means the industry and its supporters in government leave big footprints, and not just physical ones. They change the way people think and live

It was the wholesale clearing of the land for agriculture that began a process of degradation and disregard for the natural environment, which was taken up with enthusiasm by the mining industry. Then, as now, the relationship to the land was one of power and purpose, fed by the European colonialist desire to subdue the land and bring it under control. My own family had a hand in this destruction, clearing and farming the land for generations. My forebears were typical of the first waves of arrivals to Western Australia, coming from England, Scotland and Ireland in the 1850s, some free like Thomas Peel's migrants, but most of them convicts (at least the men), quickly making the transition to farming through tickets of leave and Crown land grants. (I'm less certain about the women, but at least some were illiterate young women brought to the colony to work as domestic servants and to remedy the 'scarcity of women', as one account put it.)

Most of them came without apparent prospects and probably without much hope either – they were extruded from their homes, miserably adrift. But they were resilient (they had to be) and adapted quickly, though at what cost we will never really know. For the most part, these weren't people who had either the time or the education to allow them to reflect on their changed circumstances. They came with no understanding of the Aboriginal people or the uniqueness of the place and seemed blind to both as they cleared and cropped the land, eking out a living in conditions that were utterly unlike anything they had encountered before. Many of them were city dwellers to begin with, plucked from the slums of London and Glasgow with few of the skills needed to farm the unfamiliar land.

BY THE TIME I was growing up on a farm in the marginal Wheatbelt country south of Geraldton, success in farming had come to be equated with clearing as much land as possible, as quickly as possible. Farmers who were content with their holdings and left more than the occasional, isolated

York gum for stock shade were seen as derelict, lazy, holding back progress. Governments offered incentives to increase clearing, and the soldier settlers like my father were required to clear the land as a condition of the land grants and loans that made farming possible. In later years, my father remembered one of his neighbours warning him against clearing one of his few remaining patches of bush because it would 'go to salt'. My father ignored this advice – to his cost.

Early land-clearing efforts were considered to 'improve' the land. Speaking about clearing forests in the 1930s, one farmer said that 'ring-barking the trees [is] a process guaranteed to sweeten the soil, improve the quality and quantity of native grasses, and build up the soaks' – the opposite, as it happens, of what actually occurs. While Dorothy Hewett celebrated a landscape and a way of life that many Wheatbelt kids like me still hold close – her rendering of space and light, of the land's relentless grasp – she clearly sensed that we were spoiling our heritage, and wrote of a 'whole Noah's ark of animals' having been whisked away and of erosion carving up the land and of white patches of salt that 'deadened the paddocks'. Her fellow poet and kindred spirit John Kinsella tells of helping his uncles and cousins plant trees to try to reclaim land lost to salinity: 'The salt was the poison. The salt was the truth behind it all and the rich green and the yellow and then burnt stubble of crops were only an illusion.' Describing two poems she had written decades apart about the same area, Hewett observed that while 'the place is the same the poem has become a lament. Clearing and overstocking have decimated the fragile earth and the salt is rising.'

The destruction of the mallee woodlands in Western Australia that Kinsella and Hewett wrote about is almost complete. And along with it, hope for sustained and reliable agricultural production. In the Avon area, where my father grew up, only about 7 per cent of the natural vegetation now remains, mostly as scattered remnants. Over the whole of the South West (12 per cent of the state's area), 65 per cent of the vegetation cover has been cleared, with less than 2 per cent of some vegetation types remaining. What is now well understood, but was not when my father and his mates were ripping through the 'scrub', as they called it, is that native vegetation is crucial in sustaining soil fertility: providing nutrients, regulating salt levels,

preventing erosion, maintaining good water quality and controlling invasive insects, plants and animals. As my father and many other farmers came to understand (too late), the removal of deep-rooted eucalypts and their replacement by shallow-rooted crops caused dissolved salts to come to the surface with the rising ground water, where they were concentrated by evaporation, the rate of which has increased due to climate change and the localised effects of wholesale clearing. The result is a drop in rainfall by one-fifth over the last few decades, a decline starkly evident in the records my father kept for years for the Bureau of Meteorology.

Land clearing has had a devastating effect on native animals too, although they weren't much mourned when I was young. Apart from the fact that millions of animals are directly killed when the land is cleared, natural habitats are lost or fragmented, which makes inroads for invasive weeds and feral pests and accelerates the already catastrophic loss of species. While our lost richness is celebrated without any apparent sense of irony in our state's animal emblem (the numbat – endangered) and in one electricity retailer's advertising campaign (the chuditch – vulnerable), most people here seem entirely unaware of what has gone. Governments and businesses see what is still to be exploited, not what remains to be protected and treasured.

Although not on the same vast scale as for agriculture, clearing for urban development and mining continues apace. The population looks set to grow at a gallop to reach four million by 2050, driving the unthinking and uncontrolled coastal sprawl that is Perth as it chews up the natural vegetation, creating in the process isolated communities where young men and women sleep off the exhaustion of a fly-in fly-out lifestyle. The federal government has, in the last couple of years, approved clearing of the largest remaining intact banksia woodland in the metropolitan area at Jandakot Airport, and given the green light to clearing of the Alkimos region north of Perth for a residential development. Both included nationally listed, critically endangered species and ecological communities. I saw what happened at Alkimos quite by accident, travelling back to Perth along a newly constructed road, taking a short cut after a visit to friends up the coast. The transition from dense, undulating coastal heathland to the blasted, flattened moonscape was jaw-dropping in its intensity. And to amplify the effect, a huge real-estate sign

boasted that the new development was ‘Bringing Life to the Land’. It was too much for me – I pulled to the side of the road and howled.

IN COMPARISON TO agriculture, mining directly affects relatively small areas of land, but the local impacts can be intense. Mines and mining operations have the potential to despoil relatively pristine landscapes (exploration grid lines strafe the deserts), disturb and destroy habitat, spread weeds and damage cultural heritage. In the early '90s, when I was Premier, I had the first of many brushes with the mining industry. After a very public stoush between international mining giant Conzinc RioTinto (CRA) and local people about a proposed mine, we moved to protect one of the last areas of relatively unspoiled vegetation in the sand-plain country of the northern Wheatbelt, in an area known as Mt Lesueur (the French again – Charles-Alexandre Lesueur was a naturalist and artist on the French sailing expedition led by Nicolas Baudin in 1801).

Described in *Nature* as one of twenty-five global environmental ‘hotspots’, Mt Lesueur consists of many different landforms and vegetation types and is home to over nine hundred plant species: acacias, leschenaultias, melaleucas, kangaroo paws and a rich diversity of superb orchids. (It is now being considered for listing on the National Heritage List.) Even then, Mt Lesueur was recognised for its outstanding wildlife and landscape, yet CRA was determined to assert its professed right to mine for coal within the boundaries of the proposed park, threatening to sue if they were unable to proceed with their large, open-cut coalmine and an associated, privately owned power station. It was local farmers who started the campaign against the proposal (as they are doing again today against proposed coal seam gas exploitation – fracking – on farmlands and on conservation reserves in the area). They were soon joined by conservationists, scientists, union-members and artists. This campaign, bolstered by a new policy that prohibited mining in national parks, gave the Environmental Protection Authority (which had much stronger powers than today) the momentum to decide that the proposal was ‘environmentally unacceptable and against government policy’, since the gazetting of the park was in prospect.

Like many parts of Australia, the Mt Lesueur region does not provoke an

immediate aesthetic (protective) response in naive visitors – ‘it’s just scrub’. It takes close observation, patience, and the turning of the seasons to see what is really there. And like many parts of the state, the natural wonder of the place is jeopardised by what is under the ground. Struggles to protect and save the natural environment are as much a part of WA’s fabric as is mining but, although the victories are sweet, they are increasingly rare as governments relinquish control over their lands and seas to international corporations.

As Paul Cleary noted in his book *Mine-Field* (Black Inc., 2012), ‘the frenzied pace’ of resource development in Australia ‘has tipped the balance of co-existence to the point where mining dominates our society, our economy and even our political system’. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Western Australia. And mining has changed the people. At the peak of the latest mining-construction boom, it was the place to be – jobs and opportunity and stratospheric wages. But there is a dark side. Every day, planeloads of workers fly north to the slog of twelve-hour shifts in the Pilbara’s searing heat and red dust, sometimes for weeks at a time. Perth airport in the early morning of those days when the new shift leaves is a grim place. The mood speaks to the dark side: depression, anxiety and increased rates of suicide among mine workers. Not everyone finds the experience of living in mining camps distressing, but many do: the anonymous spaces; the boredom and drinking; identical ‘dongas’ away from family and friends; not being able to say goodnight to the kids; threatened with fines and docked pay (in at least one case) if they didn’t show up to work over the Christmas and New Year period.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT OUR places and landscapes and why we should protect them are difficult to have here. Governments typically underestimate the importance of place to our wellbeing, and ideas that might improve the quality of our lives are buried under the fixation with quantity, ignoring the reality that our shared sense of belonging is rooted in those places to which we are attached. Even when we may not fully apprehend their significance, the destruction and neglect scar us deeply. A sense of homelessness and alienation results when cherished places, spaces and settings are destroyed or irrevocably changed. Most of us, even those who have not yet put down deep roots, experience a sense of loss and we grieve.

This has particularly important implications for Aboriginal heritage, which is often damaged by resource development and about which little is understood in the wider society. The result is that we do not really know what is being destroyed or how much has been lost. Assessments of Aboriginal heritage are often funded and undertaken only in response to specific threats from development projects, and usually at the behest of the proponents. Anticipated changes to the Aboriginal Heritage legislation mean that, in future, even those records need not be made public. Record, then destroy.

But we are not ignorant of the fact that Australia's Aboriginal people view their world as an interconnected whole, making no real distinctions between the lands, waters, the plants and animals and the culturally significant sites and objects. This traditional knowledge, at the heart of Aboriginal culture, is handed down through the generations and can only thrive when it is lived in the country to which it is tied. Where this link is disrupted, as is often the case with resource industries, cultural heritage in the broadest sense is threatened. The activities carried out for and by resource companies often result in the removal or degradation of features that form an important part of Aboriginal heritage – landscapes, habitats, rock art, ancient storylines and geological formations. In the feverish desire to plunder the riches to be made by feeding the steel mills of China, we barely stop to consider the enduring loss that this demolition represents. The tragedy is that there is no recovery from these harms; no mine rehabilitation program that will restore the cultural meaning of these places.

But there *are* people here who stare down the 'development at any price' boosters and seek better outcomes. For years, governments and companies have been planning to enable the exploitation of oil and gas off the Kimberley coast by establishing a 'gas hub' at James Price Point (Walmadan), forty kilometres north of Broome, smack bang in the middle of the Lurujarri Heritage Trail and peerless dinosaur track ways.

After a sustained and determined campaign by the local people in the face of an extremely hostile political establishment, the main proponent, Woodside, pulled out, citing 'economic reasons' as the cause but conceding that the delays and obstructions of the campaign cost them significant time and money. Despite firm opposition to the idea of a major industrial

development in such a precious place, James Price Point is being stubbornly pursued by the government as the location for the hub. What was/is in contemplation is not a small footprint but a very large and complex piece of infrastructure, which would almost certainly expand over time. It would also give the green light to other development. Across the region, miners have extensive leases over bauxite, coal and shale gas deposits, with the latter already being extracted on a trial basis by Buru Energy and others planned on the land of the Yawuru people, much to their chagrin.

THESE PLACES ARE all in the West Kimberley, an extraordinary place by any measure (and listed on the National Heritage List). It has a fascinating and unique wildlife, a magnificent coastline, spectacular gorges and waterfalls, ancient and ongoing Aboriginal culture and a distinctive pastoral and pearling heritage. Not only is it recognised as one of the most ecologically diverse parts of the world, but scientists discover new species almost every time they visit. Some have argued that it deserves UNESCO World Heritage Status as a ‘site of outstanding cultural and natural importance to the common heritage of humanity’. Whatever its official status, it is, I believe, one of Australia’s last great wild places – one of very few remaining on our planet. Despite decades of European settlement, it is remarkably unspoiled; the coastland and marine life are not fully charted, and many parts of the rugged, trackless terrain are rarely visited. It has so far been protected by this relative isolation. But that may be coming to an end.

The vibrant, if threatened, Aboriginal cultures of the Kimberley are marked by the many overlapping stories of the people who have occupied the land for more than forty thousand years. It is the traditional and spiritual home to thirteen traditional owner groups who speak more than thirty different Aboriginal languages, some unique to the region. It is home, too, to their ancestors and the many creation beings held by traditional owners to have shaped and occupied the ranges and plains, rivers and waterholes, seas and islands. Powerful creation beings such as the Wandjina are seen in many different forms in the rock art, river systems, tidal movements, stone arrangements, geographic formations, animal and plant species, and in the stars and planets.

What we now know as the ‘Dreaming’ is for Aboriginal people the law, transmitted through traditional narratives, images, song and dance, weaving together the elements of their social world – their entitlements, responsibilities and obligations. As one Bardi women said: ‘They are living stories; they are the spirit of us.’ The many Wandjina paintings of large-eyed, mouthless, anthropomorphic beings with halo-like rings encircling heads, and the elegant human-like painted figures of Gwion Gwion rock art have attracted significant international interest. They form what is considered one of the longest lasting and most complex rock art sequences anywhere on the planet.

It is typical of the sense of privilege that now goes with being a ‘resource giant’ that the company at the forefront of the James Price Point development sought approval to destroy Aboriginal sites in order to build the pipes to bring the gas onshore. And the approval was duly given, despite the fact that a similar request to destroy sites in the area was emphatically refused, twice, in the 1990s. Although some of the local Aboriginal people initially approved the proposal, even they threatened to withdraw their support if a proper social and cultural impact assessment was not undertaken, citing evidence that ‘aspects of the project would cause “significant disturbance” to Aboriginal heritage values’.

Other local Goolarabooloo people steadfastly opposed the development, believing it would destroy important sites crucial to Aboriginal law and culture. In the course of the campaign, evidence emerged that, at the request of Woodside, the Western Australian government withdrew letters to the company from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs advising that their proposed work site at James Price Point overlapped with significant sites integral to Aboriginal men’s song cycles. Apart from the potential impropriety of this action, the message is clear: Aboriginal heritage can be sacrificed without public knowledge and without penalty. The fallout from the unholy relationship between the company and the government is still being felt. In 2013, the Goolarabooloo people brought forth a case to challenge decisions made by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA). Chief Justice Wayne Martin struck down the environmental approvals for the gas hub because of a failure by the EPA to have proper regard for the conflicts of interest of its members. The legal status of a raft of similar approvals has now been thrown into doubt.

Despite stories like this of needless confrontation (other options were available) and a history of regular and destructive booms and busts, the official line still gives priority to digging it up and shipping it out, no matter what the effect on other values that are important to us. Short-term economic imperatives almost invariably prevail when contests about land use emerge. To point out cumulative harms, or to indicate the possible gains from a more diverse economic base that is less reliant on the unpredictable resource price gyrations, is still to invite ridicule. But it seems increasingly clear that unless we reweight the balance between economic activity and what remains of our heritage, priceless natural and human assets will be lost forever and the wellbeing of Aboriginal Australians – and of us all – further compromised. Successes like those at James Price Point, by determined people resisting development in priceless places, inspire hope that the Kimberley (and places like it) will eventually be recognised for their deep intrinsic value. They are not just places ripe for unrestrained exploitation. We need to be able to talk frankly about the long-term effects on us – on the quality of our lives – of such a single-minded focus on what we can wrest from the land. Instead of seeking dominion over all the Earth, perhaps it's not too late to recast ourselves as its custodians.

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Lucy Dougan

High school sewing

Wincey – but
really – wincey,
a baby word
from a nursery rhyme
is what was doled out
by the metre.
You could make a layette girls
because who would know
when you might need it?
Strange shapes and sizes
dolly small or too big
for some monstrously headed
imagined baby who would divide
heaven from earth and wreck your cunt.
The thought that you might really pop one out
was perhaps too horrific to transfer
to tracing paper.

Portion control is what it was.
Getting ready to get ripped off
in all sorts of ways.
It was practiced in Home Ec too.
Measly sizes from magazine recipes:
toad-in-the-hole and egg-in-the-nest.
Only once when the history teacher
invaded the kitchen
did we get the taste of something else.
Don't grate the carrots leave the skins on
they're good for you.
He was curly haired and gap toothed
with the bones of a child.

The one girl in the class
who made real things
had hands that ran
uncontrollably with sweat
and when some other girl

got extolled for her work
(exquisite, just exquisite)
we lost it together
behind the poke-hole frames of our machines
husqvarnas on one side and berninas on the other –
all the man-made borders of that class
– we were banished from Switzerland/Sweden
to the barren quadrangle
where we were still sat on opposite sides
holding flat bellies,
the laughter pain in them
sharp little heralds
of what we might birth later
and clothe in everything
but wincey.

Lucy Dougan's works include *White Clay* (Giramondo, 2008), *Meanderthals* (Web del Sol, 2012) and her forthcoming collection, *The Guardians* (Giramondo, 2015).

ESSAY

Finger money

The black and white of stolen wages

Steve Kinnane, Judy Harrison and
Isabelle Reinecke

IN THE KIMBERLEY, Aboriginal people were forced to work on pastoral stations from the 1880s. The impact of station life became all-consuming. Whole communities and even entire language groups attempted to survive this transformation of traditional life by continuing to work and live on stations, yet remaining close to country to maintain law and culture. Colonisation in the form of pastoral leases was protected and patrolled by the Western Australian police, in theory until the 1967 citizenship referendum, but in practice until the 1980s. From 1905 to 1954 people worked under a permit system operated by the state government, which purported to oversee and uphold work and living conditions, but was in fact a system of containment and forced labour that limited traditional livelihoods and ensured subservience by withholding income, the consequences of which have lingered for generations.

In Western Australia, Aboriginal people have imprinted the term 'stolen wages' with personal, political and intergenerational meanings to form an unswerving black analysis of white ways.

Aboriginal leaders across the state reacted with disbelief and disgust when in March 2012 a meagre payment of \$2,000, limited by stringent criteria, was offered under the WA Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme as recognition for decades of non-payment. For many it felt like a return to the days when

Aboriginal people were non-citizens and were offered payment in sticks of tobacco and finger money (pocket money). In response, thousands opted to use the scheme for their own purposes: to tell their stories about years of unpaid labour in government-controlled or sanctioned institutions and on private pastoral stations under government regulation.

AS THE MIRIWOONG Dancers took the stage, Steve Kinnane knew the dirt was about to fly – East Kimberley rock-and-roll-style. He writes: ‘Elders voices ring out through the rising dust. More than a dozen male dancers float and stamp, building in pace and strength, converging on the audience before a final leap and shout to the clear night sky, then sauntering backstage for another performance to claps and cheers. Over a thousand traditional owners and invited guests watch expectantly, waiting for their own countrymen and women to perform, sharing the law, language and culture of the thirty-four language groups and five cultural blocs that sustain the Kimberley.’

The meetings are for members and invited guests only. On this day, one politician, Josie Farrer – Kija woman and Labor member for the Kimberley in the Legislative Assembly – is singled out for special attention. It is her birthday. It is a relief from the serious business of native title and combating threats to heritage and sacred sites from proposed amendments to the Aboriginal Heritage Act (1972) to laugh and clap and sing ‘Happy Birthday’.

This is a significant day for Josie. It is the birthday she chooses to celebrate – 24 September. The day her mother raised her to acknowledge as the day she was born in the bush between Moola Bulla and Old Halls Creek – not 25 September 1947, the day wrongly identified in the few pages she has managed to obtain from her Native Welfare file. This may seem a small error, but when your life has been tracked and controlled as a non-citizen by an all-powerful authority, being aware of such details is power, an important life skill. Details matter. Knowing the whole story matters.

As one of many respected leaders in the Kimberley, an MLA and the newly elected chair of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Josie Farrer embodies the complexity of the Kimberley Aboriginal community:

a dynamism founded in extended family, cultural governance and connection to country; long threads of tradition and language given respect through new forms of expression in art, language nests, films, music, festivals, sport, Aboriginal media, cultural governance, ranger programs and new businesses tied to Aboriginal knowledge and country. But like many of her age, Josie has also experienced the intergenerational traumas of past policies, and the long journey to rebuild communities and create education programs and employment opportunities. She knows the toll this can exact.

I'M A MIRIWOONG Marda Marda (blood blood in the Moore River Native Settlement lingo for a person of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry). Miriwoong Country straddles the East Kimberley of northern Western Australia and the western boundary of the Northern Territory. It borders Kija country, Josie's country. I first met Josie through her work maintaining language through the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. I was documenting projects tied to Caring for Country and sustainable livelihoods that Kimberley leaders have been building carefully since the 1980s as part of the out-stations movement, to reconnect with country and escape refugee-like living conditions in town reserves. Local people were thrown off stations when the 1967 Pastoral Industry Award wages decision, which granted all Aboriginal people equal pay, began to impact the Kimberley, making the 1970s a time of incredible distress and hardship. Remaining close to country and maintaining practices and values provided a collective cultural strength from which to battle the powerlessness that was generally felt. Our old people held fast to these foundations and as a result, almost 85 per cent of native title claims in the Kimberley are likely to be fully determined by 2015. Josie was a key claimant on Kija Ngarrawanji, which includes the Moola Bulla cattle station, a government settlement station where Aboriginal people from all over the Kimberley were sent from 1910 to 1955. Josie spent part of her childhood there and it remains a place of complex significance.

My family's story shifted south as my grandmother was taken away from Argyle Station on Miriwoong country when she was five years old, in 1906. She was raised on a mission, then incarcerated at Moore River Native

Settlement when she was not working as a domestic servant (forced labourer) under the various incarnations of the Aborigines Department. This department was responsible for the removal and control of thousands of individuals: the massive disruption of hundreds of families and whole communities under the various guises of the 1905 Aborigines Act (WA).

I first learned of the realities of stolen wages for our people listening to the stories of my mother and aunties and uncles. Stockmen, domestic servants and farm labourers – people who had all been removed from stations that had been carved out of their homelands, or whose parents and grandparents had been taken away to settlements and missions, people who had worked all their lives, most of it for little or no pay. From 1988, historian Lauren Marsh and I began tracking these stories through the archives. Moving between the Kimberley and the south, we came to know many of the elders whose stories were documented in the files: mothers, aunties, uncles and grandparents by skin and law. Our work focused initially on child removals, but shifted to the systemic controls and sanctions imposed on Aboriginal people. As well as the oral histories of community members who survived this system, the voice of the state was revealed through its own records.

My family received my grandmother's file in 1990. Its three hundred and eight pages documented her life from when she left the control of Swan Mission in 1921 until the late 1950s. The file contained her letters complaining about poor treatment by employers, letters requesting access to her trust account, which held three-quarters of her wages. Even the pocket money she was supposed to receive (the other quarter) was not always forthcoming. She wrote asking to use her money to buy clothes but was often refused access to her own money. Her file bulged with judgments by the Chief Protector, police officers and employers on all aspects of her life, and showed where the money had gone – to pay her bed and board (which was greater than her wages) at the East Perth Girls' Home where she was forced to live between jobs, to pay for mandatory medical tests and for a police escort when she was sent back to Moore River Native Settlement and the like. It angered, but did not shock, my family. We preferred to know what had been written than to remain ignorant. Ultimately, seeing all of the information in the file was empowering, a kind of archival justice.

THE SENATE STANDING Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Indigenous Stolen Wages was launched in 2006, responding to the work of Queensland historian Dr Ros Kidd and local Aboriginal activists. The inquiry investigated the scope and nature of the widespread practice of withholding Aboriginal income.

Lauren and I accessed hundreds of administrative files, to aid families who sought to piece their history together, as part of community-based historical research from 1988 to 2004. While conducting this research we were also able to track the ‘ghost files’ destroyed by the government. For instance, of the 15,400 personal files that were created by various Aboriginal administrations in WA and used to manage people between 1926 and 1959, a fifth (3,276) were destroyed. Of the 10,787 administrative files created for the same period, more than half (5,919) were destroyed. Government files were kept for eighty-six years from 1886 to 1972, providing a vast bureaucratic record of surveillance. The level of destruction of administrative files is significant, but enough examples exist to create an accurate picture of how this system worked. In my evidence to the senate inquiry I described how most Aboriginal people who had worked on stations received no wages, with some exceptions for valued head stockmen – who were paid far less than comparable white stockmen.

In her detailed submission, Lauren Marsh explained how the administrative files dealt with many subjects: child removals, missions, stations, government settlements, rations, employment regulations, co-habitation laws, section-twelve transfers where people could be removed from one part of the state to another without warrant, paternity files and so on. The personal files were the centralised summation of the state’s actions against individuals: whether they were to be imprisoned in the Moore River Native Settlement in the south or Moola Bulla in the north; permits that enable white people to employ them; how much pay kept as pocket money and how much banked in trust accounts.

As they commenced in the era of ‘protection’ they were unlike any personal files government clients would expect today. They were the tools that the Aborigines Department used to maintain control. UNESCO describes such collections as ‘archives of repression’, and likened the files

to those kept by the East German Stasi or South African security forces. They also detail how wages and other income – maternity allowances, age pensions or deceased estates – were withheld, stolen from Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

Having revealed the machinery of government through its own records, Marsh's conclusion was direct and simple: 'Given both the department's attitude in not consulting, informing, or holding itself accountable in any way towards Aboriginal workers and pension recipients regarding their trust accounts, it would be both an impossible and unjustifiable requirement for Aboriginal people to provide comprehensive written evidence. The best source of evidence in relation to matters relevant to this enquiry is oral history, and as was made very clear by Aboriginal witnesses at the hearings, there is an urgent need to record these stories now.'

The Senate Committee's report, *Unfinished Business: Indigenous Stolen Wages*, was tabled in December 2006. Its first recommendation was that all governments should provide 'unhindered access to their archives for Indigenous people and their representatives for the purposes of researching the Indigenous stolen wages issue as a matter of urgency'. The second recommendation called for joint funding of an education and awareness campaign about stolen wages issues and preliminary legal research. It also recommended funding a national oral history and archival research project, plus urgent consultation with Aboriginal communities about the impacts of stolen wages.

The report recommended the Western Australian Government urgently consult with Aboriginal people in relation to stolen wages and establish a compensation scheme, and that the Commonwealth also research its archives about stolen wages in the state.

AS A DIRECT response, the WA Government established the Stolen Wages Taskforce. It had a broad brief: 'to identify the scope and extent of the stolen wages issue'. The taskforce was criticised for having too many government representatives, although Aboriginal advisors were employed to provide 'cultural and ethical guidance'. Hundreds of Aboriginal people shared their stories.

Its report, *Reconciling the Past: Government Control of Aboriginal Monies in Western Australia, 1905–1972*, was completed and delivered to the government

in mid-2008 and responded to the general terms of reference by examining frameworks under which peoples' lives were controlled, including the use of government-managed trust accounts.

Reconciling the Past drew a distinction between direct state control of incomes and indirect control through state regulation of employment and living conditions for Aboriginal people working on pastoral stations, and through state distribution of federal social security benefits. Aboriginal people did not draw this distinction. Their common experience was of having income withheld without explanation. The report did not estimate the value of Commonwealth benefits or other income withheld, and the actuarial report commissioned by the taskforce has never been released.

The report found that 'the practices of control over Aboriginal people's money' had a 'consequential impact' that continued for the duration of people's lives, and 'in many cases extended through subsequent generations' resulting in 'trans-generational disadvantage'. It acknowledged that many Aboriginal people who made submissions and participated in consultations 'spoke of their strong and continuing need to find answers to questions that they have about their past'.

It endorsed the Canadian model of a comprehensive approach to reparation, 'designed to recognise, resolve and reconcile'. It recommended a formal apology for the impact of past income controls, a public statement of recognition of economic, social and cultural contributions, and that the WA Constitution acknowledge Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants. It urged consideration of 'a range of policy initiatives as a genuine step in reconciling this aspect of the state's history', including 'Welcome to Country' at significant events; headstones and memorials; and training of Aboriginal archivists and oral historians. It recommended establishment of an 'ex-gratia Common Experience Payment to those still living who experienced direct government control over their money' and a fund to encourage economic development. There was no recommendation about the factors which should be considered in setting the amount or a plan to negotiate with Aboriginal people about reaching a settlement.

The report was completed in 2008, an election year – and in September the Labor Government left office. Responding to the report became an issue

for the new Liberal–National Government, which chose, despite concerted lobbying, to withhold it from public release and from those who had shared their stories for nearly four years.

ON THE EVENING of Tuesday, 6 March 2012, Judy Harrison was lying on the lounge at home in Kununurra watching ABC News. She writes: ‘I came to town the year before on sabbatical from the ANU Law School and by February I was working on a project for the Kimberley Community Legal Service (KCLS) with Bev Russ, a Kija woman, and other KCLS staff. We were researching local experiences with the 2008–09 Redress Scheme, which included a payment of up to \$45,000 to those abused or neglected as children in state care. The scheme was for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, including British child migrants. But it was clear that hundreds of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley had missed out. They hadn’t applied because they didn’t hear about it in time and because there was not enough local legal help.’

I had heard about the Stolen Wages Taskforce. Some lawyers thought that if the government established a structure to administer a stolen wages scheme it might also suit a re-opened Redress Scheme for Aboriginal people who had missed out earlier.

The newsreader that night said the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Peter Collier, had announced a Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme, which would be open for six months and would give a maximum payment of \$2,000, and that the early reaction to the scheme from Aboriginal leaders was one of condemnation. Despite having had the report for almost four years, there had been no negotiation or advance notice, no indication of learning from the shortcomings of the Redress Scheme.

The next day, KCLS was awash with disbelief about the process to claim the money and the pitiful amount on offer. We worked through the material on the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA) website to try to understand who was covered. It was restricted to those born before 1 January 1958 who had income withheld when living in a ‘government native welfare settlement’. But there was no definition of this new term, which sounded historical but wasn’t; no way for people to know what income had been withheld; no reference to those who worked under government regulation on pastoral

stations; no mention of withheld Commonwealth benefits; no recognition that allocated birthdates (usually 1 January or 1 July) made the cut-off date arbitrary.

Perth-based departmental representatives simply advised that people should put in an application if they thought they might be eligible, full stop, with no clarification of the guidelines. The department would not release the scheme's definition of 'government native welfare settlements', and the list of eligible locations was withheld and still secret when the scheme eventually closed on 30 November 2012. The full list has never been released, although many sites were later identified through Freedom of Information requests. No discretion applied to birthdates – the government reasoned that no children worked or had income withheld until they were at least fourteen, despite the written and oral record that proved this was not the case.

Most of those who talked to KCLS were disgusted. A former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission regional councillor wanted to know, 'Who's in charge down there in Perth now in that government? Why are they doing this?' A well-known elder said, 'The government should come here and listen. Write to them and say they should come here now and sit down and work this out.' An old woman in Kununurra, who had worked as a housemaid and kitchen hand for white station bosses urged me to 'humbug those white men, they're only looking after themselves'. A member of the stolen generation in Warmun said she couldn't talk about it as she was 'too sad for what they are doing again to us Aboriginal people'. A former stockman from Halls Creek argued, 'I worked from dawn to dusk, I got no pay, they never treated other whites like that.' We heard people talk about 'station money', others called it 'mission money' or 'hostel money', most did not know what income they should have received, only a handful had heard of a 'trust account' and only a few had seen their Native Welfare file.

While the claim form did not require applicants to tell their story or provide space for them to do so, invariably that was what KCLS clients wanted to do. They thought their stories made the injustice clear, and that if the government heard them it would respond differently. They wanted to be respected, and for their past work to be understood and valued. Over the following nine months more than two thousand people delivered their stories

to the department, and explained the impact of systemic community-wide controls. Even if the scheme didn't apply to them they still wanted their story told, and wanted government to listen. By the time it closed, these responses became the way of opening up the story, a 'protest application', a way of presenting their experience unmediated by bureaucratic selectivity and guidelines. 'Stolen wages' meant stolen lives, stolen work, stolen education, stolen health, stolen culture, stolen land, stolen ways of life, stolen opportunities, stolen human rights. Trust accounts were essentially white record keeping, which was now being used against Aboriginal people. They did not accept that because these accounts and records had not been located, or had been destroyed, that the past never happened.

WHEN THE PRO bono opportunity arose to go to East Kimberley and help out with the claims, Isabelle Reinecke jumped at it. She writes: I'm pretty sure I put my hand up before I even knew what stolen wages were. I used to sit all day and a lot of the night bored to death in a brightly lit, air-conditioned, fishbowl office at the big end of Australia's corporate legal town. If I swiveled my chair and tilted my head, I could see the Sydney Harbour Bridge reflected in the glass walls of my office. The closest I was to actually being outdoors was a ferociously growing little desk plant whose tag informed me 'Thrives on Neglect'.

I had volunteered at Canberra Aboriginal Legal Service during university and assisted on an amicus application to the High Court in *Wurridjal v The Commonwealth*, so was looking forward to providing whatever support I could, and couldn't wait to get away from my sterile, six-star-energy-efficient fishbowl and pot plant.

Within a couple of weeks, in July 2012, I was on a 737 heading north to Darwin and then on a thirty-seat Embraer Brasilia flying west to Kununurra. Shortly after arriving, I was handed a card for a local taxi service that said 'Don't Risk It, Cab It'.

I was rushed to East Kimberley in response to a call for help from the short-staffed Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALS) and KCLS. They needed lawyers to traverse the country and help applicants under the Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme before the deadline for applications closed,

which at that time was still the end of September. It was feared that hundreds of individuals scattered across the state in regional and remote communities might miss out.

I set off from Kununurra in a beaten up four-wheel-drive with an ALS solicitor and a couple of student volunteers. We trailed after another vehicle carrying local community legal service solicitors who were en route to present legal education sessions, stopping every so often to let the red dust settle enough for us to find our way along the dirt road behind them.

You're on Mars. It's red and endless and flat and rocky. You feel the warm air on your face through the air-conditioning and you're holding onto the steering wheel as hard as you can to guide the huge old four-wheel drive through the long dirt track. You try not to blink as rocks spatter up against the windscreen, and keep your mouth closed to stop your teeth from violently cracking open and shut on the soft inner flesh of your cheeks as you bump along. It's 35 degrees outside and you realise that actually you're on Earth and you're driving on a 1,261 kilometre round trip, out of Kununurra and south into the beautiful, brutal centre of this extraterrestrial country.

The red earth and the blue sky battle intensely in the Kimberley. Endless flat and rocky redness turns into yellow bushes either side, smattered with green trees, bound by blue mountains and back again to endless, dusty, dirty red. The beauty, rawness, vibrancy, extremity and vastness of the landscape smack you with almost holy significance.

Stepping out of the heat into the relative cool of the Halls Creek sandwich shop, 'De Alto Cedro voy para Marcan, Llego a Cueto, voy para Mayar' floats through the air. Buena Vista Social Club is playing. The familiarity of the music combined with the strangeness of the location is a happy, silly memory. How a Central American family found themselves living twenty-nine hours drive from Perth, eleven hours from Broome and four hours from the Northern Territory border running a sandwich shop, I don't know. But here they are, and they're playing Cuban classics. Looking back on it now, I realise this was the last moment before I began to understand the recent history of the place.

On the Canning Stock Route on the western edge of the Tanami Desert, about eight hours drive south of Kununurra, we set up wherever we could

find some space and shade – under corrugated iron shelters in Balgo and Billiluna, and on the basketball court in Mulan. Surrounded by red dirt, disused trucks and rusted mechanical equipment, we crafted makeshift promotional posters with butcher’s paper and textas and taped them to each community’s local store. Word had spread that we were coming. The lines in all the communities we visited were huge – elderly people, and sometimes their younger family members, waiting for hours for their turn to tell their story and apply through the scheme.

The forms applicants were required to complete were deceptive in their seeming mundanity and simplicity. When were you born? Did you perform work on a ‘government native welfare settlement’ when you were over the age of fourteen? Can you provide two forms of accepted identification, or the signature of two witnesses you are not related to?

They had been designed without any consideration for the people who would be required to fill them out. Not a low-level government bureaucrat, but the elderly and very ill. People for whom English is a second, third or fourth language. People who, to varying degrees, cannot read or write. People who had been given arbitrary birthdates by government officials many years ago. People who do not carry a wallet full of identification and bank cards. People who are related to almost everyone in their communities. People for whom the term ‘government native welfare settlement’ is meaningless.

It didn’t take long to realise that without an interpreter I’d need to start at the very beginning with every client.

Do you know when you were born? July 1 quickly became familiar. Do you know where you were born? By the tree near the mission. In the desert. Where did you live as a child? How old were you then? This high? Or this high? Did you do any work there? What sort of work did you do? Did you do cleaning work? Did you do cooking? Did you do work outside? Did you work with animals? Did you do work on the land? Did you ever get paid for your work? Were you given rations or money? Did you have a trust account? When did you leave? Where did you go next?

Continuing the loop of questions until finally arriving at the present day.

It wasn’t simply an administrative exercise. My clients were determined to have me listen to their stories – for me to pay attention and make careful

notes. I wasn't 'government', but I was a white lawyer and an outsider – a representative of white Australia with a responsibility to listen.

Story after abusive story poured out. Stories that sounded like slavery. Stories of decades of unpaid work, proud work, demeaning work, debilitating injuries sustained while constructing the backbone of modern Australia, physical abuse at the hands of missionaries, the murder of a small child. Some of these stories were already at the surface, I learned, because of the recent testimony people had given as part of the Redress Scheme.

In Balgo, we slept in an accommodation container surrounded on all sides by a locked cage. We were careful to obey the sign in the kitchen that read:

REAR PORCH ROOF
IS UNSTABLE AND
MAY COLLAPSE
AT ANY TIME
AVOID ALL RISK BY NOT
ENTERING THE REAR OF THE BUILDING
Your safety is our concern
but your responsibility

On our first night there, after crosschecking the piles and piles of files we had created, I lay in bed feeling completely disconnected from my world. The massive booming sound of 'Zorba the Greek', turned up to the maximum through huge speakers by a gathering in the basketball court nearby, only added to the sense that I was operating in some dislocated parallel universe.

AFTER CIRCLING THROUGH the East Kimberley we eventually wound back to Kununurra, where I stayed on for a week to assist KCLS with potential applicants based in town. I visited the local respite care centre almost daily on foot in the scorching heat, armed with a list of people KCLS had a hunch might be eligible for the scheme. The centre was a haven of air-conditioning, clean, white-walled and tiled – wholly unlike the dusty, mad world outside.

One by one, with clients at the centre, I continued the looping questions that had quickly become rote on the road, hoping someone would say the names of settlements, missions and hostels that I'd heard whispered were considered 'government native welfare settlements' by the Perth authorities. A few clients called bullshit on the system and the arbitrary inclusion of some work and some dates and some locations – a heartening sign that some would have the energy left to fight.

For the most part, though, it was plain these multi-generational, dogmatic bureaucratic practices caused harm among the clients I interviewed. At the time it seemed to me people had been beaten down by many incarnations of random and harmful government policies. People barely shrugged when I explained that despite the extreme exploitation and abuse they had suffered, they were unlikely to be considered eligible under the scheme. Justice did not seem to be anyone's expectation. Strikingly, given the tedious process required by the statutory declarations, many strongly wanted to at least have their stories heard and written down on official documents.

One lady on my 'hunch' list from KCLS hadn't been turning up at respite. A carer who had recently moved to Kununurra, after a lifetime of trucking huge lorries across the desert, offered to take me around town while she did her rounds ferrying the elderly to and from the centre.

We drive to her house and I walk inside the dark front room, with exposed concrete walls, floors and ceilings, empty except for a rusted metal bedframe in the corner, where an elderly lady sits silently, her bare feet and legs hanging over the edge, wearing clothes so old and torn they leave her exposed.

I explain who I am and ask to sit with her. She motions for me to sit beside her on the thin single mattress. We go through the routine and she tries to answer my questions. *Do you know where you were born? Do you know when you were born? Where were you next? And next? And next?* Eventually, having exhausted all possibilities, I explain that she is unlikely to be eligible for the scheme in its current form despite all she had been through. I feel ashamed and helpless. She nods quietly. I apologise and leave.

The next day Julia Gillard is in town, looking appropriately prime ministerial in a crisp white shirt and blue jeans, doing a press conference in one of Kununurra's breathtaking lakeside parks. The media throng surrounds her, as do

the freshly laundered children who have been brought along to see her. She holds and kisses a beautiful plump white bub. A few gorgeous Aboriginal teenagers stand front and centre in the audience, observing closely, wearing white T-shirts painted with the slogans 'NO' and 'Our songlines are living heritage protect the Kimberley Coast'. Behind us all a man sitting on a ute wearing a Guy Fawkes mask provides a bit of theatre, holding a painted wooden board that reads: 'We live in a world built on promises constructed by liars'.

MONDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2013, noon, and it is time for Judy Harrison to drive to the Waringarri Arts Centre. She writes: 'A few KCLS staff pile into the office RAV, the rest are already there helping to get lunch ready for the big meeting about stolen wages. As we head off, someone in the backseat runs through the names and backgrounds of some of the men and women sitting in groups on the grass under the tree. "That one there, old man, stockman, worked all over, rations, no pay, but he's been no good since he was in his twenties, got trampled loading steers." Someone else says, "Yep, I sat with him to do his stolen wages application, he said he was working from about eleven years old." A woman waves and someone says, "Wave back, she's waving at us – over there, them old girls, they all stolen generation ones, that one at Beagle Bay Mission, next one at Moola Bulla and those other two were taken down south... That old one there, he's having a good sleep." I remember doing his statement, he missed out on the Redress Scheme because he didn't hear about it in time, and he put in for stolen wages. He was at Charles Perkins Hostel in Halls Creek while he was going to school, he finished at fifteen and returned to a station. Then he worked at lots of stations in the Kimberley, but busted his leg in his thirties in a rollover. It set wrong, he got no pay for his work, just rations, and no compo for his leg. Someone in the back cuts off my chain of thought. "He hobbles everywhere, really slow, he humbugs people for a lift but he can't do much else. What do you reckon the tourists think when they look at these people? Do they know what's happened here? Do white people know what's happened?"'

When the scheme closed after nine months, the department had received 2,026 applications. By 30 June 2013, 1,263 applicants were deemed eligible for just \$2,526,000 in payments; 757 were deemed ineligible; three were closed

without assessment, and payments to another three applicants were on hold pending advice on bank account details. Most of those rejected were former pastoral workers who had worked as stockmen, camp cooks and domestics.

For some, the stolen wages payment coincided with the Clean Energy Advance, making it hard to tell the difference between a special payment from Centrelink and the compensation. Some, who were sent the pro forma letter stating they were eligible and were about to be paid, became confused and distressed when it turned out that the stolen wages payment had been made months before the date of the letter and it had already been spent.

Getting closer to Waringarri, we pass the school, Clontarf Academy, the Ord Valley Aboriginal Medical Service, Waringarri Radio and the big Waringarri Aboriginal Corporation administration building – a place of many Aboriginal-run programs and meetings and gatherings, inside at the conference table or outside under the trees.

The last time I was there was for the Sorry Day event in May. I knew a lot of the older people who turned up because we had talked about stolen wages. I nod to an old man across the room. He's one of the Wave Hill (Kalkarindji) strike walk-off mob, he can't believe the scheme doesn't include former station workers. He talked to the members of the taskforce when they came through, and years later when we met he said slowly, 'It was all of us, all our lives, do you know that?'

At Waringarri Arts people are sitting around, talking and smiling. There's a mum with a tiny baby, surely only a few days old, dogs walking or lying under the tables. Sausages and meat cooking. It takes me a while to see that there is a seating plan. The women are mainly together. The men are separate. The older male leaders are together – Tom Birch, Frank Chulung, Jack Trust, Button Jones, Ronnie Carlton – there is business happening. First, they decide, the group needs to talk about what's happened so far with stolen wages, then who will talk to the ABC journalist when she arrives.

JOSIE FARRER'S APPLICATION to the WA Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme included a detailed statement of her life and the impact of government decisions on her family. Josie was born in the bush between Moola Bulla and Halls Creek on 24 September 1947, and lived there until she was

rounded up and sent to school. Josephine was the name given to her in 1953 at Moola Bulla school. Her family followed to be near her, and she and her mother worked teasing the horsehair for saddles each day – a continuous job on a cattle station. Schooling was intermittent. In 1955, on the day the government sold Moola Bulla to a pastoralist, Josie and the other children were taken away:

A truck pulled up and the men on the truck said we should get on for a ride. We had never been on a motor vehicle before and we got on the back of the truck... The truck went on to other camps, picking up more children. At some point we were told we had to stay on the truck and we realised that something wasn't right. Families started crying and pleading to let their children off the truck. But we weren't allowed off the truck. Once there were about thirty children on the truck, the truck headed out of Moola Bulla and then more children were put on the truck in Halls Creek and we found out we were being taken to Fitzroy Crossing. It took several nights to get to Fitzroy and each night we camped we were cold. There wasn't enough food, we were hungry and a lot of children were crying... When we got to Fitzroy there were no facilities for us. There was no building or mission. We started out sleeping in the open... A week or so after we arrived another truck arrived with adults, including my grandparents.

Josie's application described her experience of being taken from her family without any discussion to the Fitzroy United Aborigines Mission, boys in one dormitory, girls in another, locked in at night. Josie tried to run away several times, but was brought back and flogged. There was strict segregation between family members in their 'camp' and children fenced off in a 'compound'. Adults were expected to work if they were to remain near their children. After five years at Fitzroy Crossing, when she was thirteen, Josie was sent to the Amy Bethel Hostel in Derby for further 'training' – cleaning the houses of staff, ironing their clothes, scrubbing, cooking and cleaning. At fifteen she was taken back to Fitzroy Crossing, but her family had gone back

to Moola Bulla, her mother's country. Moola Bulla was under new management and they wanted Aboriginal workers, so Josie asked to be taken there and began working with her family.

Josie's application focused only on these early years, when she was held in government and government-sanctioned institutions and expected to work. This was common in the Kimberley. In 1963 Josie and her husband moved into Halls Creek, at the urging of the Native Welfare Department, which was providing rations for people to encourage them to move into the town. This was when the government began funneling people into towns and reserves with devastating consequences. Aboriginal refugees from the stations were channeled into town camps, on land designated as reserves, which were overcrowded and had inadequate shelter, poor sanitation and little prospect of work.

Josie and her husband were soon directed to a station owned by the Quiltys. Even though she was heavily pregnant she was expected to work without pay:

Looking back, I think all the work I was made to do, at Amy Bethel Hostel, Moola Bulla and the Quilty's, was like slavery. I never received payment. I do not know whether Amy Bethel Hostel received money for me or kept money, which I should have received. All I know is that I was never paid anything.

In February 2013, Josie received a letter from the director-general of DIA saying, 'you have been assessed as eligible to receive an ex-gratia payment of \$2,000'. There was no indication why her application was successful, no expression of regret, or responsibility, no acknowledgement of the hardships she experienced. Greater transparency was needed. Just as Josie did not know why she was deemed eligible and what had been taken into account, others did not know why they were refused.

Josie later instructed KCLS to make a FOI application to learn how her application was assessed. The response included the hitherto secret list of most of the 'government native welfare settlements'. It became clear that in assessing applications, the department did not research to see if a trust account existed for the person or what income had been withheld. KCLS renewed a

request to the minister that the department be required to write to all applicants to explain the reason for the outcome. This would respect the claimants' right to know, and avoid problems in the future for those who were at more than one qualifying institution and would otherwise be unable to say which resulted in their payment. The minister again declined, this time stating that as KCLS had the list, it could tell its clients.

For Kimberley people, clarifying which institutions were covered and why was particularly important because their income was withheld while working on stations under government regulation. This was never just about money, it was about recognition of Aboriginal labour and the benefit the state accrued from the pastoral industry in the twentieth century. The scheme was meant to be about reparation. Instead it appeared to be a risk-management response, a lesson in how not to deal with the past.

KCLS clients continue to argue that more needs to be done. The legal centre has followed up on hundreds of cases. Kimberley Aboriginal leaders are seeking to have the entire scheme reviewed and re-opened. Leaders of the Labor opposition and Greens have visited the East Kimberley to listen, but no one from the government has made the journey to discuss the problems.

In June 2014, a petition was tabled in the Legislative Council calling for a new scheme to be negotiated – one that adopts a broader understanding of 'stolen wages' and acknowledges past wrongs. The petition called for a new process of consultation, evaluation and assessment of the full impact of stolen wages in the state and the adequacy of the scheme. The Legislative Council Committee that received the petition wrote to KCLS advising that the minister's response meant there would be no further action by the Committee.

The Liberal–National Government has the numbers on the Committee, in the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly. The Labor Party has a policy to review stolen wages should it be elected at the next state election, but that will not be held until March 2017.

FAIR AND JUST approaches to reparation for past actions are sensible and ultimately beneficial to all members of societies in which such injustices have

occurred. This is part of a global movement as the legacy of historic injustice is being more fully understood, with some predicting that this ‘will be the century of global reparatory justice’.

Reconciling the Past, the long delayed stolen wages taskforce report, described the success of Canada’s \$1.9 billion compensation scheme for First Nation children who were abused when interned in Indian Residential Schools. Seventy-eight thousand made claims, and those that were verified were awarded \$10,000 for the first year of internment and \$3,000 for each subsequent year. This scheme also included a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with a budget of \$60 million over five years to ‘promote public education and awareness about the Indian Residential School System and its legacy’, which meant affected individuals and families could share their stories appropriately. A further \$20 million was made available for commemoration initiatives while an endowment of \$125 million goes towards healing programs.

On 16 December 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims* (GA 60/147) after fifteen years of work by Professor Theo van Boven and others. Neither this resolution, nor an earlier draft of the van Boven principles that significantly framed the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report, were mentioned by the taskforce. The UN policy calls for a comprehensive victim-focused framework for reparations and includes compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. The taskforce ignored this rights-based framework and made no reference to the human rights of Aboriginal people. It did not consider how the treatment of Aboriginal people violated the spirit, and arguably the letter, of Australia’s obligations under international conventions.

In the United States, the massive American Indian Trust class action of *Cobell v Salazar, Secretary of the Interior*, which began in 1996, was well underway when the taskforce was operating. Whether the WA Government monitored and analysed this case is unknown, but it cannot have failed to notice that the settlement in 2009 included a \$1.4 billion fund, a \$1.9 billion Trust Land Consolidation Fund to consolidate Indian trust lands and a \$60 million Indian Education Scholarship Fund.

In September 2013, Caribbean countries established the CARICOM Reparations Commission to seek reparations from Britain and other European colonial powers for ‘native genocide, the transatlantic slave trade and slavery’. On the 16 June 2014, in a presentation to the British House of Commons, the Chairman of the Reparations Commission, Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, made his prediction that ‘this twenty-first century will be the century of global reparatory justice’. The Commission’s ten-point plan includes: formal apology, repatriation, economic development, health and education programs, social inclusion and psychological rehabilitation, technology transfer, and debt cancellation.

Even closer to home, the Queensland Government created the acclaimed Community and Personal Histories Team in response to key recommendations of the 1991 *Deaths in Custody* and *Bringing Them Home* reports. The team deals with up to a thousand requests for access each year. Cases are managed by appropriately trained counsellors, who give clients a research report and copies of all government files about them. The twenty-five staff, who are predominantly Aboriginal, have access to more than thirty-five thousand files in over a kilometre of shelved records. Their success is due to the relationships they have built with Aboriginal communities, which become a vital knowledge resource in accessing further information, identifying family members and ensuring that dealing with the past is done in the spirit of truth and reconciliation.

ON WEDNESDAY 12 November 2014, Josie Farrer was planning to celebrate the passage of a historic amendment to the preamble of the Western Australian Constitution to ‘acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples as the First Peoples of Western Australia and the traditional custodians of the land’ and that the Parliament sought ‘to effect a reconciliation with the Aboriginal peoples of Western Australia’.

At the last minute there was a problem. The government decided it would not support the bill. The leader of the Opposition, the Shadow Attorney General and government ministers took turns to speak in the debate, but without government support the bill would fail.

Josie sits quietly, dignified, contained and expressionless. She knows the way the system works. She has known it all her life.

Unjust laws build a culture of contempt. It is clear from the evidence that Aboriginal people in WA have been held in contempt for almost two centuries. Unjust schemes also belittle those in power, undermine genuine overtures for justice, healing, reconciliation and future communion. These past laws return as unfinished business when governments lack the courage to act with a true sense of truth and reconciliation.

Western Australia remains the only mainland state that does not recognise Aboriginal people in its constitution.

14 November 2014

Further analysis of these issues is available at www.griffithreview.com.

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MEMOIR

Big time unna?

Noongars transform Aussie Rules

Sean Gorman

I VIVIDLY RECALL how I felt in the middle of 1984, the moment my father came home from work and announced we were going to be leaving Albany and moving to Northam. Albany is on the south coast of Western Australia, the jewel of Minang territory. Northam is in the heart of the WA Wheatbelt in Nyaki-Nyaki country. Dad worked for Elders WA as a stock agent. He was a loyal and proud company man. He even drank Fosters because Elders owned Carlton & United Breweries, which made the beer. In parochial and staunch Swan Lager heartland, to sup on eastern states' muck was nothing short of sacrilegious. It could poison you.

I loved Albany. I loved my friends there. I loved the high school. I loved its quirky meteorological rhythms. I was socially at ease and fitted in. I loved Albany's squeaking white beaches. I had just learnt how to surf... I could go on.

My uncle, Dad's younger brother, lived in Northam and worked for rival stock agents Wesfarmers. He drank Swan Lager. I remember visiting Uncle Bill and Auntie Lynn in Northam in the early 1980s, in the middle of summer. The heat was mind-numbing. With this first-hand knowledge I pulled every conceivable trick I could to stay in Albany. In the end, Dad's Catholic will prevailed. Moving under sufferance is never good

when you are fifteen. Mediocre school marks suffered. I did not give a shit about anything.

There was one exception: football.

In 1985, I played colts in the under-17s competition in Northam. There were only four sides in the Avon Valley U17s: Cunderdin Agricultural College; the Northam hostel team, or 'the Hut' as it was called; town team Railways and their cross-town arch rival Federals. I played for Federals, or 'Fightin Feddies' as they were known. Four sides might not seem like anything much but the potency of a four-team competition was significant. Andrew Quin (Quiny) was our coach. Quiny was only a few years older than us. He had his licence and a car, a gold XB Falcon. Quiny was an apprentice butcher. As coaches go, Quiny kept it simple.

Our 1985 season did not start well. We lost every game until about halfway through the season. This was not to say we did not have a good side, we did. It was just that the other three teams were better. As a means to try and spark a winning streak, Quiny got us all together one night at training. As we huddled together he promised us an eighteen-gallon keg (of Swan) if we won the premiership. We all started hollering like bastards, but deep in our hearts we knew that the contents of that keg were never going to pass our lips.

Soon after, perhaps it was the following week, the football gods started to smile on us. Two young Noongar footballers came to training: Hank Yarran, a superbly gifted and athletic ruck, and Charlie Dick, a small, lightning-fast dynamo who became our number-one rover. It was Dick who changed my perception of football forever. The reason was simple: he was the best footballer I have ever played alongside.

As in some weird Disney film the fortunes of Fightin Feddies U17s changed. We started winning. Everything. Those few months were a revelation to me. I had grown up watching Aboriginal players in the WA Football League (WAFL) and on ABC shows like *The Winners*. There were amazing footballers in both the WAFL and the Victorian Football League (VFL) but I had no inkling they were Noongar, just Aboriginal. Players such as Stephen Michael, Jim and Phil Krakouer, Derek Kickett, Barry Cable, Phil and Keith Narkle and Nicky Winmar were all superstars. But with Charlie Dick I saw it up close, intimately. It took my breath away.

As time progressed and the wins kept coming the inevitable occurred, a traditional grand final derby: Railways versus Federals. On the phone to Quiny at his butcher shop in Northam, he remembers it was blowing and cold. I recall it was warm. The local paper in 1985 reported that at three-quarter time each side had five goals and eight points:

Railways were being brilliantly served by Danny Taylor and Davis on the ball but the Federals defence, led by a strong Sean Gorman held firm... Federals came home very strongly and ran out premiers with a 3.5 to no score final term to finish 23-point winners, 8.13 to 5.8. The Robbie O'Driscoll medal for fairest and best on the ground was won by brilliant Charlie Dick from Federals.

With that, Quiny was down to the pub to pick up a keg that cost him \$180 and, in his words, 'nearly did him in'. We partied like it was 1985. I never saw Charlie Dick again, except for a very brief encounter outside an office in the main street of Northam. Charlie was handing out Potter's House flyers. He had found God. I had found drugs and girls.

THERE ARE TWO things that can heal a nation haunted by the ghosts of the past and a fiercely contested history: a cup of tea and Australian Rules football. People generally stare at me blankly or smirk when I say this, but there is something mysterious about the restorative qualities in a well-made cup of tea. Problems are solved. Differences are ironed out. Similarly, I have seen the redemptive power of football in bringing communities together and literally saving lives. Football in particular has an incredible ability to disarm. Through this ideas can take root, and if an idea can take root then that is more powerful than any legislation, policy white paper or politician wanting to *save* Aboriginal Australians.

Imagine if Aboriginal people did not play Australian football. I am not asking you to imagine that Aboriginal people did not exist and therefore could not play, but what the world would be like if Aboriginal people did not participate in Australian football (AFL). They have changed the game, and in the process changed the nation. Because Aboriginal Australians love it and

play it so brilliantly, they are central to the Australian game. (By comparison, Jason Gillespie is the only test cricketer to have played for Australia who identifies as being Indigenous – Kurna, from South Australia.)

Noongar players like Nicky Winmar, Barry Cable, Polly Farmer, Derek and Dale Kickett, Byron Pickett, Chance Bateman, Leon Davis, Winston Abraham, the Materas, Des Headland, Jeff Farmer and the Krakouers turned football into a space where one can investigate both positive and negative historical issues about race relations in Australia. In this way, football ceases to be a game but becomes a teacher. Through its lessons we become, as Australians, a better team.

Just under a tenth of the current AFL players are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. This is a significant statistic, but has been as high as 11 per cent. It bucks the trend of every other social and economic indicator. Of the 262 known Aboriginal players to have played in the VFL–AFL from 1897 to 2014, Noongar footballers make up just under a quarter. That is a massive figure. But like many boring whitefella ways of measuring things, it cannot measure the most important things – the excitement and joy those players have provided and what they have brought to the game.

If you open Steve Hawke's book *Polly Farmer: A Biography* (The Slattery Media Group, 2014) onto page ninety-six, you will see a photograph of Polly Farmer taking a mark over his archrival Jack Clarke of East Fremantle in the 1957 grand final. Stare at the photograph long enough and you can be hypnotised. Unlike that other famous Western Australian mark by John Gerovich, which has been forever immortalised in bronze outside Fremantle Oval, Farmer's mark draws and holds your gaze – he seems to be hovering. The ball has yet to reach his grasp, a tantalisingly incomplete task. But unlike the Gerovich mark, it is replete with poise and timing. It is an intriguing shot as Clarke seems to have run in and been knocked off balance by Farmer. The *potentiality* gives this picture its great power: 'What will Farmer do?' 'What can he do?' 'What will be his next play?'

IN THIS WAY, football ceases to be about the game and becomes much more important. Farmer is still considered one of the most influential and gifted players of all time. His story hints at the importance of football for Noongar

people. As a child, Graham Farmer lived at Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home. As policy at the time dictated, when those living at Sister Kate's turned sixteen they were sent into the country to work on farms, severing any chance to thrive in the city. The Native Welfare Department had been sending them to work as labourers and domestics for years. As Farmer told Steve Hawke: 'The only thing I did not want to be in was farming.'

The *Sunday Times* rallied to the support of this outstanding young footballer and asked its readers to send in letters of protest to the government stating, as Hawke records, 'it smacks of slavery'. This had been happening for years in WA and would continue for those with less football skill. Without football, Farmer would have been banished to the backblocks. His only ticket out was that he could play football, and play it better than almost anyone. The institutional and everyday racism that has pervaded the Western Australian political psyche for decades probably means that other great sportsmen were lost.

Today, it seems almost normal that there are so many first-grade Aboriginal AFL players. For many years though, there was an unspoken but active belief in the VFL (which became the AFL in 1990) that too many Aboriginal players would weaken a team. The rationale was that they gave you flare, but were not disciplined enough. With too many they would become a ghetto within the team and the club. Quite possibly 'go walkabout'. Why risk it?

It does seem incredible now but I have heard enough accounts to know this idea was a reality. I vividly recall a conversation with a lawyer at a 'Sportsman's Lunch' in Melbourne, who had seen internal recruiting memos where decisions were made about the viability of recruiting Aboriginal players from WA in the 1980s. No doubt many genuinely talented players were never selected.

Then AFL changed.

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the name 'Krakouer' epitomises much of what is celebrated about Aboriginal footballers. Seamless play, timing, skill and speed, and what has become known as 'the X factor'. Jim and Phillip Krakouer came to the WAFL in the late 1970s and the VFL in the early 1980s, and changed the way the game was played. While there had been Aboriginal

players in the WAFL before, none had played in a way that was so complimentary or so devastating. When they moved to the VFL this became even more pronounced – it was the first time two Aboriginal players had been recruited *as a package* to play in the same team. When they arrived in Melbourne in 1982, they literally exploded onto the football scene. Today it is not unusual to see a cohort of Aboriginal players on an AFL list, but before 1982 two players had never been recruited together. North Melbourne's recruitment manger Ron Joseph recalls: 'As I kept watching you could see their understanding of one another as brothers, but you could see Phillip's absolute class as a finisher and you could see Jim's hardness.'

The novelty of the Krakouers was pronounced by their complimentary skills. Football reporters in Melbourne made sure people appreciated what they were watching even if it was, as the senior football journalist Martin Flanagan called it, 'anarchy and art':

Their vision...at times seems to transcend what is understood by that term and suggests another sort of awareness. Who can forget the first time they made mayhem in Victoria after coming from Western Australia, running where no one had run, handballs hooping and looping between the pair of them and the Fitzroy defence utterly perplexed and unnerved as a new version of a hundred-year-old game unfolded before their eyes? It was anarchy and art rolled into one.

There are athletes in every sport who defy the limitations which both nature and the rules of their sport impose on them. To watch them perform is, in the true sense of the word, a transcendental experience for they push back the boundaries of what we believe was possible... They [the Krakouers] are the Pele and Maradona of the VFL.

When asked by journalists to explain what the special ingredient they brought to the game was, Jim would simply shrug his shoulders and say 'confidence'. Phil would speak of kicking a football through the forks of trees, of rolled up socks kicked down passageways, or handballing a football to see

how close they could get to their father Eric's nose as he sat eating his tea after a full day shearing.

Given the number of Aboriginal players who have played at the top level (especially in the last ten years), what becomes painfully obvious from the discussions I have had with many of them is the immense role football plays in these young men's lives. For the Noongar players in particular there is a special understanding and pride that they have contributed greatly to the code. Their legacy is strong. This is a weight-of-numbers thing, but can also be appreciated by watching the fantastic 1988 documentary *Black Magic* by Paul Roberts and Frank Rijavec, which looks at the social, historical and political barriers that Noongars have faced. Fortunately, it has been through those tough pursuits of boxing, athletics (running) and football that Noongar men have been able to show their talents and transcend social and political obstacles.

WHICH BRINGS US back to the question: what if Aboriginal people did not play football? From a localised context, if this awful reality was indeed the case we would not currently be able to watch players like Buddy Franklin (Sydney Swans), Chris Yarran (Carlton), Jeff Garlett (Melbourne), Harley Bennell (Gold Coast), Michael Johnson (Fremantle), Stephen Hill (Fremantle), Brad Hill (Hawthorn), Michael Walters (Fremantle) and Lewis Jetta (Sydney Swans).

It was in a spirit of validation and celebration that I decided to track down the player who had changed my experience on the field but, alas, did not go on to play at the elite level.

Through a series of contacts I managed to speak with Charlie Dick. He had only just moved back to Broome after living in Alice Springs for ten years. He was working for the Department of Training and Workforce Development. Charlie had a patrilineal connection to Broome: his father was Bardi, his mother Noongar. His sense of connection was for Yuat country around the northern Wheatbelt town of Moora and Moore River. Growing up mainly in Goomalling, his first football memory was of valuable advice from his junior coach. 'Going to training we always tried to be fairly flashy. I recall we did this drill where we would be turning and twisting and the

coach pulled me over and said, “Why are you wasting your time doing all that when you should just run straight?” That helped me because when I got the ball I started to move in straight lines and look for options going forward rather than trying to look good. I became more team focused and positive with the football for the team.’

Football was particularly important to regional Aboriginal people. Charlie Dick remembers getting lifts from Goomalling in the bread truck down to Northam to play with his brother-in-law Hank Yarran. We reminisced about the ’85 grand final where we were teammates. He recalls the game, and said at times he had two taggers on him to try and quell his influence. I sent him the news article of the game report, we laughed that the tag did not seem to work. Dick said that this was the last season he would play until 1991 because he turned, in his words, ‘churchy’. He wishes he could turn the clock back and regrets not pursuing his dream of playing football at the elite level, which I believe he could have done and so does he.

But the obstacles were too great. Simple things like not having a car or enough money for fuel cost him such chances as participating in the final stages of the Teal Cup squad, or the state U18s team in 1985. When his cousin Willie Dick returned from playing with Essendon in 1993 and went to the Perth Demons in the WAFL, twenty-four-year-old Charlie went along to test his luck. But the extra cash his country team Goomalling paid, and their lack of a demanding training regime, tempted him back. A few hundred dollars extra a week compared to being paid next to nothing for busting your arse was all it took to curtail any WAFL success he may have hoped for. Besides, he would be among family and friends and starring every Sunday, as opposed to pitting his skills against hungry eighteen and nineteen-year-olds in front of crowds who could not care less. Now, he thinks that more recognition needs to be paid to develop and support the many Aboriginal players who go on to administrative and coaching roles. Charlie was president and coach of the Broome Pearlers in the Masters competition in 2014: ‘What needs to be recognised is the amount of participation that happens outside the playing arena. That needs to be recognised a bit more. Here in the West Kimberley we had eight teams and five or six Indigenous coaches.’

I hang up the phone and reflect on my days playing football and what it taught me. It taught me application and teamwork, but the biggest thing I learned was to empathise and accept people (even West Coast supporters). I still filter much of my working and family life through the maxims of football – common maxims that don't seem to have translated to the telling of Aboriginal history and the schism it still creates. Things like being fair and equitable, accepting the decision of the umpires and not moving the goal posts. One only has to recall the federal political scene under Howard, where he wound back land rights, rejected every key recommendation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, refused to offer an apology to the Stolen Generations or negotiate a treaty and, when he saw his chance, dismantled the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission just as it was becoming a force. Furthermore, has there been a more disgraceful rant by any federal leader in Australian history as Howard's, when he hammered the lectern at the Australian Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in May 1997, where he reduced child removal and dispossession to mere 'blemishes'?

Perhaps we should be very grateful that football has helped bring these stories to light, great stories of endurance, survival and success. Because for two hours every winter weekend we can celebrate how Aboriginal sportsmen have helped create the most exciting game in the world.

Sean Gorman holds a senior fellowship at Curtin University. He has published two books: *Brotherboys: The Story of Jim and Phillip Krakouer* (Allen & Unwin, 2005) was adapted for stage as *Krakouer!* and toured nationally in 2011, and *Legends: The AFL Indigenous Team of the Century* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011) is a collection of life stories of Aboriginal AFL players. He is the lead investigator on an Australian Research Council Linkage grant that has assessed the AFL's vilification laws.

FICTION

FROM NOW ON

BROOKE DAVIS

AT HOME IN Melbourne, they play kick-to-kick wherever they can: in the backyard, the hallway, at the park, on the MCG at full-time, walking down the street, in the aisles of the supermarket, in the rain, the wind, the dark. He tackles her to the ground and knocks the wind out of her and she's left gasping for air, but she smiles the whole time. For goalposts they use trees, bins, milk cartons, other footballs, rocks, dogs, points on the horizon, people, actual goalposts. She loves the feeling of the grass under her feet, the wind on her face, of running till her lungs almost fall out. She loves breathing against the cold air, bumping into her dad, sprinting after that red misshapen ball as if you'll die if you don't. Her dad commentates and she is always the star, always running down the ground, kicking on her left, three seconds to go, kicking from sixty out, the entire defence closing in on her, and even if she misses he always puts her on his shoulders and sings, 'We're the Eagles, the West Coast Eagles...' and the crowd is always chanting her name, 'Perthie, Perthie, Perthie', and she is always tipped to win the Brownlow, a firm favourite for the Norm Smith, about to kick her hundredth for the season.

Up till now, she has learned to guide the ball down to her foot with her right hand, to kick it so it flips over and over itself, to bounce it so it returns to her hands. She has learned what it means to play on

the wing, to be tagged, to hold the ball, to be pushed in the back, to go to ground. These are all words she knows but they suddenly take on an elevated air, they are grouped together to form a new dialect, a kind of code they use in front of her mum, who doesn't get it at all, who doesn't get anything most times, who says phrases like: 'How did your footy game go?' and 'Has the horn sounded?' Words that are slightly off, just to the left of their meaning, words that mean Perth can share a secret moment with her dad.

He takes her to the MCG and Kardinia Park and Waverley. She loves walking to the ground before the game, that you talk to strangers who know the same people you know and they speak to you as if you're in the middle of a conversation, yet you've never met them before in your life. The complete strangers say: 'Let's hope Sumich has got the guts today,' or 'Shame about Heady,' or 'D'ya think Woosha can do it again?' The complete strangers smile at you, they look you directly in the eye and yell 'Go Eagles!' like it's a password, or some kind of test, but it's for no real reason other than the joy of agreement. During the game they all yell and yell and yet they never yell ever in their lives. A man in a suit or a child clasping a toy footy or an elderly woman dressed head to toe in club colours, they all yell the same thing at the ump: 'You bloody white maggot!' People say all kinds of rude words and applaud and whoop, and this never happens anywhere else she knows of.

And it is dirty, rough, bloody, this game, but it is graceful and strong and hopeful, and it is the best and worst of the way humans are.

IT'S THE LAST day of the summer holidays, and tomorrow she starts high school. Things are going to be different from now on, everybody keeps telling her that, always emphasising *from now on* as if a line has been drawn through the middle of the timeline of her life. She doesn't know how or why things will change. Her mum, her dad, her teachers, her friends, her neighbours, the woman at the milk bar, the postie, the librarian, they've always been the same. The curtains in her bedroom and the carpet in the lounge room have never changed, neither has their concrete driveway, or the gum tree on their

front lawn, or their brick letterbox. All year long, every year, she watches sport on telly with her dad – cricket and tennis during the summer, footy during the winter. The weather is hot and cold when it's supposed to be. Meatloaf is on Wednesdays, tennis is on Saturday mornings, *Get Smart* is on Sunday afternoons. The possibility that any of these things might change, any of them at all, makes her feel small, quiet, shaky-limbed.

She's been playing cricket and tennis with her dad all summer, like they've done every summer she can remember, but perhaps because *from now on* starts tomorrow, her dad has grabbed the footy from the cupboard in the back room. She feels self-conscious with a footy in January, it's clumsy and imprecise in her hands, but her dad had said, 'Let's have a kick, Perthie,' and all she wants to do is be with her dad, always, so she says yes.

'Let's have some toast, Perthie,' or

'Let's do some star jumps, Perthie,' or

'Let's go to the moon, Perthie,'

and the answer is always, 'Yes, Dad, whatever you're doing is what I want to do, too.'

They walk down their suburban street towards the high school oval, past the houses made of red brick, past the tiny barking dogs, past the big quiet dogs, through the sticky, summer air. She tries not to step on cracks in the footpath. She knows it won't break her mother's back but she still can't bring herself to do it. They handpass the ball back and forth. Her dad runs a few steps ahead and claps his hands together and says, 'Perthie, Perthie, Perthie,' and she handpasses it to him and then runs a few steps ahead, clapping her hands together, too, 'Dad, Dad, Dad.' For some reason you always have to say their name more than once, even when you know they can definitely hear you. They zigzag the ball up the footpath, past the hedges and fences and men watering lawns, dodging trees and bike riders, sneaking into front yards to retrieve the ball from flower beds. Her dad says things to her that he says to the real players on telly:

'You got time, Perthie,' or

'Get rid of it, Perthie,' or

‘Good hands, Perthie,’

and he always says her name, as if he’s making sure she knows she’s still there.

When they reach the oval – her school oval *from now on* – they stand in the goal square, a few metres apart, and kick the ball to each other. She concentrates on pointing her toe when she kicks it.

‘You know your mum and I met at a footy game?’ her dad says.

Perth shakes her head. ‘Nope.’

The red ball passes in the air between them, from her foot to his hands, from his foot to her hands, and back again, over and over, tracing an invisible arc between them. Perth marks the ball on her chest and her dad says, ‘Out in front, Perthie,’ and she kicks the ball back to him, and it travels up and then down, like the sun rising and setting on a horizon.

‘I was playing for North Beach Warriors in WA,’ he says. ‘Your mum was there on a date with another bloke.’ Perth can’t imagine her mum on a date with anybody. He kicks the ball back to her and she holds her hands in front and marks it. ‘That’s it, Perthie,’ he says.

‘We were just out of the six,’ he continues, ‘and had to win to make the finals. We were down by five points when the ball fell into my hands in the forward pocket.’ He holds the ball above his head. ‘A snap kick on my left,’ he turns towards the goals and kicks around his body. ‘Sloane’s done it! The Warriors are in the finals! You little beauty!’

He runs towards her, crouching down to the ground as if readying to pick her up, but Perth dodges him and sprints past him, running through the goalposts and after the ball. It bounces towards the outer fence and she tries to scoop it up as it bounces one way, then the other. She can never guess which way it’s going to go. Suddenly her dad is behind her and he tackles her to the ground and hugs her to him and they lie there catching their breath.

‘I saw your mum behind the goalposts,’ he says. ‘She was an image, I’ll tell ya. I didn’t even hear the siren go.’

ALL SHE REALLY knows of Perth, the city, comes from watching the West Coast Eagles play on the telly. Her dad works for them,

and he travels over there from Melbourne some weekends during the winter. He sits in the box behind Mick Malthouse and she sees him sometimes, his hand, or the tip of his nose, or the top of his head, or sometimes his whole face, his whole entire face, there, on the telly. The Eagles glow with tanned skin and white smiles, the skies in Perth are blue and open, the shadows move across the ground in defined shapes with hard lines. The commentators refer to the visiting team's flight over as if they've come across on the boat with Captain Cook, as if they're lucky to be alive. The visitors always seem a bit ridiculous, sweating more, cursing more, tiring more, always raising one arm to shield their eyes. The Eagles move effortlessly throughout all four quarters, unfazed by the heat, not even squinting in the blinding light.

'The light's different in Perth,' her dad always says. He always says it as if he's never said it before and she never points that out. When he says it she looks through the window of their Melbourne lounge room and sees it: the heavy, shadowless light, the feeling as if she's sinking into it, as if she's drowning. Everything has that soft sway to it that underwater plants have. The colour in that Eagles Television World suddenly appears so over-pronounced. Even the brightness of their blue and yellow uniforms seems childish and overdone against the dark, composed colours of the Victorian clubs.

Footy under that kind of sun isn't the footy she knows, the footy she understands. It feels too clear, too perfect, too easily scrutinised. There is so much about footy that is about the cold, grey blur of it, the blaring white winter skin of it, the imperfection of it. The ump's get things wrong and they get things right depending on what side you're on, and the lack of clarity is part of it – it's a part of the game of which to be proud. Was it touched? Did he hold the ball? Was it ten metres? It is part of the game to question everything, every single thing, as if you know, as if you can do it better, always, and that was dependent on its imperfections. How did such a thing work in light like that? It didn't seem right. It was a kind of light that suggested there might be answers to everything.

THEY SIT SIDE by side in the goal square, looking out across the oval. The four goalposts rise up at the other end with the grand and

straight-backed formality of a line of guards. The grey-bricked buildings of her high school are scattered behind them.

Her dad leans back on the palms of his hands, his long legs stretched out in front of him, the ball resting on the grass beside him. 'The sun sets over the ocean every night in Perth,' he says. Perth has never seen a sun set on an ocean and she loves that thought: that a sun might set, and stay set, as if it were concrete.

'I fell in love with your mum in front of one of 'em,' he adds. He's never said that before, and he doesn't look at her when he says it. He leans forward and picks up the ball, flipping it over and over, expertly, unthinking, as if the ball in his hands is an inevitability. 'By the time the tip of that sun disappeared into the ocean, I knew. I couldn't ever watch anything beautiful without her.' He's silent then, for the smallest of moments, and it is this tiny silence that is alarming, that makes her gut drop.

'That's pretty gross, Dad,' she says, though she doesn't think it gross at all.

Her dad nudges her shoulder. 'You start high school tomorrow.' He says it as if she doesn't realise, as if it has just occurred to him, as if it will be a surprise for her. 'You'll be too cool for me soon.'

'I'm already pretty cool.'

'You'll get into headbanging or hip-hopping. Or boys.'

'As if, Dad.'

'Won't have time for your old dad.'

She looks down at her hands. *From now on.* She wants to tell him that this morning, as she lay out her new school uniform and new school bag and new school shoes and new school books, she felt a ball of fear growing inside her stomach and it wouldn't go away. He thinks her fearless, flawless, she sees that in every movement he makes around her. She wants so very badly to be the person her dad thinks she is.

Perth leans her head into him and he puts an arm around her. 'What's it like?' she asks.

'What? Being this handsome?'

She looks up at him. 'Dad.' She can see the bristles of hair on his cheeks. 'Being, you know. A grown-up.'

He takes a moment. ‘It’s the same, really,’ he says. ‘I don’t feel much older than you, Perthie. Honest.’

She doesn’t believe him. She looks again at the high school buildings. They seem so small from here. She squints one eye and pushes down a goalpost with the palm of her hand. She crushes a portable with her fist. She flicks a tree over with her fingers.

From now on, there will be more things to learn: that boys play kick-to-kick on the oval, that girls sit around in a circle on the nearby asphalt talking about boys, that people fall out of love, that parents get old, that feelings change, that they change all the time.

But now, in about six seconds actually, she’s going to grab the ball from her dad’s lap and make a run for it, she’s going to run as fast as she can to the other end of the ground, towards those goalpost guards, towards those grey buildings that will become bigger as she moves closer. She’ll imagine a roaring crowd, a clear and perfect day, the pronounced lines of her own shadow gliding next to her.

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John Kinsella

The artlessness of internal travel

Going away enforced where I was.
There was no here without there.
The Canning River fed Bull Creek
overshadowed by paperbarks
with its sharp white shore, a cul de sac
fed from the Hills, up over the Scarp.

Or far up the coast, a new home,
the Chapman River ate sandstone
and bream in the pools spoke
upstream language in their stasis.
Away, was religious when religion
was failing me, and I failing it.

Always heading Down South
or Up North, a thread through
a broken marriage, a string cord
between family jam tins, I travelled
to Wheatlands farm and its salt scalds,
to the millionaire's farm near Mullewa
managed by my father and his new wife.
Then to the mining towns of the Pilbara.
Later to a shack in a paddock
on the edge of jarrah forest.

Shells, rocks, cutting of plants,
 the odd polaroid, lock-journals
 with sketchy notes of departure,
 arrival, incidents: Dad hit a roo
 not far out of Exmouth after
 the cyclone took the roof off
 our motel and we sheltered
 in the doorframe of the bathroom.

Driving throughout the night,
 unloading bricks at Koorda,
 then onto Merredin, more bricks...
 and then sometime near dawn
 the truck off the road, brick packs
 broken all over. Swish of gear changes,
 hooking the button up alongside the shift,
 low, high...a range of habitation
 as adversarial as bitumen,
 night punctured with headlights.

In the shothole canyon outside Exmouth,
 communications remixing my brain chemistry,
 its electricity, I got a sense of what it is
 to be alone and lost, to drink rock
 and dryness, take blue as emptiness.
 But to retract and embrace,
 and see the fullness of loss.
 I am still there, scant vegetation
 and presence I can now explain.

Long straights, towards arid zones.
 The Pioneer bus with my younger brother,
 the flat-tops, the mesas, the emollient of erosion,
 the leafiness of banana plantations around Carnarvon
 that seemed as artificial as flower arrangements,

the pragmatic wish-fulfilment of tracking stations,
 the communities that wouldn't let us in
 but we hung around, hoping to travel
 where the car wouldn't take us, the Ampol
 and Golden Fleece travel paraphernalia
 guide us. Quasi-religious. Always quasi.
 Wanting to put something back.

And the salt ponds, evaporative vats
 granulated tissue of the iron industry,
 as hardcore porno sold to teenagers
 in supermarkets outwitted blue-ringed octopi,
 the tide rushing in over mud crabs,
 swamping mangroves, cobbler lurking
 and queenfish out in the channels.
 If you behave, we'll drive out
 to the anomaly, Millstream.
 Water in the gorges contradicts
 the dry God you want to worship.
 Nothing is 'straggly' because writing
 is what I take to it: unwritten
 yet, a shimmering affirmation.

Later I would fly on MMA down to Perth.
 Filling the map, dragging coast into crops,
 a semi-literate overview. Returning with piles
 of books, Frank O'Hara made street-corners
 of topography, silos sucked into his art.

But trips from the farm into a deeper wheatbelt
 were memories bereft of the anxieties of connection:
 salt scalds widening out beyond fences, speaking
 liminal against the grain, hot on the steps
 of the translocated, the driven-off.
 Further out, defences lowered,

where wodjil tests granite
 and rock dragons press sun
 into mirrors and the hawk watches,
 I announced the crime. In whose footsteps
 I follow, and the marks I leave behind: so distinct,
 but empty, the yellowing spray-fringe at the edges.

And south, to the tall timber fantasy,
 stomping ground of my Irish ancestors,
 stomping down karri with vestiges of hunger
 and anger, the bitten homeland transference
 to lift selkies from king waves, conspire
 with the haves and fight off the have-nots
 they might become at any moment, travelling
 through wetlands where the old farm etched
 its way into the buried, tramped down bones.

Bits of language coming through, and straight past
 the houses of family I didn't know,
 family who knew the wide spaces
 between tuarts before the ships arrived.

Or where whales ended up in kettles
 and tanks – travelogue of family
 friendships – Carnarvon Whaling Station –
 grandfather in the spotter, and great white sharks
 off Cheynes Beach I intone, carry on about:
 but mainly the eternal south, the other blue,
 the depth outside ownership, despite all claims.

John Kinsella won the Prime Minister's Prize for Poetry and the Judith Wright Calanthe Award for *Jam Tree Gully* (WW Norton, 2013). His most recent work is a collection of stories, *Tide* (Transit Lounge, 2013). He has previously been published in *Griffith Review* 16, 20, 26, 41 and 46.

Like a tourist with benefits

Dilemma of the domestic ex-pat

Helen Trinca

I HAVE A friend who says she weeps every time the plane descends over her hometown of Johannesburg. She has been away from South Africa for forty years but she is brought to tears whenever she catches sight of the city she left at the age of twenty. She never wants to return to live there permanently, but every time she flies in she is blindsided by emotion she cannot explain.

What is it about the place where you grew up? Can you draw more than sentimental memories from a home city you left behind a lifetime ago? In a world where mobility is coveted, where fluid connections with place are common, where someone in Milan or Prague or Perth can share precisely the same aspirations, does it matter where you are from?

Australians have always loved stories about ex-pats. We understand these cycles of departure, discovery and return; we give ex-pats a grudging respect. The lure of somewhere else is as much a part of the national temperament as our aggressive pride in the great southern land. Especially for my generation, it was taken for granted that you had to leave Australia – even temporarily – to find yourself. But the notion of moving from one Australian city to another seemed far less profound. Crossing the continent was often about a search for work rather than a search for meaning. Self-discovery in Sydney? Revelation in Melbourne? Pull the other one.

In my case, the exit was accidental. A colleague knocked back a job in head office in Sydney and the post was offered to me. I had never thought much about a permanent departure from Perth, never thought I'd learn much by leaving, but once I arrived in Sydney I was bitten and never really entertained the idea of going back west.

So it is that thirty-five years later, Perth is very much the city that I used to know. I've visited regularly and kept up with friends and family, but my time there takes place in something of a vacuum. For decades, I have engaged with my own, shared their big events and witnessed the arc of their lives. But I have scarcely engaged with the city.

Unlike my South African ex-pat friend, I don't choke up as the jet comes into the airport in Perth. And yet it feels special. Indeed, there's a strange sense of ownership as the crew readies for landing. *Hah!* I want to say to those obvious tourists across the aisle, *hah! I'm from here, this is my land.*

MY LAND BACK then was a scraggy suburb where we lived on five acres of sandy terrain. It was ugly compared to the beautiful district where we went to school and where our mother's family held rich orchard land, but I scarcely noticed. It was home. We weren't beach people but we swam in the Canning River among the rotting piles of the old Riverton Bridge or among the jellyfish of the Swan at Como jetty. We drove to Araluen to see the flowers, to Mundaring Weir to marvel at the engineering wonders of the twentieth century. They were my sacred sites. Yet if I think back now to the space that I truly associated with growing up in Perth it is 'the Terrace', the main street that runs parallel to the Swan River.

In his lovely little book *Perth* (NewSouth, 2014), David Whish-Wilson talks about St Georges Terrace as the street in the early twentieth century where you could 'spend your whole life'. He could well have included Adelaide Terrace because the two terraces operate as a single thoroughfare running more than three kilometres from the Causeway to King's Park. These days, the city's suburbs have spread so far up and down the coast, bursting with alternative retail and commercial spots, that the city centre is reduced. Hay and Barrack and William and Murray streets have not kept pace with change and the CBD needs a makeover. But the Terrace has held its own through the decades, even as Perth has neglected its public space. There remains a grace about the street in this city of glare and freeways.

Once upon a time, the Terrace was a boulevard containing everything from grand family homes to big private schools, churches and business headquarters. Government House was there, the Barracks and, just beyond, up near King's Park, stood Parliament House, opened in 1904. The Terrace

fed off the money from pastoral stations in the north and the first mining boom, the 1890s gold rushes.

The rich and the powerful lived on this street till well into the twentieth century. The Duracks, one of Western Australia's most admired dynasties, had a house on Adelaide Terrace. Daughters Mary and Elizabeth, who would succeed as writer and artist respectively, walked a few doors to school at the nearby Loreto convent. Their brothers, as Brenda Niall recorded in her book *True North* (Text, 2012), 'had only to cross the road to the Christian Brothers' school'.

The St Georges Terrace end oozed power, with the statue of explorer, politician and Mayor of Perth, Alexander Forrest (the great-great-uncle of contemporary Perth's richest man, mining magnate Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest) dominating its intersection with Barrack Street. The statue, by the Italian-born Pietro Porcelli, was erected in 1903 by 'a few private friends of the (Forrest) family' according to a report in the *Western Mail* (11 October 1902) just around the corner from the exclusive men's club, the Weld Club, built a decade earlier. Mary Durack, Brenda Niall notes, remembered how as a child she would accompany her father as he walked from home to his office in Howard Street 'taking off his hat to practically every second person' and bowing courteously to the Porcelli statue on the way. Just off the Terrace, more power again at the Town Hall, constructed by convicts and free men in 1870.

BY THE TIME I first saw the Terrace in the 1950s, few of the grand houses were used as residences but its cachet remained. It was the most serious public space in the city, a site for pomp and splendour, unlike Forrest Place near the GPO, which was all about commercial bustle and protest and rude democracy and street photographers.

An early memory is standing in the crowded Terrace with my mother as the Queen went by in her Daimler during the royal tour of 1954. Or at least I think it was 1954. It may well have been four years later when the Queen Mother repeated that royal journey down the Terrace. No matter, in the 1950s the Terrace looked hugely imposing to a kid from the outer suburbs.

Later, as schoolgirls, we caught the bus into town with Mum in the holidays, alighting at the Terrace to seek out the city's excitements – a round of cheese sandwiches and a pot of tea in one of the little cafés in London Court and an afternoon session at the pictures.

Later still, the Terrace was where I swapped buses to head off around the Swan River to the University of Western Australia and a world that suddenly seemed less secure to a seventeen-year-old from a tiny convent school in the hills. My arts courses were absorbing, but outside the lecture rooms and library were crowds of unknown people, all of whom seemed infinitely more sophisticated and sure of where they were going.

For many years in my twenties, the street defined my days as a young reporter on the *West Australian*, a paper edited and printed slap-bang in the middle of the Terrace in Newspaper House. I never got used to walking into that building through the small arcade of shops, past the grand entrance hall where ‘the public’ came to lodge classified death notices and pay their paper bills, then upstairs through the swing doors to the newsroom. Forty years later I can still recall that mix of anxiety and anticipation at what the day would bring in the unpredictable world of journalism. Female reporters were barred from the real excitement of police rounds, but courts carried plenty of human drama – from rapes and murders and drug runs to Vietnam War conscientious objectors who, a year or two before, had been with us on campus.

I was figuring it out, but the Terrace, Newspaper House and those who beavered within radiated an easy confidence and sense of ownership of the city that seemed improbable to me. I wanted what they had and wondered what it was. Class? Schooling? I was not the only awkward youngster in town but I felt my lack of ‘finish’ keenly.

From this distance, it would be easy to craft a narrative suggesting Perth was too small for me, but the truth is that back then Perth was too big for me. I was an uncertain adult, not yet aware of my own ambition or capacity. The mere act of leaving town for an unknown city gave me a sense of self that eluded me at home.

YOU CAN PROBABLY get away with choosing London over Perth but leaving Perth for Sydney mystifies many Western Australians. They have no trouble understanding why the rest of the country wants to settle in the west, but the reverse exercise holds little attraction.

It’s scarcely surprising.

The state has long exploited the distance between the capitals and has enjoyed placing itself in opposition to Melbourne and Sydney and Canberra.

Even leaving aside the formal secessionist movements of the nineteenth century and the early 1930s, political careers in the west are often built on an implied assumption of the shortfalls of the eastern states. Cocking a snoot at the east has always worked beautifully in the west, and the city can still exude an aggressive independence towards the rest of the country. The most recent mining boom has simply proved what Western Australians have always known: there is not much to be learned from the east. If anything, Perth seems a more self-congratulatory and inward-looking society than it did in my childhood. Back then, there were about 400,000 residents compared with almost two million now, yet it punched above its weight culturally.

Brenda Niall writes in *True North* of the surprising heights of Perth's cultural attainments during the 1950s:

Perth's art scene had a degree of sophistication unexpected in such a small city. No other Australian university had a set of Sidney Nolans, one of which hung in the University of Western Australia students' coffee shop. The P&O and Orient Line ships from London docked at Perth, long enough for visiting celebrities to be seen or at least heard on Catherine King's radio program. Sybil Thorndike came to Perth, so did HG Wells. The ABC sponsored concert performances by Malcolm Sargent, Lotte Lehmann and others. The university's student drama combined high quality with easy access. *Westerly* magazine, published from the department of English from 1956, was never parochial. An arts monthly broadsheet *The Critic*, founded by John O'Brien of the University of Western Australia Press, maintained a high standard.

It was the University, too, which spawned the first arts festival in Australia in January 1953. International theatre and music dominated the Festival of Perth and in the decades after the Second World War there was a good deal of very good theatre in the city. Much of it was on campus, including at the Sunken Garden, the outdoor amphitheatre. One night, during a performance of the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, an actor lost his grip on his fake sword. My sisters and I, decked out in identical pink dresses and out for a special night with our parents, gasped as it flew over the heads of the audience. That story, plus *Cyrano's* extraordinary nose, took on legendary status in

our family. Even now the image of the seventeenth-century duelist's sword flying through a sultry summer night reminds me of a Perth I used to know. All that high-culture aspiration momentarily undone by a plastic reality.

THOSE OF US who are ex-pats in our own land are strangely bifurcated individuals. Back in our hometown at Christmas or Easter or for family celebrations, we happily claim ownership when it suits us but avoid the engagement required of residents. We are like tourists with benefits.

In Perth, we devour the spectacular summers, the distinctive dry heat, the shorts and thongs, the dedication to knocking off at 5 pm to go sailing. But our old relationships exist in a quarantined space away from the big economic and cultural shifts that have taken place since we left. On some trips home, I don't even make it to the Terrace, bypassing the CBD as I trek between family in Como and Crawley and the hills.

It's so easy in a city like Perth to fall into semi-torpor, seduced by the landscape. In his book *Perth*, David Whish-Wilson writes a hymn to this city on the river. His is a deeply appealing view of Perth, and reading his book I can see myself in that life again, walking in the early morning through the magnificence of King's Park; eating fish and chips on a park bench near the river at Mount Pleasant; fighting the mosquitos in the deckchairs at a movie at the Somerville Auditorium. Even walking down the Terrace to catch a bus after work in the six-o'clock summer glare.

In this, I am reminded that there's not much logic or reason to the way we connect to place. We can be ambivalent about our hometowns, recognising what we have lost by leaving while appreciating what we have gained in our adopted spaces. We can be sure we're never going back and then be undermined by a sea breeze on a January afternoon. We can decide that Perth is too small, too big for its boots, too smug, too moneyed and still feel momentarily desolate about no longer being part of that casual cockiness. Most of all, we can find it impossible to decide whether it would have been better to have stayed.

Helen Trinca grew up in Perth and moved to Sydney in 1980. She has held a number of senior jobs in Australian journalism and is at present managing editor of the *Australian*. Helen has co-authored two books on work and industrial issues: *Waterfront: The Battle That Changed Australia* (with Anne Davies) (Random House, 2000) and *Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work* (with Catherine Fox) (Random House, 2004). She is the author of the biography *Madeleine: A Life of Madeleine St John* (Text Publishing, 2013).

INTERVIEW

Contending with a blank page

On writing, wealth and being a west-coaster

Madeleine Watts

TIM WINTON IS arguably Australia's most widely read contemporary novelist. His books have been translated into eighteen languages, adapted for television, stage and film, and won him Australia's most prestigious literary award – the Miles Franklin Award – four times. In 2013, Winton published his eleventh novel, *Eyrie* (Penguin, 2013). The book follows Tom Keely, a man who spends his days alone in a stuffy flat of a tan-brick apartment block in the middle of Fremantle, unemployed, disgraced, divorced, gradually drinking himself into oblivion. His solitude is disrupted by a meeting with his neighbour, Gemma – a woman he hasn't seen since she was a little girl from the end of the street, running away from chaos at home. Gemma and her grandson, Kai, force Keely into an entanglement with ugly, difficult things. The book, at once a personal story, is also a harsh reflection of Western Australia during the mining boom and the changes it wrought to the state's cultural and political priorities. In this interview, from different sides of the world, Winton discusses *Eyrie*, the importance of Western Australia in his work and the relationship between the popular and the literary in Australian publishing.

In a 2008 article published in the Australian, you said you write from what is at least perceived to be the 'wrong hemisphere, wrong country, wrong part of the wrong country'. I wonder whether you feel yourself to be a specifically Western Australian writer, if in a sense you write for Western Australians?

TIM WINTON: Well, I'm very conscious of the specifics of geography and the way it shapes us, whether we recognise this or not. And it used to take a certain doggedness to be a WA writer, defiance even, given the prevailing cultural headwind. Everything was harder. There was a weird logic to

contend with, a kind of continental cringe that made AA Phillips' cultural cringe look pretty tame by comparison. Apparently, everything important was happening elsewhere – namely in three postcodes of Sydney and maybe two of Melbourne – and this nonsense was internalised in the west to a bewildering extent. It seemed to paralyse people or, worse, turn them into the proverbial crabs in a bucket – always ready to claw the climbing crab back into the homely mediocrity they grumbled about, yet hid within. Thank God that dispensation has largely passed.

It's hard to 'own' where you're from when you're perceived to come from somewhere unglamorous and unimportant. No surprise as to why so many provincials quit home and head for the bright lights. And good luck to them, people have different tastes and needs. But if you do stay you get the chance to watch and learn, absorbing quite a lot at a distance. You make raids upon the centre and come home again, and you still retain a connection to home that isn't quite as reliant upon the myth and nostalgia of the expatriate. And if you hold your nerve *and* have a bit of luck, you can make your way from the margin. It used to be so much harder in the days of snail mail and the STD (long distance) phone call. But sometimes it seems to me that the biggest barriers were psychological.

So, yeah, do I feel like a west-coaster. But I don't view myself as a Western Australian writer, writing specifically for people in this state. It'd be like writing for your family – both too cosy and way too fraught. I'm conscious that I have a readership beyond Australia and I'm often puzzled by how warmly my work is welcomed abroad, but I'm comfortable to continue writing as I've always done without taking my foot off the pedal, so to speak.

You said in your talk at the Royal Academy of Arts in London that 'Australia the place is constantly overshadowed by Australia the national idea, Australia the economic enterprise'. What do we risk losing by overlooking the material reality of Australia?

Civilisation, really. Humane values, the sense that we are a social-cultural ecosystem, a chain of interdependent communities. The metrics seem to have narrowed and I think we put at risk our capacity to imagine and empathise. The national idea is a confection, just as the state itself is a confection. Useful,

sure, but not quite as real or as valuable as the soil and the water and the human bodies toiling and striving away on them. It puzzles me, the way postmodern people think they're angels all of a sudden, in the sense that they think they can live without material consequences, that life might be largely abstract or virtual. It's a peculiar delusion. Perhaps it comes from being in thrall to big woolly notions and from a growing impatience with the specific. And there is a contempt for the material world that has shrunk our communal and political imagination to the point where we may be making life impossibly challenging for those who come after us. If the material world is mere grist in the public and political mind, then the future is grim for humans.

Is it difficult being a writer preoccupied with landscape when so much of the work of writing is solitary, done indoors and removed from the sensory world?

I write about people, actually! And none of those are present in the room when I write, either. But that removal you mention – from people and landscape – is necessary, I find. I need time to decompress and think. The only time I've ever sat out in the landscape to write is when I've been pressed into doing it for someone with a camera because it conforms to some idea they have about me.

It's true, though, that I've always felt this tension between the indoor world and the outdoors. I can't imagine a purely sedentary existence of contemplation and analysis. But a life of action and sensation wouldn't be enough, either.

I was interested in how that relationship to the outdoor world had informed your writing or the influence of your environmental activism, if I'm being precise. For instance, what drew you to the motif of the eyrie – the imperilled nest of birds of prey? That their habitat is at risk seems inextricably tied to the sense that the characters are in psychic and physical danger in their own habitat.

To be frank, I'm not sure how it came to me. Maybe it's nothing more complicated than being a flatlander and spending a couple of years working in a tall-ish building. I was struck by the difference that altitude brings, the strange perspective of looking out and down. You feel at once superior and vulnerable; your view is both expanded and attenuated. People and things

become objects. And the high vantage point, it can tickle latent paranoia. Having conquered a citadel the conquistador can only feel exultant for so long before thoughts turn to defending it, seeing suspicious activity at every turn.

I was in Sao Paulo briefly after *Breath* (Hamish Hamilton, 2008) came out in Brazil and I was fascinated by how people lived. The richest, of course, commuting in choppers, defending whole floors of skyscrapers with bodyguards. And I guess, at a less histrionic level, any New Yorker understands the peculiarly defended world of vertical living. Not just the social siege, either. And there is the sensory shock of being in skyscrapers and feeling them sway and gulp and buzz. Buildings are alive, even if much of their life is borrowed. And the world is still trying to digest the image and reality of the Twin Towers falling so graphically and potently. So yeah, power, hubris and vulnerability – I guess they were all in play.

Rachel Carson showed that you can get a sense of the health of an ecosystem by how its birds are faring. And I was thinking during the writing of *Eyrie* that perhaps you can also tell how a society is travelling by the situation its children find themselves in. I hardly understood this at the time, but the little boy, Kai, is the canary in the mine. So it's not as if I was completely preoccupied with the non-human environment. Even in the grittiest urban place, nature leans in. A tall building is air space for birds and that, I discovered as I went, was where Keely's primary preoccupation collides with his new dilemma.

Perth is such a small sliver of refuge; there's a physical hunkering but also a cultural huddling, not all of which has its origins in history. For some reason it's whiter than most other major Australian cities. There's still an underbelly of xenophobia, I'm afraid. But the anxiety doesn't seem to be about folks with white skin. In recent years, the northern coastal suburbs have swelled with waves of 'white flight' from the UK and from Africa. These people are welcomed with open arms. This is something rarely discussed, but I think it's one of the things that distinguishes Perth and it interests me.

I don't know what my years as an eco-activist will have brought to *Eyrie* or any other part of my work. Except, perhaps, for Keely's dyspeptic view of politics and nepotism. It's a funny thing, but I never knew what it was to have enemies until I became a public advocate for the environment – an unpaid advocate, I'm sorry to say I have to make plain. I've certainly never sought nemeses of any kind and as a novelist it seems you're no threat to

anyone, really. As an artist, no one in politics or business will take much note of anything you do or say. If anything you're indulged a bit because you're harmless. But it's another matter when you step outside your 'place'. You anticipate a certain ideological antagonism, but you quickly learn that there are people in parliament or in the media who want you stopped because you threaten the interests of their masters. It's a small town, I guess, and everyone wants somewhere safe to land when the music stops.

If I'm honest, I prefer the relative impotence of being an artist, I'm not someone who relishes a stoush. Most days it seems more than enough to contend with myself and the blank page.

In an interview last year in the Sydney Morning Herald you spoke about the decision to write about an apartment block, because that kind of living environment throws into relief how separate we've become from one another. You described it as 'our prosperous individuation'. What did you mean by that?

For a few years I was working in a place not unlike the building in the book. Again, I stumbled into the setting and situation; I didn't set out to write about it. But the physical experience stayed with me afterwards. It brought to mind just how atomised our lives have become, given the way we build, live and think of ourselves.

I don't have any boho contempt for the suburbs. After all, that's where I grew up and I loved it. But the downside of most Australian cities – and Perth is one of the starkest examples – is that the block-and-bungalow tradition is producing enormous, expensive, destructive sprawl. Our suburbs are not designed for humans but for cars and roads. People – families, schools, neighbours – live in startling physical isolation from one another. And the old communal ethos of previous generations has been replaced by the concept of the citizen as consumer, first and foremost. It strikes me that links between people have hardly been fainter, even in this era of unimaginable prosperity. And this is painfully evident in WA, which was once one of the poor cousins of the federation. When we became the richest state, the boom state, the engine of the nation's great good fortune, the smugness was almost instant. The attitudes of the 'winners' in this little economy were breathtaking in their viciousness, their small-mindedness, their anxiety and xenophobia. It was like

they were standing in a thunderstorm of money, and before their frocks and shirts had even got damp they'd convinced themselves they'd made it rain by sheer force of will. Those standing beyond the band of showers were, of course, bludgers, or worse, 'whingers from the east'.

There were two gospels holding sway on the western frontier: the first was *unbridled development* and unto it the second – *Western Australian exceptionalism*. And many were the faithful. Look what happened when a federal government decided to tax some of the super profits and also put a price on carbon. The tycoons spent up on PR, astro-turfed demos and bussed in their own employees – they brought down a Prime Minister. It was like something out of Sinclair Lewis.

The boom, we're told, is over and it's definitely brought benefits to many communities. Much of it seems to have been pissed away – but that's fortunes for you, eh? One of the heartening legacies has been the slow awakening of philanthropy, an instinct once viewed in this state as dangerously effeminate. Sadly, though, prosperity brought an ugly 'fuck you' to the surface that was not merely the preserve of magnates and their henchmen. It was simmering in the 'burbs, in the clubs, along the taxi ranks every night. Fast money seemed to bring with it a catastrophic epidemic of amphetamine addiction and alcohol abuse and all the violence and heartache that go with them. And children bore the brunt of it. In Parliament we had politicians reeling about, pissed, in the House, sniffing seats and behaving like boors. No, I'm not sure I could say that sudden wealth enhanced civility in this state.

One of the things that came across most strongly to me in Eyrie was the idea of protection. That sense of being left to fend for yourself, whether it's Western Australia – left to fend for itself between ocean and desert – or whether it's the characters and the lives they're barely handling.

I hadn't really thought of it in those terms before, as in, being isolated and left to fend for ourselves as a state? Yes, I'm sure it's there in the cultural mind. There's a historical grievance at work, about being forgotten or forsaken by the rest of the Federation. But also a hardiness and inventiveness that's worth some credit. And Perth *is* a city besieged by geography in a way that's quite startling when you understand its physical situation. Without desalination it'd

be a failed state already. The Swan River is almost dead. The upper reaches are kept on life support – mostly for show – by aerating pumps. Keely's fears for the place aren't all the bluster of hangover and bitterness, he has every right to be worried and fed up. Physically, the environment within the city and surrounds is on a knife-edge and for those battling to keep it alive it's a tough, miserable struggle. Protecting it – that is, protecting the means of our own survival – sometimes feels completely impossible. The scientific knowledge and the skills are there to turn things around before it's too late. But it's very hard to get the sustained attention of media and government to do anything genuine about it. There's absolutely no political will. As a city, Perth is living as if there is no tomorrow.

So yes, I guess Keely is trying to keep his neighbours, this woman and this boy, safe. It's not hard to feel sometimes that you lack the skills, the power, the heart, the conviction to keep vulnerable people or things from danger. There's no question Keely is, shall we say, under-resourced. He's a man from a softer, safer world than the one he finds himself in. He's not practised in violence or machismo; he doesn't know anything about the bottom-feeders in the amphetamine trade that he's up against. And he's a childless man trying haplessly to father a boy who he doesn't really understand. And the kid, Kai, is a kind of provocation. He seems, almost mutely, to be demanding deliverance. And in a weird sense, since finishing the book, I see him as an agent of grace. Without knowing it, he goads Keely back to life, forces him from his funk. Until this point he has been, as Les Murray puts it and Keely's mum Dora quotes him, 'shopping in despair's boutiques'.

In extremis nobody feels they have what it takes to do what's necessary to protect others. Particularly those who are more accustomed to being protected. In the end he's forced to employ the bluntest tool in the kit – himself, his own body, perhaps his life.

I wonder if that tension between protected and protector is where the novel's preoccupation with fathers and Keely's 'father-shaped hole' comes in. He feels like he can't measure up, and that feeling is tied into the allusions you make to Biblical stories – the Prodigal Son and the story of Isaiah pressing burning coal against his lips to release him from sin.

I see it more in terms of nurture more than just fatherhood. I guess I'm interested in how people fare in their little sheltering units. The instinct to protect and nurture isn't always there, as we know, and yet there are those without children yearning to give some kind of nurture and to receive it, of course. People draw upon what they know and much of what they know is the 'embedded energy' of experience. Kai's experience of men is toxic – his father is a thug and his mum may not be all that much better. Keely is clueless and yet he has the fact of his mother and the myths of his father to draw upon.

And yeah, Keely feels inadequate. To some extent this has as much to do with generational anxiety as anything, that squishy subsoil beneath the shiny crust of so many baby boomers spared by poverty, war and so much more, something that's made worse by the large shadows cast by his own parents. Socially and politically he feels he's achieved less with more and he suspects he's part of a generation that is a bit wet and whiny. He feels that prosperity and comfort, the culture of comparative ease, may not have served him well. Or perhaps he hasn't served it well, either. He admires his parents for having exceeded their origins, to have refused the social boundaries set by their time.

As to religion: well, it was my first culture. It was the means by which I came to high language, I suppose, as well as ideas about ethics, community and so on. You might say that for better or worse it was my introduction to the notion of conscious living. And, as you say, that background seems to run through everything I write. Now and then, I gather, it breaks to the surface and gets itself noticed.

I feel like it's something I've noticed. Not necessarily through anything overt, but perhaps because so much of what's important in your writing comes from a non-deterministic, non-materialist point of view, particularly when what you're dealing with has a spiritual dimension. Is it difficult trying to find a language to express that?

The real challenge is in finding language that still carries something to people in an era when religion is counter-cultural, even anti-social – an affront to the mainstream. You're at the mercy of an erosion of literacy, for one thing, so you can assume less in common with your reader in terms of references. Maybe it's just another outlying settlement to be writing from. But like anyone – writer,

artist, farmer – you have to work a little harder to make yourself understood to someone outside your circle, and sometimes you get through and at others you baffle people. By and large though, I enjoy living and writing from outside the enclave – you can't take anything for granted. I might be kidding myself, but my suspicion is it strengthens the work. The writing I see, that is obviously from the club to the club, often strikes me as flabby.

As to material and non-material: I'm a religious person for whom matter still matters deeply. For those of us preoccupied by such affairs, the physical world is the prime means by which we encounter the sacred. It's why I'm a conservationist, I suppose.

There's a tension in Eyrie between 'working-class prejudice' and 'middle-class anxiety'. Keely's mother points out that the further he drifted away from his working-class roots 'the more you wore your blue collar on your sleeve'. What were you trying to explore by writing about contemporary class differences?

Class is a problematic business in Australia. And with the rise of the political right it's become quite awkward to address without being accused of deploying what certain news editors love to call 'the politics of envy'. And the traditional left has no language with which to address it because they've internalised the Thatcher–Reagan view of the world and rendered themselves impotent and obsolete. Apparently, a person's wealth or poverty is an expression of character, not an outcome of social circumstance. It seems to me that the egalitarian culture I grew up in has regressed markedly; the barriers between classes that were consciously lowered by government intervention in the '70s have been erected once more. To me, it amounts to a deliberate counter-reformation, a settling of old scores from culture wars we all thought were done and dusted.

By and large we live, most of us, in sequestered cohorts. It's easier than it's ever been to live at a remove from people unlike yourself. As a son of the working class who is now a bourgeois, I guess I'm conscious of that and still interested in it. This is one sense in which I do find myself an ex-patriate and, like any ex-pat, the country I left behind only exists in memory. That said, I don't think I really set out to examine it or comment on class in *Eyrie*. I think I just bumped

into it. It quickly became a factor in the story I found myself writing and, yes, I guess I drew on my own experience to a certain extent in order to negotiate it.

I'm also interested in the way you use language, particularly vernacular language. To me, it's always felt like your writing demonstrates a political and cultural commitment through the language you use.

There is a sense in which the 'owning' of common language, or at least the choice to use the lumpen vernacular in a literary novel, is a statement in itself. But I've been doing this for nearly forty years and my guess is that most of this use of the vernacular is used either automatically or from sheer pleasure. I don't know if the bulk of it springs from any kind of worthy social commitment. I happen to love the ordinary language of the people I grew up with and who I still mostly associate with. I like the sound of it, truth be told, and the particularity of it. And, yes, I like to honour it. But I'm also appropriating it, distorting it to my own ends, which are artistic and personal. I'm trying to make music with it, I suppose.

There is real pressure to relent from this, to submit to some kind of standardised, placeless, cosmopolitan usage: namely, 'American Internet'. But there have always been writers holding out against the centre, the imperium. And there are still readers who rejoice in particularity, even if it baffles now and then. I don't always know what's going on in a story by Faulkner or James Kelman, for instance, but I am excited to *be somewhere*, to feel in the language the gravity of the specific, but also not to have someone cutting me so much slack that I'm being patronised. You want to feel like a citizen in these strange worlds, not just a tourist. A really good novel makes you a citizen – it claims you. It's a full-immersion experience and like any interloper you figure things out as you go along.

You're one of Australia's most consistently bestselling novelists. What do you think the relationship is between the 'popular' and the 'literary' in this country?

I'm not certain I see a necessary distinction between 'popular' and 'literary'. I write literary fiction that seems to have found a popular audience. I'm not sure how to explain how this came about. I wrote ten books before I

sold anything in any serious numbers and haven't done anything differently before or since.

Now and then I catch myself using phrases like 'commercial fiction' to distinguish what I do from work that is unabashedly aimed at pleasing a market, and yet publishing any kind of book is an act of commerce. Lots of us in the 'literary' camp are squeamish about the industrial reality we participate in. There's a lot of bad faith and false consciousness at work there. There is much more disguised pandering and targeting and grooming going on in the high-end literary world than people realise. Go to a writers' festival sometime, it'd make a car salesman blush.

And the fact is, that unless you're a hobbyist or have academic tenure or a trust fund you'd always prefer to sell a couple of hundred thousand copies of a novel than a couple of thousand. Thing is, all the coy fluffing and mugging doesn't necessarily translate into big sales anyway. Some of what makes a book sell is industrial grunt and some is just arsey luck. Sadly, for every Dickens there are several Melvilles. Melville didn't feel pure because only fifteen hundred people bought *Moby-Dick* – he was utterly miserable.

It's true that publishing has become more conservative. The industry feels besieged and risks seem riskier. There's a tendency to concentrate on so-called 'big titles' and 'big authors'. This threatens the whole ecosystem, I suspect, and I say that as one of those people often singled out as looming large in the ecosystem. No one wants to see a monoculture. It seems to me people are still hungry to read and, God knows, people seem eager to be published. You have to hope these people find one another by whatever means are possible.

Madeleine Watts is a writer of fiction and nonfiction. She has conducted extensive interviews with authors, which are published on the Griffith Review website. Her work has appeared in *The Believer*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Junkee* and the *Sun-Herald*, among others. Raised in Sydney, she currently lives in New York.

Tim Winton has published twenty-six books for adults and children, and his work has been translated into twenty-eight languages. Since his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*, won the *Australian Vogel Award* in 1981, he has won the Miles Franklin Award four times, for *Shallows*, *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and *Breath*, and twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, for *The Riders* and *Dirt Music* (all published by Penguin Books). His latest book is *Eyrie* (Penguin, 2014) and he lives in Western Australia.

MEMOIR

Creative Darwinism

Pretty flowers grow in shit

Nick Allbrook

This is my city and I'm never gonna leave it.

Channel 7 News ad

WRITING ABOUT MY experience of making music in Perth is a strange thing, because as soon as a 'scene' is bound and gagged by the written word it is finished, petrified, swept up into the *Rolling Stone* archives and forever considered 'history'. It might be revered and glorified, but it's still long gone. This could be a very restricting view to take on a community like Perth, which is still just as inspiring and productive as it ever was. I can't pretend to understand where 'music scenes' begin or end. It seems a futile and narrow-minded pursuit. So before I begin, I want to say that this is merely a reflective exercise. There was never a 'golden age', and if one does exist I can't see it, because it's floating all around, invisible and omnipresent.

For years I suffered serious cultural guilt as a Western Australian. The orthodoxy and banality made me feel isolated, relegated to the company of eccentric long-haired ghosts singing to me from inside my Discman. Every birthday and Christmas, Dad would give me a care package of CDs. This blessed nourishment of Jethro Tull, Lou Reed, Led Zeppelin and David Bowie shone a light into the murky tunnels of my future. Playing music and generally being a flaming Christmas fruitcake became my sole purpose, and me and a few other school friends – Steve Summerlin and Richard Ingham of Mink Mussel Creek, and many other brilliant but criminally under-recognised projects – revelled in our little corner of filthy otherness. This outlook was key to our musical and creative development. We railed against

the boredom of Perth not with pickets or protest, but with a head-in-the-sand hubris that made us feel invincible and unique. We found more comrades along the way – Joe Ryan, Kevin Parker, Jay Watson – and together we erected great walls of noise and hair and mouldy dishes around our Daglish share house commune citadel on Troy Terrace where we incubated, practised, recorded, talked and grew. A friend stick'n'poke tattooed a spiral shape into my arm to represent that way of life (which I'd lifted from Hermes Trismegistus and other alchemical mumbo jumbo I learned at university). Look inside and the world can be whatever you want. Look out and it's ugly and shitty.

In Perth, use of public space is regulated to the point of comedy, and Orwellian restrictions on tobacco, noise, bicycles, alcohol and public gatherings breed a festering discontent and boredom because no one likes being pre-emptively labelled a deviant. Being trusted enriches the soul – you can see it on the face of the child who leads the family trek. You can see the flipside on the faces of disenchanting detainees. On weekends, this restlessness is unleashed across clubs and pubs in Northbridge and Subiaco in an avalanche of Jägerbombs (17mL of Jägermeister dropped into a larger glass of Red Bull and then consumed with haste) and Midori and violence and cheap sex. When the Monday sun staggers over the horizon, people rub their eyes and heave a great sigh and the city reverts to its utilitarian state – the 'bourgeois dream of unproblematic production', as *The 60s Without Apology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984) puts it, 'of everyday life as the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption'. That this description of pre-revolutionary 1950s and '60s America is so apt for Perth is damn scary. Or hilarious. I can't decide. I guess it depends on the depth and colour of your nihilistic streak, or if you actually *live* here. Whichever way you look at it, it does not paint a picture of a city conducive to creativity. Art is the antithesis of logic and functionality – it is romance and wonder and stupid, pointless lovelies. As good old Mr Vonnegut so often said, it's an exercise to make your soul grow. So how, in a super-functional and conservative environment whose every will is bent towards digging *really, really* big holes in the ground, have I seen and heard and felt some of the most brilliant, pure and original creativity in the world?

I USED TO dream about living in a cultural powerhouse like Paris or Berlin or New York, but after spending time in these places I've realised

that the emptiness and isolation of Perth – boredom to some – was a far better environment for creativity. The ‘cultural capitals’ are so rich in art and wonder that it can feel pointless to add to it.

Maybe just being *in* those ‘cultural capitals’ fills us up with wonder? Strolling through Berlin at night, ducking into a bar with fish nailed to the roof, skipping across the cobblestones for some cheap beers in a record shop in a Russian caravan in an abandoned peanut factory...that kind of stuff fills the romantic void. Having a Ricard and a few Gitanes on the *terrasse* of Aux Folies; stumbling through Camden after a lock-in at the Witch’s Tit or the Cock’n’Balls or the Cancerous Bowel or whatever you call it; recollecting a possible conversation with Jah Wobble over a pint...Perth? It has no secret tunnels to romantic fulfilment.

For me, music and art have always been a way to manufacture that romance lacking in upper-middle-class Western Australia. To be honest, if I had lived in New York I probably would’ve been so damn hung-over – or busy ensuring that I would be later – that a whole lot less creation would’ve gone on. Mundane and discouraging places like Perth create a vicious Darwinism for creatively inclined people, where survival of the fittest is played out with swift and unrepentant force and the flippant or unpassionate are left behind, drowning in putrid mind-clag. You have to *really* need it, and without the mysterious and poetic benefits of a vibrant city culture this has to come from deep inside. Amber Fresh, otherwise known as Rabbit Island, is one person who produces constant streams of music, drawings, essays, poems, calendars, videos and photos from her home. She fills her world with little pieces of homemade, lo-fi, photocopied beauty and magic. They don’t have funding or precedent or material ambition – and the result is something fresh and original. Mei Saraswati does the same thing, although completely different styles of music. She has produced, mixed, mastered and illustrated scores of albums in her bedroom and then released this other-worldly electronic R’n’B brilliance onto the internet with no fanfare, simply to turn around and start making more. These are just two examples. There are many more.

SOMEHOW, BY BEING a cultural long-drop, Perth lit a fire under my arse. In more scholarly terminology this could be called a ‘spirit of negation’ – a margarine version of the same zeitgeist that has catalysed most worthwhile

movements throughout history, from dadaism to punk to all the intellectual and artistic wonders of The Netherlands freshly unchained from their dastardly Spanish overlords.

Being isolated spatially and culturally – us from the city, Perth from Australia and Australia from the world – arms one with an Atlas-strong sense of identity. Both actively and passively, originality seems to flourish in Perth's artistic community. Without the wider community's acceptance, creative pursuits lack the potential for commodification. There's no point in preening yourself for success because it's just *not real*. It's a fairytale, so you may as well just do it in whatever way you like, good or bad, in your room or on the top of the Telstra building, which – as anyone with any common sense will attest – was built for that one potential badass to drop in on a skateboard and parachute off. Growing up in the Kimberley and then Fremantle, the true machinery of the music business evaded me. It was about as real as the Power Rangers and twice as awesome. Led Zeppelin and U2, all the way down to whatever was on *Rage* that morning, was just a pretty dream. But if I grew up in a city where success in music was common and highly visible, I reckon it would have been far more alluring. I would've understood how to go about it, probably before I actually realised how deep my love of music was. With the template for success laid out so precisely – gigs to be got, managers to be found, reviews to be had and the ultimate dream of 'making it' tangibly within reach – Perth would find itself producing far less original art. Because as it stands, it doesn't really matter if you're crap or silly or unbearably offensive, you wouldn't get much further doing something different anyway. This helps to preserve a magical purity because it's executed with love – with *necessity*. And what's more, when these artists keep going and practising and advancing – which they must – somehow their crassness coagulates into something brilliantly individual and accomplished, and you can see it performed in an arena that makes the audience feel truly blessed. I saw Rabbit Island and Peter Bibby and Cam Avery play in backyards. I saw CEASE play in a tattoo parlour in Maylands. Me and Joe Ryan were plastered against the wall by their sound, gawking up at Andrew, the guitarist, precariously standing on his enormous amp wearing high heels and full fishnet bodystocking, slowly trying to drive his guitar through the top of his cabinet like some pagan-burlesque reimagining of King Arthur. After hours they slowed to a

halt, and the crowd cheered from the stairs and bathroom door and kitchen and I remembered where we were: in a tiny share-house in Maylands, in the flaming cauldron of hell or the halls of Valhalla. Mink Mussel Creek played there a few times and once, in a flash of drunken inspiration, someone turned the only light in the room off mid-performance. I saw the fourteen guitarists of Electric Toad destroy a warehouse art gallery wearing '90s WA football jerseys. Tame Impala and Pond played in Tanya's garage and every time I cried and danced and felt like the breath of God was being embarrassingly saucy all over my skin. We played our very first show in that garage and I can still see Jay demolishing the tiny drum kit – kick, snare, ride, tom – as sparks floated from the forty-gallon drum and lit the faces of the people looking in from the dark. None of us had ever seen anyone play like it in real life, let alone in a garage, sitting on milk crates.

As far as genres go, our music 'scene' in Perth was an anomaly. A mad mosaic of groups and artists only held together by gallant separation from conventional Perth society. Nick Odell, the drummer of CEASE and Sonny Roofs, still has a poster for a gig at Amplifier Bar that I remember as a kind of microcosmic Woodstock – a tactile realisation of all the beauty and communion we cherished. The line-up included us (Mink Mussel Creek), CEASE (aforementioned stoner/doom/drone lords), Sex Panther (punk-party queens), Oki Oki (Nintendo synth pop) and Chris Cobilis (experimental laptop noise music). I think most members of the bands ended up on stage at more than one time, wrapped in Cobilis' wires or yelling into a madly effected microphone in front of CEASE. I certainly did. Nowhere else would such a ridiculously mismatched line-up consider themselves a tight community. We all partied together, played together and are still friends.

I think this spirit is lacking in a lot of the more culturally enlightened parts of the world. Maybe in these vibrant communities the countercultural idea is so entrenched it becomes capitalist orthodoxy and loses its edge. It is subjected to the rationality it once challenged. In the cultural capitals – Paris, Berlin, New York – creativity and original thinking are accepted and valued parts of mainstream life.

In Perth they are not.

Paris has over four hundred streets named after artists and writers, and this honour is not restricted to the most unobtrusive or patriotic. Rue Albert

Camus, Rue Marcel Duchamp and the recently proposed Place Jean-Michel Basquiat, for example, show the state glorifying revolutionaries, absurdists, libertines and a gay, heroin-using, Haitian–American graffiti artist. Today we can stroll along the verdant Boulevard Auguste-Blanqui, named after the man who led the uprising of the Paris Commune. A revolutionary, a prisoner, an anarchist. In modern terms: a terrorist.

There, art is a basic fact of everyday life, while in Perth it is an anomaly hidden in garages and living rooms – deep beneath a conservative fishbowl of productivity. So, all things considered, ‘cultural capitals’ should be havens for art and music, and Perth should not. The romance just seeps into the pores, *ja?*

I always thought this before I left Western Australia, but have since found it to be otherwise. I asked a young photographer and artist in Amsterdam about the music scene there and her reply was wholly negative. A lot of Parisians seem to feel the same way. I look back on my time in Perth and think about the huge number of brilliant musicians and artists who I saw and knew, often not in official venues but in backyards or sheds or the abandoned entertainment centre (yes, CEASE). Perhaps with the freedom – almost *expectation* – to create, revel and throw it all around the streets, it all just gets a bit boring.

Like much good art, it doesn’t really ‘mean’ anything, so writing an essay about it is an odd activity. The experience of a city or community varies so much that it can never be defined while it is still occurring. When it’s actually happening, a ‘scene’ is not really a ‘scene’ – it’s completely intangible and only coagulates into a definitive and convenient ball when history puts it in a cage, when someone from the outside looks in and decides there’s something shared between a bunch of vaguely artistic fools. I guess that’s what I’m doing now, which is pretty ridiculous seeing as nothing is finished and the Perth artistic community is so ethereal that it couldn’t and shouldn’t be labelled at all.

Nicholas Allbrook grew up in Derby, Western Australia. He made music in the accidentally popular Daglish bogan-ascetic commune that spawned Mink Mussel Creek, Tame Impala, Pond, Space Lime Peacock, Allbrook Avery and a sack of other near-saleable art/products.

ESSAY

Shifting focus

A comprehensive, unbiased history

Ted Snell

THE TYRANNY OF myopia continues to skew the chronicle of Australian art history. According to Edmund Capon in his ABC series *The Art of Australia*, and the interpretation of contemporary art practice in Melbourne and Sydney in *Hannah Gadsby's OZ*, art ends at the 129th meridian. Excuses of distance and expense can no longer justify this carelessness. Capon included one artist from Western Australia, Rover Thomas, but Gadsby failed to acknowledge any creative activity in the state. While extremely disappointing, this conception of the cultural life of Australia isn't new: there is an embarrassingly large number of books and curated exhibitions produced over the past century that have egregiously used the prefix 'Australian' to describe some aspect of visual art practice on this continent yet exclude any reference to Western Australian artists, galleries or institutions. Retrospectively, curators and critics have often acknowledged they were remiss in omitting artists, events or works held in public collections in Western Australia from their 'national' surveys. Unfortunately, the recorded history is what remains and private apologies do not impact on the next generation of critics, curators or art historians who regularly replicate these oversights.

It's not surprising, then, that many locally based artists look at their world through a different prism. Living out west encourages them to work

globally and think expansively – they are influenced by geography, but not constrained by it. Their horizon is Berlin or Finland, New York or LA. Many of us left for the lure of swinging London in the '60s and '70s; the Triffids were huge in the '80s in the UK and Scandinavia; and, currently, locally based artists like Oron Catts and Jacobus Capone are working and exhibiting in Berlin and Helsinki, New York and everywhere else. For them, art isn't over there, it's where you are as an artist – and on the western edge of the continent there is a great deal to get the juices flowing. Along with a raised digit, a give-it-a-go mentality and a dose of fierce optimism, there is also a sense of urgency spawned by dislocation and invisibility that ignites these artists and propels their creative responses to their surroundings, their experiences and their situation.

Living on the west coast is a catalyst for new ideas and new approaches. Aboriginal people have been creating images and responding to the conditions of life here for forty thousand years or more. The Dampier Archipelago Rock Art Precinct comprises the largest concentration of petroglyphs in the world and possibly the largest number of megaliths known in Australia. It also constitutes the greatest continuous cultural site in Australia – and it is one of many. The galleries of images engraved or painted are a treasure-house of world culture that affirms a vibrant and ongoing engagement with this land. Those same artists have seen visitors arrive on their shores for centuries, welcomed them and shared their knowledge. The Macassans, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French and the British have impacted on their world, and it is reflected in the visual record of their encounters on rock, bark and more recently on paper and canvas.

Later they came to stay. It is frequently the case that the western coastlines of continents attract outsiders later as the great waves of migration and human movement sweep first upon the eastern seaboard and only subsequently find a foothold on western shores. This lateness in itself offers a kind of freedom, a space to act in response to what is happening elsewhere while not being constrained by it. In Doug Pray's 1996 documentary *Hype*, which chronicled the rise of the grunge scene in Seattle (also on a continental western edge), the lack of mainstream infrastructure is described as one of the liberating features that made it possible for young musicians to imagine recording their own music, writing their own magazines and independently

distributing their work. It was the only way to get something happening, and the young musicians and entrepreneurs had the ‘make do’ mentality often associated with the outback, with the new frontier, and the self-reliant, innovative spirit of early explorers and settlers in the ‘Old West’. Artists in Western Australia do it too, in full knowledge that if they don’t no one else will. Without the great weight of established corporate monoliths on the doorstep they are free to ‘have a go’, to see what can be achieved, to break new ground or stir it up. It happens in music, in theatre, literature and most definitely in the visual arts.

As a result, the visual culture of Western Australia documents a local response to international and national issues that, by its very presence, not only contributes to the larger history of Australian visual culture, but also offers a distinctive perspective to that larger narrative. For Aboriginal artists it is often a process of strengthening culture through reflection and reimagination, for non-Aboriginal artists it can be a mechanism for establishing a sense of belonging, and both groups are now connected internationally through digital networks. This connectedness provides both camaraderie and also a sense of liberation and independence. Out west has a deserved reputation as a hedonistic environment, but it is also harsh, unique and biodiverse. The extraordinary landscape and ecology demands a response and artists find ways to inflect received knowledge with their experiences of living here.

BOTH HISTORICAL AND contemporary visual art practice has focused on developments in or from the centre, ignoring the ways in which artists on the periphery, often on the western edge – Los Angeles, Seattle, Perth – respond to these ideas and generate new meanings from their knowledge of their local environment. This is especially true for Aboriginal artists for whom this place is the ‘centre’, and hence their response to external ideas reflects and refracts that embeddedness.

For non-Aboriginal artists the questions proliferate. Does distance from the centres of world art and national hubs of creative practice generate a vibrant regional identity? Has liberation from the centre led to a different art culture and to alternative forms of practice? Are artists’ practices on the western edge of differing continents comparable and resonant? Is the western

edge the frontier or an isolated outpost? Can great art be made here? Is there any better place to make art that is responsive to new ideas and big issues, but with a unique accent?

These were the questions that fuelled discussions when my colleagues and I returned to Perth after the obligatory sojourn in England. In 1973, I had left Western Australia – for good! Art was elsewhere, not here, and despite some inspirational figures like Howard Taylor and Guy Grey-Smith and irrepressible innovators like Miriam Stannage, the lure of swinging London hooked me and I grabbed it.

Two years later with an unfinished thesis in my bag I was back, defeated by the cold, the damp and perpetual drizzle but re-energised by the vibrancy of an art scene that began in art schools with seductive names like Chelsea, Hornsey and Saint Martins and morphed into exciting and challenging Arts Lab-style spaces across the country and the ICA in London. This energy swept up to the high-end galleries of Cork, Albemarle and New Bond Streets, and museums like the Tate and the National Gallery, but it was those rough edges at the Birmingham Arts Lab and the ICA that were uniquely intoxicating. The question for me was could they be replicated in Perth, on the western edge, so far away? Indeed, was there something unique about Western Australia that could add to this heady mix of ideas and practice?

Just after I arrived back in Perth, the intrepid gallerist Rie Heymans announced that she was selling the Old Fire Station Gallery and moving to the position of curator at The University of Western Australia. My immediate response was to see whether it was possible to raise the money to buy into the gallery myself, and begin to implement strategies to invigorate local practice and celebrate the work of local artists. I tried desperately to pull together enough friends with money to support this lunacy. Failure was inevitable and swift, but Rie put me in touch with other young artists with similar ambitions and we met to discuss how we might implement change in what seemed like an increasingly stultifying environment for the arts in Western Australia.

Mark Grey-Smith had returned from Chelsea School of Art a few months earlier than me and immediately began to generate support for a new artist-run gallery that would shake-up the conservative art scene in Perth. The PRAXIS gallery/club house was located in Murray Mews, a run-down

laneway that snaked through a derelict part of town, then a lost sector of the city trapped behind the polite facades of infrequently visited city stores. It was most definitely at the wrong end of town, and while His Majesty's Theatre was just around the corner, it was an area rarely traversed in daylight hours by the passing shoppers patronising Foy & Gibson, Boans, Bairds and Aherns. In that space PRAXIS organised lectures, including one by visiting American theorist Lucy Lippard, and exhibitions that drew together an entirely different crowd of people from those usually found at Sunday afternoon openings at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Old Fire Station or Skinner Galleries.

PRAXIS WAS A direct outcome of the optimism generated by Whitlam's election slogan: It's Time. It seemed possible to propose radical new alternatives and to expect they would succeed. In Perth there was an additional urgency fuelled by a shared sense of dislocation, isolation and stuff-you larrikinism. Not surprisingly then, a major feature of the cultural landscape in late 1975 was the sacking of the Whitlam government, which acted like a pin in the balloon of our self-confidence. After all, this was the government that bought Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* and had engineered our withdrawal from Vietnam, which had made us proud to be Australian. Now we were returned to Liberal rule, to the boring predictability of Malcolm Fraser, who refused permission for the Australian National Gallery to buy George Braque's *Grand Nu*. It was incredibly deflating, and we all felt it deeply. By the end of the year PRAXIS was languishing too, and although it would be foolish to place the entire blame on the changing political climate, it was certainly true that our sense of hope had been punctured.

Despite concerns about the likelihood of moral corruption if the group accepted money from an external body, expressed with unregulated vehemence by Mark Grey-Smith, it was finally agreed to seek out additional funding from the Perth City Council. With a base funding and a program of exhibitions planned around a single conceptual idea, to which individuals would contribute, the first year of the newly restructured PRAXIS looked very bright.

The inaugural event was organised by Geoff Jones in May 1976. *Life Class* was intended to provoke a reaction from the media, and with the help of

committee member Kim Humphries' connections through the ABC it did just that. Of course, a pair of naked models sitting like statues is the stuff of every life-drawing class, but the shock value of a young naked man and woman presenting themselves unprotected to the gaze of others was incendiary to the general community. Despite the row of young art students shown drawing the two handsome German models, the coverage on the ABC's current affairs program *This Day Tonight* was all we had hoped for.

With one event, PRAXIS was launched into the local community as an organisation at the dangerous edge of outrage and subversion. It was laughable, but it was effective, and the results in terms of funding and support were palpable. The exhibitions that followed were more intelligent and considered, though much less inflammatory, which certainly disappointed many of those who clambered up the narrow stairs with high expectations of titillation and scandal. *The Light Show* was followed by *The Head Show*, *The First Picture Show*, *The Environment Shows I, II & III* and *The Found Object Show*, which drew an enthusiastic review, 'Finders still keepers' by Patrick Hutchings in the *Australian* on 25 June 1976:

Happenings don't in Perth, and conceptual art is rarely conceived outside the loft of PRAXIS, the local young artist's co-operative. Most PRAXIS exhibitions are group affairs, and a degree of anonymity, even, is sought but not always achieved. Ted Snell poises his sets of objects between the theoretical extremes; Theo Koning presents with an authority that makes the fall of objects look as serendipitous as their finding; Debbie Cain presents objects in a way that carefully stresses that they are single things and no more. Subject and object meet, pointedly, in 'salvaging'. For anyone's bit of picked-up and treasured junk, melted bottle, rusted mincer, attaché case of textile scraps, we can ask, as the whole PRAXIS show does: *What's it to you?*

There was certainly a hint of *what's it to you?* about PRAXIS; it presented an alternative to what was seen as the safe and predictable commercial gallery scene and the stuffy, traditionalist and ultra-conservative State Gallery. *The Ego Show* was an affront both artistically and conceptually. It

was a purposeful statement about identity and reflected the self-confidence of emerging artists no longer prepared to accept the status quo. The quintessential expression of that self-confidence was the final work, completed just minutes before the show opened. A young artist from Claremont School of Art named Mary Moore walked into the gallery and, spying an empty wall, asked if she could be in the exhibition. Following a short exchange, she rolled up her sleeves, dipped a huge brush in black paint and simply wrote her name in huge letters across its entire length. It was fantastic, extraordinary and succinct, brilliantly clever and absolutely intuitive. It was a PRAXIS gesture par excellence, a raised index finger, a confident gesture of belonging and a reaffirmation of the power of art to provoke, inform and challenge. She was remarkable then and even more so now. We married in 1982.

Then, just when everything seemed to be coming together, a bombshell! The lease on the gallery premises was not renewed and PRAXIS was left without a home. The city was finally encroaching on the ‘bad end of town’ and the run-down back lanes and side streets of the area were well on their way to their present status as highly desirable real estate. Always resilient, the next phase of PRAXIS evolved with Brian Blanchflower and myself holding the company seal. PRAXIS had become an incorporated body, which enabled the group to seek and receive funds from government agencies. This new status enabled other artists to run programs under the PRAXIS banner and for members of the group to present their projects. It then moved to Fremantle and gradually transformed into the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), taking up residence in the Old Perth Boys School in James Street under the direction of Noel Sheridan in 1989.

ALTHOUGH HARDLY A blip on the national consciousness – and only acknowledged cursorily in the *Australian* and *Art & Australia* – PRAXIS achieved its goal of energising a younger generation of artists by challenging them to make art that was relevant to this place while intently aware of international concerns. Since PRAXIS there have been many other artist-run initiatives (ARIs), all of which have reflected that same larrikin spirit and pugnacious insistence on changing the game plan. If not acknowledged locally or nationally, then they are determined to do it anyway and look to new audiences

– elsewhere! Some of these ARIs are still around; others had shorter bursts of activity. Some were large, others a converted garage, but all wanted to have an impact by encouraging local practice, nurturing local artists and confronting a community that stalwartly ignored them and their activities. They include Gotham Studios, 6A.N.I.C.A. Gallery and Studios, Jacksue Gallery, Verge Gallery, Spiral Studios, The Terminal, Kurb, Venn, Anthony Riding, OK, the Museum of Natural Mystery, Galleria and, recently, Moana Project Space, whose mission sums up the spirit and vision of PRAXIS and all those they succeeded, to create what Kate Mullen and Dale Buckley described in an email to me on 30 April 2014 as an ‘independent art space dedicated to presenting experimental and diverse practices to a consistent and critical degree’.

In the face of the closure of many of Perth’s established commercial art galleries, Kate Mullen and Dale Buckley grasped the opportunity presented by the Moana Chambers redevelopment project in the Hay Street Mall in Perth city to fill a gap in the local arts infrastructure. Several innovative ARIs have been established following those closures, and Moana Project Space needed to assert a point of difference, so they created, in their own words, ‘a platform for collaborative curatorial and experimental projects, somewhere between an artist-run, not-for-profit project space and a small institution with a dedicated focus on curation and inter-disciplinary, inter-state collaboration’. As a result, Moana is as much a laboratory for curatorial experimentation as it is a hothouse for nurturing new work and bringing together artists, curators and collectors. There are evident similarities between PRAXIS and Moana. As well as the basic premise that spawned them, they both chose old buildings in the city centre reached via a flight of stairs and patrolled by the artists whose work is on show. There is also a similar sense of optimism and urgency fuelled by dislocation and invisibility.

Like their predecessors, the current generation of emerging Western Australian artists showing at Moana, Paper Mountain and other local ARIs is energised by living on the west coast. Abdul Abdullah, Anna Richardson, Casey Ayres, Nathan Beard, Tom Dudley, David Brophy, Anna Dunnill, Teelah George and so many more are not oblivious to the art scenes of Sydney and Melbourne, but they are keenly aware of what is happening in Berlin, London, New York, Shanghai and Hong Kong – and more attracted to visit

and to engage there. Hopefully, they will achieve the success they deserve both locally and internationally, and in the future when Australian-based critics and curators are interrogating the contemporary visual arts nationally, their achievements will be acknowledged as part of a comprehensive, informed and unblinkered version of Australian art history

Ted Snell AM, CitWA was born in Geraldton. He is currently Winthrop professor and director of the cultural precinct at The University of Western Australia. Over the past two decades he has contributed to the national arts agenda as chair of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools, Artbank and Asialink Visual Arts Advisory Committee.

The rise of a sustainable city

Much more than the Wild West

Peter Newman

PERTH IS NOT high in the national consciousness, although its growth has sparked some interest. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics projections about its population growth are remarkable – three million by the early 2020s, passing Brisbane later that decade, five million by 2050, bigger than Sydney now: the prospect of becoming Australia’s second ‘global city’ megalopolis beckons.

It is not hard to deconstruct these projections, and they may be overstated. Perth has always grown in fits and starts depending on the mining industry. But in-between the spurts it continues to grow, because people find interesting things to do and a good place to live. So Perth will keep growing at a fair clip.

On *The Gruen Transfer* a few years ago, the ABC’s chosen marketing gurus were asked to sell the idea of a ‘bogan-proof fence stopping Western Australians from crossing to the east’. I was amazed by how seriously they took it. The view from across the Nullarbor is that Perth is a ‘Wild West’ town with few of the features of a cultivated and civilised society. There is some truth in this, as our treatment of the Noongar would indicate, and we have little of the iconic architecture or memorable townscapes of the European ideal.

But this is a city with a very strong civil society, especially in environment and planning. I study cities around the world and find that idealism about environment and planning is the basis of a strong city, essential to any potentially sustainable future. From my professional point of view, I know that self-satisfied cities are in trouble. The best are full of people who are dissatisfied with what their cities are doing about the future, and who set up organisations to change this.

Perth is much more than a relic of the Wild West, its civic sensibilities are strong and it is setting the pace towards building a sustainable future. The American–Pacific states threw off their Wild West past to become the epicentre of sustainability, innovation and cool, confounding preconceptions. Perhaps the analogy can be applied here. Maybe the better challenge for *The Gruen Transfer* would be to sell the sustainability lessons that have been learned in the Indian Ocean state.

THE ‘WILD WEST’ should not care for its environment – it should just exploit its forests. But that is not our long-term or recent history. People noticed the amazing wildflowers very early on, and now we know that the south-west corner of Australia is one of the world’s biodiversity hot spots. Preserving bushland has had a strong scientific and popular base.

The early settlers could find no suitable agricultural land in the sandy soils of the Swan Coastal Plain, nor was there much on the adjacent Darling Scarp with its jarrah forest and ancient, eroded soils. But there were good soils inland, so the great Wheatbelt was created and some of the most biodiverse countryside in the world was used to produce grain. As the population grew and water became the most limiting resource, jarrah forests were set aside for water catchment and the Swan Coastal Plain groundwater systems for water supply. Much bushland was saved by these decisions, and is now mostly preserved in perpetuity.

Further south, however, both jarrah and karri were easy prey for export and the local market. The forest campaigns began early, as people realised how special these forests were, but it was not until the 1960s that their conservation campaign really got going. The civil society movements generated over the next forty years became more and more sophisticated, and began to eat into the political landscape. Finally, in the 2001 election, ‘stopping the logging of old growth forests’ became the mantra of the ALP government, after much internal lobbying and a famous campaign involving Mick Malthouse (the coach of the West Coast Eagles AFL team), fashion queen Liz Davenport, and other famous public figures including the artist Robert Juniper. It was the time of the ‘men in suits’ protests, where protesters gathered outside the premier’s office and jammed the switchboard with mobile calls.

Geoff Gallop won the election. Polls showed that not only were all his Australian Labor Party supporters wanting to set aside these forests, but 92

per cent of Liberal voters as well. Never before had there been such a complete whitewash of the opposing forces – led by captains of industry including Michael Chaney, the former CEO of Wesfarmers. WA was the first state to make such a decision; it was not a ‘Wild West’ decision.

DURING THE 1990s, alarming predictions were made that Perth would have to be abandoned in the near future because its water supplies were not sustainable. All the climate change models demonstrate a drying climate in the South West, and this has been observable during more than forty years of reduced rainfall. Dams and groundwater were never going to be enough, and the Water Corporation decided well before climate change became a political football that the predictions were real. In 2001, a crisis emerged when it did not rain. Apart from immediate conservation measures, the long-term solution was thought to lie in a large deep aquifer called the Yarragadee in the South West. But civil society objected: stressing a natural system in a drying climate was not sustainable. The result was a decision to build wind-powered desalination.

In the eastern states, desalination became a dirty word for wasted public expenditure: the plants built at the end of the last big drought have hardly been used. Not in Perth. Over half of the water supply comes from the Indian Ocean, and soon recycled, treated sewage will recharge depleted aquifers. Perth is now climate-proofed – the first Australian city to successfully introduce wind-powered desalination. A remarkable turnaround from the earlier dire predictions.

This journey began when CSIRO scientists and others demonstrated that reduced rainfall was likely to be a permanent reality. People in Perth and the South West were highly sensitive to the issue, and pushed the politics of resilience planning to the limit by saying an emphatic *no* to using the Yarragadee aquifer as the next major water source. Desalination and recycling of sewage were the only real options, and despite being the first city to attempt it, the politicians moved quickly to affirm desalination and get it into the water supply system. They have been proved right.

As the Pacific Ocean moves into another El Niño drought cycle, the eastern seaboard cities will move to use the mothballed desalination plants that were built just as it started raining again. Perhaps the politicians and their technical advisors who thought it was a good idea to buy them will finally

be recognised for their resilience planning, just as they are in Perth. Being a leader in climate adaptation is definitely not ‘Wild West’.

PERTH TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago had virtually no railway system. Only seven million passengers a year trundled along in the old diesel trains. The new suburbs to the north and south had no prospect of good quality public transit.

Now, there are more than seventy million passengers a year travelling on fast, quality railways to the north and south. Perth’s public transport has become the envy of other Australian cities. It needs to double this again, but this is not the Wild West when it comes to public transport.

Perth is a very beautiful city, but it has always been a car-based city. The processes that began to reverse this, and build railways instead of freeways, were not the result of public-sector plans – they were shaped by civil society action, through the political system. The almost two hundred kilometres of modern electric rail built since 1990 would not have happened if the public sector had had its way.

The railway to Fremantle was closed in 1979 after a government report claimed Perth would never need a rail system. A four-year grassroots campaign resulted in the removal of a government, and a period of rebuilding. Extending the rail into new areas was the subject of at least four elections, and at each one the same public-sector advice suggested that car-based suburbs would never work with a rail system. The public disagreed, and hence fast rail was introduced into the long northern and southern corridors with spectacular patronage results. The ‘Perth model’ of building rail into car and bus-only suburbs is now being adopted in many cities around the world, including all the main cities on the east coast. It was not a Wild West culture that did that.

Perth has had a long history of idealistic planning since early days, from John Septimus Roe through to Gordon Stephenson. Professor Stephenson, Britain’s most eminent planner, drew up a plan in the late 1950s that created a long-term land use, infrastructure and open-space strategy girded by a statutory process with real legislative teeth. It also produced a land tax-based fund, hypothecated to providing regional infrastructure reserves and nature reserves.

The planning system in Perth has had bipartisan support now for more than sixty years. No regional decisions can be made without going through

the Planning Commission with representatives from across government and all the local government corridors and regions. One of the great achievements of the planning system is that 90 per cent of the land along the river and the coast was acquired. It has enabled reclamation of this priceless amenity for public use.

Perth's main planning problems are due to car-dependent urban sprawl. The Stephenson Plan was created when car ownership and use were rising dramatically, so building a city to accommodate this seemed to make sense. Cities are shaped by their dominant transport mode, as housing and jobs cluster around the means of transport. Thus, we have central cities of Perth and Fremantle (the old walking city fabric) and the traditional railway suburban corridors (the transit city fabric from the 1880s to 1950s) that are rather thin, as they did not grow in the periods of intensive commitment to these modes like Melbourne and Sydney, and most European cities. Perth's growth has mostly been in the automobile city period from the 1950s on. We did it well. Perth, Brisbane and the Gold Coast are the most American of cities: in Perth, this is due to the planning system.

Each boom has fed into further growth of the car-dependent suburbs. For those seeking a safe and easy suburban lifestyle, Perth has everything. But the city now stretches for one hundred and twenty kilometres along the coast; predictions for 2050 suggest the sprawl will extend more than 270 kilometres from Myalup to Lancelin. The resulting lifestyle does not suit everyone. Indeed, the latest boom lured a clutch of young professionals west, eager to take up some of the opportunities that growth provides. They were not just seeking the delights of suburbia, but wanted an urban lifestyle with all the benefits of being able to walk, cycle or take the train to work, with nearby bars and entertainment precincts, top-end restaurants and interesting places to stroll. They brought a taste for the urban from Melbourne and Sydney, New York, London and Shanghai.

And Perth has begun to provide it. Car use per capita has peaked, and the city has witnessed a dramatic growth in rail and cycling. And those thin bones of the walking city in Perth have been strengthened to create a much more interesting city centre. The streets are now filled with pedestrians day and night, footpaths host coffee shops and bars spilling out in ways that were never imagined, even a decade ago. Young immigrants of the iron ore boom have given Perth a new urbanity.

THE NEXT PHASE of filling in centres across the inner and middle suburbs has been planned, and stresses the need for more redevelopment and less sprawl. But it is still tentative and most local governments are not so keen. At Curtin University we have developed a *Plan for Perth*, which suggests the next thirty years of urban growth should be filling in the gaps rather than sprawling. The development will need new rail extensions and a series of twenty to thirty cities within already existing suburbs. Such centres would need European densities and should also be demonstrations of green infrastructure and design, following the leadership of developments like Josh's House (joshshouse.com.au). It's a plan to save money, petrol, greenhouse emissions and bushland – but will it happen?

'Perth people don't like living in flats' has always been the cry, and this remains a feature of the city's culture. But now, a large and young group seek dense, green urbanism and want to live in such centres. A more sustainable urban form beckons if we can overcome the fear of density. As the processes of planning are based on community engagement and the NIMBY (not in my back yard) reactions of local groups, convincing people of the benefits of the new green urbanist market is a challenge.

It is feasible to imagine Perth being a far more interesting, lively and sustainable city. Not a bogan hang out, but the model of a sustainable future. Civil society has demonstrated how this can be done in relation to the environment and transport – the challenge is to have the same impact on the way we live. Planning for city centres rather than endless sprawl is the next step. Perth can become a sustainable, polycentric city, and a model for the twenty-first century.

Cities are always much more complex than their popular perceptions. But as populations grow, planning is more important than ever. It is worth remembering the lessons of the recent past: we saved the forests, provided a sustainable water supply and built a rail system. I was surprised that they actually happened, but not that they worked. I hope I will be surprised again, and Perth becomes an urban centre of sustainability.

Peter Newman AO is the professor of sustainability at Curtin University and director of CUSP, which has eighty PhD students examining sustainability policy. Over forty years he has written fifteen books and 280 refereed papers, and helped establish academic and policy thinking about sustainable cities. He has also been an activist and worked in government at local, state and national level, as well as being on a number of international bodies including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

MEMOIR

Monsters

The swimming speed of sharks, and other lessons

Samuel Carmody

We're not just afraid of predators, we're transfixed by them, prone to weave stories and fables and chatter endlessly about them, because fascination creates preparedness, and preparedness, survival. In a deeply tribal sense, we love our monsters.

EO Wilson

MY OLDER BROTHER took an interest in the sea first, and, as with everything he did, I followed close behind. By the time he was ten years old, surfing and fishing and diving had become obsessions. He was devout; I was cautious. But in his gravitational pull I ended up spending many of my childhood days down the port beach in front of our house in Geraldton, on the central rural coast of Western Australia. Fishing for herring from the edge of the reef. Spearing for the skippy and sweetlip that hid in the dusty green shallows, the water warm with the Leeuwin Current that flowed south from Indonesia.

If an interest in the ocean can be hereditary then the link would be our grandmother. Freda Vines lived alone in a war-service home in the Perth coastal suburb of Marmion. On school holidays our family often made the five-hour drive south of Geraldton to stay with Freda, setting up camp in the ethereal clutter of her home. Amid the loose papers and paintings and overstuffed bookshelves were strange, exotic things. A death notification from the Royal Australian Air Force dated 5 February 1945. Spears and boomerangs recovered from the Cape Range in the north-west of the state, which hung on a living room wall. In a cupboard of coats and boots I found a .22-calibre Lithgow rifle and, in breathless moments alone, I felt the weight of a gun in my hands.

I had grown up knowing my grandmother was a novelist, historian and a painter, and even at seven I had her pegged as an eccentric. Freda had over-large reading glasses and she wore her waist-length grey hair swept up in a gigantic beehive. She liked lipstick and heavy jewellery, but she wasn't anything like other old women I knew. I'd once overheard a distant relative whisper that my grandmother wasn't 'houseproud' in a way that suggested something truly wicked, though I didn't know what it meant. I did know Freda preferred ordering pizza to cooking dinner. She drank beer and sherry and, when we were at hand, had her grandchildren fix her strong rum and cokes.

In her old age Freda walked with a stoop and only seemed able to comfortably look someone square in the face when she sat down, and would smile when she locked eyes on you. I remember her spending long summer afternoons on those school holidays sat at the kitchen table, a drink sweating in front of her, staring out the sea-facing windows.

IN PERTH MY brother and I continued our daily practice, indifferent to the sprawling city to the east, preferring to explore the limestone coves and beaches down the street from Freda's house. The sea there was foreign to the one we had grown up with in Geraldton. We knew it was the same Indian Ocean, of course, but the water was a darker, deeper blue, and even in the summer months it kept its chill, the inshore reefs flushed by the nutrient-rich current reaching up out of the Southern Ocean. I became more circumspect than usual on those beaches. Despite the mansions peering over the busy water and the constant hum of shark-spotter planes and rescue choppers patrolling above, and despite the visual boundary of the surf-fringed outer reefs and the island standing guard beyond them, the city beaches always felt exposed, as if a window had been left open.

Freda noticed our prepubescent seafaring and responded to it in a way that these days might be condemned as irresponsible. One day my brother and I returned from the beach, and were given a book titled *Sharks: Silent Hunters of the Deep* (Reader's Digest, 1987). I had never seen a book like it. It was a real book, a book for grown-ups, but it was ours. Beyond its innocent cover – the side-profile of a harmless grey nurse shark – were stories and images our

parents would not have permitted had they known, and we kept its content secret. We were drawn to that book in a way we suspected was dangerous, always wanting to look as much as wanting to look away. *Silent Hunters of the Deep* was in some ways my first experience of addiction and, through the book's stories, my first true encounter with death. I developed an encyclopedic knowledge of shark attacks that had taken place decades before I was born. Like the 1967 attack several hundred metres off the remote Western Australian township of Jurien Bay. How twenty-four-year-old spearfisherman Bob Bartle was separated in two by a great white shark in front of his friend Lee Warner, and how Warner, after shooting his own spear at the circling shark, had to retrieve the gun floating near Bartle's upper half to arm himself for the long swim to shore. Or the 1923 attack on thirteen-year-old Charles Robinson, killed while bathing near the Scotch College boatshed in the Swan River. I learnt them all, and I would re-read each terrible account until I could almost recite them verbatim, revisiting them like biblical passages.

Silent Hunters of the Deep had pictures, too, but there was no *Finding Nemo*-style anthropomorphism. I remember the photograph of a South Australian diver lying flat out on the deck of a boat, his right leg gone, blood fanning out from the stump across the timber boards like the jet stream from a rocket. There were photographs taken in ambulances and operating theatres, gloved hands holding torn limbs under surgical lamps. Shredded tissue over spoilt hospital linen.

And every birthday or Christmas we would be gifted a new book about sharks, each one surpassing the one before it for the visceral hit it provided. One book contained a section of glossed pages preceded by a warning, so graphic were the coronial photographs within. I can only imagine Freda in a bookstore, flicking through pages, the grim amusement as she ensured they contained the adequate gore.

My brother and I took the books home to Geraldton and dutifully studied each one, over and over, imbibing the tales and photographs and the zoological information that would never be forgotten. Like how a fully motivated, two-tonne adult great white shark could reach speeds of over thirty kilometres an hour, covering the final twenty metres between itself and its target in less than two seconds. And how, water depth permitting,

their preferred attack trajectory was vertical, striking from underneath the eyeline of its prey.

I soon had trouble putting my head underwater. I would never go in the backyard pool on my own. My only memory of vacation swimming lessons was the five-metre white pointer that stalked the deep end of the Geraldton aquatic centre.

Even now, when I am in the sea, I find myself circled by the repeated visions of an attack in progress. The huge shifting of ocean and then the sudden heaviness on my legs. I see the tumbling red clouds in the water around me. I have surfed for two decades and though I have never once seen a shark, I am never without them. The ocean I live with is an ocean of monsters, vivid, fully formed. I am almost resigned to it now. I suspect this is how it always will be.

I don't write of this to show how my grandmother gave me a mental illness. It is clear that is, by some definition, what has happened. I wanted to propose a question: why? Why did she cast monsters into an ocean that I loved, an ocean *she* loved? What was the lesson or the instruction?

BECAUSE THAT IS what a monster is. An instruction. The Latin root of monster, *mon re*, means not only to warn but also to remind and advise. To instruct.

Perhaps the earliest story that has a monster of the sea at its heart is the Greek myth of Andromeda, the daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, king and queen of Aethiopia. The boastful queen Cassiopeia enraged Poseidon, god of the sea, when she claimed her daughter Andromeda was more beautiful even than the Nereids, the sea nymphs. In vengeance, Poseidon sent Cetus – the Greek 'Ketos' meaning large fish or sea monster – to stalk the African coastline. Cetus would only be placated by the sacrifice of Andromeda. Cepheus chained his daughter to a rock in the sea but she was rescued by Perseus, who slayed the leviathan and married Andromeda.

References to Leviathan are littered, too, throughout the Old Testament – most popularly in the tale of the prophet Jonah, who spent three days in the gullet of a 'great fish'. Israeli biblical-zoologist Menahem Dor has written about the possibility of the original Hebrew given to the sea monster –

dag gadol – having been inspired by great white sharks, believed to have inhabited the Mediterranean at the time. The account of Leviathan in the Book of Job has all the fevered poetry of Melville: ‘On earth there is nothing like him, which is made without fear.’

Like the eternal, inscrutable Leviathan of the Bible, great white sharks stalk the Western Australian literary imagination. In Robert Drewe’s short story collection *The Bodysurfers* (Penguin, 1983), a character imagines sharks everywhere: ‘In every kelp patch, in the lip of every breaker, I sense a shark. Every shadow and submerged rock becomes one; the thin plume of spray in the edge of my vision is scant warning of its final lunge.’

On the page, sharks are the witnesses of human fears and failures. The deadpan escorts into psychic uncertainty. And when sharks surface, showing their physical selves, they do so in concert with a protagonist’s deepest troubles. With its primordial gaze alone, a shark can tear a character open, unravelling their human stitching.

Barney, the fourteen-foot great white shark who patrols the bildungsroman of Tim Winton’s novel *Breath* (Penguin, 2009), silently watches as the book’s young characters, Pikelet and Loonie, tumble into the perils of adulthood:

Barney surfaced like a sub in the channel, rolled over beside Loonie
and fixed him with one terrible, black eye before sliding away again.
That eye, said Loonie, was like a fuckin hole in the universe.

LIFE ON AUSTRALIA’S south-west coast is a life lived in the company of sharks. The months from November to March repeat a cycle of the arrival of great white sharks followed by the ritual horror they inspire, captured here in John Kinsella’s 2004 poem, *Perth*:

the Great White comes in close to the shore,
tracking seals and the human swimmer
on the surface agitates the water
in much the same way; government
must be seen to be in control

so increases air and sea patrols,
a network TV station lends its chopper,
fishermen hunt like sentinels

In 1997, fifty-one-year-old lawyer and ex-VFL hero Brian Sierakowski was attacked by a five-metre great white shark while paddling a double surf ski with friend Barney Hanrahan off Cottesloe Beach. The men were thrown from the ski, and Sierakowski hit over the nose by an errant tail, but the men survived. The story gained unprecedented media attention and aerial patrols were increased. Shark-spotter planes became a daily fixture of Perth summer life.

The death of businessman Ken Crew in 2000, fatally bitten in knee-deep water beneath the Cottesloe Beach mansions and restaurants, signalled a distinct elevation in the scale of media reporting on shark attacks in Western Australia. It wasn't a surfer 'up the coast' or an abalone fisherman making his risky living on a remote southern ocean shelf. A great white shark had struck at the heart of the establishment.

And they kept coming back, every year, harassing the central Perth coast like Poseidon's Cetus. Five fatal great white shark attacks in Western Australia – in the span of ten months from June 2011 – marked the tipping point, including the 2012 disappearance of sixty-four-year-old CEO Bryn Martin, last seen swimming alone two hundred metres off Cottesloe Beach. Later that year, on 12 September, Western Australian Premier and Cottesloe resident Colin Barnett announced a \$1 million drum line trial designed to kill large sharks. Premier Barnett hit the front page of the *West Australian* holding a thirty-six-centimetre stainless steel shark hook, recast as Captain Ahab, desperate to vanquish the eternal leviathan. Over the following summer, one hundred and seventy-two sharks were killed, either drowning on the lines or shot if found still alive. Fifty tiger sharks were shot, their carcasses dumped in deeper water. But no great white sharks were caught. In September 2014, following numerous protests and global criticism from the marine science community, the Environmental Protection Authority recommended against future implementation of the drum line program, citing 'too much uncertainty in the available information and evidence about the south-western white shark population'. Reluctantly, Premier Barnett abandoned the policy.

Peter Benchley, the author of *Jaws* (Doubleday, 1974), wrote of the ‘paradox inherent in our reckless assault on sharks’. In recent times Benchley has spoken and written mournfully of his first novel that had him, in his own words, ‘catapulted to two-bit celebrity’, and great white sharks vulnerable to extinction. He wrote: ‘As the bizarre overreaction to *Jaws* demonstrated, while we may fear sharks and profess to hate them, we are also thrilled by them.’ Benchley references here the oft-quoted writing of biologist EO Wilson: ‘We’re not just afraid of predators, we’re transfixed by them, prone to weave stories and fables and chatter endlessly about them, because fascination creates preparedness, and preparedness, survival. In a deeply tribal sense, we love our monsters.’

Was that the lesson my grandmother was trying to teach us? Was it preparation, an education in survival?

FREDA DIED BEFORE I could ask her myself. It was 7 July 2000. I was fifteen. The whole family was there, in that cluttered house. By then we were living in Perth, and had moved in with Freda when a bad fall had left her too frail to manage alone. My brother and I slept in the room at the end of the hall that had once belonged to my father and uncle. I remember the cold on my face as I lay in my bed. A storm was up outside. I remember that my father came in and told us to follow him. We sat around Freda’s bedroom, the room cluttered with books and paint canvasses, and looked at her, her face strange without the glasses in place, her long grey hair looped under her head.

My brother and I walked to the beach at the end of her street when the funeral directors arrived. Our surfboards were heavy, with the westerly against them. I remember how low and grim the sky was, how the water was cloudy with sediment. My brother and I bobbed around in the roiling sea without words.

In the week following there were the expected rituals, retelling stories and sifting through keepsakes and writings. The grandchildren learnt about the death notification Freda had received from the Royal Australian Air Force. Her first husband, Ted, had been a navigator in a Lockheed Ventura bomber that crashed in the Gulf of Carpentaria on the 27 January 1945. Her

first book, *The Maker of Music: The Story of the RAAF*, was released as the war came to an end. She had been twenty-eight, my age now.

In the following decades she published numerous books. Her short fiction appeared regularly in *The Women's Weekly* and she wrote radio plays for the BBC. But that was a career I would only learn to understand years later, when I was trying to begin a writing career of my own. As grandchildren we had known her as a storyteller, but just for the tales she had told us when we were alone with her, and in the days after she died we shared each one, revelling in the irreverent darkness of them. One of these was a sort of ghost story that she told many times and that surprised people due to the enthusiasm with which she would tell it, and for the fact she might tell it at all. As the story goes, and as all of her grandchildren could recite, years after Ted's death and the conclusion of the war Freda was on a date, walking in Perth's Kings Park, when she looked away from the path and saw Ted, her husband, glaring out at them from the banksia woodland, apparently displeased. Her startled date saw the man too, but it was Freda who recognised who it was. It was a chilling story. I often dreamed of that spurned soldier, the angry ghost in the shadows of the jarrah and marri trees. Her cheery moral of the story – that the spectre of Ted had warned her out of the arms of her date and into those of my grandfather, Joseph – did little to make me sleep better.

My older sister remembers another story Grandma told her about the disappearance of the family cat, Rusty, when my father was still only a small child. The cat had been badly injured fighting with neighbourhood moggies and was weak with infection. After dinner one night, when my father and uncle had been put to bed, Joseph had taken Rusty out into the large yard behind the shed, away from the house. He fed the cat its favourite kangaroo meat, and once it had finished eating blasted it in the head with a .22-calibre Lithgow rifle. My grandfather had been distraught over the ordeal, Freda reported. That story stayed with me, too. Joseph, the World War II veteran, crying in the backyard, alone in the dim of evening with his children's wounded cat. It made me think about the weight of secrets and the toll of violence carried by a generation.

And there was 'the Braeside tragedy', the story of Freda's great-uncle, Dr Edward Vines, who was speared through the heart in 1899 by tribesmen

on the remote Braeside station in the north-west Pilbara desert. Dr Vines had been attending the pregnant wife of the stationmaster, Mr Hodgson, when they were attacked. It had been payback, and unfortunate timing for the doctor. The stationmaster, as it turned out, was notorious for his violence and had been suspected of 'interfering' with his workers. Mr Hodgson survived his injuries and later fled the Pilbara while six tribesmen, some of whom are believed not to have been in the Pilbara at the time of the attack, were hanged.

Freda told her grandchildren things other adults would never trust to a child. And we were disciples of her stories, spellbound by their even-handed melancholy, the way they delivered the darkness within them without agenda or simple moralising.

I WOULD NEVER have known when I was fifteen, watching her still body in the winter cold, the influence my grandmother would have on me. I was too flaky and too easily distracted to see myself in her. I often wonder about the conversations we might have on writing if she were still alive. I rehearse the questions I would ask. And I would give anything to quiz her on why she bought those books about great white sharks, on exactly what the lesson was.

Because of Freda I can tell you that a great white shark has forty-eight exposed teeth, two hundred and fifty more set back in its mouth, hidden by tissue, like knives sheathed. I can tell you that a single committed bite can cleave a person clean in two, that a hungry shark can easily consume a person whole.

And it is because of Freda I've developed a particular radar for horror. When I read a newspaper I find myself scanning it as I might the dark water beyond the sandbank. I search the internet with the same grim fascination with which I pored over those books about sharks, drawn towards stories and images – so often in high definition – that shake the psyche and that can never be erased, wanting to look just that bit more than wanting to look away.

Everywhere I look for monsters, and everywhere I see them. I see monsters in the world, in my own country and its history. I see monsters in the fears and prejudices of people I know and love, in my own fears and prejudices. I see monsters in the things Australians say and in the things they don't. I see monsters in myself.

And just as I know I wouldn't want an ocean without sharks, I don't wish to know the world without its monsters. More to the point, it is in the places where a reality is disturbed by something below the surface that I have become most interested.

I like to think that was my grandmother's lesson – an artist's lesson. A lesson in being drawn to darkness. Maybe if I could ask her now she would quote Keats on how 'a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul'.

Or maybe she wouldn't quote Keats. Maybe buying books about great white sharks was simply a dark joke, a prank – the terrible, brilliant plotting of a grandmother who spent long afternoons sat at the kitchen table, a drink sweating in front of her, watching the sea.

Samuel Carmody is a writer and musician. His debut novel *The Windy Season* was shortlisted for the 2014 The *Australian/Vogel's* Award. *The Windy Season* will be published by Allen & Unwin in 2015.

Rosemary Longhurst

Deep: Indian Ocean view from the Blue Duck Café, Cottesloe

The sea rolls flat, pleasant and blue under a warm sun. In the distance, ships glide easy toward the horizon. An occasional white-crested ripple breaks the bland surface. Seabirds and swimmers enjoy meeting the friendly edges of the ocean. But further, deeper, who knows what may be broiling and toiling? Above, all is clear: below, all occluded. Hidden currents flow while tides pull and surge in collusion with an invisible moon. In dark waters misted with fine sands, creatures linger amid curling fronds of weed, waiting for the surprise of darting fish. Rocks lurk for unwary mariners. The experienced are prepared for more than they can see.

White sands burn and glare along the shore. Cool waters invite pleasure-seekers to splash and laugh. None venture far, preferring to anchor themselves in the firm footing of packed sand beneath soft wavelets, fearing loss of contact with the safety of everyday earth. Slippery patches of weed waving just under the surface are best avoided.

The depth remains aloof, untested, barely known even to itself. Its mood can change in a moment from light to dark and dark to light, sometimes mixing both in fragile playfulness. Stirring the deep, something moves, slowly, deliberately, clouding the holding waters.

The Blue Duck is an iconic Cottesloe café overlooking the Indian Ocean. In October 1997, Ken Crew, a regular morning swimmer, was killed by a shark only a few metres from the café and very close to the shore.

Rosemary Longhurst taught at UWA, Murdoch and Edith Cowan Universities and directed for the Artrage Festival. Her works include a collection of poems and prose, *The Hope Beast* (self-published), and her recently completed first novel, *The Hamlet Project*.

REPORTAGE

The worm in the bud

Writing about crime

David Whish-Wilson

I'M SITTING IN the climate-controlled archival room at the Battye Library in central Perth, reading through old *Police Gazettes*. With a fifty-year buffer maintained to preserve the dignity of extant convicted criminals, the gazettes begin in 1905 and end in 1964. The journals record job availabilities and relate general policing news, but it's the recording of arrests and accompanying mugshots – pictures of wanted men and missing women and children – that I am interested in.

The photographic record begins in 1905, during the tail end of Perth's first gold boom and a time of great social change in the city and Goldfields. Prior to 1892, when gold was discovered out in the Coolgardie/Kalgoorlie semi-desert in Wongi country, Perth (and indeed Western Australia) had struggled to thrive. Despite the introduction of convict labour in the late 1840s, just as the practice was being phased out 'over east', the population had remained largely static and for the majority, times were hard. This is reflected in the statistic that Perth's general crime rate was said to be seven times greater than in Adelaide and, according to historian Geoffrey Bolton, in one year alone one quarter of Fremantle's male population was locked up for petty crimes, caused by poverty and unemployment. The discovery of WA's mineral wealth and the subsequent gold rush brought opportunity and

a surge in the population, fuelled largely by the arrival of miners and drought-stricken farmers from Victoria and South Australia. The city of Perth, with its population of 48,000, saw half a million new arrivals pass through the city in a matter of a decade. The boom wasn't to last, however, and its benefits didn't reach everyone. The crimes recorded in the gazettes reflect prevailing poverty and social problems associated with alcohol abuse among men and women – vagrancy, drunk and disorderly, resisting arrest, assault and petty theft are common.

Because 1905 was also the year that the WA government introduced the notorious Aborigines Act, which institutionalised the paternalistic and segregationist attitudes towards Aboriginal people that were prevalent at the time and made virtually all Aboriginal subjects wards of the state, 1905 also sees the beginning of crimes related to the Act – for example, the charge levelled against Aboriginal men of 'enticing native girls' away from settlements and missions. The charge sounds sinister, but of course relates mainly to men trying to maintain their relationships with institutionalised partners, without the prior permission of the Chief Protector of Aborigines. It's an enduring tragedy that the effects of the 1905 Act, and the policies of ensuing governments, can still be felt in the social fabric of Western Australia today. It's no simplification to suggest a link between these policies and the statistic that incarceration rates per capita are the highest in the country. While almost half of the prison population consists of Aboriginal inmates, recent analyses suggest that at any given moment one in fourteen Aboriginal males is in custody – the same rate of imprisonment as African-American males in the most disadvantaged areas of the USA.

Disaster struck Western Australia in the form of the Great War, then the Depression. Both of these were to affect Australia as a whole, of course, but in the case of the former not to the extent that they affected Western Australia, which, due to its higher rate of enlistment, suffered a greater number of casualties (51 per cent of the state's eligible male population). From the end of the war and throughout the Depression, the crimes usually associated with poverty increased in prevalence, and a growing number of those charged were returned Australian Imperial Force servicemen. The faces in the mugshots are often gaunt and angry: the eyes are hard and the clothes are grimy and

threadbare. Many of these men would have had grandparents, even parents, who were convicts and of whom many were still alive. The late winding down of the convict period in WA, where transportation continued until 1868, meant that there were men alive well into the 1930s who had been tied to a frame and flogged with the cat-o'-nine-tails and, conversely, men who had tied others to the frame and flogged them. The resulting attitude towards authority is made plain in common statements in the police records, such as 'has a hatred for the police' – evidence of a reflexive antipathy and a tolerance for social crime that has endured, and which partially accounts for the state's considerably higher rates of general incarceration.

The early *Gazette* records also detail a commonplace crime that has become less common, or one might say it has shifted its focus and amplified its effects in the process – the charge of gaining an advantage by false pretences, or of being a 'false pretender', or conman. In the 1920s, this often involved the passing of dud cheques or taking on a fake persona, usually of someone richer and more influential, to trick people into investing or parting with money. These kind of fly-by-night characters appear more in wanted pictures than in the lists of convicted offenders, suggesting that they were either highly mobile or experts at reinventing themselves. There is little sign in the gazettes of convictions for the kind of scams that have plagued boomtown stock markets over the years, including Perth's, although that is perhaps because their targets were originally interstate or foreign investors.

PERTH HAS ALWAYS been, in its isolation and size, a small enough city that a limited number of dynamic people can have a disproportionate effect upon decision-making and certain modes of behaviour. Inevitably, this has been a good thing on occasions, but of course in other areas it has led to ingrained cultures of favours, graft and relationships of undue influence. Writer and publisher Terri-ann White suggested as much in her book *Finding Theodore and Brina* (Fremantle Press, 2001), where she describes 'a tradition in this place, entrenched and well accepted. It starts in 1829 and churns along all of the years. Favours in the tight little system of established business and power. Still as potent as it was with the first families who shared the first schemes and opportunities, and made sure they had a voice in the future.

The tradition works across party political lines, across ideological divides. It transcends politics.’

WA joined the Commonwealth only ten years after it achieved self-government, and it wasn't long before there were calls to secede, primarily because during the Depression it was felt that the 'Hume Highway hegemony' wasn't acting in the state's best interests. Post-federation, the physical isolation that led to a lack of scrutiny from the capital, and the attitude of WA being justified in looking to its own welfare, has traditionally reinforced the idea that certain vested interests might properly exercise their power by keeping up the appearance of a political and business culture that is clean to its core, with a corresponding accent on pragmatic interpretation of laws. This has led to some interesting accommodations over the years, whose effects can be felt today. For example, in the 1920s, during a time when prostitution was officially illegal but unofficially tolerated, the brothels on Roe Street not only survived but thrived, despite being visible from the central Perth train station and a minute's walk from the central police station. During the first five decades of the twentieth century some of Perth's madams were extremely well-known and popular figures. According to Ron Davidson's biography of the 'dirty but clean' *Mirror* newspaper, *Hijinks at the Hotpool* (Fremantle Press, 1996), one such madam – the Frenchwoman Josie de Bray – on one occasion took a poulterer to court for setting up shop next to 'Josie's Bungalow', the largest and best appointed of the line of brothels on Roe Street. According to de Bray, the sound of chickens being beheaded 'tended to cool the ardour' of her clients. Despite the fact that officially prostitution was illegal, the judge ruled in her favour, fined the poulterer two pounds and ordered him to move. During World War Two, with the arrival of thousands of foreign soldiers and sailors, Perth's 'Mothers Union' forced the erection of hoardings to hide the brothels and the queues of men outside from the gaze of train commuters, but not only did the brothels themselves remain open, but the rumours have always been that they were in fact unofficially operated by the police. The fact that in subsequent years only a certain number of 'licensed' brothels have been allowed to operate has reinforced the belief that, along with Northbridge's illegal casinos, such businesses paid regular weekly stipends to vice and gaming detectives to be allowed to operate.

There are good reasons why policing tends to prefer organised crime over disorganised crime, but the darker side to this mutually beneficial arrangement was brought into stark relief on the night of 22 June 1975, when high-profile brothel madam Shirley Finn was executed on fairway seven of the South Perth golf club, at a place where, according to the statement of a vice-squad detective at the time, consorting squad detectives met with their informants. Finn's murder shocked Perth as the first example of a high-profile gangland slaying and was the subject of my own first crime novel, *Line of Sight* (Penguin, 2010). The fact that she was killed because she'd threatened to name the names of those policemen she'd been paying, and the fact that she was clearly left out on display after her 'bowling ball' execution (four shots to the head) as a warning to others, only reinforced the belief that she had been murdered directly by corrupt police officers. A few brave souls spoke out at the subsequent Royal Commission, but they were quickly marginalised and the status quo of CIB detectives taking payments from prostitutes and gambling operations soon returned to its original, although covert, *modus operandi*.

WRITING ON CORRUPTION as it related to Perth in 1982, local writer Dorothy Hewett said that while the sense of 'corruption...is palpable', in general 'the worm in the bud is secretive' (from 'The Garden and the City', published in *Westerly*). Perth's air of manufactured innocence, she felt, was in fact the perfect field for corruption. In other words, because of Perth's native beauty and air of languor, its polite surface and general sprawl, the kinds of deeds such as Shirley Finn's murder (and subsequent incidents of nepotism and corruption) merely represent minor breaches in the policy of keeping up appearances, and this false mask of civility is in fact best able to conceal a multitude of sins.

If Hewett is correct, then perhaps the best argument for her thesis is the fact that in Sydney and Brisbane the Wood and Fitzgerald Royal Commissions were able to, by way of proper resourcing, coercive powers and effective surveillance, make apparent what many people knew to be the case – that prohibition economies inevitably create a situation where corrupt police officers take money to turn a blind eye, and on occasions will also actively participate in criminal activities, including murder. With Shirley Finn's

murder, Perth's old pragmatism towards victimless crimes and outmoded prohibitions (which had resulted in substantial sums of money reaching the pockets of detectives and senior officers, a system built up over generations) had moved out of the age of innocence and into the realm of violent organised criminality. Of course, this was happening in cities all over the world. What marks Perth's response to the problem is the rapidity with which the city returned to its old and secretive ways. Hence, there is a resulting focus in true-crime and fictional narratives about Perth on the role of certain policing practices, as they relate to some of the state's most sensational crimes.

Perhaps the best known (although least reflective of a pervasive criminal and political culture) are the murders of Eric Edgar Cooke, the last man hanged in Western Australia, in 1964. The murders have been widely represented in WA literature, directly and indirectly in the work of writers such as Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, Robert Drewe's *The Shark Net*, Peter Cowan's *The Empty Street*, Dave Warner's *The City of Light* and Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*. Cooke is often described as the man who single-handedly stole Perth's 'innocence', in that before he embarked on his killing spree, which resulted in eight murders and many more serious assaults, Perth was described as a place where people left their front doors unlocked. The idea that a city of Perth's size could create such a 'monster' was surprising to many, particularly as his crimes had a clear basis in class resentment. Despite the revisiting, as mentioned, of Cooke's crimes by Perth writers in various fictional narratives, it wasn't until the publication of Estelle Blackburn's *Broken Lives* (Hardie Grant, 2002) that a full account of the false imprisonment of Beamish and Button – two men who were charged for crimes that Cooke had committed, and confessed to committing – came to light. Not only was Blackburn key to the eventual exoneration of both men, but her advocacy on their part and her detailing of shoddy police work and the ignoring of key evidence by members of the judiciary marked the first successful prosecution, on the page and in the courts, of what has been called advocacy journalism. As described in my recent publication *Perth* (NewSouth, 2013), the title of Blackburn's book 'refers not only to the men Blackburn helped exonerate, and to Cooke's blameless wife and children, but also to the numerous women who survived Cooke's attacks (which were never attributed to Cooke at the time) and have

lived quietly with their fear ever since. The strong sense begins to emerge that in a spread-out city where the streets are claimed by sometimes violent men, the stories of Cooke's female victims and their experiences of another side of Perth's quiet streets would never have come to light if Blackburn hadn't given them voice.' In other words, Perth's so-called innocence was something of a myth, part of Hewett's 'manufactured innocence' that wilfully ignored a long history of petty crime and street-level violence, mainly because it was quarantined from the western suburbs that Cooke targeted.

But Blackburn's role in the exoneration of Beamish and Button was not the first example of advocacy journalism in the state, or the first look at the use of certain policing practices (such as verballing) to ensure a conviction, or the near-impossibility in WA of getting a conviction overturned, despite convincing evidence to the contrary. When Avon Lovell published *The Mickelberg Stitch* (Bookscope, 1985) – alleging that the three Mickelberg brothers had been fitted up for the Perth Mint Swindle of 1982 by way of a false statement taken after the beating of Peter Mickelberg, the youngest brother, and a false fingerprint lifted from a cast rubber hand – the retribution was swift. Not only did Lovell have a bullet fired through the window of his office and receive numerous threats, one of which resulted in the brakes of his vehicle being tampered with, but he was also hammered in the courts. For a long while, every serving member of the Western Australian police service had their pay tithed to enable Lovell's prosecution for libel. The book was banned and removed from bookshop shelves by uniformed police. Lovell's prosecution bankrupted him and made him unemployable, despite the fact that each of his allegations was subsequently shown to be true. The culprit, according to whistle-blower Tony Lewandowski, who later hanged himself, was 'the Silver Fox', Don Hancock, who had also recorded the witness statements of each of Shirley Finn's prostitutes in 1975, which were eerily similar. On the back of the Mickelberg convictions Hancock was made head of the Criminal Investigation Bureau, but was later killed by bikies in a car-bomb in retribution for the alleged shooting murder of one of their members in the Goldfields. Lovell has since written *Litany of Lies* (Bookscope, 2010) about this latter series of murders and the Mickelberg saga. Its concise thesis is contained in the introduction to the book, where writer and publisher Bret Christian

makes the point that ‘so much was invested in supressing Avon Lovell and keeping the two brothers convicted that it is scarcely believable’.

And yet, a third work of advocacy journalism, *Murderer No More* (Allen & Unwin, 2010) by Colleen Egan, showed even more clearly the consequences of shoddy police work, conspiracy to cover-up the false imprisonment of an innocent man, and the way the local judiciary consistently ruled against appeals lodged for, in this case, the imprisonment of Andrew Mallard, who was convicted of the brutal murder of Mosman Park jeweller Pamela Lawrence. Mallard’s conviction was only overturned after the case was taken out of the state, when the five judges of the High Court found that the case involved a clear miscarriage of justice, based on the unreliability of Mallard’s confessions and the fact that highly significant evidence was deliberately withheld from the defence. On the back of Mallard’s false conviction, one of the leading detectives in the case was promoted to oversee the Claremont serial killer taskforce, which was never solved and, sadly, the man actually responsible for Pamela Lawrence’s murder went on to kill a second woman using the same weapon while Mallard was incarcerated. As a result, author of *The Devil’s Garden* (Random House, 2007) Debi Marshall, who began writing a book about the Claremont killings, ended up writing a book largely about police incompetence and cover-up.

This is only significant to any discussion about Western Australian crime in the light of Hewett’s description that the ‘worm in the bud is secretive’. None of these cases would have seen the light of day if it weren’t for the intervention of local journalists. Similarly, in the political realm, it took a Royal Commission into what became known as the ‘WA Inc’ period to detail the incursion of a particularly cynical brand of cowboy capitalism into the body politic. That the state government, under the auspices of Premier Brian Burke, got into bed with corporate sharks of the ilk of Alan Bond and Laurie Connell, and was subsequently shafted by them leading to losses of an estimated \$877 million of taxpayer money – which went by way of juicy loans, financial guarantees and buying assets and corporate entities at inflated prices – might be read as an aberration and a salutary lesson. The premier is said to have kept hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash in his office, corporate bodies were commonly required to donate to the party to

be allowed to operate in the state, and Burke's closest business 'consultants' profited hugely from the deals brokered during his tenure. Yet, what is of the greatest significance is that Burke, and the Liberal Premier he succeeded, Ray O'Connor, were soon to be imprisoned on entirely unrelated charges. Despite the fact that many figures significant to the period had died, and that many refused to speak to the Commission, the mask had slipped – albeit briefly – and the face behind wasn't pretty.

The first novel to explore the period was David Warner's crime novel *City of Light* (Fremantle Press, 1995). The book was critically well-received and won the Premier's Book Award, but of equal importance was that the novel deployed for the first time the now-familiar Western Australian strategy of incorporating reportage in the narrative. *City of Light* was not only significant because it integrated fiction with thinly disguised representations of real events, but also because it was the first local crime *noir* novel for many decades. Not since Judah Waten's *Shares in Murder* (Australasian Book Society, 1957) had the tight little system of localised organised crime and policing and political favours been examined by a WA writer in any detail.

DESPITE THE FACT that the 1991 WA Inc Royal Commission led indirectly to the imprisonment of two premiers and a number of businessmen, and because of the fact that there has never been an effective enquiry into the links between corrupt Western Australian policemen and organised crime, the kind of books that Brisbane-based writer Matthew Condon has recently published – *Three Crooked Kings* (UQP, 2013) and *Jacks and Jokers* (UQP, 2014) – which take an insider's view of the roughly contemporaneous culture operating in Queensland under Bjelke-Peterson, will never be possible here. Instead, given the lack of prosecutions and, consequentially, problems associated with defamation, it's been left to WA crime writers to fill the documentary void and explore the always-murky frontier land between truth and fiction and myth and legend.

An article published recently in the *Guardian* described the WA crime fiction scene as arguably 'one of the most exciting in Australia', although it's true to say that most people's perceptions of sunny Perth and the strong *noir* flavour of the majority of current WA crime fiction can seem at odds. That is,

until the point is made that a majority of this fiction incorporates to varying degrees the mode of reportage, bearing witness to the difference between characters' lived experience and the purported benefits of life in a boom-time state. In such novels, what is truly corrosive and frightening is not the danger to the crime fiction 'hero' but the damage done to the body politic, just as what is represented isn't the policing of the kind of regular crime associated with a modern metropolis but the implicit violence and layering of fear associated with protecting the reputations of often powerful interests.

Ned Kelly Award-winning author Alan Carter's two novels, *Prime Cut* (Fremantle Press, 2011) and *Getting Warmer* (Fremantle Press, 2013), inflect the police procedural with the darker accents of crime noir, calling out aspects of the Andrew Mallard case and tropes of police corruption that feel local and authentic. Ron Elliott, in his collection *Now Showing* (Fremantle Press, 2013), reinterprets the Danny Hobby and Strike Softly racetrack scam perpetrated by Laurie Connell in a way that measures the fear and desperation of a man on the run, sustained financially by a benefactor he cannot trust. My own crime writing, which draws upon the dozens of storytellers and informants I've come to know during my research, incorporates as many true stories as possible within an overall fictionalised framework, so as to represent something of the history of politics, business and organised crime in Perth that is generally neglected by formal histories. Former policeman and private investigator Terry McLernon's four self-published titles contain thinly disguised representations of true Perth crimes and criminals, designed to be both entertaining and provocative. As a result, McLernon's car has been firebombed and his house set on fire, and although his books are popular with Perth's criminal fraternity (to the extent that he gets complaints when he neglects certain figures) he has also been bankrupted by litigious enemies. Rob Schofield's first crime novel, *Heist* (Allen & Unwin, 2013), contains a fictionalised representation of CIB chief Don Hancock's notorious interrogation methods, as well as exploring the fallout from the state's movement towards restricting the rights of assembly and association of outlaw motorcycle club members.

More recently, Peter Docker's novel *Sweet One* (Fremantle Press, 2014) powerfully explores the idea that the frontier war against Western

Australia's Aboriginal population has never ended, building upon a fictionalised representation of the terrible and tragic death in custody of Aboriginal elder Mr Ward in 2008, who baked to death over the course of hours in the back of an unventilated prison transport en route to jail after his arrest in Laverton. The novel investigates a war of retaliation enjoined by returned members of the Australian Defence Force previously based in Afghanistan, having been exposed to the cynical expedience and violence of a front-line guerrilla insurgency and then relocated to the frontier at home. This aspect of Docker's thriller is, of course, fictionalised, yet the crime that precipitates it is not. Neither are the Third World conditions visited upon many Western Australian Aboriginal communities, nor the long history of the sexual commodification of Aboriginal women in the state, or the history of deaths in custody and the tradition of cover-ups and protecting perpetrators. Like all of the crime narratives described here, the novel is leavened by humour and acts of goodwill among its marginalised characters, but it also has a tendency to skewer what might be described as a socially conditioned propensity to turn away from unpleasant truth towards more pleasant, picture-postcard narratives of our local history and culture, producing as a side effect the kind of cultural amnesia and manufactured innocence that Hewett described. It's merely the most recent example of a regional trend towards representing that aspect of WA crime that exists in the tension between what is known but cannot be said (on the record), and as such is precisely what has drawn WA crime writers and journalists towards its representation.

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The man without a face

Making loss political

David Ritter

BEFORE I WAS born, my family arrived in Western Australia from Europe and moved into a ramshackle brick house on three-plus acres in Kelmscott, then a semi-rural locality on the outskirts of Perth. The property featured an orchard that ran down to a wide stream, a minor tributary of the Canning River. The creek – which my family always called ‘the river’ – was full of life when they arrived, including local species of fresh water catfish, colourful pigmy perch, various kinds of molluscs and a range of crustaceans, of which the most marvellous was an abundance of that mighty crayfish endemic to south-western Australia, the marron.

The river was my father’s delight. He would clamber among the rocks, burning off and clearing brambles when necessary, and would often end up with his white vest, shorts and gumboots generously daubed with the rich, aromatic mud from the shallow pools beneath the paperbarks. Until his last years, Dad would recall his instant love of the river – an affection that deepened when he noticed big marron clambering across submerged stones and logs in broad daylight. Once they’d settled in the house, my family would periodically fish a plate of marron out of the river for a meal of imperial quality over which my father, once a frightened and penniless refugee, would preside over contentedly, extolling the beneficent wealth of his adopted state.

Then one day a stranger came, driving his vehicle close to the river on the opposite bank. It was over in a matter of days. Using a spear and swimming with goggles where the water was deep enough, he took out marron by the sackful in a carnage that was efficient and final. The stock was devastated and never recovered. The few marron that survived to be caught in my lifetime were treated with solemnity and returned to the water, in the hopes of supporting the recovery of the species. It didn't happen. I never shared marron with my Dad – they had simply become too precious to eat. The devastation occurred before I was born, but conceit of mind has conspired to stalk me with a persistent night terror of those events. In my recurring dream the man with the spear has no face, the sacks are always full and I cannot console my father.

ACROSS THE WORLD, species of animals and plants are becoming extinct at an increasing rate. A few species finish their evolutionary run violently, in the spotlight. The last known wild *thylacine* (Tasmanian tiger) in Australia and passenger pigeon in North America were shot. The final Pinta Island tortoise died a global celebrity in 2012, anthropomorphised in pitying condescension as 'Lonesome George'. The demise of the Christmas Island pipistrelle in 2009 – the first Australian mammal known to have become extinct for some decades – was a cause célèbre.

It is reasonable to assume, though, that the vanishing of species from the Earth often goes unmarked. Indeed, so little do we know of the nine million or so other forms of life with which we share the planet that many may be swept away by broadscale devastation, such as land clearing or ocean-bottom trawling, or changes in conditions associated with climate change, without us ever having known they were there. The rate of ecological deterioration attributable to human activity is now so pronounced that some scientists have begun referring to a period of 'Holocene' or 'Anthropocene' extinction, comparable to previous eras of dramatic biodiversity loss evident in the fossil record.

When animals or plants vanish locally, in many cases it will not be the end of a species. A creature may become extinct in one place but still flourish in viable populations elsewhere. The dispatching of marron from a creek

in Kelmscott did not bring that species undone. The fishery is now heavily regulated, but marron can still be found in the inland waters of the southern corner of WA and are even farmed with some success.

Nevertheless, the loss of a creature from a particular location will transform that place and can be deeply painful for the people who are left behind. US writer Robert Michael Pyle has described this phenomenon as the ‘extinction of experience’:

Simply stated, the loss of neighbourhood species endangers our experience of nature. If a species becomes extinct within our own radius of reach (smaller for the very old, very young, disabled and poor) it might as well be gone altogether, in one important sense. To those whose access suffers by it, local extinction has much the same result as global eradication.

Pyle argues that the vanishing of an animal from a person’s realm of real experience has important social and psychological consequences. WA is full of stories of local loss, of great spots ‘fished out’; of animals we ‘used to see around here’, of, ‘now that I think about it, I haven’t seen one of those in ages’. The diminishing of the wildlife around us has consequences for how we see things. In my father’s case, his relationship with the river was fundamentally altered. Dad would find himself lost in the slough of *solastalgia* – a concept coined later to capture the existential distress caused by environmental change in one’s familiar places – when recalling the pillage of the marron. The watercourse had epitomised the abundance and freedom of his adopted home; now it spoke to him of loss.

MY FAMILY WERE, of course, not the first people to have been denied the river’s riches and their experience of losing the marron was trifling compared to the original dispossession. The township of Kelmscott was gazetted in 1830 and became a military outpost of the new colony. Noongar people had eaten marron since time immemorial – the name itself is of local Aboriginal derivation – but with the onslaught of colonisation, traditional country and resources became less accessible and their ways of life were disrupted. Like

all of Australia's First Peoples, the traditional owners of the Canning River did their best in the circumstances, at times resisting, at others adapting and accommodating. My mother, a woman who combined earnest practicality and pragmatism with inconsistent folk superstitions, told me as a small child that she believed the valley we lived in was haunted by the souls of those who had been killed or driven out generations earlier.

No doubt the Canning River that my family knew in the late '60s was itself a shrunken shadow of the *Djarlgarra* that had nourished the original inhabitants for millennia. Yet each generation knows as 'natural' that which it finds, a phenomenon that eminent marine biologist Professor Daniel Pauly dubbed as 'shifting baseline syndrome'.

The river would always feel empty to my father, but to me it was magically alive, inhabited by those species that remained. I've never related to marron as anything other than a rarity; the uncommonness of the creature is, in my experience, just the normal state of things.

EXTINCTION IS AN abstraction, but animals vanishing from our places and our lives changes how we think about nature. In Australia, the two are causatively linked because our cities are located in areas of biological richness: we are attracted by the availability of fresh water and comparatively nutrient-rich soils and seas. The point of Pyle's argument is that people who have less experience of nature in their daily lives are less likely to be engaged enough to care about the fate of the natural world. Indeed, we are in the midst of an alienation that is multidimensional. For the first time in human history more people live in cities than in the country. It seems likely that, as a species, we spend more time inside buildings than ever before and the twenty-first century version of being indoors often involves a very high degree of separation from the outside. In the developed world, many of us will go for protracted periods without feeling sand, dirt or grass under our feet. Estranged from nature, we experience global environmental catastrophe from the relative stability of the dropping cage. Fish are wisecracking and pixelated, cucumbers come wrapped in plastic, air is conditioned and water bottled, and some form of everything is always available regardless of the season.

All this is considered normal.

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, scientists are deeply worried about the rate and scale of biodiversity loss, particularly given the compounding effect of climate change. The most recent *Global Biodiversity Outlook*, published under the auspices of the United Nations' Convention on Biodiversity, concluded bluntly that '[n]atural systems that support economies, lives and livelihoods across the planet are at risk of rapid degradation and collapse, unless there is swift, radical and creative action to conserve and sustainably use the variety of life on Earth.' In Australia, the CSIRO has confirmed that '[m]ost of the pressures on biodiversity that arise directly or indirectly from human activities are still strong and will continue to be so in future years', and 'pressures are not being substantially reduced nor the decline arrested'.

Something, though, is lost in translation. The commonly used expression 'biodiversity loss', for instance, is both technocratic and passive, undermining emotional and political response. 'Biodiversity' – a contraction of 'biological diversity' – may be a technically accurate expression for life's richness and variety but the term lacks the emotive power to match the depth and beauty of the creation it aims to describe. Nobody hears the call of the wild or the whisper of the trees in 'biodiversity'. Indeed, according to one notorious survey conducted in the UK, when respondents were asked about the meaning of 'biodiversity' the most common answer was 'a brand of washing powder'. 'Loss', on the other hand, is curiously passive and suggests an accidental or consequential forfeiture. 'How can I have misplaced the Dodo?' 'You must have left the Christmas Island pipistrelle *somewhere!* Did you check behind the couch?' When referring to people, sometimes we speak of 'loss' when we mean 'death' and we do so because to address our mortality is difficult and taboo. Perhaps the same dynamic applies when a type of life dies; maybe the demise is too painful to be the subject of plain speech. Just as the death of someone we know is an uncomfortable *aide-mémoire* as to our own mortality, so the demise of a species reminds us that humanity, too, could vanish from the world. Perhaps, above all, 'loss' implies a kind of neutrality – an unintended consequence.

The reality is often different. The marron beloved of my father did not go quietly into the night of their own volition – they were caught and killed by the faceless man, who had every legal right to do as he pleased under the law at the time.

When contemplating the killing and destruction of whole kinds of plants and animals, we rarely consider the phenomenon as a consequence of the functioning of power. Yet at a fundamental level, the variety of the world's plants and animals is being reduced because of how power is distributed. Species loss is caused by the harmful actions of powerful actors, private interests that are facilitated by governments failing to act for the common good. At present, our political systems are deficient in preserving the variety of life around us. Put another way, the Lorax lacks the clout of the Once-ler.

Our political economy is simply not based on the objective of securing life on earth. The formal consequence is a set of grossly inadequate institutions, laws and regulations. Their inadequacy means that, while certain specific environmental harms may be prohibited from time to time, the cumulative destruction of the natural world is today perfectly legal.

WA is a case in point. Based on its natural richness in endemic plant and amphibian species, and the significant threats that exist to its ecosystems, the Southwest Australian Ecoregion is recognised as one of the world's 'biodiversity hotspots'. More than half of our nationally recognised hotspots are also located in the state's South West. Yet WA lacks the legal framework, institutional infrastructure or budgetary allocations necessary to effectively nurture the variety of life in the state. Environmental protection legislation is inadequate, and all too rarely applied in practice because there are too few enforcement officials. There is no Perth wildlife census, or anything tracking the disappearance of animals throughout the state. The 'extinction of experience' becomes sad rumour and melancholy anecdote. In a move that bleakly revealed the alienation of politics from nature, earlier this year Premier Colin Barnett responded to the perceived threat from shark attacks by introducing a sponsored killing of the animals off Perth's beaches. There was never any rational scientific justification for the shark cull, which drew widespread public opprobrium and was ultimately terminated after a single season. Before the grotesque absurdity was discontinued, the state had spent more than a million dollars paying wildlife bounty hunters to kill sharks, including now rare species that should have been protected.

The most significant single piece of Commonwealth legislation that exists to protect biodiversity is the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act (EPBC).

It is designed to ensure that in ‘matters of national environmental significance’ the Commonwealth has some authority to act to protect World Heritage areas, endangered and vulnerable species and internationally important wetlands.

Given the declining state of biodiversity in Australia, it is clear that the Act has proven insufficient. Yet the Commonwealth Government is committed to watering down the oversight that exists by devolving power to the states, to create what it calls ‘a one-stop shop for environmental approvals’. The aim is ‘to simplify the approvals process for businesses, lead to swifter decisions and improve Australia’s investment climate, while maintaining high environmental standards’.

The push for these changes came from Australia’s organised business lobby, which regards wildlife protection as ‘green tape’. The WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry has eagerly supported the proposed changes and has found an advocate in Premier Barnett. In blunt terms, winding back the EPBC will mean that an inadequate system will be made worse – one extra strand in the legislative and regulatory enabling of the Holocene extinction.

BUSINESS CANNOT BE blamed for being business. Corporations are legislatively mandated to maximise returns for shareholders. Without specific environmental protection laws, nothing obliges big business to consider the effect of operations on surrounding plants and animals. A few years ago, when global business executives were asked about what would motivate them to address biodiversity loss, the ‘top choice’ on ‘what might spur them to take action’ was increased regulation. Yet given any opportunity, the organised business lobby in Australia will tirelessly campaign against ‘government intervention’ in the form of ‘green tape’. In practice, even those corporations diligently practising ‘sustainability’ will only do so as long as the effort is consistent with maximising returns. The most committed and well-meaning individuals acknowledge they are constricted by the ambit of their employer’s ‘mission’.

Business is all too often the faceless man of global biodiversity loss. None of this is to imply an anti-business perspective, but to argue that there is more at stake than short-term shareholder satisfaction. We need business living on the river, obliged to care for the world around.

As Robyn Annear recently observed in a careful and nuanced meditation on the politics and culture of Perth, the place is more complicated than is often

made out: 'All cities are contingent, for better or worse.' Unquestionably, there is a WA in which everything seems up for grabs, but there have always been contrary traditions, both of environmental activism and conservatives who want to conserve things other than the advantage of vested interests.

What happens to the variety of wildlife is a matter of political choices. As the authors of the CSIRO's most recent report on biodiversity in Australia noted, 'every decision on natural resource management is a choice'. They added: 'We write with a sense of urgency that these matters be debated in society and acted on. In our view, society needs to move into the normative stage of recognising that managing biodiversity for the long term is a core activity of our culture.'

The plea is urgent but the language is academic and managerial. If the environmental politics of the last twenty years has taught us anything, it is the propensity for the earnest craft of scientists and public servants to be subject to the fire and axe of vested interests. Unless the dispassionate wisdom of scientists and other researchers is backed by social, cultural and political force to secure broader changes in the allocation of power, little will change. If there is to be a new politics of biodiversity for Western Australians to be secure, content and prosperous, with wonderful wildlife all around, people on the river will need to connect with scientists and others, to produce fresh and powerful formations that can sustain a genuine challenge to the faceless men.

Preserving the variety of life demands a marriage of knowledge and experience, romance and reason, to build a political project suited to the challenge. And as far as the extinction of experience is concerned, what was lost can yet be returned. My parents' house was demolished thirty years ago, to enable the widening of Brookton Highway; but the river still runs. What will live in that little creek in the future is up to us.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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How to eat a wilderness

The past and future of the Wheatbelt

Andrea Gaynor

LATE JULY 1923, Newdegate district, Western Australia. It is not a sublime landscape, but beauty may yet be found in its intricate, fragile detail. The slender trunks of the merrit mallees glow pink in the light of the rising sun. Yellow-throated miners chase noisily in the upper branches, watched keenly by a brown goshawk in a nearby salmon gum. Below, between the melaleucas, a mallee fowl scratching in the sand finds a legless lizard and devours it in two gulps. Giant ants crawl busily around sandalwood stumps and emus drink from a shallow pool on a flat granite outcrop. A rabbit pauses beside a ti-tree not yet in flower, sits upright and delicately cleans its nose with its paws, much like a cat.

As the sun rises, the aroma of wood smoke and frying bacon mingles with the subtle scent of the eucalyptus and melaleuca. Soon the noise of axe biting into wood joins the chatter of the miners, the thumping of the buck rabbits. This is a landscape already bearing the imprint of colonisation, but about to undergo a more visibly dramatic transformation as government policy and popular aspirations together mobilise an army of settlers to eat away at the 'wilderness'.

Wheatbelt farms established in the twentieth century were to provide an independent living for hard-working families and grain for hungry millions,

as well as wealth and respect for the state and its denizens. From around seventy thousand acres in 1890, the area under crop in Western Australia exploded to almost five million acres in 1930.

Such reckless occupation left Wheatbelt families vulnerable – to prices that fell and rain that failed, to salt and locusts and boredom. The earth that remained when the bushland was consumed was also left vulnerable – to salt, erosion and abandonment. No amount of optimism, investment or technology would enable the vision of bountiful fields dotted with smiling homesteads and bustling villages to be realised in a low-nutrient environment, so far from large markets: only large-scale industrialised farming would make the Wheatbelt a viable economic proposition.

After the devastation of the droughts of the 1930s, the intensification of industrial farming increased. The approach worked for a while, but its success is always provisional in these lands. Now, the industrial paradigm is facing a bleak future. Utterly dependent on fossil fuels and agrochemical inputs to grow crops and conserve the soil, while demanding ever greater economies of scale that whittle away at its social sustainability, it is not clear that the industrialised Wheatbelt as a social and economic unit will survive the next century. Wheatbelt communities are trying to develop ways of living on the land that respects its fragility and works with its strengths, though they are doing so at a time when the Wheatbelt no longer plays a central role in the state's imagined future, and political support has ebbed.

TODAY, THOUGH HOME to only around 135,000 people, the Western Australian Wheatbelt is visible from space. Lying across the south-west corner of the continent, the light beige-green farmland eats into dark green forest to the west and blush-brown shrubland to the north-east. White chains of salt lakes and saline watercourses run like stretch marks across the lumpy and freckled skin of this old land. In one section, the division to the east is marked by a long, straight line, as if the Wheatbelt had been cut out with a knife rather than nibbled away. Here, where it follows the State Barrier Fence of Western Australia (previously the 'No.1 Rabbit Proof Fence'), the line extends strikingly into the atmosphere: clouds form over the native vegetation on one side, while the sun beats down from clear skies over wheatfields on the

other. Less rain now falls on the cleared land west of the fence. Consuming the bushland has had significant local climatic effects, as well as contributing to the global climate change that is increasing frosts and reducing rainfall across the region.

In 2012, the statistical region that encompasses most of the Wheatbelt was home to more vehicles than people and more men than women. The population density was two-thirds of a person per square kilometre, about the same as the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area in the Arctic zone of western Siberia.

Yet in 2012–13, just under half of Australia's total cereal exports came from the Wheatbelt, including 8.5 million tonnes of wheat, most of which was sent to Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, Iraq and Iran. Western Australia is the principal source of wheat for Japanese and Korean udon noodles. On average, the annual wheat crop produced by the region is around the same as that of Italy and accounts for about 1 per cent of total global wheat production. The economic significance of wheat to Western Australia has greatly surpassed its contribution to two ideals: populating the land and world nutrition.

Just after the commencement of the rush to the Eastern Goldfields, when Western Australia was still a net importer of wheat, the *West Australian Settler's Guide and Farmer's Handbook* conveyed a clear sense of optimism about the colony's potential: 'Western Australia may be likened to a huge pie, the crust of which has only, as yet, been nibbled around the edges... We want Jack Horners here to pull out the plums, and plums there are undoubtedly for men of all avocations.' One of the most desirable commodities to be extracted from the pie was wheat – essential to the staff of life, it commanded good prices on international markets. The most desirable Jack Horners were white and of limited means: men who would not run large pastoral estates or speculate on the land, but occupy and transform it. Before the First World War, such 'bona fide' settlers were enticed to become wheat farmers with cheap land, railways, credit and subsidised conditional immigration. At this time, the government saw the project of transforming empty wilderness into wheat farms as a solution to the state's growing unemployment problem, as the gold industry began to employ fewer men; later, it would be seen as a means to reward – and disperse – returned soldiers.

The region was never really an ‘empty’ wilderness. For generations, it had been managed by Aboriginal people to provide food and other necessities. They ate from the landscape they shaped – through use of fire – without consuming it whole. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the region’s Aboriginal people were mostly living in the bush as they had for generations. They knew how to use the land to sustain themselves.

As the government-subsidised settlement continued, some Aboriginal families found employment on pastoral stations and combined station work with traditional economic and cultural activities. While the pastoral economy could accommodate many traditional Aboriginal practices, many of those opportunities evaporated as land was cleared, fenced and worked by settler families. Some were able to make a living within the new agricultural economy – clearing, fencing, pulling poison or taking on seeding and harvesting work – others hunted kangaroos or trapped possum for skins, or collected mallet bark for tanning. Some worked on the construction of the roads and railways that would extend their dispossession, while a few became farmers. Legal and social changes soon destroyed these opportunities and by the 1920s many were sent, or drawn through lack of alternatives, to reserves, missions or ‘native settlements’ – spartan, unsympathetic institutions that further marginalised them, while maintaining them as cheap labour for the white landholders who had displaced them. In spite of the privations, many Aboriginal families maintained amicable relationships with white settlers. They also maintained some knowledge of traditional culture and language. Increasingly, however, the experience was one of segregation and pauperisation, intensifying as the bushland that had been their succour for so long was cleared and much of the remainder, deprived of its traditional managers, became wilderness.

CLEARING WAS HARD work, but had to be accomplished rapidly to satisfy conditional purchase requirements. Trees were ringbarked or felled, shrubs flattened with horse-drawn rollers. The lot was then burned in summer, ready for seeding in autumn. The bushland was devoured voraciously: in the eleven years from 1903 to 1914, the state’s wheat acreage increased more than tenfold to 1.4 million acres. Yet it was felt that more could be achieved.

During this period farmers began to organise politically, establishing the Country Party to oppose organised labour and secure increased support for agricultural development. Visions for the Wheatbelt started to unravel as early as 1911, when drought hit the eastern and northern areas. John Payne, of Perenjori in the northern Wheatbelt, remembered that when conditions worsened in 1914, his father '[p]ut his head in his hands and he cried there for a long time'. For many new farmers, crop failure one year meant a lack of money to buy seed wheat for the next. A 1934 Royal Commission reported that in 1914–16, there was a 'total abandonment of farms' in the Lake Brown district. Hoping to avert mass abandonment of farms and consequent losses on state investment, the government established the Industries Assistance Board, which propped up the wheat industry through several indifferent seasons and the severe drought of 1914, until conditions improved after the war.

The Wheatbelt was never self-sustaining. Though consuming the labour of countless families and beasts, the region would never have been created as a 'wheatbelt' had it not been for the redirection of state resources to provide infrastructure for farmers to establish their enterprises, and to give support when environmental or economic conditions were less than favourable.

Throughout this period there was no clear wheat frontier; rather, land was taken up in a complex pattern determined by soils, railways, rainfall and other factors. After 1906, land for selection was mapped and classified as first-, second- or third-class according to its agricultural potential: the original classification and valuation forms now held by the State Records Office show fingers of red second-class or uncoloured third-class land extending into the first-class lands shaded blue. Blocks were to contain a minimum amount of first-class land, though most included some land of each class. Some of the forms show ominous black patches. These are the poison lands, home to the *Gastrolobium* and *Oxylobium* species that sprang up in succulent, deadly profusion, especially after land was cleared and burned. Native mammals were largely immune to the toxin in these plants, but even small amounts could readily kill sheep, cattle and horses. Such land was avoided by all but the most desperate, optimistic, or well-resourced. As the first-class land close to railways was taken up, settlers pushed out into areas many miles from railways, then lobbied and hoped that a spur line would come their way. The

land itself shaped railway routes through its features of elevation and drainage, though social and political factors were also critical. Development therefore occurred over widely scattered areas, producing numerous isolated farms and small, dispersed communities. This pattern arguably increased settler vulnerability to economic and psychological hardship.

After the war, development efforts were redoubled, though by 1920 it was understood that virtually all of the first-class land with adequate rainfall and within twelve miles of a railway had been ‘alienated’ – allocated by the government to farmers. Much of the land that remained was therefore marginal, comprised largely of so-called ‘light lands’, treeless areas characterised by sandy soils that extended throughout the Wheatbelt. From 1922 these lands, where accessible by rail, sold for as little as one shilling per acre – by 1928, more than five million acres of such land had been alienated. There was little understanding of how best to farm the light lands. New settlers who depended entirely on them were especially vulnerable to climatic and economic change, and turnover of farms was high.

By 1931, Western Australia was exporting 42 million bushels (1,544 tonnes) of wheat, mainly to Great Britain, as well as India, Italy, South Africa and Egypt. But the provision of cheap wheat to the Empire (and beyond) came at a high cost to both the land and the people. The folly of such optimistic development was revealed when, in the 1930s, wheat prices crashed, followed by a succession of dry seasons and plagues of rabbits, emus and wild turnip. Hundreds walked away from their properties; others were, once again, bailed out by the state.

Llewellyn Walder, previously an inspector for the Agricultural Bank, recalled of the Eastern Wheatbelt that ‘only a very few farmers remained there. The bulk of the people just walked away with whatever they could carry.’ These and other outer areas were later declared marginal and reconstructed into larger farms, with a focus on stock rather than wheat. A similar conjunction of circumstances wreaked havoc in the central plains of the USA where overworked lands became the Dust Bowl, with devastating consequences for people and the environment.

Some of the farmers who had sufficient capital and luck to survive the trials of the 1930s sought to expand and diversify their operations by more

efficient exploitation of light lands. They experimented with applications of copper and zinc on sandy areas within their holdings and after the war they collaborated with agricultural scientists. In the 1940s and '50s, their findings were translated through work on government research stations and private farms to light lands elsewhere in the Wheatbelt. In 1962, the *Age* described the light lands around Esperance as 'a wasteland...until after the Second World War, when science changed despair into something infinitely encouraging. Catalysts in this transformation were trace elements.'

The rhetoric here echoed that of EF Smart who, in 1960, produced a booklet describing the development of his 87,000-acre farm on light lands at Mingenew, entitled *Western Australian Wasteland Transformed!*. Premier David Brand lauded Smart for his 'vigorous large-scale attack on the problem of light-land development', while Smart himself emphasised the necessity of developing such lands, stating that otherwise 'we run the risk of having it done by intruders. There are millions of people to the north of our continent who are cramped for space and opportunity, and these idle lands will beckon them unless we occupy them and make them productive.' By this time, the preference for the 'small man' was waning, though whiteness was still a requirement for prospective landholders.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA WAS one of the few parts of the developed world to undertake land clearing on a massive scale after the Second World War. Rapid mechanisation transformed and accelerated the consumption of the remaining wilderness. From 1946, bulldozers were used to push over and heap up trees for burning, while crawler tractors dragging logs or chains made short work of mallee and low shrubs. In one southern mallee area, a contractor using bulldozer drivers working in shifts was flattening four hundred hectares every twenty-four hours. As before, the state government facilitated the process. It developed eleven hundred farms for returned servicemen, many in project areas on the light lands in the far south of the emerging Wheatbelt. From 1958, the government offered remaining Crown Land in this area for sale under conditional purchase arrangements at a rate of more than a million acres a year. Many of the 'new land farmers' who flocked to the cheapest agricultural land in Australia had never farmed before: Jerramungup farmer

Ian Mangan recalled that ‘the guy who got the block next door to us actually owned a ladies dress shop in Wollongong. He arrived here with obviously no experience whatsoever.’ The prospect of development on an even larger scale also roused that peculiarly Western Australian enthusiasm for development agreements between the state and big business.

The government entered into such an agreement with the Chase Syndicate, an American group that included high-profile celebrities such as film star Robert Cummings and TV personality Art Linkletter, to develop around 600,000 hectares of sand plains near remote Esperance. The government was to classify and survey blocks and build access roads, as well as an abattoir and fertiliser factory, while the Syndicate was to develop half of the planned 650 new farms to production stage and sell half of them within fifteen years.

The Syndicate soon failed, partly due to faulty clearing and sowing methods, and the agreement was renegotiated with the Esperance Land and Development Company, a joint Australian–American venture that was to develop a total of 1.4 million acres. In both the US and Australia, this was an era of high modernist agriculture, characterised by a preference for large, planned projects that could – at least in theory – be conducted as technical exercises.

The environment was imagined as uniform, and made as close to the ideal as possible through large-scale clearing and implementation of international industrialised farming practices involving mechanisation, monoculture and massive scale. However, these practices could not transcend the messy reality of salt, dust and drought.

In 1949, there were 6.48 million hectares of cleared land on farms; by 1969 the cleared area had more than doubled to 13.77 million hectares. While economic and climatic conditions were favourable, farming proceeded apace. But from 1969, drought and a glut of wheat on international markets, which led to the introduction of wheat quotas, together brought land releases to an abrupt halt. Farmers across the Wheatbelt, especially in the newly established areas, struggled throughout the 1970s: the pie turned out to be too salty, too dry, and Jack Horner’s wheat bags were difficult to sell.

Another period of consolidation followed, in which many marginal farms were bought up by bigger neighbours. Government assistance was

again forthcoming, though in a more limited form than in previous harsh times. Drought-relief loans were made available, exceeding \$25 million in the wake of the 1976–78 drought. Yet the staunchly pro-development coalition government of Charles Court was not deterred from further expanding the Wheatbelt, announcing in 1980 that three million hectares of land would be released for agriculture in the far south-coast area around Ravensthorpe.

It took until 1984 for the newly elected Labor government to declare a moratorium on further mass land releases, and another two decades before land clearing would be effectively regulated. In that time, numerous landcare and natural resource management groups, along with individual farmers, began to ameliorate the damage by commencing revegetation projects.

FACED WITH GROWING economic pressures as well as problems of salinity, erosion and other forms of land degradation, Wheatbelt farmers increasingly looked for ways to maintain efficient production while conserving the soil. Some turned to oil mallees for biofuel to diversify farm income and reduce wind erosion and salinity; by 2013, over 30 million trees had been planted across the state, many in the Wheatbelt. Construction of an integrated mallee processing plant that would produce eucalyptus oil, activated charcoal and heat for electricity generation was completed at Narrogin in 2006, but closed in 2011. With little political will to develop the industry, farmers were left with trees but no market for them.

Another popular strategy was minimum tillage farming, which protected the soil from erosion while reducing the costs associated with frequent cultivation. The development of herbicides during the Second World War provided an alternative to ploughing in preparation for seeding. New technologies enabling single-pass seeding were also developed, some locally. On his Wheatbelt farm in 1974, Ray Harrington and his brother David worked on developing hardened knifepoints that could be used to seed directly into crop stubble, to reduce soil disturbance and compaction.

Recalling their efforts to devise a system for cultivating only the soil under the seed rows, Ray said: ‘We knew we needed to try something different and tried to think what we would like if we were crop seeds, deciding that

would be a nice environment underneath for the young roots to grow into.’ A few more farmers began to experiment with minimum tillage in the 1980s.

By 1993, 2 per cent of Western Australian grain growers were using minimum tillage practices. By 1995 they had been adopted by 10 per cent, and as much as 35 per cent in south coastal light lands. In conserving soil moisture, minimum tillage proved more drought-resistant than conventional tillage and so enabled farming to continue in areas subject to declining rainfall – including the South West of Western Australia. However, these systems are now being undermined by herbicide-resistant weeds, and scientists and farmers are again seeking solutions to the problem of how to use the soil without consuming it.

In this context, some Wheatbelt communities are looking beyond agriculture, turning, for example, to tourism and the arts to diversify and reinvigorate local economies. In 1992 the Eastern Wheatbelt town of Hyden was in decline, with only thirty-five children enrolled at the local school and businesses struggling. Only seven years later there were sixty-five students, and around twenty new businesses had started up. The key to this revitalisation was community action to establish partnerships with government and invest in diversification. The region’s grain, beef and wool farmers put forward the funds to construct a hotel, motel and caravan park to service visitors to local attractions, such as the impressive geological formation known as Wave Rock. By 1999, tourism was bringing in \$5 million a year and employing sixty local people, though sheep and cattle production remained the mainstay of the local economy. A Hyden Business Development Company, established with seed funding from local farmers, enabled new businesses in the area – plumbers, auto electricians and metal fabricators – to start up with subsidised rentals and community loans for equipment. The town now also boasts a telecentre, retirement village and youth housing, and hosts a popular annual rock music festival, the Wave Rock Weekender. Lake Grace has undergone a similar transformation, including the establishment of the Regional Artspace, which supports a flourishing arts community and connects the town with the wider state and national arts scenes. These towns are fortunate to have had the capacity to invest in their future: not all Wheatbelt settlements are so placed.

While the Wheatbelt was established, and sometimes sustained, on the back of government largesse, in the wake of a more neoliberal policy orientation communities are having to compete for government funds to supplement the self-funding of projects intended to achieve diversification for social and economic sustainability.

From 2008, the National Party (previously the Country Party) held the balance of power in the Western Australian parliament and used its position to implement its 'Royalties for Regions' policy, by which a quarter of the state's mining and petroleum royalty payments were to be spent on projects and initiatives in regional areas. Under the scheme, communities apply for funding in a competitive process. Premier Colin Barnett described the program as 'outstanding' and claimed that 'no government in Australian history had such a dramatic and direct effect on regional communities'.

In every competition there are winners and losers. A June 2014 report found that many funded projects were not required to demonstrate long-term sustainability, and evaluations were focused on the infrastructure and services delivered rather than the achievement of intended long-term outcomes. The contribution of this program to Wheatbelt sustainability is at present unclear.

In 2014, the Aboriginal people of the Wheatbelt remained in a disadvantaged position, though many hope that ongoing negotiations with the state government, aimed at resolving native title claims over the greater southwest, will provide legal recognition of their status as Traditional Owners of the land and provide ongoing support for Aboriginal economic development in the region.

The 'wilderness' that is now the Wheatbelt was eaten as the result of an inappropriate vision for the region. This vision motivated a small army of prospective farmers and resourced them to cut, burn, plough and sow until the land, and indeed the climate, had been transformed. Through technological ingenuity and consolidation of business operations, and with considerable state aid, farming has evolved in response to environmental and economic challenges in a way that has enabled us to keep eating the wilderness. The government gave the Wheatbelt its start and bailed it out whenever it was in trouble; for Western Australia, it was too big to fail. Now, when the problems it faces are greater than ever, political support is precarious. In the twenty-first

century, as many Wheatbelt communities struggle to protect their integrity and sustainability, the food produced by the region is becoming a critical global resource. The question is whether communities have sufficient capacity to transition to more sustainable production models and develop the social sustainability required to address the challenges ahead, or whether the future, along with the wilderness, has already been consumed.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Andrea Gaynor is a professor of history at The University of Western Australia. Her books include *Harvest of the Suburbs: An Environmental History of Growing Food in Australian Cities* (UWA Press, 2006) and a collection co-edited with Mathew Trinca and Anna Haebich, *Country: Visions of Land and People in Western Australia* (WA Museum, 2002).

Fay Zwicky

Droughtbreaker

No sooner resolved never
to write another line
the habit of resolution
being so strong,
the air turned suddenly
sweet outside her window –
the longed-for stirring slow-start
hesitant splutter, first rain's
rustling pitter over pear trees
eucalypt and star-studded stephanotis,
gripping her round the heart
deep into wakening dark where
the canny chortle of enchanted
magpies let her gently go.

Fay Zwicky taught English and American literature at The University of Western Australia for many years. Her second collection of poetry *Kaddish and other poems* (UQP, 1982) won the New South Wales Premier's Poetry Award, and her later collections *Ask Me* (UQP, 1990) and *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 1997) received the Western Australian Premier's Poetry Award. In 2004 she was declared a WA Living Treasure.

ESSAY

Ghosts of the water dreamers

Water histories between the desert and the sea

Ruth A. Morgan

WHEN HE VISITED Perth in 2012, Arizona water specialist Robert Glennon remarked: 'I expected a dry city on the driest continent would be at the cutting edge of water conservation and instead I'm hearing stories about groundwater wells in everyone's backyard and everyone has a lush lawn.' Had he known the state's water history, he might not have been so surprised.

What Glennon observed in Perth is the persistence of what historian Jay Arthur describes as 'the default country', a settler Australian ideal of a green, well-watered landscape against which the continent does not measure up. It was an ideal that inspired generations of 'water dreamers', to use Michael Cathcart's term, to search for an inland sea in the continent's dead heart. And when water was found to be wanting, they designed schemes to turn the rivers inland and to make the deserts bloom. In 1896, Western Australia's own water dreamer, the engineer CY O'Connor, designed a system to transport water from the Darling Range near Perth via a pipeline to the thirsty mines of the Kalgoorlie Goldfields, nearly six hundred kilometres away. Even the engineering schemes of ancient Rome had not been so bold as to pump water such a distance, let alone uphill. At its opening in 1903, Sir John Forrest, the state's first premier, referred to Isaiah (43:19) when he suggested that future generations would remember this achievement: 'They made a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.'

O'Connor's ghost – along with those of other local visionaries such as the sirs John Forrest, James Mitchell, David Brand and Charles Court – continues to haunt Western Australian politics. It has inspired bold schemes to pipe water from the state's tropical north-west, to attempt cloud seeding in the Wheatbelt, and to moor Antarctic icebergs off the west coast near Fremantle. Such water projects, bound to ambitions for the state's economic progress, remind Western Australians of their state's unique brand of developmentalism. Successive governments have taken great steps to help Western Australia overcome its Cinderella status in order to attain, as historian Lenore Layman argued in the early 1980s, a “greatness” to match its geographical area'. Water, or a lack thereof, has long been perceived as a significant limit to the state's progress and prosperity. According to this logic, drought-proofing is future-proofing Western Australian development.

Since the gold rushes of the 1890s, water infrastructure has been a means of social engineering that prevailed long after the Second World War as a way for state governments to promote development and to plant populations in particular places in a vast and seemingly empty landscape. Reticulated water supplies helped to overcome sandy soils and hot dry summers, and improved public health and hygiene. They transformed Perth into a green oasis of carefully trimmed lawns and manicured flowerbeds. Near Harvey, the construction of dams, drains and ditches allowed for the development of intensive irrigation for dairy farming and horticulture. In the Wheatbelt, which Public Works Department engineers once described as ‘hydraulically difficult country’, reticulated water supplies allowed for farming families to embark on the postwar mission to clear ‘a million acres a year’. And the expansion of water resources south of Perth was vital to the postwar transformation of Kwinana into the state's industrial hub.

But this ‘just add water’ philosophy has had its problems. As the handmaiden to the development of the Western Australian Wheatbelt and irrigated areas, water has contributed to making the largest area of salinity-affected land in the country. The scourge of secondary salinity has not only reduced the productivity of millions of hectares of land, but has also threatened the water catchments that supply Perth and the agricultural areas. Although the relationship between land clearing and salinity was observed

in the 1920s and earlier, it was not until the 1970s that the state government banned clearing in metropolitan catchments. But this was too little, too late for Wellington Dam, which is now only fit for irrigation purposes.

IN THE SUBURBS, water consumption skyrocketed after World War II, when new-found affluence and household appliances made washing and watering easier than ever. Nowhere was this more evident than in the gardens of Perth. During these postwar decades, more than half of the city's water consumption took place in suburban gardens; in the dry summer months this proportion rose to almost three-quarters of water use. Watering Perth's gardens was, as one wit described, 'as necessary a daily routine as regular breathing is to the survival of man'. Total water restrictions in 1978 came as a rude shock to many households, as it shattered their illusions of endless water supplies. Combined with the introduction of user-pays water rates, these restrictions provoked outraged gardeners to accuse the government of turning Western Australia, the 'Wildflower State', into the 'Dead State', the 'State of Dehydration' and the 'State of the Desert'. Another complained, 'Is our choice only to be brown lawns, wood chips or paving bricks?' Such was the public backlash to the bans on watering suburban gardens that state governments vowed never again.

In 2005, the Gallop Labor government renewed this commitment and pledged to reduce the likelihood of a total ban on water sprinklers to just one year in two hundred. Compared to other Australian capital cities, this was an extremely conservative approach to water planning. In parts of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, residents were prevented from washing their cars and using scheme water on their gardens. What made the pledge all the more extraordinary was that Perth, water managers and climate scientists agreed, was experiencing a drying trend that was affecting the entire south west of the continent. They believed this region was the canary in the national climate-change coal mine. And they expected the drying trend to continue.

At the opening of the recently expanded Southern Seawater Desalination plant near Binningup in January 2013, Premier Colin Barnett reportedly declared that despite these climate challenges, Perth was now 'basically drought-proof'. Barnett has not always been such a champion of desalination.

In opposition, he had campaigned against the Labor government's plans to invest in desalination technology as the prospect of an impending water crisis in Perth was gaining ground in the lead up to the 2005 state election. Just a year earlier, mammologist Tim Flannery had predicted that Perth would become a 'ghost metropolis' because of the impact of anthropogenic climate change on the city's water supplies. Where water is in short supply, water security tends to equal electoral security. Tapping into popular support for harnessing the rivers of the country's north, Colin Barnett, then leader of the opposition, declared that a Coalition government would build a canal to bring the vast water resources of the Kimberley to Perth. But 'Colin's canal', as the plan became known, cost him the 2005 election.

Since taking government in 2008, Barnett has changed his tune. Seawater desalination technology and wastewater recycling are now at the centre of the Western Australian Water Corporation's ten-year strategy to ensure what it hopes to be 'water forever, whatever the weather' for its 1.9 million customers in Perth, Mandurah and the eastern Goldfields – more than three-quarters of the state's population. In the past decade, Western Australia has set the pace for desalination with its first plant providing water to Perth in 2006. Sydney, Melbourne and the Gold Coast followed suit, perhaps prematurely. Water managers from the US have been similarly impressed with Western Australia's desalination investments, with experts from California visiting the state in search of solutions to their own water woes.

THE SEA AND the sand, once sources of the Western Australian sense of extreme isolation, are now its salvation. Over the past two decades, innovations in reverse osmosis seawater desalination technology have made the Indian Ocean a viable source of water supplies for households and businesses. Two desalination plants south of Perth now provide nearly half of the city's water supplies and, as the Premier has noted, should demand rise 'you can always build more'.

But there are the environmental costs of 'drought-proofing' to consider. The marine environments of Perth's desalination plants are sensitive to the hypersaline discharge that is produced in the purification process. These plants not only have the potential to pollute the marine environment, but also the

atmosphere due to their carbon emissions. When desalination technology was first mooted as a solution to Perth's water crisis, critics were quick to point out the irony of the situation: a desalination plant would emit atmospheric gases – the very gases causing anthropogenic climate change, which was contributing to the region's drying trend. Mindful of this carbon footprint, the Water Corporation has offset the energy requirements of its desalination plants with wind and solar technology.

Meanwhile, extensive groundwater reserves lie beneath the sandy soils of Perth's Swan Coastal Plain, which have sustained the suburbs since the 1970s. Increasing demand and a drying climate have taken their toll on these fragile ecosystems; but a recently implemented strategy offers the possibility of improving the health of these groundwater reserves, while increasing the water supplies available to the Water Corporation's customers. Under this scheme, treated wastewater is added to these aquifers where it blends with the groundwater and is extracted later for water supplies. Recycling water in this way, the Water Corporation hopes, will ensure the people of Perth have 'water forever'.

The nature of this plan has been surprisingly uncontroversial – Perth has certainly been no 'Poo-woomba'. In 2006, residents of the Queensland town of Toowoomba voted against plans to add recycled wastewater to local water supplies, despite the prospect of severe water restrictions. Mindful of the potential for this outcome, the Western Australian government has not sought the people's permission, but instead surveyed Water Corporation customers and found three-quarters in support of the scheme. Significantly, the recycling of wastewater in Perth is an altogether different prospect than that which faced the residents of Toowoomba, where recycled wastewater was to be added to dams. Perth faces a more palatable alternative: following methods long practised in California's Orange County, recycled water is now replenishing groundwater reserves under the suburbs, which, as the state's Water Minister promised in 2013, will 'underpin Perth's water security'.

The recycling of wastewater has also helped Kwinana's industrial sector to reduce both its dependence on public water supplies and its impact on nearby Cockburn Sound. The region's industries depended heavily on local groundwater resources, but by the late 1990s it was clear that further supplies

would be necessary for industrial expansion. Meanwhile, three decades of industrial development, eutrophication and sand mining had taken their toll on this marine environment. In the 1980s, industrial discharge was cut to 40 per cent in an effort to curb this problem, but the damage was already done: nearly 80 per cent of the region's seagrass meadows had been destroyed. This combination of economic and ecological pressures encouraged industry to turn to recycled wastewater in 2004, which has since halved the sector's reliance on scheme water and lowered the amount of discharge flushed into the Sound.

But 'water forever' comes at a price. Desalination is an energy intensive source of water supply, and rising electricity costs suggest that water prices will soar. According to figures published by the Western Australian Council of Social Service on the eve of the 2013 state election, the average Perth household's water bill has tripled since 2005–06, even though water consumption per capita has dropped substantially over the past decade. More expensive water is only adding to the cost of living in Perth, which is already an expensive place to live.

WEALTH AND PRIVILEGE have long enabled better access to water in Perth. Outward signs of this status, such as the cultivation of gardens, became increasingly significant in the late nineteenth century when the introduction of reticulated water supplies widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Perth's long, dry summers made gardening during those months especially difficult without easy access to water, and only those with private supplies or with enough money to pay for reticulated water could cultivate summer gardens in the sandy soils. A year-round garden was a sign of prosperity, for the garden, like the house, had become an important symbol of middle-class status. It was a way of thinking that still associated a green garden or a leafy suburb with affluence and prestige, which may well account for the boom in backyard bores during the bans on garden watering in the late 1970s. Even though lawn has lost its appeal in some quarters, the association of a dry, unkempt garden with an uncivilised household remains particularly powerful in Perth.

Cleanliness is another late nineteenth-century symbol of affluence that, without a reliable water supply, is very burdensome to maintain.

Once piped water became available in Perth in the 1890s, many affluent residents invested in bathrooms, which allowed them to bathe more frequently than they had previously. By this time, cleanliness had assumed a civic importance in Australia, Britain and the United States, whereby its absence amounted to moral decay and social decline. These concerns prevailed well into the twentieth century, where they became a mechanism for discrimination and exclusion, particularly against the state's Aboriginal population.

Forced off country as the suburbs and agricultural areas grew, many of the region's Aboriginal families were expelled from towns in the South West after the First World War and thrust onto local reserves or into native settlements. Among the reasons for their expulsion was the view that they were carriers of disease and needed to be kept separate from the otherwise healthy (white) population. They were forced onto small reserves often situated near town rubbish dumps and sanitary depots, where there were inadequate water supplies and sanitation facilities. In the Wheatbelt, future Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck observed, 'Clothing is seldom washed – how can it be when there are no facilities for doing so or even vessels in which to carry sufficient water into the dwelling? The human body goes unwashed because there are no baths and often little water...'

Although Hasluck was sympathetic to their plight, more often than not white Western Australians blamed Aboriginal people themselves for their state of health and living conditions. Excluded from schools and hospitals due to their apparent disregard for hygiene and cleanliness, they were denied the very institutions that could have helped to improve their living standards and employment prospects. Their lack of access to clean water not only restricted access of the South West's Aboriginal families to education and healthcare, but also initiated a cascade of discriminatory effects that continued to be realised even after the policy of assimilation was introduced in the 1950s, promising equal citizenship and access to government services.

These suburban standards of civility reinforced the perceived need to ensure the provision of water supplies to the state's agricultural areas, especially after the Second World War. But although the reticulation of the Wheatbelt now supplies an impressive proportion of people living south of Geraldton, the sheer distances in the west mean that some must go without.

Recent conditions in the state's eastern Wheatbelt have made this painfully clear. A five-year run of bad seasons has hit many farmers particularly hard as mounting debts take their toll on families and rural communities. What their experiences show is just how much rural policy has changed in Australia. As that agrarian vision has faded, and economic policy and the climate have dried, farmers have become expected to 'drought-proof' themselves and to ensure their own 'climate independence' with very little assistance from state and federal governments. Once 'heroic victims of fickle nature', as historian Judith Brett has observed, drought-afflicted farmers have become 'merely bad risk managers'. It seems as though an act of collective amnesia has allowed these governments to forget the efforts of their predecessors to encourage agricultural settlement in climatically marginal areas that are vulnerable to water scarcity.

Growers closer to Perth, however, appear to fare quite differently. Those in the northern suburbs of Wanneroo and Gingin rely on the Gngangara Mound for the water they need to irrigate their fruits, vegetables, nurseries and turf farms. Despite the importance of this aquifer for public water supplies, the metering of the thirstiest groundwater users did not commence until 2007 and the Department of Water has since been extremely reluctant to police the extraction of water in the area. This approach seems to conflict not only with efforts to revive Perth's aquifers with recycled wastewater, but also with the Water Corporation's more hard-nosed approach to household violations of water restrictions. The contrast between the regulation of residential and horticultural consumers highlights a long history of political sensitivity surrounding productive and unproductive water use, as well as the ongoing inadequacy of groundwater protection in the South West.

IN LIGHT OF this water history, it is less surprising that the state government would celebrate the triumph of 'drought-proofing' the capital. South-west of Geraldton, Western Australians have developed a dependency on water that desperately demands more. They have a thirst that a government can ill-afford not to slake. But the region's drying climate remains a challenge. Since the mid-1970s, rainfall in the South West has declined by about 15 per cent, which can be partly attributed, climate scientists believe, to anthropogenic climate change.

But Western Australia is not alone. Despite the isolation of desert and distance, of sea and sand, Western Australians are not somehow separate from the rest of the planet, as the state's mining sector makes abundantly clear. Export wealth and job growth are the spoils, to paraphrase historian Geoffrey Bolton, of spoiling: Western Australian carbon emissions per capita are now the highest in Australia and among the highest in the developed world. And, in the drier conditions affecting the South West, this spoiling is plain to see. In 2002, Nobel Laureate chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer proposed that the enormous expansion of the use of fossil fuels since the eighteenth century has transformed humankind into a geophysical force causing planetary change. This 'hot breath of civilisation', to borrow from author Ian McEwan, has therefore given life to a new geological epoch – the Anthropocene. When seen in such planetary terms, 'drought-proofing' Perth seems like a drop in the ocean.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Ruth A. Morgan was raised in the southern suburbs of Perth, and completed her doctoral studies at The University of Western Australia. She now lives in Melbourne, where she lectures in history at Monash University. Her first book, *Running Out? Water in Western Australia*, will be published by UWA Publishing in 2015.

A very striking parasite

Cultural history of the Christmas tree

John Charles Ryan

I RECENTLY EMAILED a photo of the Western Australian Christmas tree, *Nuytsia floribunda*, to a Chinese friend in Nanjing. In uncharacteristically gushy fashion, she wrote back rapidly, ‘I like these yellow flowers. They are very beautiful like gold, like honey. I want to eat them!’ Associating my flowers with hers, she then reminded me of *meihua*, the elegant plum blossom, the subject of much adulation in China.

Often we in Australia know more about the charismatic plants of the northern hemisphere than we do our own. Cherries, roses, tulips, oaks. But what lore of this brilliant golden tree of my part of the world could I tell my virtual friend? To venture an answer, I must begin with a premise: the Christmas tree is a perfect contradiction.

The cultural history of *Nuytsia* offers a glimpse into what makes Western Australia distinctive. Its legacy reflects the curious and sometimes dismissive, sometimes glowing observations of naturalists, settlers, poets, artists and tourists – many of who regarded (and still regard) the intriguing tree as a symbol of the isolated landscape and its anomalies, conundrums and surprises.

The mellifluous name *Nuytsia floribunda* is of two inflections. The first bears the weight of Pieter Nuyts, the violent Dutch explorer and ambassador who mapped Australia’s southern coastline from Albany to Ceduna in 1626

on the Dutch East India Company's vessel *Gulden Zeepaard* (*Golden Sea-horse*). The crew recorded seeing *Nuytsia* near Walpole. However, I speculate that the first flashes of land spotted by an earlier Dutch mariner, Dirk Hartog, and those aboard the *Eendrachtsland* in early 1617 as they approached the coast of New Holland, could have been the young blossoms of the Christmas tree – burning yellow and orange, iridescent against the earthen browns and ochres of the landscape.

The second inflection, *floribunda*, evokes the incandescent aura swallowing the tree for several weeks in the late spring and early summer in Australia's South West. This ecoregion extends in a triangular shape from Shark Bay in the north-west to Israelite Bay in the south-east, close to the fabled ivory-sand beaches of Esperance. The South West is recognised internationally as a biodiversity hotspot with almost half of its plant species, including the Christmas tree, occurring nowhere else. Such a rate of plant endemism is extraordinary.

Nevertheless, few outside of Australia (and perhaps few within) would recognise a Christmas tree that is not an evergreen with a pleasingly tapering figure: rotund and earthward at the bottom, lean and heavenward at the top. But beauty oversteps the hard lines of biology, geography and culture. If beauty is a *language* (from *lingua*, the tongue), it can be tasted.

MY FRIEND'S SYNAESTHESIA aside, the WA Christmas tree *is* gorgeous enough to eat. Over one hundred years ago, Ethel Hassell became aware of this. In 1878, aged twenty-one, she took up pastoral life with her husband, Albert, at Jarramungup, a sheep station north-east of Albany. On a late December, post-Christmas trip to socialise with neighbours fifty miles away, Hassell reported 'in the distance on the plains a clump of the most beautiful tall trees covered with deep orange-coloured blossoms'. At closer range, she and Albert observed Noongar people busily prying up the roots, or *mungah*, of *Nuytsia*, 'tasting very like sugar-candy...sweet and more or less of a watery nature'. Not only a quick (though laborious, by the standard of the mini-mart) carb kick, *mungah* were woody reservoirs during the long dry of the Western Australian summer. Sources of 'beauty as well as bread' (to quote the early American nature writer John Muir), Christmas trees have been, for thousands of years, oases in these sandy plains hugging the Indian Ocean.

Indeed, to appreciate *Nuytsia* and its sweet side is to know the tree from the roots up – to avert one’s gaze from the easy magnetism of its flowering canopy and to become subterranean, at least figuratively. One of the world’s largest mistletoes, *Nuytsia* is half plant, half parasite. Its rootlets, known to botanists as haustoria, feel discerningly in the earth for various hosts, while its leaves convert sunlight into carbohydrates, as all good plants do. The tree is more accurately a hemiparasite – a producer and consumer that pilfers nutrients from other fibrous bodies (from banksias and couch grass to utility lines), a perfectly adapted contradiction comfortably at home in the thicket of binaries we impose on the natural world. In other words, as the early twentieth-century botanist DA Herbert put it, *Nuytsia* exerts ‘the power of independent existence after it has once become established’.

In 1919, Herbert became the first to confirm the uncanny parasitism of *Nuytsia* – a subject of sustained debate among Australian botanists until then. Lugging his lantern slides and photographs into the WA Museum at a meeting of the Royal Society, Herbert demonstrated ‘the method of attack... two white fleshy arms start to grow round the attacked root in opposite directions from the point of contact’. When the two ‘arms’ meet, they fuse, encircling the host root like a wire clamp. Herbert concluded that through ‘simple osmosis’ (rather than cellular synthesis between host and invader) the root’s ‘tongue-like masses of tissue’ furtively glean the food they are after through this process. But the haustoria never penetrate the host’s deeper layers of wood, indicating that the nutrition is supplemental, rather than primary. The evidence was well received. Herbert’s paper was applauded as ‘one of the most important that has ever been read before the society’.

In addition to banksias, utility lines have become foci of the hemiparasite’s oral fixation. Vincent Serventy, in his book *Dryandra: The Story of an Australian Forest* (Reed, 1970), provides an anecdote about the species’ disconcerting culinary habits and an unlikely target – a space tracking station (presumably the Muchea Tracking Station, 1960–64), connected by underground cables two centimetres in diameter buried thirty centimetres in the sandy soil and insulated with a polymer coating to thwart fungi, termites, acids and other agents of decay. Serventy wrote, ‘All went well until six months later. Somewhere the cables had short-circuited. The engineer

raised the cable and found encircling it rings of white flesh.’ The carnivorous clamping mechanism was the same that Herbert had described some fifty years earlier with lantern slides. To the dismay of NASA’s Project Mercury, the haustoria nibbled the plastic sheath, taste-testing the cables inside, but probably experienced a case of hemiparasitic indigestion. Serventy quips that *Nuytsia* would have suffered ‘some disgust, one imagines, as there would be little nourishment in those messages from outer space’.

But to label the haustoria ‘non-discriminating’, as many botanists do, is wrong-headed and verging on the ecologically impolite. Although seemingly misplaced at times, the root system is discerning, opportunistic and ardent. Considering that it evolved in the mid-Eocene – roughly fifty million years ago – sampling of the inorganic is to be expected. According to botanist Stephen Hopper, *Nuytsia* came about following a period of high sea levels when the coast of the South West consisted of islands and peninsulas. Adapted to the infertile and weathered soils of the ecoregion, the endemic flora, including the seasonally flamboyant Christmas tree, has thrived through isolation. Buried utility lines, in comparison, are newbies to the scene, the first telegraph line in Western Australia being laid from Perth to Fremantle in 1869. In another fifty million years, *Nuytsia* could figure out how to digest space-aged polymers. If intelligence entails, among other things, the capacity to evolve and adapt, then we have a genius in our midst.

In the Noongar language, the tree is *mudja*, a marker of *birok* – one of the six seasons in the traditional calendar of the South West. *Nuytsia* is intimately connected to the afterlife and, according to the early twentieth-century ethnographer Daisy Bates, has been considered ‘sacred for its spiritual memories’. As Noongar elder Noel Nannup explained to me, the Christmas tree’s ecology and spiritual significance are interwoven: ‘A spirit sits on the tree until it flowers. Then the spirit moves on to the spirit world in conjunction with easterly winds and fire, which take the spirit out over the sea.’

EARLIER LAST YEAR, I interviewed centenarian botanist David Goodall, who immigrated to Australia from England in 1948. In his university office (he still goes to campus each day) I asked what his first impressions

of Western Australia were. Without blinking, he answered: ‘The Christmas tree. A very striking parasite.’

Perhaps you have noticed already. *Nuytsia* is not your run-of-the-mill Aussie tree like, say, the gum (no offense, eucalypts). Since the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829, its combination of striking beauty and physiological peculiarity flummoxed observers and influenced its naming. Settlers came up with colloquialisms – many descriptive, some humorous, a few poetic.

‘Fire tree’ expresses the visual radiance of the species, framing the abundant blossom as a harbinger of burning. The golden profusion corresponds to the onset of bushfire season in the South West. In *A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony* (1839–40), the first substantial published account of the local flora, John Lindley comments that ‘such is the abundance of the orange-coloured blossoms, that the Colonists at King George’s Sound compare it to a tree on fire; hence it has gained the name of “Fire tree”.’ Lindley never visited the Colony (unlike the contemporaneous naturalist James Mangles); instead, he relied on the previous accounts of botanists and cartographers, as well as word-of-mouth from settlers.

Other scribes recorded ‘cabbage tree’ as an olfactory, tactile and visual moniker for *Nuytsia*. One would expect that the pungent, slightly foetid smell of the tree’s cut wood stung the nostrils of pastoralists as they cleared the vegetation. Just a few years ago, my own sniffing glands were overtaken by a whiff of broken Christmas tree as I tramped around a suburban Perth bushland reserve. Mild sinusitis and a vague feeling of euphoria ensued. Strangely pleasurable. In 1846, the settler George Fletcher Moore referenced the term ‘cabbage tree’ along with its Noongar and scientific names in the following: ‘Mut-yal, – *Nuytsia floribunda*; colonially, cabbage-tree. The only loranthus or parasite that grows by itself. Another anomaly in this land of contradictions. It bears a splendid orange flower.’ *Loranthus* refers to the showy mistletoe family, the Loranthaceae.

But the exact categorisation of the ‘anomaly’ into a plant family evaded morphologists during the nineteenth century. Philippe Édouard Léon van Tieghem, a colleague of Louis Pasteur, created the family Nuytsiaceae in 1896. But ten years on, Ludwig Diels reclassified the Christmas tree as a genuine Loranthaceae.

The algologist William Harvey, in a letter to *Hooker's Journal of Botany and Kew Garden Miscellany* in 1854, mentions *Nuytsia*. Concerning its parasitism, he thought 'it highly probable that there is underground attachment to the roots of other plants'. Like other botanical writers, Harvey liberally garnished scientific assessment with aesthetic impressions and folk knowledge, specifically the tree's unusual likening to one of the world's healthiest foods. But he strikes me as a bit cool and restrained – like a kelp, and unlike other more effusive *Nuytsia* commentators. 'It is a very deformed-looking tree at best, but gay enough when in blossom; its leaves, too, are of a very beautiful tender green. They call it the Cabbage-tree.' 'Cabbage' could either refer to the tenderness of its leaves or the ease with which the axes of settlers penetrated its pithy wood. The metaphor could also imply a modicum of stinkiness. These names persisted throughout the nineteenth century. For now, let's take all three senses of the figuration.

The most effusive colonial-era observer of our tree would have to be Marianne North. The peripatetic botanical artist produced a very fine painting of *Nuytsia*, now held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. In *Study of the West Australian Flame-tree or Fire-tree* (circa 1880), a gracefully fluted and pleasantly mottled trunk trifurcates about halfway between the earth and a crown of deep green foliage and golden tufts. North placed the elegantly composed *Nuytsia* – albeit curiously elm-like – at the crest of a rise, aside a foot track that descends to the vast floor of the purplish plains in the distance. This is most likely somewhere along the Darling Scarp, perhaps during North's overland trip to Perth shortly after her arrival at Albany.

I have been on the lookout for her Christmas tree for the last six years, since I came to Western Australia from the northern hemisphere. But I have yet to find such a symmetrical specimen in the wild or anywhere else. Instead, *Nuytsia* comes in all shapes and sizes, from spare-looking, wind-sculpted bushes near Lucky Bay in the region's south-east corner to dazzlingly unkempt hemiparasites near Perth Airport on the Swan River coastal plain. I agree with Harvey, most are 'very deformed-looking' trees, but their anomalous growth habits make them alluring, captivating, surprising. Their bark is dark and rough and, on older trees, fractures into a raised pattern of small crevasses and rectangular chunks.

North recounts her memory of *Nuytsia* in *Recollections of a Happy Life* (Macmillan, 1892), an impressive two-volume memoir detailing her travels from Canada, the United States and Brazil to India, South Africa and Western Australia. Surprisingly, I found an original copy of this work in the stacks of a local university library, not sequestered in a special collections area. In *Volume II*, she deploys the colloquialism ‘mistletoe tree’: ‘I shall never forget one plain we came to, entirely surrounded by the *Nuytsia* or mistletoe trees, in a full blaze of bloom. It looked like a bush-fire without smoke. The trees are, many of them, as big as average oaks in our hedgerows at home and the stems are mere pith, not wood.’ This curious pithiness later led to the cutting down of Christmas trees for recreational purposes – the wood of the species being ‘a resilient, though durable, target for steel darts’ – and sparked the outrage of conservationists.

In the 1920s, Emily Pelloe, another botanical artist, noted some of the folk beliefs surrounding *Nuytsia*. To pick its flowers before Christmas Day is unlucky. To use it as a wedding decoration is to bring misfortune to the bride. A few of these beliefs continue today. Like the anti-dart contingent, who opposed the harvesting of *Nuytsia* wood for the manufacturing of dartboards, Pelloe also pleaded for the conservation of the world’s ‘most gorgeous botanical spectacle’.

I WATCHED A lone *Nuytsia*, transplanted from the northern suburbs where its habitat was cleared for housing, languish for several years on the campus of my university, until one day it disappeared, removed surgically and silently by the grounds staff. It is known that uprooted Christmas trees rarely survive – their underground universes too sensitive, their ancient *logos* not readily translatable to another locale. Meanwhile, a stone’s throw away at the local golf course, they irrupted all through early summer like miniature suns, ‘like a fire in the woods’, as James Drummond remarked in the 1800s. It had been a sodden spring season. In remnant patches of vegetation in suburban Perth, hemiparasitic miracles go on as they have since the mid-Eocene, despite bushland clearing, vandalism and disease.

A *Nuytsia* specimen bloomed at the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1842, but died in 1883. Maybe North was aware of this. She finishes her glowing

recollection with a fitting disclaimer that ‘they have never succeeded in cultivating those trees in captivity’. Pelloe concurs regarding ‘the hopelessness of its artificial propagation’. This saga played out during Georgiana Molloy’s short life. At the behest of Mangles in 1839, Molloy took up the task of collecting seeds – an arduous preoccupation that would last until her death in 1843. She wrote apologetically to the captain, conceding that ‘I have been four times out in quest of *Nuytsia* and send you the small, small harvest. They are very difficult to obtain, if not there the very day they ripen.’

Molloy’s labours were much later memorialised by Alan Alexander in his beautiful poem ‘*Nuytsia Floribunda*’:

The parasite *Floribunda* for my drowned son.
How delicate they are, these stars at random.

Stars at random. Georgiana, her lost son and her elusive seeds bring home to me that this striking parasite is a heritage that can too easily be wiped out by unchecked ‘development’ in the South West and the global impacts of climate disturbance. The irony nowadays, to my mind, is that the fiery blossom continues to symbolise what is unique about Western Australia, while the uniqueness becomes increasingly threatened. State identity through endemic flora is not a new story. It sits uncomfortably alongside the destruction of plant life.

In 2010, at the request of the Premier’s Department, Jan Pittman’s illustration of *Nuytsia* was featured as one of Colin Barnett’s Christmas cards. Yet hundreds of *Nuytsia* were expunged in the summer of 2013 to make way for the expansion of Perth Airport. I feel a pang of loss tinged with revulsion as I pass along the Great Eastern Highway where the trees once stood, the first living specks of colour noted by visitors flying into Perth for the summer holidays. The ‘not threatened’ conservation status of *Nuytsia* cannot tell this story.

Recently, the Christmas tree has been selected by Earthwatch Institute as an indicator species. Its ClimateWatch initiative involves large-scale data collection by citizens in an effort to demonstrate the ecological impacts of climate change. Although the results are inconclusive, one aspect has been made clearer: *Nuytsia* is a highly resilient species that, for nearly fifty million

years, has evolved with a fire-prone landscape. And other species rely on it, just as it depends on them. For instance, the Christmas tree is the only suitable nesting tree for the yellow-rumped thornbill (*Acanithiza chrysorrhoa*) several years after a bushfire.

THE ‘VERY STRIKING parasite’ is a state of mind, a mode of consciousness in Western Australia. It’s an aureate tuft in peripheral vision. It’s a sting in the nose, a sweet watery sap. It’s beauty and bread. Marianne North got *Nuytsia* right – it occupies the centre, but also wafts in from the margin. It’s a perfect contradiction in an imperfect world.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

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ESSAY

Not so easy

Language for a shared history

Kim Scott

A YOUNG MAN – scarcely more than a boy – stands on a rock beside the deep sea. A whale surfaces next to him, almost within reach. I can't say if the boy *knows* the whale, but he knows *of* the whale: all his life he's watched families of them travel along this coast. Recently, he learned the words of one such journey.

The boy doesn't retreat from the rocky edge; he doesn't step away from the whale. Instead, he dances out onto the whale's back and dives into its spout. Inside the whale is like a cave, and its heart is a fire. Leaping with excitement, the boy prods and pokes that pulsing heat and sings the song he's so newly learned: the song of the whale. And the whale, resonating with song in its skull. Well, in English we use the word 'sounds' for what it does. The whale dives, the song goes deep. Boy and whale are one; and the boy's voice sings on as darkness closes around and the last silver bubbles slide away.

Even the bravest would begin to doubt...

I'm paraphrasing *Mamang* (UWAP, 2011), a picture book published from the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, which – to quickly add a disclaimer, declaration of interest and stubborn measure of shameless pride – I've been closely involved with over the last several years. This essay will consider a few of that project's publications, inspired as they are by ancient examples, and also how they came to be picture books.

For now, I want to stay with *Mamang*: its brave protagonist is a risk-taker, is he not? He trusts the heritage and upbringing that has delivered him to

this cusp of opportunity, this moment of choice and contestation. He also trusts himself.

Not so easy for a young Aboriginal man today.

I WANT TO know more about the protagonist of this story, to understand the way he thinks and sees the world. Of course, his language would help because, as David Crystal points out in *Language Death* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), a language – especially one that is relatively ‘pure’ and carries very little evidence of the influence of other languages – can ‘represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history’. However, although the picture book I’m citing is in the Noongar language as well as English, it is not so easy to share insights from such a brief form, or in a situation that consists of just you, me, and the English language upon the page.

I’m also uncomfortable trying to explain the boy’s worldview by reference to some generic ‘Dreamtime’, or some shared vernacular of ‘hunting and fishing’ or ‘mother earth’.

In *A Place for Strangers* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Tony Swain, writing as theologian more than anthropologist, claims the subject of an Aboriginal worldview has been irresistible ‘for those seeking primal wisdom, New Age enlightenment or cosmic awareness’ and even scholarly discussion often moves from ‘astounding superficiality to almost comical inventiveness’.

So there’s plenty of reason to stay well away from this topic, but I can’t help myself – and since Swain appears to know some of the dangers, I’ll stay with him a little longer. Swain argues that calling an Aboriginal worldview ‘timeless’ merely continues the tradition in Aboriginal studies of presenting Aboriginal ontology in its negative form. ‘Cyclical’ also doesn’t cut it, he claims, because: ‘We cannot help thinking of something cyclical except as a line returning into itself as to form a closed circle.’

Swain would have us understand that our protagonist’s worldview prioritises ‘place’ over ‘time’. The young man is a contextualised thinker and aware of the natural rhythms of his geographical place: rhythms of the moon, sun, stars and wind; of seasons shifting, of fecundity and harvest, of migrations and movements of various animals. Time is not absent: awareness of the

various intersections of all those natural rhythms can convey different ‘states of the world’ or a sense of ‘time-points of night and day’. Underpinning these rhythms, this pattern, are the ‘Abiding Stories’ and ‘Songlines’ of the place of his existence.

Bill Gammage, in *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (Allen & Unwin, 2012), in turn demonstrates that the sophisticated use of fire, coupled with this awareness of pattern and rhythm, enabled a life of abundance, a rich spirituality and ‘voluminous and intricate’ creative practice. Not just a warrior, though revelling in contestation and challenge, our protagonist is a well brought up young boy and in learning, piece by piece, the stories of his place, he is on the way to becoming a *birdiya*, a master of *biirt* or *bidi* – the sinew, the energy, the path.

But this essay will not be so grand as to explain Abiding Stories, as useful as the concept is. I will discuss a few picture books only, and how they came about. In shining a little light into a dark history, I can only point to what may seem like bubbles glistening in the darkness.

HERE’S ANOTHER FRAGMENT of story, this time one from the archive of official correspondence from early nineteenth-century Albany, Western Australia:

I hope His Excellency will see how desirable it is this Gang of Natives should be broke up more especially as they are those who know our habits, and are more civilised for having been so much with the Europeans, and will therefore sanction Mr Drummond being sent here for the purpose of taking the natives.

The ‘Gang of Natives’ this writer is betraying included members of a community that another colonial writer, a little over ten years earlier, had referred to as ‘Landlords’. They were hospitable and generous landlords at that, curious about new cultural ‘devices’ and cross-culturally competent enough to display the ‘habits’ of the other in the interests of cross-cultural communication. They took to clothes and food, boats and guns, and even the English language and its forms. Take the example of the Noongar Mokare,

singing the Scottish air ‘Oh where have you been all the day, Billy Boy?’ as his brother enters the hut where Mokare is sitting with soldiers, holding court. Still within the first twelve months of colonisation, Mokare is using the song to make a functional statement, to show he knows ‘their’ songs and to remain true to the classical Noongar tradition of exchanging songs and of understanding people by their sound.

Of course, it may well have been a mistake to be so curious, so accommodating and humane. Tiffany Shellam cites one concerned voice: ‘Mineng man, Oscar Colbung, told me of the ambivalence felt by some members of the Albany community about Mokare’s reconciliation statue. A peaceful warrior? What did that say about Mineng resistance, he pondered.’

Some might even call Mokare a ‘sellout’. I think this more than unkind.

Mokare died before seeing how the relationship between coloniser and colonised changed. More than likely, he would have acted differently once he realised that his emphasis on reciprocity and exchange was not shared. Noongar men Norn, Wylie and Bobby experienced such a change and, unable to access their land and its resources, raided stores and outwitted the forces organised against them, thus resisting the attempted imposition of values they believed destructive.

I compliment them on their resistance, but I do want to make the point that their initial response should not be dismissed as a mistake and something never to be repeated. They may have regretted some of their earlier actions, but I hope they wouldn’t want to stop ever acting in that manner. Like the boy encountering the whale, and improvising from the story he knew, it is a good thing to trust yourself and your place in an ancient heritage.

The story of our shared history is not yet over.

ONE OF THE above ‘gang of natives’, Wylie, also features in Edward John Eyre’s *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George’s Sound: 1840–41* (T&W Boone, 1845). Miscast as supporting actor, he is a significant figure. Eyre recounts their expedition across the Nullabor as one of deprivation and suffering, and no doubt it was. But perhaps, as Geoffrey Dutton wrote, Wylie spoke about it differently because when Eyre:

...went on board the *Truelove* for Adelaide after saying goodbye to his friends and to Wylie, who had given such rosy descriptions of South Australia to his tribe that dozens of them have asked Eyre to take them with him, and now as the ship worked out of the harbour boats followed it full of natives begging to let them come aboard.

Noongar people, although without seagoing technology of their own, were very enthusiastic about ships. Henry Lawson reported a kangaroo-skin-clad Noongar who, courtesy of twelve months on a French whaling ship, spoke fluent French. Tiffany Shellam reminds that a group of Noongar *asked* to be taken by ship from Albany to the fledging Swan River Colony, an area near the other extreme of Noongar country, clearly seeing the potential of ships as: ‘...vehicles for significantly extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country.’

The route whales followed along the south coast was in some places, depending on the prevailing winds, similar to that of the sailing ships. Perhaps people saw a connection between the two, with *Mamang* (the whale) a fundamental example of extending kin and geographic networks by maritime means.

In *Mamang*, the boy and the whale eventually run aground on a beach further west along the south coast. The stranded whale provides a feast, and an opportunity for people from far away to gather and feast and celebrate the protagonist. The hero is both cause and subject of songs and stories. At the end of the picture book he returns home with wives and children, enriched and better able to contribute to his home community.

Mamang rewards trust in oneself and the acceptance of challenges.

NOONGAR MAMBARA BAKITJ (UWAP, 2011) is another of the Wirlo-min picture books. Again, a young man is alone. Hunting, weaponless, he is following a very faint kangaroo trail with a concentration so intense he doesn’t realise – until they call out – it has led him to a group of what most Noongar people call *mamari* (*mambara* in the Wirlo-min Noongar dialect; let us call them ‘spirit-creatures’ for now). They greet one another, Noongar and spirit-creatures. The spirit-creatures are surprised this young man can even see this trail let alone follow it. They welcome him, wave him on.

Let me stay close to my own interests, at least metaphorically, and give the word ‘literacy’ to the protagonist’s rare talent for identifying and interpreting small marks. This is not such a conceit; in *Writing Never Arrives Naked* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), Penny van Toorn says reading and writing became ‘entangled’ with ancient oral traditions on the Australian continent and books weren’t seen as evil or irrelevant, but as curiosities to investigate. This was true of Noongar people also. Nakina, a Noongar guide, referenced the structural characteristics of one of the colonial era’s most popular literary forms when, in performing an account of an expedition he’d led, he offered ‘a detailed recollection of the various incidents and scenery, arranged in the form of a Diary, where each day was designated by some leading distinctive mark, in place of numerals.’

This is not the only example of this group of WA’s First Peoples propensity for literacy. Gallypete, one of the intrepid party of Noongar who sailed to the Swan River Colony as a particularly early adopter of new devices, made a pen-and-ink diagram of the layout of a camp.

Sometimes, these new cultural products were exploited in tandem. As Amy Gardos wrote in her Masters thesis, ‘Several of them learned the alphabet in English very readily and I understand one boy was taught to read well by a crew of a sailing ship.’

The archives reveal further examples of the dynamic nature of Noongar oral tradition, and its sampling of new language and forms in the attempt to capture new experience. A Noongar song collected around the turn of the twentieth century begins in English, ‘Captain on a rough sea’, and goes on to offer the point of view of a sailor looking through his telescope at the shore. It shows how song and story provide, in the words of the Western Australian novelist Elizabeth Jolley, ‘sophisticated spaces where people might meet’.

What do these old stories and tales from the archives have in common? I deal them out thinking: intellectual agility, curiosity, bravery...and choose not to focus on that ubiquitous cultural device of the frontier, the gun. However, in 1851 *The Inquirer*, a south-west WA newspaper, shows even that from another perspective:

The natives have had so much of their own way lately, that half measures will not do with them now; for instance, a party of them

came to one of the stations on the Salt River a few days ago, and they were driving away about 20 of the sheep; the shepherd pointed a gun that he had at them to frighten them, but instead of which, they came all round him with their spears fixed, and told him if he did not put it down, they would spear him; he put the gun down, and one that goes by the name of Cape Riche Bobby, and who is leader of a strong party of the natives, took hold of the gun, and took out the flint; returned the ramrod, and sprung it in the barrel; finding there was nothing in the gun, he said to the shepherd 'that gun nothing in him; you cannot shoot him; all the same [as a] piece of wood', and then threw the gun away from him.

Apparently, Cape Riche Bobby told the shepherd he'd be back next day for the rest of the sheep! Of course he knew about violence, but I reckon his behavior shows someone more experienced with conflict being resolved by something more akin to ritual contestation than bullying or a brutal 'might is right'.

THE YOUNG NOONGAR man in *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* finally tracks down the kangaroo. He kills it with his bare hands, easily and quickly. On his return journey, as a mark of respect, he hands a portion to the spirit creatures whose permission he had earlier gained. However, another of them, a stranger, later accuses him of theft and disrespect, and challenges him to a duel with boomerangs. So begins a day-long tussle of stamina and skill, throwing and dodging missiles of which there is a never-ending supply, because each retrieves the weapons his opponent has thrown. Tiring, realising it is late in the day, the Noongar makes one last throw. His opponent recognises the boomerang, a special one from ancestors he had not intended his opponent to get hold of. He tries to catch it and then – standing beneath where it is spinning so fast that it is described as like a waterhole in the sky – is transfixed by his own reflection. The young Noongar has discovered something about himself in the handling of that boomerang. Feeling his new power, he rises into the sky. His community celebrates his return. Better than food, he has greater wealth – a story!

Meanwhile, back at the battle site... The boomerang clatters to the ground. The Noongar's opponent picks it up. He has the boomerang, but

not the power to ignite its magic. He sits alone by his campfire, weighing the boomerang in his hands, feeling its heft. But now it is inert.

Contrast the characters in this conflict: one, defensive and demanding, enclosed in a very small world, isolated. The other – our hero – polite and respectful, but curious and up for any challenge, who travels far from home, excels in new challenges and returns as the centre of celebration.

You might think a member of a community with a history of racist oppression is more likely to identify with the first of these characters. Yet two of the oldest of stories would allocate a quite different role, and one well suited to participation in a modern, globalised world. In both *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, the hero ‘orbits’.

I have dealt my hand: episodes from the archive history of the south coast of WA, bits of a couple of stories emanating from a small, language project on the south coast of WA. I say the protagonists are of a kind. Yes, from a current perspective the conduct of historical Noongar figures, who were accommodating and contributed so much to a so-called ‘friendly frontier’, can seem awkward and mistaken. Narratives of organised resistance needed to be sustained in order to move on from the accepted fantasy – familiar from the days of my schooling as a youth – that Aboriginal people were so inferior and/or lacking in backbone that they simply relented, laid down and died. But retelling stories only of military resistance while living among what often seems the consequences of defeat – the empirical evidence that creates a need to ‘close the gap’, a disenfranchised people alienated from the wider community, the seemingly endemic racism – is in itself to be trapped in a reductive loop.

Or so I might say. But I am novelist, no spokesperson; I speak only for myself. ‘To narrate is to give oneself,’ says Eduardo Galeano in his wonderful essay, ‘In Defence of the Word’. In truth, and reluctant as I am to be cast beside him, I have sometimes felt a little like that spirit-creature in *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*: sitting alone, cradling the heft of an antique cultural product, unable to make it do what it might. Of course in my case, that artifact was not the boomerang but the novel.

I’d like to think there is a place for literature, for story, in social transformation. I’d like to think a ‘creative writer’ can ‘awaken consciousness’ and

‘reveal identity’, as Galeano claims. It is a small and modest thing, to attempt to say what it means to be an Aboriginal literary writer.

It is not the sort of thing of which one can complain with dignity, but I have found myself torn by literary success. I think it is some variation of that ‘postcolonial’ dilemma: writing in the language of the coloniser, for an audience overwhelmingly representing the coloniser. And if one has some success? Galeano again: ‘Mistrust applause: it may mean you have been rendered innocuous.’

But he also says – and this will be his final word (though it is a wonderful essay) – ‘a “revolutionary” literature written for the convinced is just as much an abandonment as is a conservative literature devoted to the...contemplation of one’s own navel’.

IT WAS PARTLY because of this ambivalence about being a novelist (and some desire to be more useful as a writer) that I began what I thought to be ‘literary work’ with elders close to me. Writing a book, *Kayang and Me* (Fremantle Press, 2013), with Noongar elder Hazel Brown also created, as a sort of side product, the beginning of a database of sorts that consisted of various recordings of her and her siblings, and included notes she’d made as part of research for Land Rights, as we called it before the stumbling entrance of Native Title legislation. That database included Noongar language material. I didn’t know much Noongar language. Nor did many of her children or nieces and nephews.

Cross-referencing her material with published and archival material, I encountered the papers of a linguist who’d spoken to a number of Noongar men whose names often came up in Hazel Brown’s reminiscences. She would have only been five years old in 1930 when he’d recorded their stories in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). She introduced me to a man in his seventies, the eldest son of one of the informants. Another elderly couple, brother and sister, were the children of another informant who’d passed away when they were infants. The linguist in question, Gerhardt Laves, was a student of the renowned linguist Edward Sapir, and his use of the IPA gave us a much better idea of the sounds of the language than the idiosyncratic spelling used by less professional recorders. I learned the IPA and used it to map the speech of current elders.

To shorten what might become a very long essay, let me say that, chiefly guided by Hazel Brown, her brother Lomas Roberts and sister Audrey Brown (and others close to them), we arrived at a group of people descended from all of the informants and strongly grounded in the contemporary south-coast Noongar community. We asked those people to invite others to consider what was in the collection.

There was little institutional involvement at this stage, although we'd helped a university develop a protocol around the use of a digitised part of the collection. We hired a scout camp on the outskirts of Albany and organised some food. Those identified as key descendants invited others to a gathering about language and stories that was held on a cold and bright Saturday morning. There were perhaps fifty people. Within ten minutes of beginning the meeting – still at the stage of welcomes and introductions – nearly everyone in the room was in tears.

Why? Nowadays we only get together like this at funerals, the elders said. Perhaps our emotion was a response to loss – the sheer number of those funerals and of the knowledge that had died with people – and yet it might have been that, somehow, by gathering around words on bits of paper and pieces of plastic we thought we could restore a connection to them, to an ancient heritage we thought so very special and threatened. The stories, like the heroes that featured in some of them, had orbited back to us.

We had no definite strategy, but we knew we didn't want these stories to be hidden in the custody of a few, to become the stuff of brokerage, and that we hoped to find a way – despite the inaccessibility of an esoteric alphabet and our limited skills – to bring them to life.

We only had rather vague ideas for how to do that. It is much easier to collect in retrospect what we improvised from our own limited resources.

One by one, individuals and couples were called to the front of the group and handed their elders' stories.

Three or four of the stories that seemed relatively accessible were written on large sheets of paper spread across the floor. The writing was not only in the IPA but also in contemporary Noongar orthography and vocabulary, along with some alternatives drawn from our own elders. The appropriate elders worked through these, with others in the background. A

number of us scribbled over these nascent texts as we spoke. We recorded the discussion.

Details were added, memories of the informants shared; we sounded the words, felt for the link between print and sound and ourselves, where it felt right and wrong. What was this paperwork and scholarship? Maybe the linguist got it wrong? Language changed. How much? This ‘value-adding’ came from a rare co-location of archive and oral history. Eventually, Hazel Brown surmounted the distrust of ‘paperwork’. As she said at the Wirlomin workshop in 2006: ‘Well, they were our elders, *unna*? They would know more than us.’

A beginning.

Something resembling what I have described continues, as the first in each series of workshops. A number of such series have been conducted. Some of the stories arising from the workshop drafts, and later cross-referenced with other archival and published language sources, have become picture books. Sometimes they have been close versions of the archive, sometimes merely inspired by them and sometimes the result of tangential discussion.

The second workshop is to illustrate the stories. You get closer to a story that way. It’s also about ways of sharing stories and finding new skills and forms. Usually one person is selected to illustrate a particular story, though sometimes it’s a collective effort.

At a third workshop, somewhere between fifty and a hundred draft picture books – each with an accompanying CD of the story being read aloud – are formally handed out at a community meeting: gifts to recognise allies, to consolidate stories, to invite critique and comment.

Twice now we have then made a trip with about thirty core individuals to ‘reinsert’ stories in their landscape. For some, this has meant returning to ancestral country for the first time. As Roma Winmar said at the Wirlomin Camp in 2008:

It’s very emotional. I feel full. I feel full of tears, I feel full of joy. It’s hard to explain, like when somebody’s been away for a very long time and they’ve returned on a journey and you rush out to meet them and there’s all these hugs and tears and... It’s a joy, but you’re shedding tears and it’s the same sort of thing... Being here with this

mob it's great. Before my mother died – she had a massive stroke – and before she died she said, 'Roma, soon as I get better I'll take you back down to where I came from and I'll take you to all these places'. The project now has enabled me to come to these places but without my mother, and I suppose it's feeling the loss of her not being here... But maybe she is here, in spirit, and that dream is being fulfilled for me I just... (indicates tears)... Take no notice. It's a spiritual journey, to be walking this way again, reinforcing that bond to country.

We film memories of camping grounds, dance sites, show bush tucker in the places it's always been, feel for the pulse of an old land.

The fourth prepublication stage involves presentations to schools and community groups. There's usually about eight people sharing the stories, singing songs, showing how we put them together and generally raising awareness of Noongar culture.

Noongar stories and language have not been central to the school curriculum in the Great Southern region of WA. But students and teachers have asked to attend our sessions, and Noongar students speak up in recognition of names and faces in the project and with their own versions of the stories and characters in them. A song in Noongar language, written by a parent, was sung at a school assembly. These are small things in the scheme of things, but the rarity is a measure of their value. It's a double journey for most of the presenters: from the periphery to the centre and from the inside, outward. After the Wirlomin school tour in 2010, Connie Moses said:

I'm just so proud to be part of the journey. We are a team, you know, and we're growing together. I just can't wait to get up and dance and sing. It's just so wonderful to hear everyone speak, especially the elders. Uncle Russell, from earlier in the week to now has just been inspiring, listening to you. Fantastic.

Russell Nelly echoed similar sentiments in the same tour:

I wanna tell you it's a privilege to share what we feel with the kids... I get emotional at times, but when I get emotional I'm listening to the

old fellas. Because they're talking to me, along with them talking to you guys... Prior to this I was lost. I had circumnavigated Australia three times looking for my identity and it brought me all the way back to Katanning. I heard of the Wirlomin mob, I thought no, they don't want me. That's all changed now. We've got something tangible, I always tell you we've got something tangible. What we've lost, we are resurrecting it. So my people, we go with our head up high, proudly.

I think the satisfaction and strength articulated in these comments, made at the end of a week of presentations to schools and small community groups, comes from being at the centre rather than the periphery of things and seeing one's identity and heritage validated and affirmed. This empowerment – if we may call it that – has come from giving. That is the curious paradox of telling a story to an audience. Satisfaction and strength comes both from the stories, and from sharing them.

I can't pretend that the process I've described is a result of careful and strategic planning. Much of it has been improvised according to developments and the people available, and is motivated by a conviction that this heritage of stories and language is important; all the more so when it occurs in their place of origin and with the attention of a home community of descendants.

The project chose picture books as a form merely because they allow for multiple producers and presenters. Publication happens toward the end of the series of workshops I've described, and by then a relatively large number of people know the stories and how they've come to fruition, and are available to help schools and students engage with them. We have formed an incorporated body to which artists and authors give their copyright, and into which royalties are paid to help fund the continuation of the project.

This process – of ever-widening, concentric circles – allows a drip-feed of stories to a wider audience, even as a specific heritage is both consolidated and enhanced.

Sometimes the sense of empowerment is surprising. Sometimes the process seems almost transformative. Let me give some examples.

On the occasion of a presentation of storybooks to significant people in the local Noongar community in Albany, our advising elders insisted we invite a certain elderly member of a local pioneering farming family. I resisted this,

pointing out that the man's family had stolen our land and had generations of our clan working as virtual slaves on their properties. Yes, yes, the elders agreed, that cannot be denied. But, they continued, he grew up with us. He had spoken Noongar language as a child and still knows the language and songs today.

So he was called to the front of an almost exclusively Noongar gathering and formally presented with a set of stories. There were tears in his eyes as he returned to his seat. Those tears alerted me to a curious transfer of power.

IN ANOTHER INSTANCE, we took a story back to a region infamous for the killing of Noongar people in the late nineteenth century, which for that reason is still today regarded by some as 'taboo'. The river that runs between properties owned by a particular family is a key feature of this story, and one of those properties is the one where much of the killing had reportedly been initiated. We thought ourselves intrepid to be returning to the region with the stories and sounds of ancestors, but had not anticipated being invited onto the property itself. Two old brothers whose family had bought the property in the 1920s, some four decades after the infamous killing began, issued the invitation. They prepared a barbeque for us, offered a speech acknowledging prior ownership by our community and expressing their grief at the horror of shared history. They presented us with grinding stones collected – they said with embarrassment – further up river. They took us to sites on their properties: rock waterholes still covered with slabs, freshwater springs in the rocky bed of a salt river, an area rich with yams. After asking about a site mentioned in the story that had brought us back to this region, they led us to what had been a dancing ground. Even now, nothing but grass grew within the rough circle of old and dying sandalwood trees. Such sites are integral to a reconnection with the past, but also to filling in the gaps in the network of the region's sites, its pathways and stopping points.

The elders in our group had not thought they would ever return, even temporarily, to this particular area of ancestral country in their lifetimes – let alone with its stories and language – and to be acknowledged in this way.

Who knows? Such things, humble as they are, may be the harbingers of social transformation. For a moment, let us be grandiose. There is a theory, articulated in *Dark Side of the Dream* (Allen & Unwin, 1990), that Australian society is characterised by the fissure between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

society, that the fragments of the mother colony have long been held together by the threat of the Aboriginal other, which must remain outside of the social pact. This structure, they say, creates a distinctively Australian psychosis.

Some of the things I have described – the empowerment arising from the school tours, the alteration in power relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at the community meeting and on the farm – hint at the possibility of a change to this structural situation, a change that stems from the merest fragments of ‘Abiding Stories’ and their language being rejoined with their rightful owners.

Programs of Aboriginal language revitalisation are often claimed to have a benefit beyond their more immediate concerns. Thus, Lesley Jolly wrote in 1995: ‘Language loss, language retention, and the possibility of language revitalisation, then, can be emblematic of the whole history of colonial dispossession, Aboriginal persistence and a self-assertive and self-determined future.’

Much can be said of the healing and improved social outcomes for Aboriginal people that can result from reconnection to a pre-colonial cultural heritage. But there may also be the possibility of a wider social transformation in such programs.

Regional Aboriginal heritages are major denominations in a currency of identity and belonging: of what it is to be Australian. This is an exchange to be negotiated, of course, but the very structure of storytelling puts the storyteller at the centre, not locked out of the relationship. And there is that paradox of empowerment through giving. Perhaps this is further reason, beyond some desire to ‘close the gap’, for being an ally in the ‘healing’ of regional Aboriginal communities, because only through relationships with these communities can other Australians have the possibility of resonating with the deep rhythms of a continent’s Abiding Stories.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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The native seeds of Augusta

Georgiana Molloy's botanical exchanges

Jessica White

'MUCH TO MY surprise in Dec last I received a particularly choice box of seeds, and your polite note, requesting a return of the Native seeds of Augusta,' wrote Georgiana Molloy on 21 March 1837, in her first letter to Captain James Mangles, an amateur botanist in London. Molloy had emigrated from England to south-west Western Australia with her husband John Molloy, arriving in 1830. Her phrase refers to the exchange of seeds – both English and Australian – which was to become the foundation of her relationship with Mangles. Yet her inclusion of the adjective 'native' to describe these seeds signals a problematic relationship with the flora and with the Noongar people who helped to collect the seeds for her.

Molloy, born in Carlisle in England in 1805, was devout in her Presbyterian beliefs and prone to proselytising. She was accustomed to a life of leisure and numbered botany among her interests. Her husband had fought against Napoleon, but after becoming a captain in 1824 and finding further promotion elusive, he proposed to Georgiana in 1829 and the couple set sail for the Swan River Colony. Upon their arrival, however, the Molloyes found the settlement process in chaos. Together with a handful of other emigrants, they elected to sail south to the new town of Augusta, the third British outpost in

the colony regally named after the sixth son of King George III, the monarch who lost Britain's North American colonies. A few days after they landed, the heavily pregnant Georgiana gave birth to their first child, a girl. Over the course of ten days, the baby became progressively unwell, then died.

Molloy's nauseating stress and sense of being out of place in an environment made me empathise with her in that tent on the shores of Augusta, her first child dying in her arms. She was in the driving rain, beyond which were the strange cries of birds and a landscape of towering trees that she described to her sister Elizabeth Besley in 1832 as 'the unbounded limits of thickly clothed dark green forests where nothing can be described to feast the imagination'. Not only was the land surrounding her inexpressible, but so was her grief. Of her child's death, she wrote three years later to her friend Helen Story, who had also lost a child, 'I truly sympathise with you, for language refuses to utter what I experienced when mine died in my arms in this dreary land.' Adding to her inarticulation was her faltering faith, as she continued in the letter, 'I have not made the use of those afflictions God designed... I thought I might have had one little bright object left me to solace all the hardships and privations I endured and have still to go through. It was wicked and I am not now thoroughly at peace.' As historian Pat Jalland noted in *Australian Ways of Death* (Oxford University Press, 2002), a wavering belief was not uncommon in the colonies, where isolation, hardship and a dearth of clergymen and congregations could encourage a move towards secularism. Through James Mangles, however, Molloy found a new language and a new faith: that of the flora of the South West.

SEVEN YEARS AFTER her arrival, during which time she bore another three children, Molloy's son fell into a well and drowned. Just prior to this event, Molloy had received her first letter from Mangles asking her to collect botanical specimens and seeds. James Mangles entered the Royal Navy in 1800 at fourteen and became a captain fifteen years later. Shortly thereafter, he left the navy to travel and in 1831 sailed to Perth to stay with his cousin Ellen Stirling, wife of the colony's founding governor Sir James Stirling. Through her, he made the acquaintance of several people in the colony, including Molloy, and asked them to collect specimens and seeds.

Mangles, who owned a gracious, two-storeyed terrace in Regent's Park in London, had connections with the Loddiges family in Hackney, one of the most notable traders in exotic flora in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Joseph Paxton, the gardener at Chatsworth and designer of the Crystal Palace for the 1851 Great Exhibition; and John Lindley, the first professor of botany at University College London, all of whom were caught up in the rage for collecting Australian flora. Part of their excitement stemmed from the flourishing interest in botany and scientific exploration prompted by the Enlightenment. Another aspect was its association with prestige, particularly as plants were renamed to honour particular figures (for example, there are around 170 species of banksia, named for Joseph Banks, who collected the first specimen on Captain James Cook's voyage).

On 28 January 1838, Molloy began her second letter to Mangles. In her first she had complained of a lack of time to collect seeds, for 'as all my former pursuits have necessarily been thrown aside (by the peremptory demands of my personal attention to my children and domestic drudgery) I fear it will be long ere I can make an adequate return in Australian productions.' However, in this second missive, she wrote: 'Since my dear Boy's death I have, up to the present time, daily employed myself in your service.' Mangles' request had encouraged her to go into the bush to take her mind from her grief.

For Molloy, collecting for Mangles ripened into an obsession, replacing her former mania for religion. Her correspondence is peppered with accounts of her devotion to her botanical project. In a letter from June 1840, she wrote, 'scarcely a day passes I am not thinking what I can do or how in any way I could promote your cause'. Earlier that year, on 31 January 1840, she gushed, 'I never met with anyone who so perfectly called forth and could sympathise with me in my prevailing passion for Flowers.' Despite the overwrought tone of her letters, Molloy's reverence was not only for Mangles, but also for herself. Her gratitude was apparent in her letter of 25 January 1838, in which she thanked him 'for being the cause of my more immediate acquaintance with the nature and varieties of those plants that we exchanged for the productions of our own country...but, for your request, I should never have bestowed on the flowers of this wilderness any other idea than that of passing admiration.'

Molloy, although she had enough training in botany to know how to collect, dry and mount specimens and their seeds, did not have a scientific understanding of botany, because it was impossible for women to participate in institutions that taught botanical science. As Ann Shteir notes in *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science* (John Hopkins University Press, 1996), women were not permitted to join the Royal Society or Linnean Society (the world's oldest biological society), attend their meetings or be published in their journals. Women were also rarely educated in Latin, which was needed to read the names by which plants were classified using the Linnaean system, as laid out by Carl Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* of 1735.

Despite this lack of formal training, Molloy was skilled and attentive enough to her craft to earn the praise of the men to whom Mangles distributed her specimens. Joseph Paxton, on reading copies of her letters made by Mangles, commented in June 1839 that, 'They have been written by one who is devoted to the promotion of Botanical interest in this Country and zealously able to fulfil the task of collecting Seeds.' Molloy eventually became confident enough at her work to declare to Mangles in an undated letter of June 1840, 'when I sally forth either on foot or Horseback, I feel quite elastic in mind and Step; I feel I am quite at my own work, the real cause that enticed me out to Swan River.'

SEARCHING FOR BOOKS for an English assignment in the library of the University of California, Berkeley, where I was an undergraduate student, I was struck by the title of a work written by William J. Lines, *An All Consuming Passion* (University of California Press, 1996), which I found in the stacks. Its grainy cover of shadowy red leaves and the story within of that nineteenth century English woman, Georgiana Molloy, captivated me. Her letters, I recognised, were those of a person who delighted in language. In an epistle of 14 March 1840, for example, Molloy described the petals of a flower as of 'a downy white feathery appearance, and emit a most delicious perfume, resembling the bitter almond, and like all human or rather mortal delicacies, how quick these lovely flowers fall from the stalk on being collected'. I recognised Molloy as an example of one of those women who, although never published

because of their gender, were still writers. I kept the book in mind and returned it to the library.

The next year, as an honours student at Wollongong University, I found another biography of Molloy, *Portrait With Background* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1955) by Alexandra Hasluck, which contained further extracts of her letters. The sensual tone of her writing to Captain Mangles struck me as being quite different to her harried correspondence with family back in England. I showed them to my supervisor. 'Look,' I said, 'she's flirting with him!' I subsequently penned a thesis on Molloy's literary seduction of Mangles, positing that she needed Mangles to keep writing to her so that she could continue collecting, for botany had become her vocation.

By the end of that year, I still couldn't get Molloy out of my head. Being a fiction writer and a scholar, I began to weave Molloy's poetic responses to her environment into a novel. In order to carry out research for the work I needed to travel west and October 2001 saw me on a train trip from coast to coast across Australia. Ansett Airlines had just collapsed and I couldn't afford the skyrocketing prices for airfares. Thus it was a three-day journey across the Nullabor to Perth, sitting upright all the way.

I specifically wanted to learn about the flora of south-west WA to find an Australian version of the European language of flowers. This language, which became so prevalent it was given a scientific term, 'floriography', initially existed in the Orient. It was brought to the attention of Europeans through the letters of Lady Wortley Montague, in which she reported a means of communicating through objects and flowers. A few years later, Charlotte de La Tour published *Le langage des fleurs* (Garnier Freres, 1858), which is generally accepted as instigating the language of flowers. Each flower had a symbolic meaning attached to it and the recipient, after observing the position of flowers in a bunch and looking up their meanings, deduced what their sender was saying.

Molloy was no stranger to the language of flowers. Writing to Mangles on 31 January 1840, to thank him for some gifts, she commented, 'The beautifully executed illustrations of the "Greenhouse" the Language, and Sentiment of Flowers I could look at repeatedly with unwearied pleasure.' It is likely that Mangles had sent her *Flora's Lexicon: An Interpretation of the Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (Hooker and Claxton, 1839).

This journey of texts about flowers and botany from England to Australia mirrored the situation whereby Molloy sent specimens to Mangles on the opposite side of the world and waited for him to give her their Latin names by post. She was insistent in her requests for names, beginning with her letter dated 25 January 1838, enclosed with her first collection, in which she asked that he would ‘oblige me by sending me the names of the different flowers.’

By eradicating the names given to plants by Noongar people and replacing them with new names using the Linnaean system, British colonists and naturalists claimed the country for their own. The effect of this was a dislocation, as Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid writes in *My Garden (Book)* (Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1999): ‘This naming of things is so crucial to possession – a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away – that it is a murder, an erasing.’ Yet Molloy’s lack of education in Latin, and the long wait for the names of plants to arrive in the post, meant that she was receptive to some of the Noongar names for plants. On describing a particular tree, she wrote to Mangles on 14 March 1840, ‘The native name is *Danja*, and I rather think it will turn out to be a *Hakea*.’ Molloy’s attempt at classification was not quite correct, however. As Ian Abbott writes in his paper ‘Aboriginal Names for Plant Species in South-Western Australia’ (Forest Department of Western Australia Technical Paper No. 5, 1983), the plant to which she refers is *Xylomelum occidentale* or, in keeping with the European habit of giving common names to plants according to their similarity to European specimens, the woody pear.

Molloy’s receptivity to the original names for Australian plants was mirrored in her largely amicable exchanges with local Noongar people, who helped with her collecting. Once, while she was ill, she was surprised ‘to receive a nosegay from a Native who was aware of my floral passion’ (June 1840). When she was recovering from this illness, she rode out with her husband and a Noongar guide. They needed to cross a creek, but it was too high, as she wrote to Mangles later that year:

...you would have smiled to see me urging on my horse in the middle of the River, & the Native Calgood, calling out Laddy Molloa! ‘*Mocho too much.*’ ‘*Mocho too much.*’ We returned on Calgood’s

promising to find a more fordable part which never occurred however he did not lose our purpose, as I saw that no time must be lost in collecting specimens.

In using a guide – one who was obviously kind and dedicated – Molloy followed the practice adopted by early explorers and professional plant hunters. These guides, as Philip Clarke writes in *Aboriginal Plant Collectors* (Rosenberg, 2008), were essential members of expeditions into unmapped regions, acting as trackers and collectors.

Despite the Noongar people's helpfulness, violence against them steadily increased. John Molloy was responsible for leading an attack, while the neighbouring Bussell brothers executed many more. Georgiana Molloy, while not directly involved in this physical violence (although on one occasion she frightened Noongars from her house by showing them a pistol), remained implicated in colonialism through renaming the flora of the South West, another step in erasing their culture.

IF THE ERADICATION of a language can contribute to a culture's erosion, so too can the restoration of that language establish a sense of identity and solidarity. The emotional response of Noongar people to the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project indicates how important language and stories are for creating both presence and continuity. In light of this, it's heartening to see Kings Park in Perth hosting Indigenous Heritage Tours to disseminate information about Aboriginal botanical and cultural knowledge.

What is it that draws a researcher to particular subjects? Elizabeth Birmingham suggests in *Beyond the Archives* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2008) that: 'The researcher's sixth sense isn't the ability to see the dead but our potential to help the dead, who do not know they are dead, finish their stories, and we do this in the moment in which we realise that their stories are ours.' Molloy, who died at thirty-seven from puerperal fever after the birth of her seventh child, never received formal recognition for the plants she collected. Meanwhile, Mangles, her beneficiary, had what was to become the floral emblem of Western Australia, *Anigozanthos manglesii*, named after him by David Don, professor of botany at King's College,

London. It is in this context – that of a woman writer overlooked by history – that I have researched and found inspiration in Molloy’s story. In 2007, *A Curious Intimacy*, my novel planted with the seeds of Molloy’s life, was published by Penguin. Georgiana Molloy’s efflorescence had contributed to my own.

Note: Molloy’s letters to Mangles are held at the Batty Library, State Library of Western Australia, ACC 479A. Her diaries and letters to family and friends are also held at the Batty Library, ACC 501A.

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Possessed by mining

Booms, bargains and beastly governments

Sarah Burnside

'I AM SO sick,' my friend remarked, 'of hearing about the fucking mining boom.' It was 2009, and for the past few years mining had seemed omnipresent in the texture of both our everyday lives and the wider world. I was working as a native title lawyer representing claim groups in the Pilbara, which included negotiations with mining companies, and everyone else I knew seemed connected with the industry in some way. Friends, relatives and people I met at parties provided legal services to the resources sector, worked within it as engineers, or drove trucks on the mines. Newspapers breathlessly reported announcements of some new project or other and the latest disputes between companies; fluctuations in iron ore prices occupied our conversations.

A few years on, with the initial exploration and investment boom well and truly over, it remains almost impossible to write about Western Australia without discussing mining, yet anyone seeking to do so faces a number of treacherous clichés: that the state is both ruggedly individualist and rusted-on conservative; that mining occurs 'on the frontier'; that there is something innate that sets the state and its inhabitants fundamentally apart from the rest of the country. It's worth, instead, taking a second glance at notions of possession and legitimacy that lurk in the background when we talk about mining.

Arguments about property rights are, at base, about the kind of society we want and the kind of people we think we are – questions that burn away quietly in our largest state, and merit exploration.

Our system of mineral ownership has deep roots: under English common law the precious minerals – gold and silver – belonged to the Crown. This principle was extended on the Australian continent, where self-governing colonies legislated to reserve rights to all minerals (with some minor exceptions), retaining these rights when they became states on federation in 1901. The principle of sovereign ownership of precious metals (the ‘Mines Royal’) was set out in a 1568 case, *R v Earl of Northumberland*, in which the Court of Exchequer Chamber ruled, somewhat obsequiously, that ‘because gold and silver are the most excellent things which the soil contains, the law has appointed them...to the person who is most excellent’. This decision benefited the then-monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, and the phrase ‘owned by the Crown’ retains a vaguely ominous sound to some ears.

The United States is an exception to the general rule of community ownership of minerals, and in an excellent study, *Mineral Resources and Australian Federalism* (Australian National University, 1977), Canadian academic Garth Stevenson observed that some American businessmen tended to regard the system in places like Australia as ‘a relic of monarchical tyranny’. Others view our approach more positively: in a 2011 article in *Society and Natural Resources*, on the impacts of private mineral ownership on the profoundly disadvantaged region of Appalachia in the US, legal historian Jill Fraley favourably contrasted the Australian system, writing:

Natural resources...are, in effect, common property of the whole people of Australia, who as a group are entitled to their bounty and burdened with the role of protection and allocations to future generations. There is no sense of an individual entitlement to natural resources because they happen to exist beneath a particular piece of land. There is no sense of a ‘lottery’ or risk-heavy system in which persons purchase property with the hope of exploration to discover vast mineral wealth beneath the surface – allowing some to become suddenly rich, while a nearby neighbour runs his fingers through the sand.

It is rare to hear so glowing a description of the regime of Australian mineral ownership at home, particularly because, as with all areas in our public life, mining entails a constant struggle between different levels of government. As a practical matter, the states control mineral resources: they set conditions for the grant of exploration and production rights and also derive royalties from mining activity. The Commonwealth, however, can legislate in a manner which affects resource development. A 2009 review of approval processes in WA observed that over the past twenty-five years, ‘the Commonwealth Government has become more intrusive... This intrusion is mainly evident through the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, native title legislation and Aboriginal heritage issues.’

IT IS NOT only legislation from the Commonwealth that is resented, but also its absorption of mining profits through taxes, as distinct from state royalties. There is a perception that there is something illegitimate in moneys ultimately deriving from ‘our’ mines going to other states, and nowhere is this more complained of than in respect to the redistribution of GST revenue. WA Treasurer Mike Nahan characterised the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s distribution as a message to Tasmania that ‘if you lock up all your forests...and destroy growth, you will get compensated for it from the proceeds of WA’. Similarly, WA Senator David Johnston declared the ‘outrage of the numbers and the destination of our hard-earned revenue to other states and territories is a scandal’. The argument that profits from mining belong to those who happen to have been born on the right side of the border is driven by economic self-interest and buttressed by cognitive dissonance. The stories WA tells itself, full of grit and endeavour, tend to overlook that the presence of minerals within state boundaries is determined by history, geography and sheer dumb luck. In 2010, economist Matt Cowgill wrote on his blog *We are all dead*:

I don’t understand what makes West Australians, particularly anyone other than the 79,600 people who work in mining, feel some sort of proprietorial pride at the mineral wealth under the ground in the state’s far north. I speak as someone born in Perth

who lived there for twenty-seven of my nearly twenty-eight years. I never felt as if I had done something special to deserve any greater share of revenue from iron ore than, say, Tasmanians or Northern Territorians... Some states receive less than other states, per head of population, because of the principle of 'horizontal fiscal equity'. It sounds horribly wonkish, but really it just means that all citizens should have a reasonable expectation of receiving the same quality of services, no matter the state they happen to live in... Is that really a controversial suggestion?

The issue might be one of pain rather than pride. Perth is an increasingly expensive place, and for several years its inhabitants have experienced 'resource curse' aspects of a mining boom – rising costs of living and impact on other industries – with more intensity than residents elsewhere in Australia. Viewed through this lens, complaints about the distribution of GST revenue represent a desire for compensation for the inconvenience of living in boomtown rather than a sense of entitlement.

Nevertheless, I share Matt Cowgill's puzzlement and feel no particular claim to moneys generated by the state's minerals. Given the arbitrariness of state boundaries, my standard response to pub conversations about the merits of secession is to suggest that the Pilbara might as well break away from southerners who are riding on its coat-tails (and if you think living in Perth is expensive, try Karratha or Newman). Obviously, the states are constitutional entities and regions like the Pilbara are not: legally, I've no leg to stand on. But if there is some sort of sacred connection between iron ore taken from the red dirt above the twenty-sixth parallel and those of us living in Perth, I can't see it.

Subterranean arguments about moral rights in the context of minerals came to a head following the announcement of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's ill-fated proposal for a resources super-profits tax. Its successor, the Gillard government's minerals rent resource tax, was repealed by the Abbott government with some fanfare and the assistance of the Palmer United Party in late 2014. Before this, the tax was subject to an unsuccessful constitutional challenge initiated by Fortescue Metals Group and supported by the Western

Australian and Queensland governments. The case of *Fortescue Metals Group v The Commonwealth* (2013) can be read for continuities in our political history. In their joint judgment, Justices Hayne, Bell and Keane suggested that the submissions put forward by WA ‘bore a striking resemblance’ to arguments the state had made twenty years earlier when it unsuccessfully contested the validity of the Native Title Act. Much has changed since the early 1990s, but the struggle between centre and periphery continues. In any event, the judges rejected the submissions: there are limits to the Commonwealth’s legislative power but the tax, like this earlier and much-resented Act, did not exceed them. As though setting out to reinforce perceptions of his industry’s self-importance, Fortescue’s CEO Andrew Forrest responded to the decision by stating benevolently, the ‘High Court didn’t agree with us and that’s their perfect, perfect right’.

ALTHOUGH THE INTERESTS of conservative governments and mining companies will often coincide, they are not identical. This distinction has been obscured in recent years by the existence of a common foe in the form of federal Labor administrations, but it becomes periodically visible. In 2014, WA’s Liberal Premier, Colin Barnett, appealed to BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto to ‘remember who your landlord is’, referring to what he termed the ‘seeming strategy of the two major producers to flood the market’ with iron ore, thus lowering the price. Barnett’s government also faced criticism from gold mining companies in 2014, on the basis that its budget papers projected a future increase in mineral royalties at a time when a royalties review had yet to be concluded. In early August, Barry Fitzgerald reported in the *Australian* that this had ‘raised suspicions that the government has the gold industry in its sights’. Fitzgerald foreshadowed that ‘struggling gold producers are to adopt the advertising campaign tactics used in the attack on the mining tax in their battle to stop the state government increasing royalties in its review of mineral royalty rates’. That’s politics for you: the weapon that slays your enemy one day may be used against you the next.

Individual business triumphs have collective underpinnings, a fact (in)famously alluded to by US President Barack Obama in a speech during the 2012 presidential campaign, when he said ‘if you’ve been successful, you

didn't get there on your own... If you've got a business – you didn't build that.' Similarly, companies didn't put the minerals in the ground, but some argue that deposits should belong to those who discover and mine them. Libertarianism lacks a broad support base in Australia. In a 2014 interview with the US publication *Reason*, NSW Liberal Democrat Senator David Leyonhjelm explained that his homeland 'doesn't have a history of revolt against its government... We have a long way to go in terms of educating Australians that the government is a nasty, big, grasping beast.' From across an ideological divide, *Crikey's* commentator Guy Rundle agrees with Leyonhjelm's first premise, arguing that Australia is collectivist, conformist and communitarian, having 'grown through state-based arbitration, socialised agricultural monopsonies, protectionist industries, massive public works, state land distribution and highly patterned suburban existence'. Nevertheless, libertarian ideals are particularly amenable to extractive industries, which thrive on narratives of individual discovery and initiative – in WA, priority for grants of mining tenements goes to the applicant who is first in time (visiting the site of someone else's just-expired tenement in the dead of night, marking it out and rushing your application in might, just maybe, make you rich). In a 2010 Senate Select Committee submission, Alan Moran, then the Institute of Public Affairs' director of deregulation, wrote of what he termed the 'fallacy about rental income being a legitimate reward from the exploitation of mineral resources that are owned by the people'. He continued:

Rents do not exist unless someone has discovered a deposit, just as high profits in IT industries do not exist without an innovation having been made. Governments have imposed royalties on the fallacious basis that the deposit is owned by the people. This is only true of deposits that are already known.

This perspective emphasises individual ingenuity and effort, making a point that Gina Rinehart, Chairman and Director of Hancock Prospecting, articulated more bluntly in 2013 when she complained that 'few seem to properly understand...that miners and other resources industries aren't just ATMs for everyone else to draw from without that money first having to be

earned and, before that, giant investments are made'. There is some truth to these arguments, and certainly minerals weren't placed in the ground by wise, far-seeing governments either. However, such statements tend to overlook the assistance provided by governments over many decades, both in maintaining the framework in which mining operates, including a legal system to enforce property rights and, more specifically, in mapping, collecting geological and mineral resources data and providing tax concessions. A 2014 report by the Australia Institute, *Mining the Age of Entitlement*, considered the support state governments provides to the resources sector, including the construction of port, road and rail infrastructure, industry assistance funds, rehabilitation of mine sites, industry promotion and research. It concluded that, in WA, assistance to the minerals and fossil fuels sector totalled \$1.391 billion in the 2013–2014 financial year, a period during which the industry paid \$5.8 billion in royalties.

DEBATES ABOUT WHERE the wealth comes from go deeper than tussles between government and industry. The WA Mining Act (1978) provides that almost all land in the state is open for mining; you can even dig up a national park, provided particular conditions are met.

All of this land, of course, was taken from its original owners with varying degrees of force. This is our foundational inconvenient truth, which when raised among non-Aboriginal Australians often elicits sighs and variants of *do we really have to talk about this* and *haven't we dealt with this already*. We haven't – we've barely scratched the surface – and in this context it's worth noting that the Native Title Act (1993), now more than twenty years old, is still often woefully misunderstood. In a 2013 article in the *Age*, Germaine Greer wrote:

Traditional owners have rights and privileges that non-traditional owners cannot claim. Under British common law 'native' or 'aboriginal' title is not extinguished by a subsequent claim, and therefore minerals occurring in land covered by native title do not belong to the Crown. Traditional owners have a right to negotiate with mining companies; whitefella landholders have a duty to negotiate. Holders of native title can drive a hard bargain; the rest of us cannot.

This assessment is comprehensively, almost impressively wrong. Native title as interpreted by the courts is a fragile title both easily extinguished and incapable of being revived: government ownership of minerals prevails regardless of whether native title exists (the courts have ruled that there can be no native title right to minerals, with the exception of ochre); owners of private land can also do deals with miners; and native title claimants' ability to 'drive a hard bargain' is limited by the deeply flawed Native Title Act.

Let's consider what this bargaining process looks like. The Act accords registered claim groups and determined native title-holders' procedural rights in respect of activities that affect native title, such as the grant of a mining lease. None of these rights approaches anything like the ability to veto a development. Instead, they range from the very limited, such as the right to be notified, and culminate in the right to negotiate. If the right to negotiate applies, before the activity can be done the claim group, the relevant government and the entity which has applied for the lease must negotiate in good faith within a period of six months with a view to reaching an agreement. If the parties fail to come to an agreement in this time, any of them can seek a determination from the National Native Title Tribunal, which can rule on whether the activity can proceed, but cannot make a decision entitling native title claimants to payments calculated by reference to the amount of profits made, any income derived or anything produced as a result of the activity. If the tribunal determines that the activity *cannot* proceed – which it has done only three times over the past two decades – the relevant government minister can override this determination. Professor Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh from Griffith University argues that the system places heavy burdens on native title claimants' ability to negotiate, producing 'profoundly inequitable' outcomes 'in a society where markets play an increasingly dominant role in allocating resources'. It is true that some good, sustainable agreements are being made and some mining companies go above and beyond their strict legal obligations, but the overall playing field is decidedly uneven.

Debates about native title often seem to presuppose that all land subject to claims is rich in minerals, but it isn't, not even 'up north'. Such discussions also frequently overlook the 'settled south', which was the first to be colonised. The Native Title Act requires claimants to prove, among other things, that

they have a connection to the claimed land and waters that has continued substantially uninterrupted since the assertion of British sovereignty. At the risk of being glib, this task is made considerably more difficult when someone saw fit more than a century ago to plonk a city in the middle of your traditional country. In WA the 'settled south' is Noongar land, and in 2006 the Noongar people had a stunning yet short-lived win in the Federal Court. Justice Wilcox found, as a threshold issue, that native title existed in the area we now call Perth. He was not required to consider issues of extinguishment, but simply to examine whether there was a single Noongar 'community' for native title purposes and whether that community had continued to acknowledge its traditional laws and customs between 1829 and the present.

Native title is inevitably a reminder of the other side of the story – a not-so-distant past that white people often find it awkward to talk about. In opposing the 'Single Noongar Claim', the state of Western Australia relied on its predecessors' misdeeds, arguing that '[t]hroughout the nineteenth century, European settlement of the Perth Metropolitan Area caused Aboriginal people to cease to acknowledge and observe traditional law and custom and to lose connection with their traditional estate', including by 'depopulation through disease and the killing of Aboriginal people by early settlers'; 'dispossession and exclusion from the land', and 'removal to institutions and restrictions imposed on the movement and activities of Aboriginal people under legislation and government policy'. The rejection of these arguments was seen by some as more than merely a judicial decision, but as a formal acknowledgment that the Noongar people had survived all that the colonists had thrown at them. Glen Kelly, the CEO of the claimants' legal representative the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC) and a Noongar man himself, wrote: 'There was one group of people that weren't surprised by this finding. This group was Noongars themselves, who have striven to maintain...law and custom in the face of wave after wave of dispossession policy pushed by the state.' Jubilation was short-lived, however. The state government appealed Justice Wilcox's decision, and in 2008 the Full Federal Court overturned it, ruling that he had incorrectly applied the Native Title Act. The decision prompted widespread criticism of the Act. SWALSC has since focused its efforts on negotiating with the state government on

a settlement that would incorporate payments to a trust and the transfer of Crown Land – an alternative to doing battle in the courts.

The themes of history and postcolonial justice with which native title is entangled take us to broader questions. I've referred above to the arbitrariness of mineral distribution between states and territories, but this argument also applies to the nation itself and complicates the resource nationalism often invoked by supporters of the minerals rent resource tax. It would surely be theoretically possible to build a social democrat's paradise in Australia using our mineral wealth, but what of the wider world?

WE RARELY ASK what a wealthy nation like Australia might owe to those less favoured by the random presence of iron ore, coal, nickel, uranium and gold. Recent cuts to the overseas aid budget, and our increasingly punitive asylum-seeker policies, suggest the answer is 'not much'. The question of international obligations goes further. In 2013, Bill McKibben warned: 'Australia's massive deposits of hydrocarbons [are] a menace to the planet, and...have to be left in the ground if the world [has] any hope of avoiding catastrophic global warming.' Like agriculture and manufacturing, mining is a polluting industry and our impact on the environment does not conveniently end at state or commonwealth borders. WA might be at the bottom of the world and, as the old joke goes, several hours and a few decades behind the eastern states, but we can't ignore these questions.

Public conversations about fairness, in the context of mineral resources, are only a beginning. The theatre of mining – big personalities, huge deals, litigation, bravado – plays out under bright lights in Western Australia, yet while we quibble about tax revenue and joke about colourful billionaires, larger questions relating to issues of ownership, rights and responsibilities go unanswered. How long can we drown them out?

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Ancient treasures

Past and present on the Dampier Archipelago

Ken Mulvaney

FROM A SCIENTIFIC perspective, Aboriginal people entered the landmass of Sahul (greater Australia) more than fifty thousand years ago and were in the Pilbara region of Western Australia by 42,000 BP (Before Present). There they etched marks and images into the region's hard rock surfaces to create an enduring treasure of abundant rock art for their own cultural life, and a priceless legacy for generations to come.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the Dampier Archipelago, where up to a million images are visible – the densest accumulation of engraved rock art (petroglyphs) in the world. These petroglyphs display a great variety of subjects and styles, documenting shifting artistic fashions and embodying cultural, ecological and environmental changes across millennia. These ancient art galleries occur in association with other archaeological features, including artefact scatters, shell middens and stone arrangements, all in a landscape that has become an industrial hub for mining and petrochemical industries.

The Dampier Archipelago sits on the subtropical coast in the north-western arid zone. The archipelago includes forty-two islets and islands, the largest being Dampier Island (gazetted Burrup Peninsula in 1979) at 118 square kilometres. Gabbro and granophyre igneous rocks, in jointed and

fractured block piles and slopes, dominate the landscape. Narrow, sheltered rocky gullies and broad spinifex-covered valleys bisect these rock massifs. This is a striking and fractured landscape where the rock slopes, although appearing like scree, have been stable for millions of years.

FOLLOWING MY RETURN to Australia in late 1980, with an archaeological degree but little experience, I was lured to this shore. It was the call to 'go west', to document this spectacular and significant cultural heritage that brought me to the Pilbara as part of a team endeavouring to staunch the loss of this rock art. In Western Australia, destruction of Aboriginal sites has been accepted as a necessary by-product of economic prosperity. If you want to live in the modern world, drive cars and use electrical appliances, then nature and heritage must give way. At least, that is the general thinking. So we laboured in front of the machines, transforming this ancient place into modern industrial infrastructure – it was said – for the betterment of the nation. Working in the dust, heat and noise of industrialisation, it was hard to accept that such priceless art was being obliterated, especially when there were alternative locations for this development.

Up to seventeen archaeologists were working on the rugged block slopes festooned with petroglyphs, busily documenting what was there for posterity. When we finished two years later, there were 720 registered Aboriginal sites recorded, 544 containing rock art. Unfortunately, less than half of these sites remain intact and five thousand petroglyphs were destroyed. This is one of the richest rock art and archaeological provinces in the world. Overseas, such awareness of cultural richness would have mobilised a program of documentation and protection, a promotion of their cultural value, plus a strategy for tourism. Not in Western Australia, where the focus was on big industrial ventures. The cultural and natural beauty of the place was lost in the dust and heat, giving way to exports.

Twenty-five years after first coming to the Pilbara, having spent much of the interim in the Northern Territory, I returned to work in the footprint of infrastructure development. Some things had changed, yet other circumstances were remarkably similar to the early 1980s. Today, the Yaburara, Ngarluma, Mardudhunera, Wong-goo-tt-oo and Yindjibarndi people (descendants of the

original artists and custodians of the rock art) hold title to a national park covering 41.5 per cent of Burrup Peninsula. Some commercial enterprises have located elsewhere, and much of the place is now recognised for its national heritage values. Yet the frontier mentality persists – the lure of exploitation sets mineral wealth higher than heritage and tourism and Aboriginal needs. What has changed in the west?

IN 1976, WHEN I finished school, I was lured to the distant shores of England. I hoped to excavate the ancient civilisations of Britain, to remain in the green fields of England. The consequences of the Thatcher government's policies pushed me back to the red earth of Australia. In Thatcher's Britain, people like me, with cultural links but no blood ties, were sent packing. Like the convicts of old, I had no chance to remain in the 'motherland' and so, with a degree in archaeology from Sheffield University, I was transported back to Australia.

One thing that made the return to Australia more bearable was the prospect of work with the Western Australian Museum in the Pilbara. The museum's Department of Aboriginal Sites was recruiting a large team of archaeologists to document the cultural sites and features on Burrup Peninsula, between King Bay and Withnell Bay. I was based in the then-frontier town of Karratha, full of workers engaged in the construction of a natural gas liquefaction plant – at the time the biggest engineering project in the world. With my acquired Yorkshire accent and academic ways, I was an odd fit. Most were engaged in the glory of monumental construction, while we laboured in the face of epic destruction. In a few short years the commercial enterprise wiped away the accomplishments of countless previous generations. All we could do was document its passing and lament the myopic nature of government and capitalism.

This place is more than a museum or art gallery documenting aspects of the world's oldest continuous cultural traditions. The rock art and other features pattern the standards and lore that are entwined in the life of Aboriginal people, as meaningful today as it has been for tens of thousands of years. The term 'rock art' does not do justice to the petroglyphs, because they are a very dense and complex archive of symbolism that captures a range of social elements including customary law, Aboriginal knowledge of environment

and resources, and cultural practices. As elsewhere in Australia, including the Kimberley region, 'rock art remains a vital component of the lived culture of the contemporary Aboriginal people'.

In the debate that took place about locating a petrochemical industry on Burrup Peninsula in the late 1970s, Aboriginal voices were ignored. This was just after the Noonkanbah intervention, when a government-backed oil drilling operation barged onto Aboriginal-owned land. The state government was not interested in hearing what Aboriginal people had to say about their sites and country. We were given to understand that, as public servants, we were not entitled to converse with the traditional custodians of the area. This was not the case with previous archaeological undertakings in the archipelago, so to have ignored the involvement of Aboriginal people was a retrograde step. Its effects still reverberate today.

WITH THE DECLARATION of Western Australia's hundredth national park in January 2013, the Aboriginal inheritors of this place have a voice in both planning and day-to-day park management. This includes governing access, directing actions to appropriate places and ensuring culturally sensitive behaviours do not impinge on sacred sites and the wellbeing of the ancestors. In addition to the Aboriginal rangers working within the 4,913 hectares of the park, one Ngarluma man has established a commercial tourism operation providing an Aboriginal insight into culture and history.

Murujuga (its traditional name) rock art represents the efforts of perhaps thousands of artisans creatively chipping away at the hard rock surfaces over some forty thousand years. Through much of this time, what is now the Dampier Archipelago was a rugged and rocky range of hills rising above an open, eucalypt-wooded plain stretching to a coastline some one hundred and fifty kilometres distant. More recently, the encroachment of the sea and the development of extensive mangrove stands, sandy embayments and rocky headlands provided rich and diverse marine and terrestrial habitats. This area is host to both tropical and arid species, with animals and plants normally found either in coastal or inland environments only.

The production of rock art images displays how people adjusted their social interactions in the context of changing environmental conditions.

Following the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), a post-glacial sea level rise resulted in the formation of the Dampier Archipelago up to nine thousand years ago, and a consequent adjustment in both social and economic structures. These are reflected in the archaeological remains found at former habitation sites as well as in the rock images themselves, which switch in dominance from terrestrial fauna – kangaroos and emus – to marine fauna of fish and turtle.

This was an inscribed landscape where generations used the rock as a canvas. The archipelago is a human-marked landscape of stunning visual power. Rock art offers sensory pleasure and cognitive recognition that may be absent from other cultural markers, such as quarries and middens. It is a quality of being human that we can experience today, an aesthetic appreciation of images created in the ancient past. It is unfortunate that modern society so readily destroys the things we find beautiful.

Eminent anthropologist Howard Morphy observed that rock art ‘provides a reservoir of images for succeeding generations who not only can view and interpret this record, but additionally use it as a source of information and inspiration that influences their present practice’. For tens of thousands of years this has been the case at Dampier. Now we ignore what is there, pushing the cultural landscape aside for industrial enterprise. One can observe that this heritage was honoured and preserved by successive generations for millennia. Now it is devalued and abused. Future generations will decry this wanton destruction of a priceless heritage.

In the early 1960s, when Hamersley Iron was granted development rights for King Bay on Dampier Island (now Burrup Peninsula), there was no heritage legislation, so we are left with only a vague notion of what may have been destroyed. It was the same when Dampier Salt began construction of crystalliser ponds in 1968. As awareness and concern for the material evidence of Australia’s past increased, the Western Australian parliament passed heritage-protection legislation in 1972. As a consequence, we have a better idea of what was being destroyed. In the case of Dampier Salt, a major study was undertaken of the massive shell midden and petroglyphs that were partly destroyed by the construction of the haul road through the southern end of Dampier Island and out to the port facilities on Mistaken Island.

Timely awareness of this invaluable heritage came largely thanks to FL (Enzo) Virili, an Italian engineer-manager who worked for Dampier Salt. Virili photographed the petroglyphs and first brought them to the attention of archaeologists and scientists at the Western Australian Museum. The richness of the archaeological features led to the establishment of the salvage project in 1980, which I was involved in. It was not sufficient to stop the development of the Dampier Archipelago. The industrial footprint currently occupies over forty-seven square kilometres, with an additional thirty-three square kilometres gazetted for future industrial use.

It was only after detailed recording by the museum field teams in 1980 and 1981 that the wealth of the archaeological record was fully grasped. It inspired a sense of the importance of the cultural landscape, and exposed the absurdity of industrialising a site of such historical significance.

When I left the state it was with the expectation that common sense would prevail, that industry would be established elsewhere and there would be proper management and protection of the Dampier Archipelago's unique environment and heritage. Sadly, this was not to be the case. At the dawning of the twenty-first century, in my capacity as President of the Australian Rock Art Research Association, I wrote numerous letters to government ministers and officials expressing concern about the continual destruction of the Dampier petroglyphs and other cultural features.

SO IN LATE 2003, it was with some trepidation that I took a short-term job with Hamersley Iron to essentially resolve issues around port facility expansion at King Bay, halfway up the western side of Burrup Peninsula. I thought the protection of this significant place could be achieved. Positively, the iron ore expansion had shifted to Cape Lambert, forty-five kilometres along the coast, a national park had been declared over part of Burrup Peninsula, and much of the archipelago had been included on the National Heritage List. Despite this listing, inadequate management and protection systems remained. Further development of industries had also taken place, resulting in additional destruction. In 2004 the Dampier rock art precinct was placed on World Monument Fund's list of '100 Most Endangered Places in the World'; the only Australian site on the list. Lamentably, the anachronistic, incompetent and

insensitive government and agencies hell-bent on taming this wild frontier lack the finesse to adequately protect this cultural heritage.

As a resident of Dampier for the last eleven years, I have come to recognise the complex and dense character of the cultural record that is the Dampier Archipelago, and have been teasing out the chronological threads associated with the petroglyphs. Although there is no suitable method for dating the petroglyphs directly, it is possible to identify a relative chronological sequence when other archaeological evidence is associated with analysis of weathering rates and motif superimposition (where one image overlies another), along with depictions of fauna that are identifiable.

THE ROCK ART is a manifestation of the social behaviours, ritual expression and subsistence practices of hunter-forager people, reaching through lore and culture to their present-day descendants. While rock art styles equate to cultural phases or traditions, form in the Dampier Archipelago petroglyphs does not so much vary with subject or technique, but with specific arrangements and graphic composition. Human-like representations may be depictions of community members (including the artist), ancestors, mythical beings/Dreaming figures, or other non-ordinary presences. These may be gendered or not. One of the most emblematic is facial representation: some incorporate complex geometric designs, others simplified bodies. All are so deeply weathered and old-looking that they may constitute examples from among the world's earliest human depictions. These complex facial images, along with elaborate non-figurative designs and full body renderings of human and animal forms, comprise much of the range of motifs associated with the rock art's earliest phase.

There are at least four other major artistic phases evidenced by superimposition. These include changes in style, technique and subject, including the depiction of extinct animals and a sequencing of environmental change due to a sea level rise. Artistic traditions and conventions show a shift from patterned infill faces and elaborate geometric designs to an emphasis on outline terrestrial faunal and human figures. Although bird and macropod tracks and small circle, dot and arc motifs are present in the rock art corpus, the early classic *Panaramit* style of clustering small, simple geometric and track motifs is not evident.

It is believed, based on the degree of weathering, positioning in the landscape and spatial distribution across the continent, that these early artistic phases *predate* or possibly extend into the LGM, up to 22,000 years ago. Certainly, the 'faces' and life-size depictions of terrestrial fauna, albeit in low numbers, occur across the Pilbara and into what is now the Western and Central Desert, suggesting their antiquity predates the desertification of the continent.

Associated with a period of low precipitation following the LGM, and loss of territory as the rising ocean drowned a vast coastal plain, the art repertoire shifted to include an increase in species depicted. Dampier petroglyphs start to include marine subjects, especially fish, and are later dominated by turtles. The later artistic phases clearly post-date a sea level rise and the formation of the archipelago some six thousand years ago. Depictions of crustaceans, marine mammals, sharks and stingrays also appear in this Holocene period rock art. The depiction of humans also changed: they are shown with cultural items such as headdresses, ceremonial objects and implements, often in group scenes.

While the aesthetic, scientific and cultural significance of Dampier rock art is commensurate with the Kimberley and western Arnhem Land, the density and accessibility of these petroglyphs is unparalleled. If this were elsewhere in the world, or even in another Australian state, appropriate funds for documentation and management would be available. As it stands, little of the cultural heritage of the Dampier Archipelago has been mapped; the few detailed archaeological investigations have been paid for by companies as part of their development consent process. Most state government funding expended on Burrup Peninsula has been on road, rail and port infrastructure to attract and enhance industry.

The antiquity of Australian rock art awaits definitive dating. Evidence of the practice of complex burial rituals at Lake Mungo some forty thousand years ago, and the use of ochre obtained from a distant source, already hints at the practice of artistic expression. In the application of 'contrast-state', an index of relative time for weathering processes, it has been possible to demonstrate the antiquity and complexity of early Dampier petroglyphs. Fixing art in time provides a sense of its antiquity and cultural productivity.

While awaiting conclusive proof, it is nevertheless probable that the creation of images on the rock began with the first arrival of people and only stopped in the 1860s with the coming of white settlement and the decimation of the Yaburara people.

Dampier petroglyphs have been produced on the surfaces of the block piles and slopes dominating the archipelago landscape, the hardness of which has ensured their long-term survival in spite of exposure to the harsh elements of the Pilbara coast. What has lain in tranquil splendour for perhaps forty thousand years, with successive generations contributing their own aesthetic and symbolic creativity, has over the past forty years been subject to desecration and destruction. Working long hours in the sweltering heat and earning mega wages holds more interest for most Western Australians than the presence and preservation of this significant corpus of petroglyphs. Australia's cultural legacy deserves more than ensuring multinational companies profit from sending our natural resources offshore.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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REPORTAGE

Playing with fire

Learning to read and use

Jacqueline Wright

WE SIT IN the shade on the back veranda of Mardoo cattle station sipping hot, sweet tea from pannikins. Ringer's young sons are dragging tree branches along behind them, pretending they are trucks and fuelling up at termite mounds the fine colour of rust. Smoke rises from mustering fires, flushing rouge bulls from the breakaway country on the station's eastern boundary. 'You nor'westerners are so blasé about fire. Maybe it's all this space, the people—country ratio.' I sweep my hand around a near 360-degree horizon, which, 130 million years ago, was a huge river delta, a dinosaur stompin' ground. I say 'you' because, despite living here for well over a decade, I'm still not considered local.

'Oh, you gotta watch 'em,' Ringer rolls a cigarette.

He tells me about the time one of the mustering fires got out of control. The manager asked him to take the old Dodge firefighting truck and patrol the western boundary. 'The truck kept on conking out on me. Weather was too hot and the petrol kept vaporising.'

A big wall of fire was heading his way when the engine finally died on him. 'I heard somewhere that if I blew into the petrol tank I might just move the petrol further up the line to the carbie so the engine would start.'

'Did it work?'

‘I’ve got my gob jammed over the fuel tank, blowing for all I’m worth, trying to build up the pressure. When I take my mouth away...*kshsh!*’ He makes a blowing sound. ‘I’m covered in fuel with the truck that wouldn’t start. And that fire?’ he pours more tea. ‘Well, it just kept getting closer.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I hoik off my clothes, chuck them in the bushes and hose myself down. Now I’m naked with a fire getting closer. I search the back of the truck for something to wear and find this rag which turns out to be an old maternity dress of Lindy’s.’

I laugh.

He winks. ‘It gets better.’

‘How does that get better?’ The image of Ringer in a frock, bird-of-paradise tattoo dripping down his left arm, lank ponytail and pussycat tooth stuck through a hole in his left ear lobe is hilarious.

‘That God-bothering mob from the neighbouring station come over to help. Caught me hosing the flames down in a frock.’ He smiles. ‘Stopped droppin’ in for cups of tea, trying to convert us after that.’

MOST FIRE STORIES in the north-west revolve around comedy rather than the tragedy and drama of the southern and eastern states. There’s a sign ten kilometres out of my town on the highway, proclaiming, ‘Fire Risk’. It’s a half circle, divided into four colours; white, blue, yellow and red with an arrow swinging from the radius. The sections are labelled: low, moderate, high, extreme. Someone’s scratched out ‘Fire’ and written ‘Tourist’ over the top. That’s how seriously some people take their fires.

My fire story starts in a state with a history of black-something days. A hot, westerly wind was bringing to the boil the cauldron that can be Melbourne. We lived out of town at a place where smooth-barked manna gums and silver wattles were gradually reasserting themselves among the willows and plum trees growing along the Yarra River. A country built-up of Silurian siltstone and sandstone cemented together with clay and crosshatched with deserted gold mines. I’m home alone when I smell smoke. Warrantdyte kids are hot-wired to know that smoke in these conditions isn’t good. I follow my nose, which leads me to an incinerator smouldering on our neighbour’s

fence line. A big puff of wind blows across the ridgeline and, right before my eyes, a line of flame rips up the trunk of a eucalyptus. When it gets to the understory, it explodes in a big ball of fire.

‘WERE YOU AROUND for the Ash Wednesday fires?’ Ringer asks me.

‘The summer of 1983? Nah, I was on holidays, three hundred ks away from the fires in Port Fairy. I remember walking down the main street when this hot blast of air hit us. It was like someone had opened an oven. The sky was orange and it was raining ash by the evening.’

‘Seemed like the whole of the state was alight.’

‘Everyone was affected by those fires. Even the people who weren’t directly involved were traumatised. And then I moved up here and people’s attitude to fire couldn’t be more different.’

When I travelled to the north-west, I took up a teaching job with an independent bilingual Aboriginal community school and was taken out to meet the mob who were camping the night at Sheeppcamp on the Oakover River. We arrived at dusk and the kids had set the spinifex alight. It was a wall of crackling, spitting flame. Grasshoppers pinged into the air and lizards running helter-skelter to safety. The orange flames screamed against a moonless night. The adults seemed unperturbed. From that moment on, fire became my ally, not my enemy. The mob used fire to cook and light the way, to clear pathways and sites, flush out animals, reveal burrows, chase away or bring on rain, encourage regeneration. Fire warned and informed people. It let the community know where people were and what they were doing. That mob *read* fire, even the little kids: they could tell if people were hunting or cooking or had ‘sent up a smoke’ to let the mob know they had broken down on their way home. The Nyangumarta used fire to farm. Fire was a language and system I’ve still not grasped the intricacies of, nor will, I suspect. The whitefella teacher before me had set his Toyota on fire. Its burned-out carcass sits on the track just before the turn-off to Warrawagine Station. The Toyota-burning story stirs up much frivolity among teachers, Ron and Munda Woodman.

‘He broke down and thought he might send up a smoke,’ Munda tells me on a drive back from the river one day. ‘When we found him, his Toyota was all burned up.’ She hoots with laughter.

‘He bin lit the smoke downwind from that truck!’ Ron says, smiling. ‘He stupid or what?’

‘Stupid alright,’ the old girl remarks, shaking her head and wiping tears from her eyes.

‘He had no luck with motor cars, that boy. Broke down in the school truck on the track goin’ *pjukarti*...creek y’know and walked a-a-all the way. Got there in the middle of the night, everyone was asleep. In the morning when we went to get it, it was burned too.’

‘What?’ I ask. ‘He sent up another smoke?’

‘No.’

‘A storm come up that night, didn’t it?’ she looks to Ron who’s chuckling. ‘Lightning and...’ she stops, waving her hand in front of her face overcome with laughter.

‘Nother fire,’ Ron finishes the sentence for her. ‘And they reckon us blackfellas get through the motor cars.’

Munda shrieks.

Despite driving past those burned-out shells of vehicles for years, I couldn’t help myself. Lighting up the spinifex would be the first thing I’d do when we went camping. Upwind of course; I didn’t want to inherit the stupid whitefella cap. Spinifex is coated with sticky sap that smells like the coconut suntan lotion of ’70s summer holidays. The sap helps ignite the spinifex, producing a hot, fast, aromatic blaze most satisfying to repressed Victorian pyromaniacs. Over the years, I passed this love for lighting up the spinifex onto my children. They saw it as the most natural thing in the world to do. Their boldness has much to do with my own relaxed attitude to fire, it’s true, but it can also be attributed to growing up in a landscape far removed from tall timber. On his first visit to Victoria as a small child, my eldest son pointed to a tree and asked me what it was.

WHEN DID ‘BUSH’ change to ‘wild’ when it came to fire? Is it a west-versus-east thing like ‘bathers’ versus ‘togs’ and ‘milkbar’ versus ‘deli’? Or is it something a little more than jargon and firmly connected to politics, as when ‘boat people’ became ‘illegal immigrants’? If we use the word ‘wild’ then we introduce an element of needing to be tamed. When we use ‘bush’ we take

ourselves out of the equation. There's not a lot of human agency in 'bush'. It can exist perfectly well without us. The media often portray fire as some kind of beast requiring herculean efforts to defeat. Now fires are our dragons and we are saved by knights armed with hoses and fixed-winged water bombers.

Australian winters are our dry season in the north-west. People living outside of town clear firebreaks in the Dry. Preceding the Dry is the Wet. The wet season is the time of abundance: abundant humidity, greenness, cockroaches and mould. Spear grass grows taller than a man during the Wet. Dragonflies signal the beginning of the Dry. Around about then, easterlies roar in from the Great Sandy Desert making everything powder dry. A few 'knock-'em-down' storms flatten the spear grass so there is plenty of fuel to be burned.

In the Dry we get our fair share of bushfires, some caused by lightning. Others include burning-off fires, mustering ones and those that are part of fire-control regimes lit by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), Western Australia's Fire and Emergency Services (FESA), as well as traditional owners. FESA burn-offs are now called 'prescribed burns', which insinuates that there is something wrong with the bush, that it needs treatment or a remedy.

FESA's prescribed burns are supposedly carried out early in the dry season, before June, whereas late dry season fires are usually the result of arson or campfires getting out of hand. This year it was a tourist at Willie Creek who started a bushfire. Last year it was FESA, whose back-burn to contain a bushfire got a bit wild when an unexpected sea breeze cranked up. If properties and people aren't at risk, these government departments prefer to let fires burn out. We don't have as big a population of people living in the bush as they do down south and over east. But this room-to-burn attitude has come back to bite FESA and DEC, especially after the Boorabbin National Park fires, west of Kalgoorlie, which took the lives of three truck drivers as they drove along the Great Eastern Highway.

Then there were the runners participating in the Racing the Planet ultramarathon at El Questro in the eastern Kimberley. The front forced some runners into a narrow gorge where there was no chance of escape; two young women were horribly burnt, one had to fight for her life. FESA and DEC

copped flack after those incidents. People asked, 'What's wrong with this crew, why are they letting fires burn instead of fighting them?' FESA and DEC still let the wild fires burn out but their response at removing human beings from the equation is now swift, their fear of retribution palpable.

A COUPLE OF years ago, for National Science Week, I travelled with a friend two hundred kilometres along a corrugated red-dirt road to visit Nyul Nyul and Bardi communities on the Dampier Peninsula. We travelled in a rattletrap of a car, and the only way to conduct a conversation was to shout at each other. When we got to Bruno Dann's block at Twin Lakes, the peace and quiet was breathtaking. Bruno and his wife Marion cultivate gubinge, *Terminalia ferdinandiana*.

They are one of Australia's major producers of this new superfood. It's super because it's one of the richest sources of vitamin C known to man. When I say 'cultivate' I really mean 'encourage'. This gubinge isn't propagated and planted in neat rows, it isn't fertilised or sprayed with insecticides. Gubinge have always been growing there and Bruno and Marion just help the trees along. And when I say 'help' I really mean nurture. Bruno tells us that they talk to trees, hold onto them and let a tree feel their heart beating, rub them down, make them feel special.

Their gubinge orchard is far too precious to risk fire going wild. One of the ways they look after it is through traditional land and fire-management practice. While we make our way toward the lakes through the orchard, Bruno quietly explains how he walks over the land, mapping the special areas, burning it in sequence, rotating the burns, year in, year out. 'The land speaks for itself,' he tells us, dragging a hollow log and some dead trees together. 'There are areas you just don't burn.'

We help him and, as sweat drips down my legs into my boots, the woodpile grows. We are clearing the country of fuel while, at the same time, providing wildlife with homes and havens when a fire is lit. The fire, Bruno says, is lit during the cool, dry, dewy season on windless early mornings to minimise the chances of it going wild. These kinds of burns leave the country looking healthy, the leaves on the trees are still intact, animals don't perish. Afterwards, we sit by the lake in the shade of the paperbarks shrouded in

butterflies recently hatched from their cocoons, watching the donkeys, at the opposite end of the lake, watching us. At this time of the year the lake has dwindled to a pool. I smell the moist, dark earth of the wetlands and think about Bruno's approach to fire and how it puts a whole different slant on the western media's perception of fire being the bad beastie guy and men being shining and herculean. Back-burns and burning off at the wrong place at the wrong time during the end of the Dry, without rotating fires and providing havens for animals, is less Hercules, more Viking.

LATE SEASON FIRES in the Dry, fed by an enormous fuel-load, can kill trees, but worse, they'll wipe out the seed bank on the ground. 'Regular fires don't allow the seed to mature and fall,' my mate Doc says, shaking his head as we drive past the burn-offs on the Broome–Derby highway. 'These really hot fires kill other tree species like the bloodwoods and the woolybutts, the bauhinia, gardenia and ficus, allowing the acacia to take over. If the fires are continual these, too, get destroyed and the sorghum and spear grass dominate, leaving us with savannah instead of pindan woodland.'

Fires have already decimated the beautiful Cooktown ironwood, which once was the best building timber in the north. The saplings are slow to regenerate and now they don't stand a chance. Doc is part of an organisation called the Society for Kimberley Indigenous Plants and Animals (SKIPA). Doc wants to get rid of the 'animal' bit and make it just SKIP. He's mad for it. SKIPA members are a core group of people who love the pindan woodland that grows around Broome. Loving pindan woodland is a little bit like loving an old dog that farts a lot. You need to *know* pindan woodland to love it, see it closer and more regularly than through the window of a car. Pindan woodland fruits and flowers provide food and medicine for Yawuru people and a haven for all kinds of animal and bird life. SKIPA members collect seed, propagate indigenous plants and wage war on invasive weeds. This year, they have funding to create a living seed bank. They also embark on revegetation and rehabilitation programs and try to wean people off their water-thirsty lawns and palm trees. I'd like to think that the understated beauty of native bush will win people over in the end. That they'll be wooed by the white trunks and yellow, tombowler-sized blossoms of the elephant-ear wattle;

struck by the green-red contrast of a mamajun tree in full fruit; stopped in their tracks by the earthy smell of a ti-tree forest. But, in the end, I think it's the water bills that will change people's thinking.

THERE'S ANOTHER ECOSYSTEM up here even more fragile than the pindan woodlands and that's the monsoonal vine thickets of the coastal dunes. Fire is a big threat to these thickets. Since 1992, Jeanné Browne has been walking and documenting the plant, animal and cultural heritage of the country traversed by the annual Lurujarri Dreaming Trail – what the Goolarabooloo people call 'living country' between Minyirr, Gantheaume Point, Broome and Bindiangoon, Yellow River. She has a plethora of paintings, prints and journal extracts from time spent with the Goolarabooloo community, Paddy Roe and Richard Hunter in particular. The Goolarabooloo have been walking this songline with people from all over Australia for twenty-three years now. It takes a great many years of walking the trail to understand that it's not about getting to know the country but, rather, the country getting to know you. Jeanné says the vine thickets of quondong and walmadany offer a concentrated and diverse array of bush fruit to supplement the wealth of reef fish, shellfish and marine food sources of the adjacent reef. The thickets have been a favoured camping area for Aboriginal people in the area for many centuries. They aren't part of the traditional firestick-burning regime. As Bruno Dann says, 'There are areas you just don't burn.' Jeanné created a large screen-printed artwork on canvas of these thickets. It's greeny-blue and purple on a sandy background with snatches of pink and red that are the flowers, leaves and seed pods of the jiggle (*Bauhinia*) or 'mother-in-law' tree. The canvas is scattered with line drawings of shells and artefacts found in the middens as well as species names, both in the Aboriginal language of the area and English. A lizard with its U-turn tail nestles beneath the foliage. The writing on the top right-hand side of the print reads: 'Soft place. Haven'.

THERE IS A spectacular example of a monsoonal vine thicket on the eastern side of the Dampier Peninsula, at the pearl farm of Cygnet Bay – or Borrgoron as the Bardi mob call it. It's spectacular because, like Twin Lakes, it has been lucky enough to escape the fires. Cygnet Bay. Again, I rode that two

hundred-kilometre stretch of red-dirt road. The journey was slow, this time, rather than loud, due to a chip that had lodged itself in the filter. It gave me a chance to view the country on either side of the road properly. It had been burnt beyond an inch of its life and had that drab, suburban sameness about it. No green, mostly grey, all acacia and grass. The vine thickets at Borrgoron were another story. I was astounded by the girth of those trees, the shade they provided, the bird life they supported. It was so very hard to leave that soft place, that haven, and drive back to my hometown, the ‘tropical paradise’ spruiked in tourism brochures.

Ringer is a bit of a bush botanist. We spend a lot of time talking about the plants and animals, Ringer and I. So he gets it when I speak passionately about the monsoonal vine thickets. ‘They’re fighting for their lives,’ I tell him. ‘I read somewhere that if you wipe out one ecosystem it impacts on another which then impacts another... It’s the domino principle.’

‘Now that really is playing with fire,’ Ringer says and we watch the mail plane fly over. He sloshes the dregs of his tea on the ground, pulls on his ten-gallon hat and saunters off towards the airstrip.

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ESSAY

Lustre

Reflections on pearling

Sarah Yu, Bart Pigram and Maya Shioji

lustre: radiance or brilliance of light

THERE IS ANOTHER boom-and-bust resource industry in the West, one with a long and near-forgotten history. The exploitation and artistic use of the pearl shell *Pinctada maxima*, one of the largest and most lustrous nacre-producing bivalve shells found along the northern shores, is an ancient craft dating back over twenty thousand years. Its story is full of wonder, intrigue, romance and greed – yet to be fully appreciated in Australian history.

As authors, we have close associations with the pearling heritage of Broome. Sarah Yu married into the Yu family, whose patriarch was a hard-hat, deep-sea diver who worked in the industry for over thirty years before becoming a citizen of Australia. Bart Pigram is part of the Pigram–Puertollano families, who have a long tradition of pearling workers and musicians. Maya Shioji is the daughter of Itsushi Shioji, one of Broome’s last Japanese hard-hat divers. We weave together stories of the intersecting strands of northern Australia’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal pearling history and its quest for pearl shell and, much later, pearls; of the enduring influence on the cultural and economic character of the north from Shark Bay across to the Torres Strait; and of the changing qualities and cultural meanings of pearl shell and pearls. The pearling tradition of northern Australia is a fascinating mosaic of encounters and relationships.

Most well-known pearling stories have been presented from the perspective of the pearling masters or their daughters, wives or divers, summoning exotic and romantic notions of a northern colonial Australia flavoured by close links with the 'Orient'. These histories tend to hide or disguise the significance of Aboriginal people, as well as Asians, in pearling. That Aboriginal people may have been the world's first people to appreciate the beauty and associated power of pearl shell is often overlooked, as is an appreciation of the antiquity and ingenuity of this trade.

In the archives, Aboriginal people are identified but not named, or they figure in the background of images of lugger crews, pearling sheds and master pearlery and their families. And yet, as our oral histories confirm, almost every Aboriginal family along the west Kimberley coast contributed to the pearling industry in some way. As the pearlery arrived in the traditional coastal countries of the Ngarluma, Jaburara, Kariyarra, Yindjibarndi, Martuthunira, Nyangumarta, Karajarri, Yawuru, Jabirr Jabirr, Nyul Nyul, Bardi, Jawi and Worrorra, they needed supplies of fresh water and wood for their boats and, in the early contact history, Aboriginal workers to harvest shell from the seabed.

Wherever the pearlery went, it was always in someone's country. As the industry rapidly expanded in the late nineteenth century and there was a large-scale influx of Asian indentured labour, Aboriginal people continued to work on the luggers alongside their Asian counterparts as guides, deckhands and shell-openers, and as tenders and divers. Their intimate knowledge of the tides, currents and weather was essential for the pearling fleets operating on a cruel and unpredictable sea. On shore, many were employed to repair and build luggers, unload and grade shell for export, or as servants in the pearling masters' homes and businesses.

The Aboriginal story, including their contribution to the pearling industry, has a tradition dating back more than twenty thousand years. It reveals the spiritual connection of Aboriginal people to the sea country where the shell is found, their respect for the forces that created the sought-after creatures, and their ongoing sense of responsibility to look after and care for the species. The late Aubrey Tigan, a Mayala pearl shell carver of world renown, spoke of how the rainbow serpent *Aalinggoon* created shell in the waters of Strickland Bay, where his people have been collecting shell for thousands of years:

He [Aalingoon] came down here...from the mainland, down. He came into the bay and lives beneath the sea. He comes every full moon, when it's a big tide. As he floats on his back, as he drifts, the scales fall off his back and turn into *goowarn* (pearl shell) as they drift down to the seabed below. The tides came and chucked them everywhere, on the reefs, all around the islands. This way he always gives us more shell.

THE ALLURE OF mother-of-pearl crosses time and cultures, as peoples from around the world share a fascination and appreciation of its lustre both as shell and as pearls. In universal mythologies, pearls and pearl shell are powerful objects, often associated with the moon and water. The Chinese depict dragons who follow the 'pearl of wisdom', re-enacted every year in Broome's Shinju Matsuri festival. Melanesians of the Solomon Islands inlay pearl shell in larger wooden funeral vessels, where the iridescence invokes the shadows, or spirits, of the deceased. In the highlands of New Guinea, pearl shell is a currency for bride price.

Pearl shell has been used throughout the world, and particularly in the West, to enhance material objects with beauty and lustre. Prior to the invention of plastic, pearl shell was crafted into beautiful buttons and buckles to fasten shoes, bodices, coats and dresses. It was used as inlay in furniture and musical instruments, binoculars for the opera, cigarette holders, evening purses, brooches, hair clips, knives and forks, and beautifully crafted handles for muskets and pistols. The shell was intricately carved with filigree designs to become the fronds of fans, indispensable to the *toilette* of nineteenth-century bourgeois women.

In world literature, pearls inspire analogy to the moon, or as tears of the moon, and are often linked to virtues of purity and perfection.

When natural pearls were first fished in the Arabian Gulf (around 10,000 BP), they were traded and worn by the ruling monarchs of Europe and the Orient, and through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fleets were sent across the oceans in search of the world's pearling beds. In the twentieth century, pearls continued to adorn the rich and famous.

MOLLUSCS ARE ANCIENT beings, and the *pteroidean* bivalves, which include the nacre-producing *Pinctada maixma*, date from four hundred and seventy million years ago and follow evolutionary pathways that malacologists continue to research and reassess using DNA and fossil records. There are only a few nacre-producing molluscs and, while most molluscs are able to produce pearls, few species produce pearls that are considered worthy as gems. *Pinctada maxima*, both gold-tipped and silver-tipped, is the largest and most lustrous. Nacre of pearl shell and pearls is made from tiny hexagonal plates of aragonite (calcium carbonate) that are arranged in layers at a thickness close to the wavelength of light then infused with a silk-like protein called conchiolin, and possesses a sense of unique beauty. These substances combined produce a strong, flexible, material that is resilient, tough, porous and beautiful as it refracts light. Thus, the resulting *lustre*, which means radiance or brilliance of light, as with all iridescence is not actually a substance but an *event of light* that is experienced as the light passes through the nacre.

Six species of the *Pinctada* family are found in northern Australian waters but *P margaritifera*, commonly known as the black-lip pearl oyster, *P albina* of Shark Bay, harvested for their pearls, and *P maxima*, the queen of the family, are most common.

The beds of *Pinctada maxima*, particularly those adjacent to Eighty Mile Beach and Cape Bossut, south of Broome, flourished in a unique environment created by the strong tidal movements and the Leeuwin Current that sweeps along Western Australia's Indian Ocean coast. These pearl shell beds are considered some of the best and the most extensive in the world and, despite historic degradation from extensive harvesting, they are resilient with an inspiring capacity to regenerate.

IN THE WEST Kimberley, *riji* (engraved shell), *guwan* (plain shell) and *binji-binji* (smaller blades of pearl shell) are given to Aboriginal boys during initiation to be used as phallicrypts and displayed in ceremonial dances. These public performances celebrate key tenets of our coastal country – salt water, cyclones, fish traps and sea life – brought to life with the engraved shell imbued with a power to embody the country. The tradition of recording story in shell continued beyond the catastrophic colonial encounter, into the present.

Archaeological evidence from sites along the north-west coast demonstrates the ancient treasuring by Aboriginal people of the lustre of pearl shell. In a cave at Winjingarra (opposite Montgomery Reef), archaeologist Sue O'Connor found evidence of pearl shell dated at 19,000 BP when the case site was located two hundred kilometres from the sea. Another piece of shell, found at Koolan, was dated at 26,500 BP. These are rare finds because pearl shell, being a form of calcium carbonate, is a relatively soft substance that deteriorates easily. A much hardier marine shell product, dentalium – also used as decorative and ceremonial beads – was discovered in a cave in Riwi, five hundred kilometres inland and dated at 29,000 BP, indicating the trade in shell began before this date.

Ancient Aboriginal trade networks that crossed the Australian continent still exist today. Known as *wunan* in much of northern and eastern Kimberley, or as *yinyali* in Yawuru, pearl shell and other artifacts were passed on by trading partners, always moving along in one direction. In inland areas pearl shell was used in powerful rainmaking ceremonies. Regarded as an emblem of life, the iridescent shell embodied water, rain and lightning. Elders from our region – the country of the Karajarri, Yawuru through to Bardi and Jawi – have been engraving shell with ochres, creating intricate designs inspired from *Bugarrigarri* (the creator or Dreaming) for at least three thousand years.

Since the arrival of the Europeans, shell artists such as Joe Nangan, Bigge Albert, Sandy Paddy, Aubrey Tigan and countless others have also decorated shell with designs and imagery to depict historic events such as the coming of pearling fleets, missionaries and violent encounters, as well traditional coastal life. These 'story shells' were traded locally, and many are now found in museum and gallery collections around the world.

FINDING PEARL SHELL became a major preoccupation of early explorers and colonists in the north-west. In the late 1600s William Dampier, the buccaneer mariner, was probably the first white person to note the presence of pearl shell in Australian waters, in Malgana country around Shark Bay. It wasn't until after colonisation of the north-west began that surveyors and pastoralists confirmed Dampier's reports. In 1861, after explorer FT Gregory

discovered pearl shell in Nickol Bay, Western Australia's pearling industry began. Early settlers also noticed Aboriginal people wearing shell, and were quick to exploit their knowledge and labour as battling sheep graziers formed economic partnerships with pearlers for their mutual benefit.

Pearler-pastoralists were quick to adapt methods to suit the supply and type of shell, collecting shell in the off-season from their pastoral activities, using the traditional method of beachcombing or 'dry shelling' on the low tides. From the 1860s, pearling was to become the maritime equivalent of the Western Australian gold rushes. However, as the in-shore shell beds were depleted, pearlers looked to deeper waters where they used boats and began forcing Aboriginal people to dive for the shell. Diving to depths of up to seven fathoms, five to six divers would work off dinghies from a mother ship, harvesting shell. This free-diving phase quickly became an inhumane process characterised by coercion, brutality, kidnapping and enslaving of Aboriginal people from the Kimberley coast and inland, who were forced onto boats and imprisoned on barracoons on the islands.

Police, magistrates and fisheries inspectors often supported blackbirding, creating *de facto* government-supported slavery. In the competition for labour, shell, water supplies and women, conflict between the pearlers and Aboriginal groups was inevitable. The increasing brutality against Aboriginal workers forced the British government to intervene in 1873, with pearling laws that gave some protection and banned female divers.

As shell stocks in shallow waters were depleted, alternatives to free-diving were explored and, after some experimentation, diving apparatus (also known as 'hard-hat' or 'dress diving') was introduced, operated first by hand pumps and later by diesel motors. As Aboriginal divers would not use the diving suits, pearlers began to indenture Asian workers from as early as the 1870s. They were exempt from the 1901 White Australia legislation, and this practice continued until the 1960s. Over the last century, thousands came to work in pearling via Singapore from Malaysia, China, Japan, Philippines, Timor and Sri Lanka, on three- to five-year contracts. Conditions were harsh. Long weeks were spent at sea in cramped, unsavoury conditions as the shell dried on the decks of the luggers and cockroaches infested the cabins. No refrigeration meant a diet of fish and rice, and with no radio communication

to advise on approaching cyclones many boats were lost at sea. Divers worked the seabed from sun-up to sundown, dependent on the commitment of their tenders and engineers who operated the lifeline of air from small platforms. Low pay, restricted rights and limited tenure meant divers could be sent home at any time, especially if they transgressed the racial laws preventing 'cohabitation' with the 'natives'.

Prior to World War I, up to a third of indentured divers lost their lives through disease, diver's paralysis or drowning during natural disasters such as cyclones. There was no compensation for families who lost loved ones at sea. Maya's father Shioji, a hard-hat diver in the '60s, told us, 'Diving very risky. Air stop – you die,' and he almost did once, in 1969. He said every diver got the bends (diver's paralysis) in their working lives, often made worse by the competitiveness between the divers. The more shell a diver collected the more money they made, increasing their job security with the pearling masters, so the more risks they took. Fear of death didn't stop Maya's father. He kept diving until 1973.

Pearling was a dangerous business, not just because of the diving conditions, but for the risk of cyclones – which destroyed many fleets and many lives. The fleets depended on local experience and knowledge of weather, tides and currents. The coastal people brought these skills to the pearling fleets. Alongside their Asian counterparts, they were deckhands, shell openers, navigators, cooks, tenders and divers. Luggers were usually skippered by the head diver, who directed the drift of the lugger over pearling grounds from the seabed. Close relationships formed between divers and crew, and there was mostly camaraderie and friendship in their competition to get the most shell, which contrasts to the strict racial hierarchies often presented in the popular histories of pearling. Many divers now lie in unmarked, 'lonely' graves that dot the Kimberley coast, and in every pearling port local cemeteries have separate sections for Chinese, Japanese, Malay and the other groups. Today, local communities such as the Chinese and Japanese in Broome continue to honour those who died with annual ceremonies such as Hung Seng and Obon.

RACIST PARANOIA OVER the dependence of the industry on Asian labour led to a brief attempt to ban Asian workers. In 1913, Broome pearl-ers

trilled British divers but most died within a couple of seasons. Pearling was not considered suitable employment for white men until the advent of hookah diving in the 1960s – a further phase of diving, and also the time when the industry shifted focus from collecting shell to culturing pearls. Even then, labour was not unionised and the conditions were questionable.

These ‘saltwater cowboys’, immortalised in song by Stephen Pigram, lived and worked on luggers, the workhorse of the pearling fleets. Beautifully crafted wooden vessels, purpose-built with innovative designs, they were adapted to suit the particular conditions of the area in which they operated and featured many locally inspired technological innovations. Operating in tropical waters, luggers had to withstand the onslaught of tropical storms and cyclones and the impacts of ten-metre tidal movements and, in areas where there were no jetties, be able to ‘lay up’ in creek beds or along the foreshore.

They required constant maintenance, such as caulking and repairing, to keep them afloat. In a highly regulated fishery, those lost at sea would be resurrected as new boats in the fleets, thus many luggers, such as *Redbill*, had long stories. In Broome, Aboriginal men including Robyn Hunter, Doug D’Antoine, Donnelly McKenzie, Dickie Chi and Nipper Roe were builders and carpenters who did this work. They worked onshore to keep the pearling industry profitable, tending to sails, sorting and packing shell for market and making divers’ boots.

Lay-up, which occurred from November to March, was a time for repairs and rest. From the 1860s, when the first luggers headed along the Kimberley coast in search of shell, the pearlery needed water and wood, which they collected from traditional water sources, located on the edge of tidal creeks. These areas also served as safe ‘lay-up’ areas for fleets of luggers when cyclones approached or boats needed careening. Relations between the early pearling crews and coastal groups were defined by this need. The north-west coast was peppered with such lay-up camps as pearlery, including Harry Hunter and Frenchy D’Antoine, set up long-term outposts with Aboriginal groups.

The other ‘trade’ was that of women; sometimes this was with consent, sometimes not. In the context of colonial encounters, women’s relations with members of the crew of the pearling fleet were sanctioned in Aboriginal society and close relations were formed between their families and the divers.

This provided an important source of food and supplies to coastal groups like the Karajarri, who were able to use this independence to stay away from threatening pastoralists and police. Edna Hopiga, a Karajarri woman, said: 'I used to call the Malays uncle and many of us knew who our fathers were. That was a good idea for people to help one another.' However, the spread of venereal disease, fear of Asian dominance in pearling and the growing 'coloured' population meant that Western Australia's Aboriginal Administration was swift to legislate against these interactions, although human nature meant these laws were destined to fail.

On the spring tides, crews and boats returned to town for lay-up and, as the wet season approached, the end of the pearling season. Until the 1980s, these were exciting times when the small coastal towns would 'come alive'. Lugger picnics were a highlight. In defiance of the restrictive laws of White Australia, Chinatowns quickly evolved in towns such as Broome to service the needs of the pearling crews. Asian businesses, boarding houses, gambling dens, cafés, laundries, general stores, discreet brothels and even photographic studios flourished.

They were places where cultural traditions were shared between Asian divers and Aboriginal people. Relationships ran the full extent of human connection: love, enmity, friendship and death, enriched by shared values of family, culture and respect, creating the distinct multicultural communities that spread with the pearling industry across northern Australia. Torres Strait Islander Charles Passi explained how pearling had created family across the north for most Torres Strait Islander families: 'I come to Broome and feel at home because of pearling, because my family is here.'

In Broome and other pearling towns, the ramshackle foreshore pearling camps were rich with good food, music and parties as crew members looked after their extended Aboriginal families. These relationships proved to be enduring, with many local Broome families now reconnecting with their Asian relations. Sister-city relationships – such as with Taiji, Japan – provide support for the pearling communities.

PEARL SHELL WAS the backbone of the industry, as it was exported for button manufacturing. Discovering pearls was a rarer, more

exciting, occurrence. There are many tales of deception, thievery and murder surrounding the theft and sale of pearls. Master pearlery tried to control this by appointing trustworthy 'shell-openers' and inventing a special safe box to hold the pearls, but still most pearls were 'lost' and traded as 'snides' in the underground markets of Chinatowns.

In the late 1950s, when plastic replaced pearl shell buttons, pearling appeared doomed. In the late 1880s British biologist William Saville-Kent developed a method of culturing pearls that was perfected by Mikimoto Kōkichi, who became synonymous with women's pearls. From the 1950s pearl farms such as Kuri Bay were established on the north-west coast and from them came strands of the highest quality cultured pearls, which may take years to construct and can sell for millions of dollars. The world's highest quality pearls, now marketed as South Sea pearls, grown from *Pinctada maxima*, are produced in Australia. The modern industry is dominated by Paspaley. The company has led a campaign to market Australian South Sea pearls as superior, while smaller operators such as Cygnet Bay Pearls survive through diversification with tourism, selling pearls on-site and engaging in marine research. The current pearl producers maintain that pearling in Australia has a future and that their pearls will survive competition from the cheap, mass-produced freshwater pearls of China. They continue to invest in an industry that they estimate is worth about \$300 million a year.

Similarly, Aboriginal people, including younger pearl shell carvers Tigan and the Sibosados, are determined to keep the traditions of their grandfathers alive, and are adapting to new opportunities, including integrating their designs into pearl jewellery.

THE PEARLING MAP of the Kimberley is extensive and includes trading sites, art sites, lay-up camps, archaeological remains, pearl shell middens, water sources used by the pearlery, pearl shell beds, cultured pearl farms and the leases in the pristine waters of the Kimberley. This continues across the north, creating a trail of sites from Shark Bay to Thursday Island. These sites, and the many associated intangible, cultural values, tell a compelling and unique Australian heritage story worthy of world recognition.

Despite the world's love affair with pearls and the significance of pearling

to northern Australia during the last century and a half, the story of place can be quickly eroded. In Broome, as the few surviving buildings connected to pearling bow to the ravages of time and weather, pearling heritage is disappearing. The focus is now on tourism and beach destinations.

The changing identity of place is reflected in how children see *their* place. In 1963, when Queen Elizabeth visited Broome, the children of St Mary's School were asked to draw pictures of their town for their royal visitor. The resulting artworks depict the pearling industry in great detail, sensitive to the harsh conditions divers and crew endured, with luggers sailing into the wind and the underwater world of the hard-hat divers, threatened by sharks. Broome children today have no such clarity about the contemporary town. As the last of the hard-hat divers pass away, the challenge is to remember this diverse, multicultural history. Beyond the shell and the pearls is an intricate web of connectedness between the shell, its habitat, the people who harvest it and our responsibility to 'look after it'. Just as nacre, applauded for its qualities of lustre, lightness, strength and porosity, inspires other diverse innovations – such as artificial bone, hardening of glass or treating burns – we hope that this salute to our pearling traditions will inspire ways of protecting our heritage. We hope you agree. *Galiya mabu*.

References at www.griffithreview.com

Sarah Yu is a curator. In 2007 she co-curated *Opening the Common Gate* exhibition. Bart Pigram and Maya Shioji are training as curators. They are all working at Nyamba Buru Yawuru in Broome, in partnership with the WA Museum, to curate an exhibition entitled *Lustre: Pearling and Australia*.

REPORTAGE

Mirror rim

Lost and found in the Abrolhos

Ashley Hay

I THOUGHT *BATAVIA* was the story I was carrying on my trip to the Abrolhos in the first weeks of spring. You know the one – the Dutch East India Company ship that ran aground there in 1629, delivering 316 people to a cluster of tiny islands in the northern part of the archipelago where some endured a murderously mutinous attack at the hands of their fellow travellers. Only 116 arrived safely in the Spice Islands, half a year later.

I thought it was that ship, that story, those people who underscored how I approached this place, the way I saw it and what I experienced. It took me some time to fathom the truth.

Perhaps it's a writer's worst habit, carrying narratives around to fit to new places, or having unexpected ones rear up in places that should be fresh and free of all associations. Their eyes always open for a scene, a sentence, a moment to steal for a story they don't yet know they'll tell. I'm with Hilary Mantel when she says: 'Insights don't usually arrive at my desk, but go into notebooks when I'm on the move. Or half-asleep.'

Which probably makes me awful to travel with – or sleep with.

IT DISAPPEARED SO quickly, the enormous heft of Australia. It was spring and, in the striped blue thickness of the Indian Ocean below our tiny plane, whales surfaced and frolicked – a spray of water, a raised flipper, the giant splash of a breach. The occasional vessel appeared: trawler, cruiser, carrier. There was so much space around each that the chance of any one intersecting with another seemed impossible. The chance of intersecting with anything seemed remote.

Yet more than ninety boats' lookouts are known to have failed at their post in this place, leading their vessels to run afoul. Below the plane, we saw the boiler of a recent wreck (the *Windsor*, 1908), the remnants of the *Zeewijk* (1727), below which was, perhaps, the *Agtekerke*, lost two years earlier in 1725 but only – possibly – revealed in 2012. For almost four hundred years, for all anyone knew, the *Agtekerke* could have fallen off the face of the earth.

It's an A to Z of submarine detritus, drawn to – and destroyed by – the Abrolhos Islands, this exquisite scatter of reefs, shoals, shallows and 170-odd 'islands, islets and above-water rocks' that covers eight hundred square kilometres of space about seventy kilometres off Australia's western shore. This spotty archipelago, a smattering of limestone and coralline punctuation spread across a wide, wet canvas.

You do not just happen across the Abrolhos. There's a small seasonal crayfishing industry and some aquaculture operations, mainly pearl farms: the oysters here can produce a pearl the colour of an indigo dusk. But there are no public jetties and no marinas – only private access ways and a handful of public moorings. There are three airstrips and one local helicopter company has the right to land anywhere it can set a chopper down.

If you do get there, you're not supposed to stay: there's nowhere to book a room; nowhere to camp. The chance of sleeping over comes by working with the fishermen or pearlers and bunking in one of their huts – or by being invited to stay, as we were, in the Department of Fisheries' dormitories on Rat Island, in the middle cluster of these outcrops, the Easter Group.

And so we came, a handful of visiting writers – offered the chance to be somewhere, see somewhere, as writers sometimes are – and we stared across

the shape of this small piece of land, its vast blue sky busy with the sounds and swoops of birds.

More than two million birds breed throughout these islands: terns and noddies (including the only Australian breeding population of Australian lesser noddies, *Anous tenuirostris melanops*) and gulls. There are populations of *Larus pacificus* here, the heavier, more cartoonish gull that lived around Sydney until it was out-competed by that smaller, harsher-voiced kelp gull with its red beak and beady eyes. There was the possibility of sea lions too – the Abrolhos is the northern limit of the breeding population of *Neophoca cinerea*, and one was known to come and play.

Beneath the sounds of the birds lay the strange wuthering the wind makes where there's not much for it to play against – sounds a usually busy mind could easily spin into something like a noisy road on a wet day. A thing so far from real: the island was deserted but for us and our stomping, two out-of-season crayfishers working on their hut, and what remained of Giuseppe Benvenuto, who drowned in 1929 when his boat went down nearby. The view beyond the headstone of his neat and obvious grave gave way to limitless west.

There was something compelling about the water beyond that grave. Close by, where it turned against the sandy shore, it sometimes rested – completely still, like a millpond – for the better part of a minute, even more. There was not the slightest ripple or wave, and then, like a breath, some pulse would return; a small fold, another and another. There was no discernible pattern to this, no logic, and far out against the western horizon the high white walls of breakers rose up and shattered against the raised ocean floor. Too far to hear their noise; too far to gauge their size or weight or power. They were a suggestion, or a threat, perhaps, like a misplaced loop of film disrupting an otherwise serene line.

Those waves evoked the phrase long-ago sailors used when they left charted waters: they spoke of 'sailing out of the world'. Out there was the far shore that closes *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – the far shore that opens *Twelfth Night*. Out there were lost stories and undiscovered lands.

The clouds took on rose-gold and apricot as the sun began to set and the light went down. Out at the edge of the world.

I'M AN UTTERLY east coast creature: I grew up with my feet in the Pacific Ocean and a clear stretch between me and Chile – had I been able to see that far. All my life, the sun has risen out of the ocean, illuminating a coast spotted with the colonial busyness of familiar British names: Cook and Banks, Bass and Flinders.

On the west coast, where the sun falls into the sea, the names are more exotic and the narrative of colonial exploration is at least a hundred and fifty years older. Dirk Hartog nailed his silver plate to a tree in 1616. Willem de Vlamingh, more than seventy years later, coasted from Rottnest Island up to Hartog's landing site near Shark Bay, replacing the original plaque. In between came Frederick de Houtman, charting the constellations of the southern sky along the Dutch East India Company's route between Europe in the north and the Spice Islands – as Indonesia was known – in the south.

In the days before the reliability of longitude, the smart navigational money was on tracking east from South Africa until the coast of New Holland – or Australia – appeared. Turn left at the place now called Kalbarri, the thinking went, and you could track north-west to Batavia (Jakarta).

But Frederick de Houtman found a suite of reefs between his vessel and the sea cliffs of Kalbarri in July 1619. He named them for a common seafaring phrase – *abri voll olos*: 'keep your eyes open'. Hoping no one else would stumble on them as he had.

But here came *Batavia*, in the early hours of 4 June 1629.

I thought I saw the sea breaking on some shallows, said the ship's lookout.

I thought you saw the moonlight on the water, said her skipper.

And the ship ran aground, her hull gouged.

Of the 316 people aboard, forty drowned. The rest made it to shore – even the panicky second-in-command, Jeronimus Cornelisz, who spent the last twenty-four hours of the ship's life clinging to the bowsprit because he couldn't swim. You know what happened next. There are novels and non-fiction books; there are operas; there are films.

The ship's skipper, Ariaen Jacobsz, and its commandant or 'upper merchant', Francisco Pelsaert, slunk off under the cover of darkness with a subset of crew and passengers and the two small extant boats, first to search for water and then, failing that, to attempt the three thousand kilometre

open-water sail to Indonesia to effect a rescue. In their absence – deemed treacherous by the abandoned survivors – command devolved onto that unstable apothecary, the ‘under merchant’ Cornelisz, a man who’d been planning mutiny well before the reefs of the Abrolhos appeared. He began separating the remaining passengers and crew; he began ordering them killed – more than a hundred of them were, and the skeletons of some were found, centuries later, in shallow graves. When Pelsaert returned – having been unable to find the islands for a month, thanks to the dubious calculations of latitude and longitude taken by his now imprisoned skipper – Cornelisz was tried. He had one of his hands amputated – some reports say two – before he was hung alongside several other mutineers.

It’s a grisly tale, told and retold. Its first incarnation as a book was published in 1647 and became an immediate bestseller. But the recitative of its horror notwithstanding, perhaps some fates are worse. The abecedarly of known shipwrecks encapsulates many hundreds of lives cut short – but what of the unknown lost, those ships whose fates aren’t known? As Simon Leys calculated in his own elegant essay on *Batavia*, of the ships that sailed to the East Indies, one in fifty never arrived. On the return voyage, the odds dipped to one in twenty. ‘Most of the lost ships,’ he wrote, ‘disappeared without a trace.’

‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live,’ as the famous Joan Didion quote goes, and perhaps it’s our stories that keep us alive when we’re gone – a stab at immortality. But if a story cannot be told – if its last teller disappears beneath the last wave with the crumbling bowsprit – then the shape of its narrative is necessarily upended, incomplete. Who knows what has happened or where? Someone has to survive; the longboat or the yawl has to make it back. Otherwise the story sinks, forgotten, into the ocean.

ON THE ABROLHOS the moon rose out of the sea as bright and as orange as the sun. It was two fingers above the horizon by the time I reached the foreshore, swung up so fast and already apparently diminishing. Someone knew the trick of holding your thumb against its disc to undo the illusion that it rises large and begins to shrink, and we sat there, measuring the moon and measuring our misperceptions.

This demonstrable difference between how we see things and how they are was irresistible. We joked about it. We joked about the creepiness of this empty island with its empty huts. We joked about the ghosts we didn't want to see – the worst of them just over there, twenty-seven kilometres to the north, where *Batavia* went down. We talked, we told each other stories. We turned ourselves towards sleep.

We know that we sleep differently to our ancestors (they often slept in two blocks a night, waking in between to eat, pray, love – even to burgle, brew beer, or pop out to see a neighbour). We know, too, that different cultures still sleep differently to each other today (from the famous southern European siesta to various African tribes where no one is ever told to sleep and where the boundaries between waking and sleeping are described as 'very fluid'). So can different landscapes generate different experiences of sleeping? Can different landscapes generate different dreams?

Twice I skidded out of somnolence, jolting awake with a shock, like a step taken with no ground suddenly beneath it. The second time, I know I cried out too. The night was ringingly quiet and the sleep that finally arrived was tessellated so that I seemed only to dream that I was awake when I knew I must have been dreaming and woke as exhausted as if I'd never closed my eyes.

I did dream of Francisco Pelsaert's mother, dispossessed and punished via the decision that her son was partly culpable for the mess of *Batavia* because he had left his ship and sailed for rescue. I dreamed of walking into a depth of water that suddenly levelled out, shallow and only chest-deep – and I dreamed of walking across to Australia's mainland through this flat and silvery rime. *Batavia* was reckoned to have a top speed of about four-and-a-half kilometres per hour; I could walk faster than that and reach Geraldton in ten hours, top speed.

And then I slept, deep, dreamless, as if I'd disappeared from my own imagination.

I woke, though, with the unsettling thought of Cornelisz's amputated hands. Lying on my front, my left hand was gripping at the fingers of my right while the full weight of my body pressed onto both; they'd been numbed and dulled of all sensation. I managed not to cry out again – my roommate was still asleep.

Through the window the morning was the blank silver of the time before sunrise when the world hasn't yet found its colour, and the gulls rose silently to hover on thermal streams, as if to regain their wings after a quiet night on the ground.

I shook the feeling back into my hands and sent the power-mad apothecary away. The sun shone a straight line across the water to the end of one of the jetties, just as the moon had the night before, and the real world seemed far off.

'I had such a wonderful sleep,' said my roommate, smiling and stretching towards the beginning of her day.

Hours later, as our plane rose up from the airstrip and cleared the land's friable edge, my phone clicked back into range and immediately started to ring. I sent an automatic message – 'can't talk now' – wishing I could shout instead, over the engine's roar. 'You'll never guess where I am; you'll never guess at the beauty I'm seeing.'

Keep your eyes open; tell something from this place.

OF COURSE IT'S a compulsion, the need to convert time and space into stories. A bunch of writers on a speckle of island, a limestone platform undercut by the movement of water so that it hovered like a tree on its trunk: we couched it in terms of longing to be marooned in a place like this; the fear of being marooned in a place like this; whether or not we saw a snake, a lizard, or a seal; whether we could ever have enough of the exhilaration of a land's edge.

Days later, my plane home east still seemed determined to collude with the primacy of that famous and brutal accident as the story that defined this part of the world. The map of its flight path indicated each state capital, plus Darwin – and 'Batavia, 1629', with a small dot for the site of the wreck, out there on the reefs.

But it hadn't been *Batavia* and its souls who staked a claim on my imagination during my time offshore. What came to rest there were the truncated arcs of the 239 stories that seem to have disappeared entirely – further out, further down in the unplumbable depths of the Indian Ocean, beyond my millpond and its distant wall of waves. Not centuries ago, but on

8 March 2014, when MH370 disappeared off the face of the earth. Without the wreckage we expect from such impacts. Without the last-minute phone calls we expect from such moments. Without the careful lat/long pinpointing we expect from this century. Without an explanation to lament; without a fate.

This was the story that had found me, on the edge of those eyes-open islands at the edge of the world.

Further out, further west. Under the infinite vastness of all this blue.

Ashley Hay's most recent novel, *The Railwayman's Wife* (Allen & Unwin, 2013), won the 2014 Colin Roderick Award and the People's Choice Award in the 2014 NSW Premier's Prize, and was long-listed for both the Miles Franklin and Nita B. Kibble awards. She is the editor of *Best Australian Science Writing 2014* (NewSouth), the author of five previous books and a regular contributor to Griffith Review, most recently *The Way We Work*. She lives in Brisbane and travelled to the Abrolhos Islands before the 2014 Big Sky Writers' and Readers' Festival in Geraldton.

FICTION

THE QUIET SLAVE

JOHN MATEER

EPISODE ONE: Near Mutiny

In 1820, Alexander Hare, the owner of a household of slaves and an increasingly controversial figure among the British in the East Indies, abandoned his plantation on Java and sailed for Cape Town. After setting up a farm and working it for five years, he decided to return to the Indies. On the question of whether this was prompted by his being ostracised by Cape Town society for his behaviour and owning slaves, the records are unclear. However, it is well recorded that Hare was undecided as to his ship's final destination, and this uncertainty led to a mutinous confrontation between him and the crew before their eventual landing at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

ROSIE WAS WITH her baby on the deck of the ship when the fight broke out. They were arguing. She could not understand what the sailors and the captain were saying to Tuan Alexander, their owner, who had brought them all the way across the ocean for the second time. They were shouting in English. First the sailors were shouting and shaking their heads and raising their fists to Tuan Alexander and the captain, then Tuan Alexander was speaking harshly to the captain, shouting back at the sailors. One of the male slaves whispered to Rosie that she should go down from the deck with her baby. MALE SLAVE: *Maybe there will be trouble. The sailors want Tuan Alexander to stop sailing from port to port.* There had been talk for many days that Tuan

Alexander was confused, that he did not know what to do, where to go. He wanted to return to Java, but for some reason none of the slaves knew why he could not. He had taken them to Africa – the Cape – six years before. Rosie still remembered their arrival, waiting on board, after all those weeks at sea, for permission to go ashore, with the icy winds like whips and the rain and hail like curses. And it had taken a long time for them to get used to being on the farm. Like most of the other slaves, Rosie had never been somewhere so cold before, nor worked as a labourer. The slaves were people used to being in the heat, and all of them, having being in Tuan Alexander's household for more than a decade, were Malaccan people. Now Malacca was a distant, but fond, memory. Before that long, sad voyage to Cape Town they had for years lived on Tuan Alexander's Java plantation. Cape Town, if only Tuan Alexander had made his home there, in that port city, instead of on a windy farm! Cape Town was like Malacca, with all its British and Dutch and Portuguese, with the many slaves from Bengal, Mozambique, Madagascar, even Java and Bali. And many were Muslims, too, like Tuan Alexander's people, like Rosie. Once she had even seen a Malay funeral party walking alongside the road, led by a proud imam wearing a turban! Tuan Alexander's farm had been a day's walk from Cape Town. While at first they had been shocked by the cold and the labour – some slaves ran away to complain to the district magistrate about their treatment by Tuan Alexander and his Dutch overseer – after the first months they had grown used to life there. On board this ship sailing across the ocean, they even started to call themselves Orang Cape. They had begun to forget their own stories of how they had become slaves. Anyway, many of them, like Rosie, had been born in Tuan Alexander's house in Malacca. Others were like her mother, and still remembered where they came from, how they had been given as gifts by the Rajas and Sultans of faraway Borneo or Sulawesi, men who had wanted to be friends of Tuan Alexander. ROSIE: *At least none of us were bought in the dark caves of shops in Sumatra, or at the auctions in Batavia or Cape Town.* The male slaves who knew several languages had spread the rumour that slavery was over, that they should now all be free, that Tuan Alexander was unfairly keeping them. But Rosie and many of

the others believed that if this were true, then Tuan Alexander would have freed them. Tuan Alexander, they felt, was not an unfair man. Those same male slaves had said that Tuan Alexander was in trouble with the Dutch and the King of England. That was why he had been forced to leave Java. That was the reason they had had to leave the Cape, and were now sailing again, already having crossed the ocean, visiting Mozambique, Mauritius, Diego Garcia and the small island of Nias, off Sumatra. MALE SLAVE: *Tuan Alexander does not know where he wants to go! He is like a bird who has forgotten the way home... Maybe he is trying to sell us, and nobody wants us?* Now below the deck, as the sound of the ocean was slapping at the hull and the inside of the ship stank like a dying animal, Rosie was worried. She was the mother of two boys, one a baby at her breast, the other an adolescent. The ship was filled with slave-men and their women and children. This was not a ship that could sail to England. There, in the half-dark, Rosie started to pray, as she did every day. This time she was praying for a home, for a sanctuary for her children, for her people. She was also praying for the man who had fathered her children – for their Tuan Alexander. In the long calm of prayer she was lost in quiet until one of the slave women, Tuan Alexander's favourite – whom all the slaves called Nyai Satu – touched her shoulder. NYAI SATU: *The English sailors are demanding Tuan Alexander take us to a proper, European port. Unless he does, they will mutiny.* Rosie continued with her prayer. After many days and more prayers, the ship arrived at the islands. On board the ship, before a single person could disembark, Tuan Alexander addressed them all in Malay. TUAN ALEXANDER: *This is where we will live now. We will stay here until I can find a new Malay crew who will follow my orders.* That was only one of his lies, Rosie would later realise when she defended him against the criticisms made by the other slaves. There were other lies, too. Ships had visited these islands before: there were rats on one island and an illegible carving in Jawi on some trees, and another island was already inhabited by a sailor – Tuan Henry – who had been shipwrecked and who lived with them for a year until departing on a passing ship. But the worst lie was Tuan Alexander's promise that he wanted to take them all, his people, his Orang Cape, back to Java or Malacca, back home.

EPISODE TWO: Recollections of Malacca and Java

It is believed that Alexander Hare resided in Malacca between the years of 1801 and 1811, and it is assumed that he met Stamford Raffles, the esteemed administrator and chronicler of the Indies, there prior to the British invasion of Java known in accounts of that time as the Java Expedition. Hare is thought to have been a crucial figure in Malacca during that period due to his knowledge of Malay and his considerable business links with the regional kings. After 1812, although he also had at least one property in Java, he is said to have been given a sizeable portion of land in Borneo for his role as Resident, and it was this controversial gift from the Sultan of Banjarmassin that led to his downfall. Strangely, after settling the islands Hare finally chose the tiny Pulau Bras at the north of the atoll as his abode.

NOW THAT THEY were on these distant islands, Rosie remembered better than ever before their life in Malacca and Java. Even in the Cape, on the farm where they had all had to work in the cold and the wind with the Dutch overseer shouting at them – even at her, Rosie, who was only used to housework! – she had not remembered life in the warm lands as clearly as she did now. It made her dizzy, almost sick. ROSIE: *These islands are not land. They are as small and cramped as boats!* And she had been born in the great city of Malacca, with its markets and traders and ships, and all those voices – Malay, Portuguese, Arabic, English, Javanese, Dutch and Hindi, a wonderful babble. Looking up at the sky over these islands she felt that she was always falling, or sailing. She had been a child in Malacca. She promised herself that she would explain her life to her boys when they would be old enough to understand. Her eldest boy was now just old enough to understand some of these things, but her baby, born in the Cape, at her breast on the ship, would not be able to for many years. ROSIE: *Hopefully we will be back at Tuan Alexander's plantation in Java before then. Or maybe even back in Malacca. That would be wonderful, to be back home!* She wondered about the wife of Tuan Alexander, whom he had left in Java with her own son. Some of the slaves said that his son was now the owner of

the plantation. MALE SLAVE: *Even though he is only a boy, he is keeping the plantation until his father, Tuan Alexander, can return.* Rosie had laughed at that. MALE SLAVE: *Why do you think it is impossible? Have you not heard of child-kings?* She had, yet she could not imagine the English believing in something like that. ROSIE: *Because the English do not believe in kings or gods, only in business.* Although they had their own Raja back in England, Rosie never saw any of the English in Malacca or elsewhere honour him. The English were not like the people of Aceh or Java, or of Lombok, where her mother was born. Rosie's mother, even though she had been sold by the Raja of Lombok, never said anything against him. She would fear being cursed. Now, on the islands, Rosie started to wonder if in the future she herself would remember Malacca. She remembered when she was a child. Not long after the English had arrived, they decided that they should destroy the Fort. Like all the slaves she was afraid of the Fort. She got a chill whenever she passed it. Sometimes, when she was with her mother on an errand for Tuan Alexander's wife, they would pass it and hear men inside groaning. ROSIE: *Is that true, or only something my mother told me?* The English had decided to destroy the Fort, which had first been Portuguese, then Dutch. They employed many Malays and other workmen to start attacking the massive stone walls. MALE SLAVES: *The Fort is cursed!* Many of them had nightmares or became ill, vomiting even as they worked. Some ran away back to the forest, leaving the English shaking their heads. At night there were voices murmuring from under the stones of the Fort. So the English decided that they needed to use explosives. On those days, a gong was struck. Then silence. Rosie could still remember the silence, then the boom, even here on the islands! Rosie had been standing in the crowd, squeezing her mother's hand, when she had seen the explosions for the first time. There was the smoke and huge stones, stones as large as elephants, flying through the air. This continued for several days. Some workers were killed by falling stones. Everyone agreed that they should now be afraid of the English, if the English could destroy something like that, something so old, in only a few days, and frighten all the ghosts and spirits away. The English did not scare Rosie. After the Fort had been made a ruin, many more

Englishmen started arriving. Rosie's mother told her that they were warriors of the English Raja, that they would go to fight the Rajas of Java and the sultans of Borneo. Sometimes, when Rosie was with her mother, she would see those Englishmen standing in rows, walking all together in rows. Often they were led by other men wearing strange clothes: leather trousers, tiger skins over their shoulders, hats with long pink and black feathers that Rosie's mother said came from tall African birds that cannot fly. Although Rosie had now been to the Cape, she still wondered about those birds. Some of the men said that there was a place in the Cape where men could ride them like horses! With the English in Malacca, the city was busy and crowded. Rosie's mother did not like it. She complained that the Englishmen were eating too much food, that their cooks always got the best food at the markets. ROSIE'S MOTHER: *Remember, Tuan Alexander is a very important man, more important now. He will take us to Java, and there we will live like queens.* Even though she was just a child then, Rosie thought of Tuan Alexander's wife, and of his other wife, the woman they called Nyai Satu. They did not use that expression in her presence. Nyai Satu was Tuan Alexander's real wife, a slave from Bali. Everyone said she was from Bali because she said she was. She said she was the daughter of a Raja. She was Tuan Alexander's favourite, the mother of two of his children. Who would have thought then that Rosie, little Rosie, would become Nyai Dua, and would also have two children for Tuan Alexander? Here, on these tiny islands, the great cities of Batavia and Malacca were almost forgotten dreams. Occasionally, when she was nearly asleep, lying against the bodies of the other women in the Cave under the house of Tuan Alexander on Pulau Bras, hearing the other slave women whispering in the kind of Malay that always reminded her of Batavia, Rosie would remember that one evening when Tuan Alexander had allowed the slave women to bring their children to a party that he and his wife hosted in the grandest room in their house on the Java plantation. Important people had come from Batavia and other cities. Rosie, holding her mother's hand, had entered the room that was bright with countless candles. She was almost a young woman then. She held her mother's hand because she had never been allowed

somewhere like this before. They were amazed. There were hundreds of candles, and the smell of tobacco, coffee and freshly washed clothes, and of flowers. And the music of gamelan and fiddles. The wives of the Dutchmen were sitting on the floor in their best sarongs and kabayas, the golden threads in their clothes shimmering like tiny, happy lightning. They were talking in Malay and Javanese. Rosie and her mother did not yet understand Javanese. The important men were speaking their European languages. Rosie shivered with excitement. The wives of the Englishmen and Tuan Alexander's wife were seated in chairs, fanning themselves, in dresses like large, fleshy flowers, white and pink. But what Rosie remembered best, even now, even on Pulau Bras, was the moment when one of the Dutchmen's wives stood up from the floor, her mouth red from chewing betel nut. The wife was dressed like a Javanese queen. Then she took a few steps to sit down on a chair behind a large harp and started to play a wonderful music.

ROSIE'S MOTHER: *Beautiful, isn't it? That is the music we will hear in heaven.*

EPISODE THREE: The Cave and the Kraal

After landing on the islands of the Cocos (Keeling) atoll in late 1825 or early 1826, Alexander Hare found that John Clunies-Ross, his former long-term employee, had also decided to establish a settlement on the islands. As Hare had preceded Ross and was accompanied by workers, the great majority of them slaves, Hare was able to occupy most of the islands, leaving only Palau Atas to Ross and his family. According to all accounts of this time, Hare's behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic: he divided the male from the female slaves, and at his home on the impractical Pulau Bras at the north of the atoll held the single women and children in what was a kind of imprisonment.

THE SLAVES COULD not say for how long they had been on the islands. Pulau Bras was the female slaves' home now. Their imam would have known, but he was on Pulau Panjang with some of the men. Rosie and the women had not seen him since the slaves had been separated. Tuan Alexander had sent the men to set up camps on almost

all of the islands. He only allowed Tuan John and his men to have one or two of the islands. Tuan John had only a few people with him – his family and some English workers, and the Portuguese cook who had been with them since Malacca. Rosie sometimes spoke with the cook in her Portuguese. Tuan Alexander was much stricter on the islands than he had ever been before, even in the Cape, when they had had to work so hard on the farm – planting crops, picking grapes and all those other jobs that had been done for them by local slaves in Java. But in the Cape he had not been bad-tempered and agitated. In the Cape and in Java there had been only a few occasions when one of the men was flogged, and Tuan Alexander had never before separated the male from the female slaves and their children. Tuan Alexander had always recognised that many of them were married, even if they had only been married by their imam. It was true that their imam was not an imam educated in a mosque. Still, he knew more than anyone else did about prayers and rituals. They believed everything he told them. Now they were on the islands and it seemed that Tuan Alexander did not know where he could take them next, even if he did say that one day, once he had made the arrangements to regain ownership of his plantation, he would take them back to live in Java. Everyone liked the idea of returning to Java. It was not as good as Malacca, but it was better than being in Africa or on these lonely islands so far from everywhere. As soon as they had reached the islands, Tuan Alexander had separated the men from the women, the boys from the girls. Many of the married slaves were allowed to live together, unless Tuan Alexander believed that the husband had done something wrong, in which case he would keep the wife with him on Pulau Bras. Mostly it was the childless women whom Tuan Alexander kept with him. On their arrival on the islands, he had told the slaves in Malay that separating them from one another was to protect the purity of the women, to keep the children safe: he did not want the girls to become pregnant or the boys to hurt themselves or drown. When some of the men tried to object he had spoken to them in harsh English. Those few who could understand him kept quiet, knowing that he was warning them that if anyone disobeyed him they would be whipped or drowned. MALE SLAVE: *Tuan*

Alexander said that he wished he had brought the Dutch overseer with him from his farm in the Cape, that savage man who whipped us when we were working out in the fields, swearing at us in his strange Dutch or in his devilish Portuguese. When Tuan Alexander had addressed them on their arrival on the islands he had held up the whip he had brought with him from Cape Town, a whip made of the leather of a rhino! None of them had ever seen a rhino, yet they could imagine it clearly when they closed their eyes – an animal large as an elephant, with a single long horn that could stab through a man faster than a spear. They feared that being whipped with that would be like being speared over and over. ROSIE: *What made Tuan Alexander think like that? What made him so cruel?* Maybe all of them wondered the same. Even though she was Nyai Dua, she was kept with the other female slaves in the Cave under Tuan Alexander's house on Pulau Bras. Only Nyai Satu could sleep with Tuan Alexander in the room above them. Tuan Alexander sent the single men and the married couples to the other islands where they had to work from dawn until dusk, with only a half an hour for food at midday, without a day of rest. Rosie and the other women and girls worked in the day on Pulau Bras, or sometimes on the other islands: finding coconuts, making palm oil and boiling seawater for salt. At night they were all locked up under Tuan Alexander's house. They called their new home 'the Cave'. The girls were with them there, while the boys were kept in the Kraal – like what the dark-skinned people in the Cape used for their animals – beyond the two tall fences surrounding Tuan Alexander's house. There were two fences around Tuan Alexander's house, one around the Kraal. Tuan Alexander explained that the fences were needed to protect the women from Tuan John's men. Tuan John's men were all European and all unmarried. To those slaves who knew about the tribes in Borneo and Sumatra, the Cave was like a cage only animals or prisoners should be made to live in. Rosie did not see it like that. To her the Cave was a dark, safe place, somewhere she could hide among the women. There she could keep her baby close to her. Her older boy was in the Kraal. Even if they were like prisoners, at least they were together, on one island. ROSIE: *Because they are Tuan Alexander's sons he will always take care of us.* None of them could have known how long

they had already been on the islands. Occasionally, they would hear something from the imam who, by observing the moon or talking with sailors from a passing ship who were buying supplies from Tuan John's settlement, knew which year it was – how long they had been on the islands. None of the slaves had much clothing. Each had only a sarong, except Nyai Satu, who had two sarongs, enough cloth to cover her breasts. And there was little food for the nearly one hundred slaves, Tuan Alexander's Orang Cape. Being on these islands was nothing like being in Malacca, Java or the Cape. It was like being on a becalmed ship. On those days when Rosie was able to wander away from her tasks for a while, she would go to the north side of the tiny island and stare at the open ocean, its angry grey like the ocean at the Cape. There she would quietly, sadly, think of nothing.

THE PRECEDING IS an extract from an eight-episode text conceived for radio broadcast. *The Quiet Slave* is a historically accurate fiction that describes the first years of settlement on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, a tiny atoll midway between Perth and Sri Lanka, through the eyes of a female slave in the possession of Alexander Hare. It was Hare, rather than the first John Clunies-Ross, who brought the Malay people to the islands in the early nineteenth century. Even today, most of the Cocos Malay community are under the impression that the Clunies-Ross dynasty, who ruled the islands until the 1970s, was solely responsible for the founding of the settlement and for the Malay people's one hundred and fifty years of servitude. The history of the Cocos Malays is a complex one, shaped by the ambitions of the Clunies-Ross family and the British colonial administration as well as by the Australian government, not least through its White Australia Policy. The Cocos Malay population is now divided between the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the WA towns of Katanning and Port Hedland, and the Malaysian state of Borneo. My text was conceived with the aim of informing the Cocos Malay communities of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and the Australian mainland of the nature of their origins, restoring a sense of their place in the history of the South-East Asian slave trade and the British Empire. It is currently being translated

into Malay and will be transcribed in the Jawi script. The completed text, performed in English and Malay by members of the Cocos Malay community of the town of Katanning, will be produced for broadcast on 6CKI, Cocos (Keeling) Islands' radio station, and, perhaps, on ABC radio in the Great Southern region of WA. After the broadcasts, the edited sound work (with documentation) will be exhibited as an installation at the Western Australian Museum, as part of *spaced 2: future recall*, the international biennale of contemporary art for which it was commissioned, before a national tour.

John Mateer is a poet and writes on contemporary art. His latest books are *Unbelievers, or The Moor* (Giramondo, 2013) and *Emptiness: Asian Poems 1998–2014* (Fremantle Press, 2014). He has read his work at many international festivals, including PEN International's Free the Word! at the Southbank Centre, London. He curated *In Confidence: Reorientations in Recent Arts*, a major, Indian Ocean-focused show for the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

MEMOIR

Calcutta

A view from the street

Terri-ann White

I'M PERCHED ON the western edge of Australia, looking out on the buoyant and impressive Indian Ocean. The vista, if I turn back towards my city, continues to be dominated by cranes. A city transformed by capital and mining; a population that has grown faster than we've ever seen. From the time this place was a colony, population has been a struggle and particularly during the cycles of our boom times. If I put on my long-distance goggles and look north, I'd see the mining capital laid out in all of its exploration logic, and the waste left after the extraction has taken place. Laid out all over that red earth.

Growth is addictive. We keep coming back for more. We've cranked our controls up high. *It's good for the economy.*

John Butler locates his allegory about the Kimberley, the last great 'wilderness' region in Australia, in the monumental struggle over the James Price Point gas hub when songlines and industry collided:

Now it's come to a showdown and it's all push and pull.

Got the lawyers having a field day while the cowboys are funding schools.

It boils down to how you see it: do you see Kimberley,

Or just another damned hole in the ground, just another opportunity?

I found my nirvana on the streets of Calcutta. Surprisingly. It had nothing to do with spirituality or anything I thought I lacked. Everyone I encountered was purposeful and confident. I have only ever lived in Western Australia so I am a wide-eyed enthusiast when I see large groups of people behaving co-operatively on an everyday basis, despite their differences.

Calcutta is a magnificent city in ruins. Its extravagant nineteenth-century architecture was largely modelled on the grand buildings and streetscapes of England. It's startling when you first come upon the Post Office, the Writers' Building (clerks, not poets) and the massive figure of Queen Victoria, Empress of India, at the Victoria Memorial Hall. It boggles the mind to see the grandeur and that commitment to a 'stately, spacious, monumental and grand building surrounded by an exquisite garden' that Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, commissioned and erected on the Maidan, the gorgeous open field of Calcutta littered all day and night by the enterprise of cricket and play, military parade or protest. The scale of these city features is monumental in every sense.

The city of Calcutta was held hostage for decades by the figure of Mother Teresa standing in as its image broadcast to the West. That was my introduction, from afar, and those images were mixed with a lurid and contested historical phrase, 'The Black Hole of Calcutta', that, in ignorance, was imposed on the contemporary city.

These images are but one small part of the story of West Bengal. What is more pertinent is the breathtaking innovation, revolutionary thought and passion for learning and ideas that distinguished the period described as the Bengal Renaissance, spanning the centuries from the late eighteenth to the twentieth. The example of writers and artists and thinkers in the humanities and sciences, and the pride with which these things are held, has fostered a culture of people confident to discuss and argue.

THIS ISN'T JUST a historical moment, it's an active part of life for many across the whole of society. It is not just the predilection of an elite.

Tens of thousands of people, ordinary readers, attend the Calcutta Book Fair to look at the range of books in a range of languages, including Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and English.

So, I want to hone in on how it is that people, after their formal education has ended, still read works of literature, follow cinema and actively *read* films, and have an interest in reading ideas-based books. I have a professional interest: as a publisher I am dismayed – heartbroken is more accurate – at how small the readership is in Australia for books that are not made with a soggy middle range of formulaic elements. Books produced out of the fascination with celebrity are increasingly consumed in the place of serious works of fiction and non-fiction.

The city of Calcutta is filled with bookshops and makeshift book stalls on many streets. After a Dalhousie Square walking tour in ‘white Calcutta’, I buy a handsome hardcover volume about imperial Calcutta from the Foreign Publishers’ Agency bookshop on JL Nehru Road near the Grand Hotel. This bookshop has the most comprehensive collection of high theory books from publishers such as Verso (formerly New Left Books) that I’ve seen since the 1990s. The proprietor applies a 10 per cent discount to my purchase on the information that I am a colleague in publishing and bookselling. The gesture has meant I’ve kept his handwritten cash memo as a memento.

On a meandering walk to the Kali temple along Ballygunge Place I find a modest bookseller with a very small range of books. I ask him to recommend a piece of contemporary Indian writing and he presents me with the first book by Calcutta’s great chronicler, Amit Chaudhuri. We haggle over the price as it is old and scuffed, but once we reach an agreement his two young male assistants take over, one to write a receipt and one to wrap my little book in brown paper with string, just as I once did for my customers in a bookshop in Perth. In most of these bookshops there is an old-book smell, slightly dusty, that is matched with the scents of incense and the general redolence of spices. If you are lucky, the sweet aromas of Bengali sweets (milky, custardy, honey, pistachio, jaggery) from the street will be much more pungent than the competing smells of rotting rubbish and cow shit, as they are for me.

STREET LIFE. ACROSS the sprawling city’s greater metro area where more than fourteen million people live, it is possible to ask for assistance on the street: for further information, for directions – even recommendations.

This is my own experience: it is straightforward enough to find English speakers in most parts of the city and to find courteous people with accurate information most of the time. Men and women are about equal in their literacy levels and it's up in the mid-80 per cent range.

On Republic Day, shared with the non-republic Australia Day on 26 January, I step out after the marches and celebrations for a leisurely walk at noon. On a street corner I hesitate, just long enough for two young men to offer assistance with directions. They are in their mid-twenties, very neat in their casual clothes with T-shirts and jeans. They start with a tremendous vitality, as if they already know me, and are then a little taken aback when I match them for energy.

Dip is the leader, his friend a reluctant talker. We spend the next five hours together, walking around the Victoria Memorial, standing in queues; we take a taxi to the floating mosque at Rabindra Sarobar Lake and walk over its suspension bridge.

When we sit down on the lush lawn in the gardens around the Victoria Memorial we go deep, fast. Dip tells me of the life of a twenty-seven-year-old Indian man, living with his parents who are keen to arrange a marriage for him. He has already rejected two potential brides but, frankly, wishes to remain single a bit longer and pursue his ambition to be a film actor. He's had a small part in a small film and has a taste for this as being more appealing than his IT career.

The focus turns to me fairly quickly. Single woman wandering the streets on the national day, visiting Calcutta alone. Living alone and not miserable. And no children. There are choices, after all, in a joyous life of privilege. *But what happens if you get sick in the middle of the night, Terri-ann?* I'd call a friend. *But what if you were still sick the next day and night?* I'd ask another friend or go to a hospital.

What would you do, Dip? *My friend would come once, and then not answer their phone again if I called. We all have too many obligations to family to be able to do that.* He asks me frank questions (his friend mute but attentive). *Are you lonely? Do you feel isolated not being married? Why didn't you have any children?* It is refreshing having this conversation with these two young men who, I surmise, have only had one narrative for women like me (sad failure) handed down to them

from their culture. Being outside the marriage market as I am, through choice and age, inspires some envy in Dip.

We stay in touch through Facebook for a year until my next visit, when I meet Dip at the Grand Hotel for a beer. It's a risky move for a young man but he goes through with it and meets me in the foyer. He updates me on the marriage stakes and his parents' annoyance at his not complying.

The reason I first visited Calcutta was to see where it was these powerful intellectual Bengali women I'd met all around the world had come from: women who, often with their mothers and sisters, conducted classes in their homes for neighbourhood children unable to attend daytime school.

Manjit Singh Hoonjan takes me on a walking tour on two of my visits to Calcutta. His company offers a range of walking options with descriptions such as 'Confluence of Cultures: Bow Barracks to Burrabazar' and 'Bengal Renaissance Walk'. These are illuminating experiences that smash that Mother Teresa Calcutta image once and for all for me. In *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (Penguin India, 2013) Amit Chaudhuri describes it: 'By the early '80s, Mother Teresa's profile as the face of eternity was so widespread that, in the western world, this great city (mahanagar) of modernity, with its many contradictions and exacerbations, was seen as a present-day Galilee, a place of supernatural cures, of lepers awaiting the miraculous touch.'

On both of my Calcutta Walks tours I am the only paying guest, a surprise as it is a thriving small business. I'm collected at 6.30 am from my hotel and the proprietors give me a remarkable gift by honouring my booking and taking me on a three-plus-hour highly animated walk.

In four street blocks this is some of what I was shown: a Jain temple, glorious mosques, the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters, five synagogues – including one that seated 1,700 people and is now a monument of national importance – an Armenian church and cemetery from the seventeenth century, the Portugese Cathedral of the Holy Rosary, a Chinese temple, a Parsi fire temple, a Buddhist temple, a Shiva temple. We eat street food and meet local shopkeepers and the custodians of buildings.

What I am attempting to say here, as an anecdotal, non-specialist, folksy enthusiast observer, is that we can learn well from the restraint of failure or dysfunction. Calcutta is described as having been in paralysis in the face of

a globalised world, with its economic decline after decades of neglect and struggle, a thirty-year long Marxist government with periods of stability and armed struggle, and echoes of the trauma of Partition when the eastern part of Bengal was split from its west. And yet the intense value that is applied to the pleasures of education, of reading and narrative and imagination, as well as its practical usage for a fulfilled life, seem imbued with less value in today's Australia.

THE LACK OF decisive action over decades is the opposite of our predicament in Western Australia, where growth can easily become toxic and necessarily be the principal means for making funding decisions on industry and education, new roads and other infrastructure. It's a city where young people struggle with rental costs and forego that old dream of *owning one's own Australian home*.

I was once present when a proud working-man, a labourer by the looks of his uniform, took the microphone at question time at a literary event in Calcutta. It gave me the sense that education and knowledge are part of people's lives rather than an experience from youth. Education as pleasure rather than a rite of passage was how I interpreted the eloquent statement he made about the nobility of work for a character in a novel under discussion.

Like a good western feminist, I make a pilgrimage to Kali. The flood of sensations I experience nearly sinks me. It's the first time I denote *exotic* to my experiences in this visit to a new city. Everything else has points of recognition. The Kalighat temple is, even in the middle of a bright and sunny day, a place of frenzy. Many, many people are there, many keen to help a solo foreign woman. It's very hard to read the messages being offered: a tour of the temple; the opportunity to see Kali, and a description of her role in this cosmology; an account of the daily rituals here; the opportunity to donate money to keep poor families in food for the next month. The sweet odour of blood is evident, but the stains on the tiles look older than today's slaughter. It is a wet zone: the blood washed away after the daily sacrificial beheading of goats and then the butchering of the carcasses to be used to feed those poor families around the temple.

I give over a large sum and hope it'll do the promised work, but it is hard to know. I step up to be admitted to the private and darkened shrine Kali occupies, and all sensations are profound. The airless space is crowded with candlelight as a soundtrack of ecstatic voices pushes me along. A flash of Kali's face: three eyes, a gloriously long golden tongue. Ten arms, hands holding an array of tools and weapons including a bloodied sword and freshly severed human head. The incomprehensibility of human nature: strength and vulnerability co-existing in a terrifying symbol of female power, violence and nurturing maternal love. No equivocating here, as we are so adept at doing in the West. The reminder, for me, contained in this temple visit, is that there are ways to live with the complex choices and inherent contradictions thrown up every day, with both curiosity and ease. The insight that we *contain multitudes* is as clear as the day for me on this visit.

Terri-ann White has spent her working life around books and ideas: as a bookseller, writer, teacher and workshop presenter, editor, festival organiser and now publisher. The one driving constant is her passion for the unique voice in writing, and her evangelical promotion of great books. She is currently Director of UWA Publishing.

ESSAY

In flight

Castaways and the poetics of survival

Suvendrini Perera

ON 9 APRIL 2013, a boat carrying sixty-seven asylum seekers from Sri Lanka made its way undetected through several levels of surveillance and border security to sail straight into the port of Geraldton. It was lunchtime, around 1 pm, and café-goers at the local Dome could hardly believe their eyes: the overburdened and ramshackle craft was nothing like the industrial vessels and cargo ships that criss-cross this busy regional harbour. Customs officials and police were alerted and would lose little time in cordoning off the scene and impounding the boat. But, for a short while, the arrivals still remained on board and could be viewed and photographed for local media.

Caught in the brilliant afternoon sunshine, silhouetted against a giant 'Welcome to Geraldton' sign, the castaway boat has an almost festive look. A jaunty blue trim offsets the cracks and rust stains on its hull. There is a stir and energy to the figures moving on deck. Curious children peep through the railings. A woman unfurls a long, thick plait of hair. You can just read the name on the prow, *Bremen*, and a corporate logo. A makeshift banner atop the cabin declares the desired destination, *NEW ZEALAND*, and even bears an image of that country's flag. The boat, it seems, was making for friendlier shores before engine trouble forced the passengers to try their luck here, after forty-four days at sea. A breeze lifts the makeshift flag. An emblem of hope

and a statement of intent, it flutters, then flies, for now, in the uncertain shelter of this strange harbour.

In flight: a double-edged phrase, whose Janus-face looks back and forward, betokening both the fears it seeks to escape and the dare of joy ahead. Within fraught refugee geographies of peril and possibility, a voyage across oceans in a small boat, *flight* signifies at once the covert or embattled movements that attempt escape from desperate situations *and* the soaring hopes and aspirations of those in flight. Embodied movements of flight and escape are animated by flights of imagination and desire; they are the expressive media of high-flying hopes and dreams.

The possibility and peril with which flight is fraught is perhaps most clearly embodied in the story of two fourteen-year-old boys from Guinea who stowed themselves away in the wheel-bay of a plane bound for Belgium. Found on their frozen bodies on landing was a message addressed to 'Excellencies, Messrs. members and officials of Europe'. It was labelled simply, *In case we die*. They signed it with their full names, Yaguine Koita and Fode Tounkara. The irony of this story, a number of commentators pointed out, is that in the absence of this carefully crafted letter the journey might have ended there. Discovered dead or alive, the boys would have been quietly deported, or their bodies quickly disposed of, like countless other anonymous arrivals in the global north ensnared in immigration and security checkpoints. Their lucid articulations of the violent neo-colonial and postcolonial geographies that entrapped them, and of the aspirations of others like themselves to which they sought to draw attention, would have remained unheard. Preparing for this all-too-likely eventuality, the boys determined that they would not die nameless and in silence. Their letter, at once apologia and manifesto, boldly claims for itself the space to speak.

Unlike the boys' fragile, contraband bodies, the eloquent testimony of their letter succeeded in breaking through the silence and separation of the border. It drew global, if fleeting, attention to their dreams of flight. Reminiscent of a message in a bottle, the boys' letter is a paper plane, an attempt to communicate across a vast divide and against the odds: a form of survival media. *Flight* and *fancy*: here they allude to an everyday poetics of survival that attends movements of terrified escape and the large and small

acts of imagining that enable and sustain them – messages set afloat in plastic bottles, or held up high across the razor wire, the name of a destination blazoned on a ship's mast, a letter stored on a frozen body – through the spaces of terror and blockage in which they are repeatedly ensnared. This essay weaves and veers across disjunctive, irreconcilable geographies of flight and fancy – and the embodied and expressive media they engender – drawing on the concept of the borderscape as a complex of shifting spaces, definitions, relations and practices.

THERE IS AN irony attached to the *Bremen* as it sits in Geraldton Harbour. Lankan fishing craft are not usually powerful enough to make the long voyage to Australia, let alone New Zealand. It turns out that the boat is a legacy of the Indian Ocean tsunami, when aid from neighbouring states and donor organisations poured into the ruined coastal communities of the region. In Western Australia, the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 was not known only through media screens. The overpowering tidal surges that devastated so much of the western and eastern coasts of Lanka were also felt off the coast of Rottnest Island by families on their annual Christmas holidays. Swimmers in Busselton had to be rescued from the abnormal tides it caused; in Geraldton boats sank in the harbour after breaking their moorings in the dangerous swells.

The tsunami, I wrote at the time, underlined that on this coastline the Indian Ocean is an intimate horizon. Its lights and tides govern the rhythms of comings and goings – the vital outflow of minerals from the port of Fremantle and others to the north, the inflow of commodities. It shapes our quotidian as it also defines limits of the imagination, contours the borders of our being. Robert Drewe's autobiographical novel *The Shark Net* (Penguin, 2003) beautifully captures the sensations of a small white boy in a small, determinedly white town, gaping into the waves on Cottesloe Beach. Across the charged waters, where sharks and other invisible terrors lurk, he can sense Africa, the ultimate unknown, meeting his gaze.

In the nervous years after 9/11 and the Bali bombings, the 2004 tsunami briefly allowed Australians to reflect back to themselves a gratifying self-image from other shores. Announcing that Australia had the largest international aid package, Prime Minister Howard exulted: 'The response

of Australians to this disaster has just been so overwhelming and so generous and so decent and so good that it makes you very proud indeed to be an Australian.' At the commemoration for the dead on Bondi Beach, then New South Wales Premier Bob Carr assured the crowd that the images of the ceremony would 'go round the world' to demonstrate to all that 'Australia is a good neighbour'. Any doubts about Australia's status in the region (these were our 'deputy sheriff' years) would be assuaged by an overwhelming display of Australian goodness and benevolence. In John Howard's rhetoric the note of self-congratulation is inescapable, remaking connectedness with the region into an act of nationalist consolidation. The focus shifts from the suffering of the dispossessed and bereaved to a celebration of Australian goodness and benevolence as defining Australian characteristics.

THE CLEAR DEMARCATIONS between here and there, us and them, that were drawn in the official responses to the tsunami solidified in the ensuing years, as the Indian Ocean was patrolled, surveilled and increasingly militarised in the effort to secure the borders. In these years Western Australia has become home for several new detention centres, large and small, remote and suburban: boat arrivals are incarcerated at Leonara, Northam and Port Hedland, in addition to those in the WA-administered Indian Ocean jurisdictions of Christmas Island and Cocos Island.

A small and unremarkable holding pen that looks like a government office is located inside Perth airport, just next to the domestic departure terminal. Although designed as a 'transit facility' to accommodate detainees from Christmas Island brought to the mainland for serious medical treatment or court appearances, many of the 'temporary' inmates have lived there for months and even years, rather than the specified limit of thirty days. There is a peculiar cruelty to this centre, where inmates are held in tantalising proximity to the everyday lives of those from whom they seek asylum. In their confined and enclosed surroundings they hear, but cannot see, the rhythms of this fly-in fly-out state, with its taken-for-granted comings and goings, its serviceable routines of business and pleasure.

Once, visiting some of the detainees from Sri Lanka at this cramped site, many of them fishers from the same tsunami-struck coast from which the

Bremen originated, I was beset with questions about the ocean the men could sense but not see: How far is Perth from the sea? Is there a lagoon? Do they have the same fish as we do? How big are the fish? The questions reminded me of a sensation I often experience at South Beach in Fremantle, close to where I live: a deep sensory recognition of the texture of light as the sun sets, or the braiding of waves caught in a certain play of currents.

Nearly a decade after the tsunami, when donated boats, tossed by the same dangerous, unpredictable ocean tides, carried refugees to the shores of WA, any residual sense of connection or responsibility to the region has all but disappeared from public memory, to be replaced by indignation and fear at the failure of the cordon of border security. In these months, asylum boats, like sharks off the beaches of Cottesloe, trigger frenzied calls to defend the beaches and *our way of life*.

Nationally, refugees from Sri Lanka now are a target. Under the speciously named regime of Enhanced Screening, many of them will be returned quickly to the place from which they fled. Thirty-eight of those who arrived on the *Bremen* were summarily returned less than ten days after their arrival, triggering a warning from Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Trigg that 'a screening process like this, rather than giving people access to the normal protections under the refugee-status determination system, risks involuntarily returning people who may, in fact, have legitimate claims for protection under international law'.

However, an even more dangerous, if more accurately titled, policy was waiting in the wings: No Advantage.

And in May 2013, less than a month after the *Bremen* sailed into Geraldton Harbour, parliament took the extraordinary step of legislating the excision of Australia's mainland from its own migration map. Any boat arriving in a mainland harbour would now be deemed to have landed *outside* the designated migration zone, in 'an excised offshore place'.

The surreal development was the outcome of a logic put in place over a decade earlier, in 2001, when outlying Australian territories where asylum-seeker boats landed, such as Christmas Island and Cocos Island, were retrospectively removed from the Australian migration zone. This initial move, justified by the imperative of 'controlling the borders', was followed

by the excision of hundreds more small islands and outlying land formations, including miniscule outcrops and reefs, to ensure that asylum seekers who landed in these parts of Australia would *not* land in Australia, but on the excised ground of a chimera, not-Australia. Further legislation was made retrospective to ensure, even more fantastically, that places where asylum seekers had made landfall were excised in time: they did not exist at the time of their landing. Through such decrees the state exercises its will to sovereignty not only over its spatial but its temporal limits.

The excision of the Australian mainland from its own migration zone in 2013 was a culmination of this process of the desire for overweening sovereign control in space and time. Australia performs its absolute self-sovereignty through the ultimate disappearing act, extreme self-insulation through dissolution. In a paroxysm of anxiety over its borders, the state, in effect, has swallowed itself whole: Australia becomes not-Australia.

For asylum seekers arriving by boat, the Australian border functions as a set of makeshift geographies, rather than a static and clearly demarcated line. The border is defined by a set of sleights of hand (excision of territories, deterritorialisation from the migration zone); militarised practices (surveillance, interception, enforced turnbacks of boats in mid-ocean), and by a layered geopolitics built on relations between Australia and its former colonies and protectorates.

The shifting geography I refer to as the borderscape includes coastlines, seas, outlying islands and territories as well as varied claims to tenure over neighbouring lands and waters. This is where historical relations of sovereignty in a postcolonial world are constantly reinforced and remade through aid, trade, technology, infrastructure, as well as militarised practices for securitising and controlling the oceans. These create a violent, unstable, racialised border zone, traversed by the tortuous itineraries of castaway bodies and boats.

The complex geographies of the Australian borderscape with its hybrid spaces and no-places (excised coastlines and islands) and zones of ambiguous sovereignty (off-shore camps, neocolonial territories, international waters), find their virtual counterpart in what Joseph Pugliese describes, in an essay on Australian and European Union refugee regimes, as the technologically

enabled proliferation of borders, ‘pre-frontiers’ and ‘externalities’. Australian Customs and Border Protection policy, Pugliese notes, exercises its authority over what it terms a ‘border continuum’ and operates ‘ahead of the physical border, to identify and manage risks’.

SUCH AN ABSOLUTE impunity attended the killing of Reza Barati, a twenty-three-year-old Iranian man of Kurdish ethnicity, beaten by guards and left to die in an Australian detention camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, in May 2014. Reza Barati’s passage to the chaotic and lethal conditions of a shoddy prison block on Manus Island was a painful and twisting one. It involved a journey from his home country to Indonesia, followed by a boat voyage from Indonesia to Australia, where he intended to seek asylum. The final stage of Reza’s passage was his enforced transportation from the detention centre on Christmas Island to a recently established offshore detention camp on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Other layered geographies and complex colonial histories of the shifting border between Australia and PNG in the Torres Straits also underlie the tortuous trails of Reza Barati’s journey to Manus.

The violent end of Reza Barati’s journey fits the contours of a violent regional borderscape, across which refugee bodies are forcibly transported and traded in a regime that closely mirrors the very trafficking in lives that Australia purports to oppose. Despite the attempts to distance and displace, Barati’s outsourced life in a remote place remained constantly under the punitive gaze of the Australian state. The logic that led to Reza Barati’s death is one starting point from which to trace the contours of a vast and shifting borderscape with Australia at its centre. This border zone now stretches from Nauru and Papua New Guinea in the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, with Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia and Sri Lanka all within its reach.

Cambodia is the latest of the region’s economically and politically vulnerable states to be annexed to create a system of diffused and outsourced non-locations to imprison refugees, while buffering and insulating Australia from their contaminating presence. Nominated as a place of settlement for ‘genuine refugees’ who seek to come to Australia, the troubled state of Cambodia, like its impoverished Pacific counterparts, has become an agent of Australia’s multi-billion dollar trafficking in refugee bodies.

ON 26 SEPTEMBER 2014, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison signed a \$40 million agreement – sealed with a champagne toast – with the government of Cambodia. The pact allows for the removal of four of the three hundred people deemed genuine refugees currently held on Nauru to Cambodia for permanent resettlement. The toast was accompanied by the inauspicious sound of breaking glass, as a waiter dropped her tray on the floor in full view of waiting cameras.

Out of sight, the signing was attended by other, even more unfortunate events. On the same day, back in his village in Iraq, another asylum seeker from Manus Island, Hamid Kehazaei, was being buried by his family. At twenty-two, he suffered a heart attack after a cut on his foot turned into fatal septicemia because of inappropriate treatment at the Manus camp. While his family mourned for Hamid in Iraq, in the Australian camps on Nauru news of the Cambodia agreement unleashed a fresh wave of despair. Immigration officials had flown from Canberra to Nauru to deliver a harshly-worded video directive from Minister Morrison telling the camp inhabitants that Cambodia or Nauru were their only alternatives – unless they chose to return to the places from which they had fled.

Upon learning this news a fifteen-year-old girl attempted to poison herself and had to be rushed to the Australian mainland for emergency treatment. Five other minors attempted suicide by various means, their actions illuminated by the information piling up regarding sexual abuse, intimidation and other forms of violence towards the inmates that are rife in the Nauru camp. Seven young people sewed up their lips. The father of one of them cut his own throat. This tally of horror continues even as I write the final pages of this essay, with the Nauru camp in a state of lockdown.

Iraq, Sri Lanka, Nauru, Manus Island, Indonesia and Cambodia form a part of the vicious Australian borderscape within which increasing numbers of refugee lives are placed in situations of unbearable risk. The acts of the young men and women in response to the intolerable predicaments in which they find themselves, as they are trafficked and transported around this carceral zone, are received with media silence and official anger. In response to a report that thirteen mothers at the Christmas Island Detention Centre

were contemplating suicide, Prime Minister Abbot declared dismissively that he would not be held over a 'moral barrel'.

Yet rather than forms of extortion, such acts are better understood as one of the only ways castaway bodies are able to rebut the symbolic and material violence to which they are subject. The slogans and messages held by young inmates of Nauru declaring 'Only our corpse might go to Cambodia' or 'Suicide is sweeter than Australia's dirty policy' are a form of 'corporeal poetics', of *survival media*. Together with the expressive poetics of scrawled messages set afloat in bottles, or transferred across the razor wire, survival media are at once means, medium and message. They inscribe themselves, corporeally and symbolically, across land, sea and air, through bodies that bleed and flame in displays of unbearable anguish.

In the circuitous cartographies they inscribe over land and sea, the new itineraries they map in the air, illegalised migrant bodies draw upon and adapt a panoply of media, including their own bodies, as they cast themselves away from the known into new lives and spaces. Their flight, in turn, invests the scenes and elements through which they move with new meanings and ontologies; sets in play new geographies, poetics and politics. Amal Basry, the *SIEV X* survivor who has inspired several writers and artists with her determined testimonies, told of a poignant instance she witnessed just before *SIEV X* went down:

I saw five people, a man and four women. They were standing together and writing something on a piece of paper. The boat was climbing up and falling down. [T]hey told me, 'We are writing a letter to the angel of the ocean. . . Angel of the ocean, please help us. Angel of the ocean, please, look after our children. Angel of the ocean, do not be angry. Angel of the ocean, do not leave us. Angel of the ocean, please save us.' And they folded up the paper and threw it into the water.

After her rescue, Arnold Zable wrote in *Violin Lessons* (Text, 2012), Amal yearned to return to the ocean, where she and her fellow passengers left so much of themselves, in order to be able to continue with her task of her witnessing, of calling for accountability to the dead of *SIEV X*.

Letters cast into the ocean or set afloat in plastic bottles, networks of connection stretching between shore and sea, Facebook entries tracking a clandestine movement between worlds, these are the motley and evolving tactics, as much as the insistent eloquence of survivor testimonies, poems and images, through which illegalised bodies mark and remake the seascapes and controlling border geographies through which they move. Even when their movement leads, all too often, to new places of violence and terror, their flights engender new creative and communicative forms, stand as thresholds and entry points to unspeakable histories, spaces of embargo and blockage that make up the borderscape.

IN SEPTEMBER 2014, the Western Australian Museum announced that the *Bremen*, after being impounded for over a year in a shipyard in Geraldton, would become part of the state's display of maritime heritage.

The decision breaks with the long-established practice of burning asylum boats, described by one journalist as the 'torching rite' of Australian sovereignty. This torching of boats is the treatment also meted out to illegal fishing vessels caught in the indeterminate border zone between Australia and Indonesia. In her book *Troubled Waters* (Allen & Unwin, 2005) Ruth Balint reported that in Darwin in the early 2000s, these boat burnings were 'a public spectacle, and onlookers have been known to drape themselves in and wave Australian flags enthusiastically as the perahu [*prau*] explode in flames'. In the detention camp for Indonesian sailors at Willie Creek, north of Broome, 'the fishermen are often made to douse and set fire to their own boats. They watch the flames with a mixture of despair and disbelief.'

The asylum-seeker boat stands as both metonym and medium for those who seek to flee aboard it. The act of boat burning as a staging of sovereign power conveys a powerful message of the punitive violence visited on castaway bodies. Held in a museum, the boat will stand, perhaps as another kind of trophy of sovereign power over the borderscape, perhaps as a source of shame and symbol of defeat, neutralised and out of place – high and dry. Or, described primly as representing 'a stage' in Western Australia's relationship with the Indian Ocean, the boat may be easily framed by, and incorporated into, a 'safe' national narrative, in contrast to the unknowable fates to which

the bodies who sailed on it have been consigned. It may stand as a triumphal object that reaffirms the insular nation, Fortress Australia redux. Yet, like other trophy objects, human and non-human, assembled in the space of the museum, this boat, its meanings and resonances, are not to be easily controlled. With its jaunty trim, its hopeful flag, this survivor of oceans speaks to me still of the swell and roll of waves, of tides receding yet returning and, amid the churning of stomachs and hearts, the irrepressible billowing, beckoning of its makeshift flag of stars: in flight.

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ESSAY

Hidden

Living behind bricks and wire

Caroline Fleay, Nadir Ali Rezai
and Lisa Hartley

IT IS EASY to hide people in the vast expanse of Western Australia. The state stretches thousands of kilometres, from the sweltering north to the cold winds of the rugged south, and extends to remote islands far off the coast such as Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, 2,600 kilometres north-west of Perth. There are plenty of places to lock people up and keep them hidden from view.

For more than twenty years, Australian legislation has enabled the mandatory detention of people who arrive here without a valid visa. This includes asylum seekers who make it to Australia by boat in the hope of finding a safe haven. Mandatory detention means they can be held until their refugee protection claims have been finalised, even if it takes years. This is despite the fact that Department of Immigration figures show the vast majority are eventually found to be refugees who cannot safely return home.

At any one time, nearly five thousand people can be concealed behind electrified fences in three of the nation's largest sites of immigration detention. One is on Christmas Island, the Australian non-self-governing external territory, where nearly three thousand can be held. Another lies one hundred kilometres east of Perth in the town of Northam, which has

a maximum-security, prison-like structure capable of detaining up to six hundred people. The third is in the Kimberley region of the state's isolated north, on the grounds of the Curtin Royal Australian Air Force base, where fifteen hundred people can be hidden.

Caroline Fleay, an academic and refugee advocate, was a regular visitor to the Curtin immigration detention centre throughout 2011. One of the first people she met there was Nadir Ali Rezai. Nadir was held in immigration detention for sixteen months following his arrival in Australia by boat to seek asylum, and he spent most of this time at Curtin. Drawing on Nadir's experiences of being detained, and Caroline's observations and conversations with others held at Curtin, we outline below the experiences of people who were detained for long periods at this time in remote Western Australia. When Nadir and hundreds of others were finally released from detention, some of them came to Perth. Caroline and fellow academic and advocate Lisa Hartley meet often with some of the men who continue to wait for their refugee claims to be finalised. Lisa draws on her observations to convey a sense of their lives in the Perth community, where they effectively remain hidden.

VISITING INSIDE THE FENCES: CAROLINE

IT TAKES A lot of time and money to visit the Curtin detention site. Throughout 2011, I made this journey every few months with several other refugee advocates and spent hours over the ensuing days talking with as many of these hidden people as possible. The quickest and cheapest way from Perth, without driving for three days, is a two-and-a-half hour flight to Broome, then hiring or borrowing a car and driving in the direction of Derby for another two hours. The final five kilometres is down a long stretch of road punctuated by warning signs:

TRESPASSING UPON THIS LAND IS PROHIBITED

NO THROUGH ROAD

TURN BACK

There are no signs to indicate that hundreds of asylum seekers who came to Australia by boat are locked up just beyond the horizon.

When we reached Curtin for the first time in January 2011, what hit me most was the utter isolation of the place, reinforced by the weariness of the long journey. We saw a large collection of demountable huts, surrounded by two looming electrified rows of wire fencing, in the oppressive heat of the Kimberley wet season when temperatures average 36 degrees and humidity reaches over 95 per cent. Curtin can hold well over a thousand people in indefinite detention. But as we entered, only a few bodies could be seen moving between huts or sitting under the few trees within the fences.

At the time, Curtin detained twelve hundred men who had fled the violence of Afghanistan. Most were members of the long-persecuted Hazara ethnic group. I felt as if we had stumbled across a secret prisoner-of-war camp for Afghans. Several months later, the Afghans were joined by Iranian and Sri Lankan men seeking asylum. Many were still there by the end of 2011. The majority had left their families behind to take the dangerous boat journey to Australia alone, hoping that once a safe refuge had been found they could arrange for their families to join them.

The toxic combination of many hours spent worrying about their families, their claims for refugee status, and not knowing when they would be released soon became evident. Despair at Curtin was as rampant as the mosquitoes, and every time I visited I saw the escalated ageing of men as that despair was etched into their faces.

In a reinforcing loop of trauma, everyone had to bear witness to the toll that indefinite imprisonment was having on them all. Many saw an older Afghan man pacing the compound, incessantly talking to himself. They saw that the detention officers employed by Serco Australia, the multinational corporation contracted to manage the place, were often ill-equipped to deal with increasing numbers of men who clearly needed psychiatric help.

Self-harming and suicide attempts became commonplace across Curtin. It was devastating when nineteen-year-old Mohammed Asif Atay killed himself on 28 March 2011, after ten months in detention.

The officers began to use some of the detainees with good English language skills as interpreters to help communicate with others who were in the midst of

their profound moments of crisis. I spoke with one of the enforced interpreters a few days afterwards. The experience catapulted him back to a few months earlier, when he had saved another man's life by holding up his hanging body until a Serco officer could cut the rope around his neck. The enforced interpreter closed in on himself, and began to spend most days hidden in his room.

Growing numbers of men would fall asleep with the help of sleeping tablets just before sunrise. They tried to keep their minds closed to their surroundings for as long as they could during daylight. There was no point in getting up. All that can be done with an exhausted mind in a scorching environment is to worry. Many men told me that phone calls to loved ones left in situations of insecurity back home rarely brought relief, only further worry and feelings of no longer being a man. They listened to their children asking when they would come home on outside phones barely sheltered from the beating sun, and in the midst of the biting mosquitoes that swarmed in the evening.

TRAPPED BEHIND THE FENCES: NADIR

I WAS LOCKED up at Curtin for fourteen months following a few months in the detention centre on Christmas Island. I was one of the first to arrive at Curtin after the Labor government reopened the site in June 2010. It had been out of operation since 2002, when the Coalition government closed it down following a riot by those it had imprisoned.

In an effort to distinguish Curtin Mark II from its previous infamy, attempts were made to make it appear humane. Air-conditioned 'dongas' were erected to protect against the heat and swarms of biting insects. A few health professionals were hired to prescribe Panadol, sleeping tablets and anti-depressants to dampen the pain that accompanies being locked up for months.

I had left the mountainous terrain of landlocked Afghanistan for the giant island of Australia, and was amazed by the blue expanse of the Indian Ocean as I was flown from Christmas Island to the mainland. The red Kimberley soil felt welcoming. Perhaps I would finally be safe from the persecution that I and many other members of the Hazara ethnic group had faced for more than a century in our country. But I soon found myself behind electrified fences, the type seen on the news about Guantanamo Bay,

where the United States government kept those it called terrorists. My sense of welcome vanished.

When we first entered Curtin, we saw a bed sheet tied to a strong tree branch in one of the centre compounds. We understood that an asylum seeker had placed it there to hang himself when the detention centre had last been in operation in 2002. The sheet was almost completely worn but its message was as potent as if someone had taken his life right in front of us. It was terrifying, and we wondered what our fate would be. The following year, I saw the body of young Mohammad Asif Atay. He had hung himself with a bed sheet.

One day, hundreds of us were visited by a delegation of Aboriginal elders. We were Australia's newest arrivals and we were quietly greeted by the First Australians. 'Welcome to Australia.' 'We hope you'll find it a safe place.' 'We wish we could help you more.' The elders left a book for us to read about the Stolen Generations. I studied the book, and as I absorbed the misery of its story it was upsetting to realise that yet another part of the earth had endured the yoke of British imperialism. Clearly, Aboriginal Australians continued to live with the impact of genocidal policies. So did the Hazara people, many of whom had suffered under the brutal reign of a British-backed king in Afghanistan (Abdur Rahman Khan) at the end of the nineteenth century. Thousands were killed and others were forced from their homes and enslaved.

Hazaras continue to experience the impact of that terrible massacre and displacement, as well as ongoing persecution within Afghanistan. Militias such as the Taliban have targeted us for decades, in part because we are Shia Muslims and the Central Asian features of many Hazara people make us highly visible. Hundreds of us who fled this ever-present fear of persecution ended up hidden in the remoteness of the Kimberley.

We were locked behind electrified fences for many months. As small boats continued to arrive in Australia, more men from Afghanistan, and others from Sri Lanka and Iran, crowded Curtin beyond its holding capacity. Some spent two years and many long waking hours in the place, waiting for news of their request for refugee status. For the first six months of my detention, my refugee claim was ignored. I had arrived in

the wake of the Labor government's decision to freeze the processing of Afghans' claims for six months and Sri Lankans' for three months, with the justification that conditions in these countries were about to improve. They did not.

It was incomprehensible to me and many others that we were being deprived of our basic human rights in Australia, just as Hazaras had been in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. It felt as if the Australian Government had thrown the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the bin. I was sure that such discrimination could not reflect the attitudes of all Australians, but still we had to endure it. Processing for Afghans finally resumed at the end of six months, but many waited more than another year for the processing of their claim to be finalised.

Visitors were rare and most were welcomed, but there were some unpleasant occasions, such as when then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott visited Curtin and talked to us like a bullying kid in school.

Outings from the hidden site were also rare. Some men were escorted by Serco officers to see the Boab Prison Tree on the road leading to Derby, where they were told Aboriginal people had been imprisoned overnight in the late nineteenth century. Most other outings were for medical purposes. After thirteen months at Curtin, I was driven the forty-five minutes into Derby District Hospital for treatment for an arm injury. Despite the physical pain, the drive to town felt joyful. Once in Derby, however, I saw groups of Aboriginal people walking together but apart from other people. I knew of the Rudd government's apology to the Stolen Generations and yet I could see the distance between the peoples of this town, and it shocked me.

NADIR WAS RELEASED from Curtin in late 2011. By this time there was a growing list of reports documenting the mental-health impacts of long-term detention in Curtin and other Australian sites of immigration detention. Mirroring the findings of earlier reports on indefinite detention, mental-health professionals, human-rights organisations, refugee advocates, academics and journalists highlighted the self-harming, suicide attempts and suicides in Australia's immigration detention centres.

While women and children began to be released from their sites of detention in late 2010, it took another year before the Labor government began allowing men to be released before their refugee claim was finalised. By May 2012, most of the men detained in Curtin from 2010 had been allowed to leave their remote imprisonment. By the end of that year, more than 90 per cent had been given a permanent visa to remain in Australia, according to the department's annual publication, *Asylum Trends Australia 2012-13*. After locking them up for many months, the government finally recognised that almost all of the men detained in Curtin had a well-founded fear of persecution should they be returned to their own country.

Some of these men now live in Perth. One man, Noor, was released from detention in March 2012, twenty-two months after arriving in Australia by boat. A Hazara man, he had also fled the persecution in Afghanistan. Noor is not his real name. The continuing insecurity of his status in Australia means that we have to conceal his identity.

Along with six hundred of those detained between 2010 and 2012, Noor's claim for refugee status has not yet been finalised. Reports from asylum seekers detained during this time highlight the many inconsistent findings between Department of Immigration officials and independent reviewers of their decisions. The Labor government's Minister for Immigration, Brendan O'Connor, finally conceded in 2013 that many of the claims given negative decisions had to be reassessed. One year later, the men continue to wait for this to be done.

RELEASED BUT NOT YET FREE: LISA

NOOR LIVES WITH four other Hazara men in a Perth suburb that is characterised by cheap housing and poor infrastructure and public transport. Caroline and I visit regularly for a chat and a cup of Afghan tea, or sometimes dinner. From the outside, the house looks like any other in the street – a small, weathered red-brick. But inside, the men's lives are starkly different to those of their neighbours. In the two-bedroom house, many waking hours are spent sitting in the living room, thinking and worrying about their future.

When Noor was released from detention he was given a bridging visa that granted him the right to work; he was desperate to find a job so he could send money to his family, who were suffering in his absence. He also hoped that work would disrupt the depression that plagued him in Curtin. He found a job gutting chickens soon after settling in Perth and worked hard, sometimes seven days a week, until he injured his hand. As the months in the community surpassed the months in detention, with no resolution to his refugee claim, depression took a strong hold again. Noor is now too unwell to work and is entitled to little government financial assistance. 'I feel like a beggar,' he says.

Mehdi, another man whose name we cannot reveal, also lives in the house. He is one of thousands across Australia, including fifteen hundred people in Perth, who are subject to a policy first implemented by the Labor government that denies the right to work to asylum seekers who reached Australia by sea after 13 August 2012. The denial of working rights was part of the government's attempt to deter the further arrival of asylum seekers by boat.

In some ways Mehdi is lucky. Another deterrent policy sent asylum seekers to offshore sites of detention on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Instead, Mehdi was held in detention centres in Australia before being released into the Perth community on a bridging visa. In other ways, he is unlucky. He continues to wait for his refugee claims to be considered some two years after his arrival in Australia, and is surviving on very little financial support. He often thinks about the dangerous boat journey from Indonesia to Christmas Island. The boat was cramped and the ocean terrifying. He remembers the relief when, after five exhausting days at sea, an Australian customs vessel was spotted on the horizon. Mehdi's feet touched Christmas Island's jetty on 16 August 2012. If he had arrived just three days earlier, he would have been given the right to work. During the long days in the house, with little to do, this deprivation feels bitterly unfair.

Mehdi survives on a government payment of about \$221 per week, equivalent to 89 per cent of the Centrelink Special Benefit. While Perth is home to some of Australia's wealthiest households, it also hosts a growing number of people who struggle to meet the high living costs of a city flush with the profits of mining. After paying rent, Mehdi is left with

\$16 a day to cover all his expenses. This includes food, clothing, transport and phone credit to call his family. Public transport is not subsidised for asylum seekers in Perth, and the cost of taking a bus or train means they can rarely travel far.

Some weeks, Mehdi has to supplement his allowance with vouchers from a charity in the Perth CBD, a fifty-minute journey by bus and train. He finds this humiliating but has no choice – the few supportive charities are also stretched beyond their capacity. Some agencies provide free English lessons but they are also located near the CBD. The thirty-minute walk to the local library is one of the few activities available to them outside the house. There are many waking hours spent inside with little to do. ‘It’s like living in a cage,’ Mehdi says.

Mehdi and Noor, and the others in the house, continue to worry about their families. Noor has not seen his wife and four children for more than four years. For Mehdi it has been two. Before December 2013, there was the prospect that after being granted a permanent visa an application could be made to the Department of Immigration for visas for immediate family members. The Coalition government now refuses to process family visa applications until Australian citizenship is gained. The government also insists that people applying for refugee status who arrived by boat will be issued only temporary visas. Temporary visas do not allow them to apply for family reunion.

Mehdi and Noor sometimes show Caroline and me photos of the smiling young faces of their children. Noor talks about how much they have grown since he last held them. ‘I am not concerned for myself. I am only concerned for my family.’

Just as they would with their families back home, the men eat dinner with us on the floor of their living room. For people who have so little money, their generosity and hospitality is humbling. Dinnertime discussion often turns to trying to make sense of the latest official announcement about which visas may be granted to asylum seekers, who may be allowed to stay in Australia and who might be told to go. At other times, they eat in silence. Sometimes, after dinner, Noor brings welcome respite with the nostalgic sound of the *dambora*, a long-necked string instrument that he made when

he was in Curtin, and he sings old Hazaragi folk songs. But sadness is never far away. At the back of their minds, they are all waiting for news that will determine the future for themselves and their families.

NOOR AND MEHDI are no longer locked behind electrified fences, yet they continue to be hidden. They remain isolated and out of view of most Western Australians. So too are more than fifteen hundred asylum seekers currently locked inside sites of immigration detention throughout the state, according to the department's July 2014 *Immigration Detention and Community Statistics Summary*.

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Might be rainbows

A road trip through the Western Desert

Holly Ringland

ON THE SOUTH-WEST boundary of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, in the centre of Australia, an unmarked red-dirt track turns left off the Lasseter Highway. For the few kilometres still within park lines it's known as Docker River Road. Beyond that point it becomes Tjukaruru Road, leading to Western Australia through Aboriginal freehold land.

In 2006, as a member of the park staff, I occasionally had to go down Docker River Road for work. From the park boundary I would stare into the seemingly untouched red landscape, both delighting and recoiling at the expanse of land ahead. I had never ventured any further.

My boyfriend at the time, Dave, worked for the local Aboriginal-owned arts co-operative at Uluru, based in Mutitjulu where we lived together. Part of his job was to drive the co-op's bush truck on regular trips to remote Aboriginal communities, only accessible by air or four-wheel drive, to procure art direct from the artists. The painted canvasses, *punu* (decorated wood carvings), *tjanpi* (colourful grass and raffia weavings) and *inintis* (seed jewellery) that Dave brought back were then sold through the co-op's retail gallery to tourists at Uluru's Cultural Centre. In this way, the co-op supported eighteen communities throughout the Western Desert, a handful of which were visited on each procurement trip. I had stood at our fence gate numerous times waving Dave off in the bush truck, every time thinking of him driving into the void of Western Australia and worrying I'd never see him again.

One spring afternoon Dave came home from work to tell me a procurement trip was coming up to visit communities in the west.

‘Come along,’ he said.

Curiosity seized me. I took time off work, organised entry permits to travel through Aboriginal land, stocked the first-aid kit and gathered my things.

‘No showers, no reception,’ Dave reminded me as I packed toiletries and my phone charger. Feeling like Peter Pan’s Wendy, about to step off the balcony into thin air, I left luxury and technology behind, stuffing my bag instead with clean knickers and deodorant.

FOR A WEEK we would live out of the bush truck, camp in swags and eat tinned food while we travelled in a westward loop to communities who had been painting, carving and weaving in preparation for our visit. The back of the truck was stacked with empty red tubs tied down by thick ropes in complex knots, all secured under a large tarp. By the time we returned those tubs would be full. On the morning of our departure we left before sunrise. The co-op’s newest employee, Em, came with us.

We set off on Uluru Road, with all its bends and grooves that we knew by heart – there’s only one public route in and out of the national park. At the intersection of Lasseter Highway, with Uluru behind us, we headed west towards Kata Tjuta, waiting for the moment when the dunes dipped and the tips of the tallest rusty-red domes appeared. Rolling sand hills covered in golden spinifex and gullies of skinny and fat desert oaks sped past. Dave flicked the left indicator on and angled us onto Docker River Road. The tyres took traction on the dirt and Dave put his foot down; the slower you drive on graded roads the rougher the ride. As we clattered past the road sign signalling the end of Docker River Road my stomach erupted in nervous pinwheels. I turned to look back through the cab window at Kata Tjuta shrinking into the distance. Red dust floated through the air-conditioning vents. Soon a fine, rosy film covered my skin.

For a long time we didn’t speak. The noise of driving the graded road didn’t allow for chatter. As the truck rattled along my stomach was in spasms. Would I be able to make do with the little Pitjantjatjara I knew? Why hadn’t I learned more language? Why wasn’t I fluent? What if we got lost? Ran out of water? Got bitten by a king brown? Got a flat tyre? Sitting between Em

and Dave in the broiling cab, hurtling towards the Western Australia border, I wondered what I would do if something happened to them and I was left alone in the nothingness of the desert.

AFTER A FEW hours of driving the landscape began to change. The deep, rusted-red colour of the earth lightened to paler sand and the rolling dune country turned rockier.

‘Let’s have a quick stop here before we get to Docker River.’ Dave pulled off Tjukaruru Road into an empty square of dirt that appeared to be a car park. I didn’t understand where ‘here’ was, until I noticed a small wooden archway to our right, the top of which was etched with the words: TJUNTI – LASSETER’S CAVE. In my life, I’d only known Lasseter to be the name of the highway we’d just travelled and a ride at Sea World on the Gold Coast inspired by an old outback myth.

Em, Dave and I climbed stiffly out of the truck and stomped feeling back into our legs. We walked under the archway and up the skinny path through low shrubbery. Ahead on our left appeared the small cave where, in 1931, Lewis Lasseter camped for twenty-five days, waiting to reunite with the expedition party he’d previously separated from in his search for a reef of gold. He had eventually set off in the direction we had just come from in the hope of rejoining his team along the way, but perished before he got to Kata Tjuta.

Lasseter’s Cave was a quiet and peaceful place. I stood in the cool darkness with Em and Dave, the three of us gazing out at the sunny view of trees swaying in the breeze. A year later I would remember standing there in that small rocky space as I travelled with a different companion to a different community to attend the funeral of a senior lawman who, when talking about his life and country, was known for saying, ‘that Lasseter, that’s not his cave, my name should be on that sign, that’s *my* cave, I was the one born in there!’

Back in the truck, the metal roofs of Docker River shimmered in the distance like a mirage. The community ran alongside Docker Creek, under the shelter of the western end of the Petermann Ranges. Wildflowers sprung from rocky crags, dotting the landscape with pastel colours. We parked by the community aged-care centre. Mangy camp dogs chewed on their legs beside a gaggle of children playing in the dirt under the shade of towering gums.

Health-care workers led us inside the aged-care centre. There were fire pits along the veranda for resident use and though only mid-morning, groups sat gathered around small fires. With my limited grasp of Pitjantjatjara I was able to chat to some of the elderly, but there was a distinct lack of younger artists. As Dave and Em started working I kept my distance, until the gestures of a lady with tufts of white hair poking out of a colourful beanie caught my eye. She motioned for me to join her, which I did. From behind her back she revealed a rolled up canvas in one hand, her other was closed in a fist.

‘Punu *kungka*, you see?’ she asked. I nodded.

She opened her fist to reveal a necklace of brilliant red *ininti* seeds. Through each seed a hole had been burned, as I’d seen some of the ladies in Mutitjulu do with end of a wire coat hanger heated by fire. The string of seeds smelled of smoke and shone in the sun, blood red and glistening darkly. When the old woman pooled them in my hand they sounded like rain. Next, she unrolled her canvas. My whole body contracted in a rush of goose bumps. Swirls and streams and waves and dots: all the colours of the rainbow. Her painting assaulted my senses.

‘Big story,’ she said.

‘Oh, I can see that. Must be a good one.’

‘*Uwa*. Walking country with my ancestors,’ she said, sweeping her arm through the air around us. ‘*Tkari pulka*.’ Big smile.

I had thought Mutitjulu was remote until we drove to Docker River, where I began to understand; I was blind to the ageless narratives embedded in the landscape, but for an artist like the woman I was talking to the land inspired astonishing, colourful creativity and a sense of happiness in spite of the isolation and chronic adversity.

‘*Palya*, I’m shy.’ She nodded, nudging me to give her artworks to Dave.

‘*Palya*,’ I replied, deeply grateful for having had the sense to hang back from the crowd. I called out to Dave, signalling for him to join us. A year later I would learn from late-night news that another elderly lady in Docker River who had brought us paintings that day, one of Australia’s last nomads, had fallen into a firepit on the aged-care centre’s veranda and died. The news had revealed the aged-care centre had been regularly unsupervised from six at night to six in the morning.

WE LEFT DOCKER River at lunchtime, crossing the Western Australian border shortly after. By late afternoon we had arrived in Wingellina. It was immediately obvious that something wasn't right. The community's few streets were empty, the brightly coloured doors of the local store were closed and there was a clear and thick plume of campfire smoke burning from a ramshackle house nearby. We approached in the truck at a crawl. All three of us heard the wailing before we saw the sorry camp. Em and I stayed in the truck, our heads down and eyes averted. Dave got out and spoke to a young man who stood to greet him. Some people had punu and they met with Dave, but sorry business had just started and others were too distraught. The outpouring of grief was visceral.

Em and I got out of the truck to work silently alongside Dave, gathering and sorting what little punu and art the bereaved had brought forward. *Ngalutujara*. We collectively murmured our condolences, shaking some hands, occasionally meeting teary eyes. *I'm so sorry for your loss*. As soon as our work was done, we left. I was grateful not to intrude for longer than we had to.

Just after sunset, when the dusk light softened the harsh edges of the day, we reached Blackstone where we would stop for the night. Before making camp we popped into the art centre. Jean, the co-ordinator, was waiting for us. We were still shaken; the wailing tolled loudly in my mind.

'You fellas have seen that sorry business in Wingellina,' Jean stated. That she knew of it in spite of the long drive between the two communities shocked me until, feeling ridiculous in my naivety, I remembered that one thing I knew firsthand about remote living was how much time you spent on a landline telephone.

'Come on, I've got coffee and sweet biscuits.'

We followed Jean's offer, nearly turning in circles with salivating anticipation. As she led us through the art centre, and my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I began to think we were inside some kind of Aladdin's cave. Around us whispered stories woven into *tjanpi*, painted in colourful layers and textures on stacked canvasses and burned into punu shapes of snakes, lizards, shields and birds. I paused, holding up the group.

'They can't be stopped,' Jean said, seeing the awe on my face. 'The ladies have been on a creative high since they won the Telstra award last year with their *tjanpi* Toyota.'

We chuckled appreciatively. News of the 2005-winning spinifex truck was still a hot topic of conversation in Mutitjulu.

Through the treasure trove Jean took us into another menagerie – her house, haphazardly filled with books, art, pot plants, dogs and dirty dishes. The scent of pipe tobacco was pungent. Jean rinsed a few cups in the sink, spooned instant coffee into them and tugged a tray of Iced VoVos out of their packet. Both the coffee and the biscuits were stale, but they still made for one of the most memorable meals I've ever had. While we sat together Em and Dave talked art-centre business with Jean, who was in the process of filling her pipe from the pouch in her lap, while I cradled my coffee mug and reached for another biscuit. On the facing wall there was a cluster of dusty frames holding faded wedding photos of a young couple in distinct '70s fashion. They looked exuberant; the girl had the same one-dimpled smile as Jean, though it was now deeply tanned and lined. I wondered where her husband was. I wondered how Jean had ended up in Blackstone alone. I remembered the saying I learned from locals when I first got to Uluru: whitefellas end up in the desert because they're either hiding from the law or themselves. I had been twenty-three when I arrived in the desert and had committed no crime. Still, I was no exception to the rule.

We left Jean, agreeing we'd return in the morning to do business with the artists, and drove out of town to make camp closer to the Blackstone Ranges. Our headlights cut through spinifex and mulga, searching for a patch of clear ground to set our swags on. I wound down the window and looked up, the cool air rushing at my face. Somehow the night sky seemed even more spectacular there than it was in my backyard at Uluru. The stars were inseparable, pulsing and glittering. I found the Emu lying in the formation I'd grown up knowing as the Southern Cross, and the Seven Sisters in what I'd learned at school was Pleiades.

'Isn't it unfathomable to think we're looking up at the same sky that people have used for thousands and thousands of years as maps to travel this land?' Em pondered, leaning on my shoulder to look up at the stars with me.

The next morning, after tea and a breakfast of bruised pears and salted crackers, we drove back to Blackstone Art Centre. From poverty-stricken living conditions, the likes of which I had never experienced in my Gold Coast upbringing, Blackstone's artists emerged with colourful, intricate, laborious and vibrant art. Dave and Em exchanged a knowing smile.

In the coming days we continued west to visit impoverished communities, which continually yielded a thriving collection of inspired art. The red tubs in the back of the bush truck were nearly full.

As we continued on the rough, dusty journey, I slept leant against whoever wasn't driving. We stopped at roadhouses that popped up out of nowhere, as wildflowers do in the desert after rain, and drank endless cups of sugary, powdered-milk tea. Canned tuna on flat bread had become a banquet. Occasionally, we peeled open a tin of peaches and passed it around, syrupy juice dribbling down our chins while we rested against the thick trunks of roadside gums.

The last community we stopped at was Tjukurla. We'd been on the road for a week; I thought all I wanted was a shower and my own bed.

We unloaded the truck for the umpteenth time and laid out the red tubs. Word of the bush truck's arrival spread instantaneously, there was a festive energy in the air. People emerged from their houses with carved birds, lizards, snakes and rolled canvasses under their arms. It had become a familiar sight; the anticipation of seeing the artwork felt something similar to Christmas morning.

It was Rebecka's smile I noticed first, under her crop of silver curls. She sat beside me and unrolled her canvas. The ladies sitting around her collectively nodded their approval. Rebecka's canvas was tri-coloured in undulating red, white and black curves leading to a centerpiece, which consisted of two U-shapes sitting either side of a symbol, somewhat like a horizontal ladder.

'Beautiful painting, Rebecka,' Dave said. 'What story is it?'

As Ben Genocchio noted in *Dollar Dreaming* (Hardie Grant, 2008), it is common knowledge among communities that, when selling art to tourists, the painting without the story is nothing.

'Kungka one. Hair belt time,' Rebecka answered softly. She explained it was a girl's story: the ladder-like symbol at the centre was the hair belt Ngaanyatjarra girls traditionally wore for modesty during puberty. The two U-shapes on either side were female weavers and the colourful arcs surrounding the centrepiece were the journey from girl to woman. More appreciative nods came from the ladies gathered around Rebecka. Later, back in Mutitjulu, I would learn Rebecka was a senior law artist, a guardian of Ngaanyatjarra cultural heritage and custodian of sacred women's business and ceremonies in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Em labelled Rebecka's canvas. She and Dave turned to meet the next artist.

'Kungka,' Rebecka whispered conspirationally to me once the others were busy. She pointed at her canvas again.

'Canvas *wiru*,' I complimented her. Rebecka shook her head, looking mischievous.

'Might be old story.' She pointed to the arcs in her painting. 'But. Might be rainbows.' She nudged me, giggling like a young girl.

I laughed along, incredulous at her playfulness, but mostly at my own ignorance. Despite living in Mutitjulu and knowing otherwise, cultural stereotypes I had grown up with still stubbornly lingered within me: Aboriginal communities were only filled with elders who gazed mystically into the distance and painted mysterious, traditional stories. I traced the edge of Rebecka's canvas with my fingertips; sometimes, it might *just* be rainbows. Rebecka and I caught each other's eye and started chuckling again. It seemed we both understood the joke was on me.

'*Ngayulu mukaringanyi nyuntu* rainbows.' I smiled, trying to express what I was feeling using my pinch of language. For many reasons, my love of Rebecka's painting was instant.

THE DRIVE HOME was long and we were quiet. Em closed her eyes while a small triangle of sunlight played across her face. Eventually, our wheels crawled off the dirt road onto sealed highway again. I turned to look back through the cab window at Docker River Road, that red ribbon into the west. The dust plume we left behind rose and billowed before it slowly vanished into the molten afternoon.

We arrived back at our house in Mutitjulu. Dave turned the engine off and the three of us sat listening to it tick and cool. We smiled at each other – one last unloading of the truck to go.

As we unpacked the tubs full of art in the fiery sunset light, I had no way of knowing what turmoil lay ahead. I couldn't have guessed my relationship with Dave would end in just a few months, or that I would move into a house on my own – my first experience of living alone. I was oblivious to the actions of key whitefellas in the community, which would result in the Howard government's 2007 Northern Territory intervention and alter Mutitjulu

irrevocably. I didn't imagine then that I would start another relationship in the desert, or the role that domestic violence would play in it. Standing there, unpacking the dust-covered truck and mucking about with Em as we did so, the two of us were high on our budding friendship. Six years later she would die in a car accident, seven months pregnant with her first child, a daughter.

That afternoon none of those things existed. The future was unwritten. Uluru blazed alongside us. The sunset was shot through with golden and silver threads. We are suspended in that light, in that moment.

As I finish writing this I'm sitting in Copenhagen, overlooking white swans gliding across the surface of Sortedams Sø while clouds of red dirt fill my mind. I've just gone through the image library on my laptop and realised I don't have one single photograph from my trip west with Em and Dave. This causes mild panic to flare in my chest, until I remember where my memories linger: my home is peppered with the tjanpi, punu, ininti and canvasses I collected during the time I lived in the desert, in particular one treasured painting full of stereotype-razing rainbows.

The trajectory that our trip to Western Australia set my life on contributed to reforming my identity, not just as an Australian but also as a global citizen. That night we returned home, the shower I had that I'd been coveting all week didn't satisfy my expectations. Nor did my fresh stir-fry dinner. I hankered after our campfire, our tinned food and our swags, and silent stories passing overhead among stars. Still now I cling to the feeling of that evening, when the trip technically hadn't ended yet and the lights in Em's house glowed softly across the dirt road that separated our houses. I'm happy to stay there in that suspended moment, when we could rise once more and head west on adventures into an Australia I had never known.

All names in this memoir have been changed to protect privacy.

FICTION

NULLIUS

AMANDA CURTIN

LEAVINGS I: 1928

THE CLEARING IS unknown to her, a flat irregularity in a broad swathe of rocky ground the men call ‘the wasteland’ – heavily wooded, sloping to the creek, destined to be left virgin. The boundary of the next block runs through a corner of it. Barnard, the neighbour, had been livid, threatened to put in a complaint to the Board, to take it up with bloody Mitchell himself if he had to. *Grant me my land and part be useless? Reet disgrace.* He’d snorted when the supervisor told him that anomalies had been accounted for when the Board had carved up the blocks, that he did indeed have his allotted 200 workable acres.

Why has she ventured so far from the cottage? Ah, well. Sometimes you have to walk or run as far as you can go, just to pretend you are free. To fool yourself, because there is no one else. Tom is out with the group all day, ringbarking, fencing, dispatching poisonous palms that make the beasts stagger like drunkards and crash to the earth. At night, he is too tired almost to speak any more. Barnard is a tyrant; his wife, as beaten as a donkey. She does not see them often, and is glad of it, despite the claw of loneliness. She has stopped writing letters. Exhausting, the effort to sweeten words to spare those back home.

And so sometimes she is wilful. Impotently so, since no one is made to suffer but herself. But she does it anyway. Ties the ugly straw

hat onto her head and walks, abandoning copper and oven, dirt floors, the sad square of sand that passes for a garden. Only by carrying with her Tom's coil of fishing line can she tell herself there is a purpose to it, assuage the guilt of wastrel hours.

On this day she had woken raddled from the inside, homesick, bilious, restless. She was angry with Tom, angry with this place, with every dream they had been sold and had brought with them, packed between serviceable linen. All of them blighted now. She had turned from the creek on a whim, gathered her skirt in her hands, and walked into the wasteland. Pushing past branches that plucked at her sleeves and scratched her wrists, struggling over rocky outcrops, gritting her teeth at the crows and their endless dismal wailing. And then she almost fell into the clearing.

Eerie. The earth is flat, the herbage blunted as though by feet or fire. Pale shapes stud the earth here and there. She sinks down, uses her toughened palms to sweep the sand away from them. Flat stones, they are, rough worn smooth like those found in the bed of the creek. Someone, she thinks, has placed them here; they are uphill from the creek and too far from it to have been carried by flood.

Glancing around, she notices other strangenesses. Mounds erupting from the earth on the edges of the clearing, weathered dark, decayed. Stripping leaves from a fallen branch, she approaches one cautiously. Is it shelter for an animal? A nest? A hive? She probes it with the stick. Draws back. Mud crumbles, a powder of old leaves. She scratches at it again, and when there are no signs of life she puts the stick down and uses her fingernails to break through the crust. Something sharp pierces her thumb, and she flaps her hand, flicking spots of blood. Peering closely, she slowly prises away a solid, familiar shape and holds it up to the light. A claw! And it is just the first. The mound is a conglomeration of old, thin shells – whole, broken. Legs, heads, claws, tails. All stuck together with mud. Someone has had a feed of gilgies. Many people. Many feeds.

She picks apart the mound, right down to the level of the earth. Finds it to be merely the summit of something larger, a deep cache of leavings that become softer, smaller, more unrecognisable, the deeper she excavates.

For a long time she sits there among the remains of life long-gone. She imagines herself telling Tom, the others, leading them here to this place of presence. Her husband's blank face blanker. Barnard's turkey-red, spitting contempt. The supervisor, Kelly...no.

Her stomach clenches and turns, her mouth floods. She scrambles away on her knees, to heave onto the weedy scrub beyond the clearing.

LEAVINGS II: 1975

THE GIRL IS supposed to be keeping an eye on her younger brother, but in truth she takes every chance to lose him. Losing him is easy: a goanna and a stick are all it takes. She is far ahead of him on this hot spring day.

Sun stipples through the canopy above her hatless head. She trails a whip of wattle, picking her way over fallen boughs and threading through slimy reeds. Bare feet squelching. Scum ripples the surface of the creek in greens and greys. It's not deep, she knows that, but still she wonders: how shallow is too shallow to drown? The thought makes her stop for one guilty moment, and then she moves on again, shaking her head. He's not that young, not that stupid.

The creek is full of gilgies, and you can sweet-talk them into your scoop net with a bit of gristle or bacon rind tied to a string. Her gran loves gilgies. She boils them up in a big pot, then pulls off the heads, splits the tails, squealing as the hot shells nip at her fingertips. Pop sniffs at that – he can't be bothered with shelling, but he'll smash the claws with a hammer and suck out the meat.

She hasn't brought the net and bucket today.

Before long she'll be reaching the strands of rusty wire that mark the boundary between her grandparents' farm and the next property, which used to be a dairy farm owned by Uncle Jack but now has a brown tennis court cut into the old pear orchard. The new owners are never there. She could slip over the wires; she's done it before. Or she could turn back, check on her brother – that's what she *should* do. Instead, she shuts her eyes, tips her face to the sky and twirls and twirls until everything she's been thinking breaks apart and her head is full of

air and bits of words. Whichever direction she's facing when she stops, that's where she'll walk.

Finally, her body slows, winds down to stillness. She lets her head undizzy, shards of thought settle, regather. Her eyes squint open fraction by fraction. And then she walks, not towards the fence, not back to the cottage, but up the slope, away from the creek, into the bush.

Pushing through the ti-trees makes her feel intrepid. A bush kid. Even though she lives ten months of the year behind a suburban picket fence. Even though she's getting older now and should want to be done with kid stuff. It's a special place, this, her grandparents' farm. The first time she came for the long Christmas break, before her brother could even crawl, she was small enough that Pop could swing her up onto his shoulders and tote her around. He called it his 'selection', and kind of laughed when he said it. He kept a herd of Friesians in a paddock between the cottage and the nearest road, another west of the dairy. But, except at milking time, cows were boring. Cows were just cows. The bush on the far side of the property, with the creek running through it: that was where the special things were. Bandicoots that came out only at night, and only if you were quiet. Roos thumping through the trees to the creek at dusk. Racehorse goannas – lean, angular things – and those sneaky bobtails, although *they* would steal in close to the house in the late afternoon to feast on Gran's strawberries, pink juice dribbling from their scabby mouths. There were snakes but not all of them dangerous; it was the dark, whip-thin slithers you had to be wary of. Kangaroo paws, egg-and-bacon, buttercups, donkey orchids – never, *never* to be picked.

Later, when her brother tagged along, all boybluster and noise, Pop came good with new kinds of knowledge: how to get gum out of grasstrees, how to make whistles from leaves, how to light fires with bits of glass, which types of wattle made their mother sneeze (although Gran said this was information her brother could have done without).

She misses that Pop. He is older now, too – creaky-old and tired and kind of sad – and he waves them away to do their own exploring.

It's slow going, and she's careful where she puts her feet, wincing, wishing she hadn't left her lace-ups swinging on the cottage veranda rail. From time to time she turns back, fixing the way in her memory,

although Pop has always told them the place isn't big enough to get any more than a little bit lost. *Just keep going, and sooner or later you're gunna find a fence.* Small birds flit and rustle alongside her, wrens and robins colouring the way. Overhead, the bluesky screech of twenty-eights, pink-and-greys.

She's tired, ready to stop for a sip from Pop's tin flask, when she discovers the clearing. She walks into it, a cool, damp place, and thinks of fairy circles she's read about in books. Magical places. A self-conscious laugh catches in her throat. Fairies! Magic! Imagine what Pop would say to that. He'd call her a baby, and so she was. But still, it's giving her the shivers.

She plonks herself down next to the stump of a jamwood tree, still scoffing at her fairy fancies, and reaches round to unstrap the flask from her belt. And that's when she sees the cairn.

A thrill runs the length of her spine. She crawls towards it, lightly, carefully, as though the ground were suddenly glass. It's a rough thing, put together with stones of different sizes. They're piled up in a little mound, held together with mud and moss. She touches the green: damp, furry.

The next thought stills her breathing: it's a grave!

LEAVINGS III: 2007

Display case exhibit cards

(A) Three partially intact letters (c. 1928) found at the donor's family property, thought to be correspondence belonging to the first European settlers who occupied the land as part of the Group Settlement Scheme (1921–c. 1932). The scheme, enthusiastically promoted by James Mitchell, then Minister for Lands (earning him the name 'Moo-cow Mitchell'), offered British migrants assisted passage to Western Australia, sustenance payments and 200 acres of arable land in the state's South West, to be developed in supervised groups of 12–20 families, with freehold granted upon repayment of a 30-year loan. Poverty, isolation, poor conditions, unsuitable land, inadequate resources and infrastructure, lack of farming skills and, finally, the Great Depression combined to extinguish the hopes of those enticed by over-optimistic promises of 'A New Life', 'A Farm of Your Own'. Many families walked off the land with nothing.

The letters were encased in a leather pouch *(B)* and buried in a blackened tin *(C)* beneath a stone cairn.
(anonymous donor, 2006)

The letters have suffered water and other damage, blurring or erasing words and passages, and the handwriting across the worn folds of the pages is illegible.

The three letters name the recipient as 'Nora' and her husband as 'Tom'. It has not been possible to further identify the family. Several groups were established in this area. The museum would welcome information from the donor about the exact location of the property.

Letters 1 and 2 are from Nora's sister 'Lallie'; letter 3 is from her mother.

The fate of Nora and Tom is unknown.

29th Sept. 1928

dear Nora,

you written? We are all of us beside ourselves with worry. I said it was wrong of Tom to take you away from us to the other end of the world far from us but you were stubborn, Nora, never have I seen you like you were your future in Australia

rise above his Station & make something of himself. And pray for what? You a slave could not even boil you are carting Water & milking Cows & churning Butter & making Soap out of mutton fat. When I think of your beautiful hands I cannot carry on like this with a baby on the way. The conditions you have to your little one should not have to suffer

Mrs. Skubbe's Lillian has written Dear God in Heaven Nora filthy Water & flyblown Meat & a Hole in the ground for a Lavatory! It's going to need more than a bottle of Lysol to keep the baby from harm and ill health when your time comes? miles from or even a Neighbour, let alone a Nurse. Believe me, Nora, Mama did not tell us all wrong. You must be firm in stating this. You cannot hush like a Native. You are at our wits' end.

sister

appalling news of the Groups. It surely cannot be as
 saying the Scheme pay debts
 & their Capital gone
 godforsaken place. All you have done, all your backbreaking work!! Surely Tom's
 for something? Tom say a lot of the
 never even seen a Farm before they went. At least Tom knows one end of a bow from
 other. What kind of a stray country is this that
 farm of your own. I cannot understand
 becoming hard here, too, and there is talk of
 we thought you would be self-sufficient & protected out there. Is there no
 sell your farm back to the Gov't and gain recompense for all your work?
 cannot bear to think of among the dust & flies & fleas
 have heard stories about infants sleeping not in cradles but in gelignite boxes
 respectable barefoot through the bush
 Gypsies until they are old enough to
 for this? When I think of my Marjorie I
 crying for your little one only because I want
 happy, & I cannot forgive me Nora
 love, your Lallie

dearest child,

& your little one is due so soon. Now, I know you might be
what your Sister
will not trouble you to do this, so that But Now, dear, I worry about you &

this for I see some things
could not help but think how absurd to send
knitted dainties for your Baby But I want your child to have all that I would

achieve. The Lace will seem utterly fanciful
is a special gift a length from your Grandmother's Wedding dress & I wish
use it for your Baby's Christening gown. Maxie's was
from her Great Grandmother's bridal Lace & it is my hope

Tom will laugh, I know, but it makes me feel so
think of your baby wearing Maria's precious Valenciennes on that special
worry about how
spare the time to when

news, any news at
beginning to wonder if she has said too much. I am sure you will forgive
can be sure we will be praying for you & your little one.

Love loving Mama

LEAVINGS IV: 2014

SHE RESTS THE shovel between the arms of the barrow, pushes damp hair from her forehead with the heels of her gritty hands. Sweat streams down her arms, making grey slurry of concrete dust caught in the fine white hairs.

It's mid-morning, spring-warm. There will be time enough for sunscreen, for hats; for now, she wants nothing between her face and the sun's blessing. A small flock of black cockatoos passes overhead and she has to imagine their shrill cries, their warning of rain. She and Jack are making too much noise to hear anything else. Nerve-jarring scrapes of the trowel across mud bricks punctuate the steady churn of the concrete mixer, the talkback banter splatting from the paint-spattered radio.

The sky is cloudless, boisterously blue. Hard to imagine rain, but the cockatoos are never wrong. They'd better remember to cover the bricks with plastic before they leave.

Surveying the neatly stacked hillocks of mud bricks, the results of her months of hard labour alone in the bush, gives her a pride she would find hard to explain to anyone. Who would have thought? After all those years in front of a computer screen? She shakes her head.

Jack's face is furrowed as he manoeuvres another brick into place, but as he stands up, slowly uncurling his spine, he huffs the strain away, blows it through his teeth in a gust. He catches her watching. Smiles. She must be smiling too; she must be wearing that goofy grin she sometimes catches on her face in the mirror. Being here, doing this: it makes her feel stupidly happy. The physical work of making something new from almost nothing.

It's the third cottage they've built on the property, this one financed by solid bookings for the first two. Visitors want what it is they're offering, keep coming back. Bandicoots and brushtail possums. Solar power and wood stoves. Gourmet picnic hampers. Hot tubs under the stars. Spoil-yourself luxury in a rustic shell of mud. The new one, closer to the creek than the others, will be charmingly equipped with scoop nets and pots, Huck Finn fishing

poles. Marron and gilgies – premium local produce *and here you can catch your own!*

Jack is signalling to her, holding up the thermos. Mouthing over the noise of the radio: *Coffee?*

The cockatoos arc over her again, wheeling away to the east. Still she can't hear them.

THE CLEARING IS UNKNOWN TO THEM.

PERHAPS WHEN THEY traverse the land in their Blundstone boots, searching for the ideal aspect for cottage number four, they will come upon it, six hundred snake-lengths along the path of the creek and another twelve hundred in from that.

There's not much to see now. It is overgrown, barely a clearing at all. If they are inattentive, deaf to its whisperings, to a certain change in the air, they might push through, move on.

But perhaps they will catch something on the breeze, think of it as an eerie place. Perhaps they will sense presence through absence.

Once there was a jamwood tree, felled to make a fence.

Once there was a theft, and the footprints of a barefoot girl.

Once there was a cairn of stones. Beneath that, a cache of letters. Beneath that – undisturbed still – a small, malformed skeleton, soft as chickenbone, wrapped in cerements of lace.

Once there was an ugly straw hat, a discarded coil of fishing line.

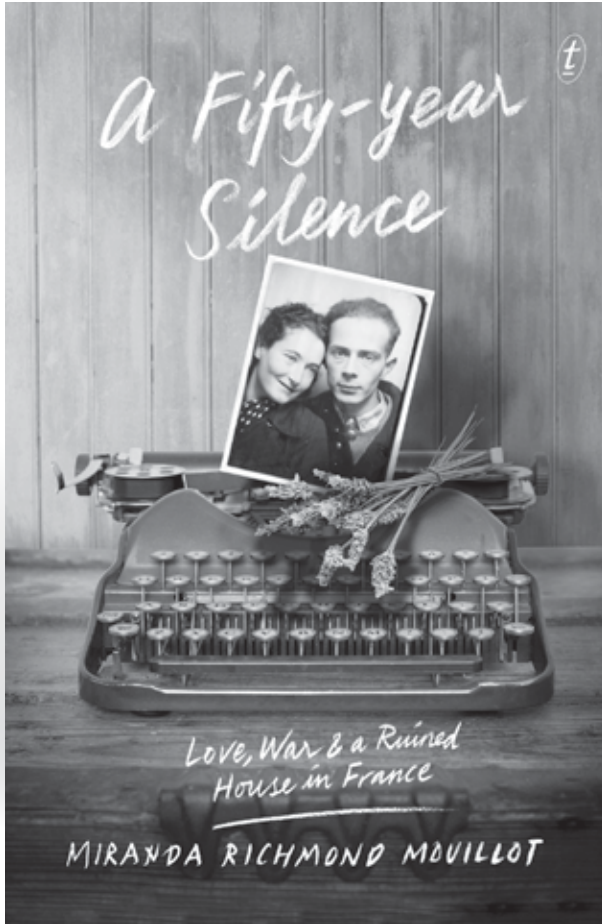
Once there were middens, layers silted down over time to feed the earth.

Once there was a campfire. Muller stones where acacia seeds were ground. A seasonal feed of gilgies for many. For thousands of years.

Amanda Curtin is a writer, book editor and adjunct lecturer at Edith Cowan University. She has published two novels, *Elemental* (UWA Press, 2014), shortlisted for the WA Premier's Book Awards, and *The Sinkings* (UWA Press, 2008), and a short story collection, *Inherited* (UWA Press, 2011). Her short fiction has won several awards, including the University of Canberra National Short Story Award, and has been widely published and anthologised. She is currently the fiction editor for *Westerly*.

After surviving World War II and the Nazi occupation,
Anna and Armand settled in an old stone house
amid a picturesque village in the South of France.
Then Anna walked out, taking the typewriter and their children.
Anna never saw Armand again.

OUT
NOW!

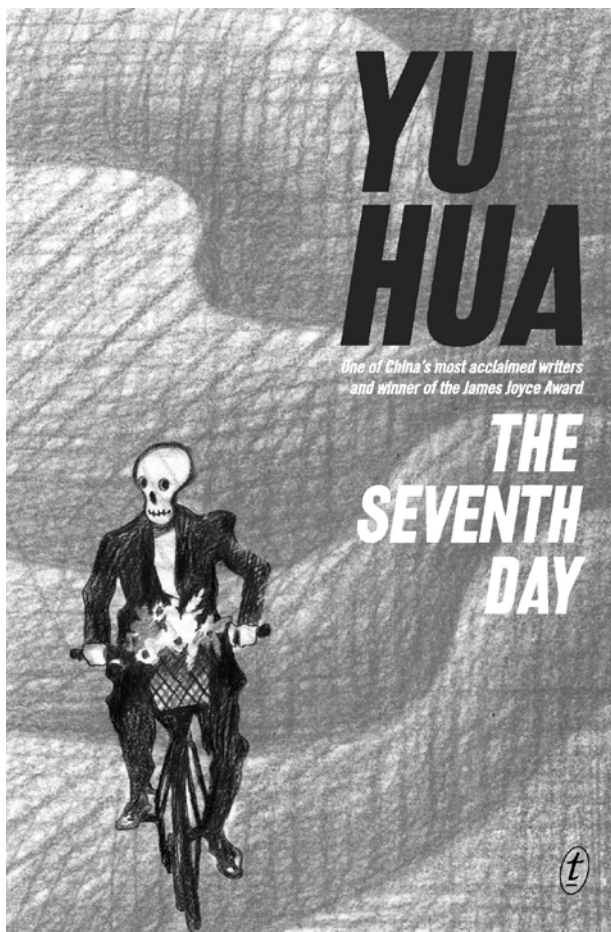


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