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This is where you come from
Miranda Tetlow

I can still see the thin, white membrane ringed with blood. The calf inside, pushing against it, like someone very much alive and surprised to find themselves in a body bag. Grandpa was bending over the newborn in his work trousers, the ones with a fly permanently at half-mast (“Peter! Those pants are for the bin!” Granny would have said back at the house). He ran his thumbnail along the membrane until it popped, spewing out liquid the colour of rust.

I was sitting in the passenger seat of Grandpa’s Subaru, tracing flowers into a layer of bull dust on the dashboard. Earlier, I had been allowed to drive the unregistered car from Grandpa’s lap, steering while he rode the clutch. The Subaru lurched along the dirt road that led from the homestead to the paddocks. Grandpa said he was taking me out for a treat. I was hoping for an icy pole from the workshop freezer, lemonade-flavoured and coated in a layer of icicles.

Had I known this was the treat, I would have stayed back at the house with Granny. From between my hands, I watched the calf unfold, sticky in her coat, not yet ready for those legs. Grandpa called out to me. I gripped onto the unused seatbelt. The cow started to lick her baby clean. Grandpa opened the car door and I made my body arch and stiff.

He growled, “Come on, Tilly! Be a big girl!”

I buried my face in the seat. Grandpa returned to his poddy calf and her mother, all teats and udder.

That story can’t be entirely true, because I was only three years old at the time but that’s how I remember it. Looking back now, what surprises me most is that the cow didn’t make a sound. None of the deep-throated bellows you might have expected, the bovine version of expletives you’d hear in a fourth-floor maternity ward.
But then, I didn’t make a sound either when my son was born. In my early labour, I could hear a woman in the neighbouring birth suite screaming for it to be over.

"Get. This. Fuckin'. Baby. The fuck. Out of me!"

"Don’t worry,” the midwife assured me. “Her baby’s twice the size of yours and she’s had no pain relief."

I had all of the pain relief. Eventually, they extracted my son with a pair of forceps. They looked like salad servers, long and silver. He came out in a slither, all arms and legs, perfect apart from a slight indentation on his left ear.

Nine weeks later, we went to visit Grandpa. He wasn’t out in the paddocks anymore. The farm where I grew up was sold after Granny died, all 1600 acres of it swapped for a house in one of Canberra’s nicest suburbs. Grandpa sat perched on a wicker chair. We presented him with our baby.

"Who have we got here, then?” “This is Mischa,” I said.

"What is he – a Russian?” Grandpa beckoned me closer. “You know I’ve already got a great-granddaughter named Poet?”

He shook his head.

"Poet. You don’t get around in the playground much with a name like that.”

Grandpa inspected my son like he might have checked a horse at an auction. He held him up to the light; he examined his eyes, then his gums for teeth (there were none); he counted out fingers and toes. He ran his hands down Mischa’s limbs, over the folds of skin that fell from shoulder to wrist and thigh to ankle like strings of party sausage rolls. He fingered the clip on his ear left by the forceps, a flaw that would have let him bargain price with the horse’s owner, or with us, if we were in the business of selling our baby and he was in the business of buying one.

Then he harrumphed. “Very good. You can take him back now.”

We moved to Darwin after that. My husband Steve and I bought a small home in the northern suburbs, an elevated prefab with a tropical jungle out the back.

Frangipani trees, vines that stretched between the palms, and a series of empty pots that served mostly to breed green tree frogs. Mischa learned to crawl, then walk in that garden. He celebrated his first birthday by swirling his hands in the stagnant puddles of mosquito larvae and frog spawn, licking his fingers clean.

One day, I got a phone call from Grandpa out of the blue. I held the phone away from my ear as he trumpeted an imminent arrival.

“Tilly? What are you doing next week?”

Darwin Airport smelled like wet wool and old dogs. I nursed my cup of coffee in the foyer while Mischa examined a luggage trolley, spinning the wheels with toddler intensity. Grandpa was easy to pick out in the crowd: tweed jacket, glasses fogged up. He crossed a stream of lily pads, the lotus flowers embroidered onto a heavy carpet that hadn’t been updated in over a decade. When we hugged, my face pressed against his and I could feel the new slack of his cheek against mine. He rubbed my hands.

“How’s my Tilly? And the little man?”

Grandpa chucked Mischa under the chin. He gestured towards the luggage carousel, and we walked over to collect his suitcase.

“If I’d known it was your wet season, I wouldn’t have come,” he said. “Some big storms on the way up. Pilot nearly had to land at Tindal but he pushed through. Good man.”

I reached over for his paper. In Darwin, we didn’t get the interstate newspapers until mid-afternoon. It was something I missed. Spilling over the front page was a shock of red hair, and the blue and red lightning struck face of Ziggy Stardust.

“That picture’s all over the papers,” he said. “Some pop star.” “David Bowie,” I said, grabbing his newspaper.

“Never heard of him.”
I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go,” I said. “I’ll take you the scenic way home.”

We drove back to our place in silence. It was low tide. Lonely mangrove trees poked out of the mud flats. Grey clouds pushed down on the horizon until the sea started to dissolve. Through the windscreen wipers, I spied two men walking along the bike path, bare chested and beaded with rain. They were holding magpie geese by the neck like they were umbrellas.

Grandpa rubbed his eyes. “When are you going to come home? You’re living on the frontier here.”

We pulled into the driveway, and I opened the gate, creaky with a padlock that was for show rather than security. I showed him around the house. He tried to hide his dismay at the guest bedroom, the low slung double bed and the click-click-click of the ceiling fan. Grandpa rested his suitcase on the dresser. I watched him run a hand along the bed, smoothing the sheets. They were already damp.

When Steve got home from work, we sat down to dinner. Mischa gurgled away in his high chair, flinging portions of potato salad onto the verandah. Within minutes, the mayonnaise started to curdle. There was a burst of lightning and the frogs answered in kind, a wet call and response.

A scream cut through the darkness.

I stood up straight away. “What was that?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” said Steve. He smiled wanly at Grandpa.

“Just some kid who doesn’t want to go to bed.”

“What about that couple down the street? Should we call the cops?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Grandpa. He sat up as straight as our flimsy outdoor furniture would allow. “Don’t you two kids know anything about birds?”

We didn’t.

I had friends who could point out a dot in the sky and a speck on a branch. *Whistling kite* and *sacred kingfisher* and *tawny frogmouth*, they could recite with a certainty and confidence about their place in the world. That wasn’t me.

Grandpa nodded. “Bush stone-curlews. There’s probably a nest of them nearby. We’ll have a look tomorrow.”

I scraped our plates into the bin, and called it a night.

In the morning, the rain was gone. Mischa was playing with his trike under the house and I hunted around for breakfast supplies. Grandpa was a firm believer in bacon and eggs. Instead, I held up a box of cereal like I was a hostess on a game show.

“Can I tempt you?”

He waved me away. “Not right now, Tilly. Mischa and I are off to find the curlews! Aren’t we, Mish? I’d reckon that nest is around here somewhere.”

Mischa pointed toward the sky. “Bird!”

Grandpa clapped his hands. “That’s right! Bird! Come on, Mischa boy!”

I went back into the kitchen. Yesterday’s paper was still sitting on the bench, and I stared at Ziggy Stardust. I thought about the parallel universe that Grandpa occupied in the ’70s and ’80s, the one devoid of David Bowie. The surgery where he treated hayfever and chronic allergies. The tennis afternoons, the rounds of golf. The dam we used to swim in when the temperature hit forty degrees, mud flaking off us afterwards like plaster of Paris. The dinner parties on the verandah. The back paddock, filled with cow pats and granite boulders.

That was my universe, too. How did Bowie even find me?

My friend Katrina’s seventh birthday. Her lounge room, transformed into a blue light disco, with her older brother Marty in charge of the stereo. He liked The Clash, Michael Jackson, The Sex Pistols. It was not a parentally endorsed set list. Then Marty pulled out a new cassette tape. He slotted it into the deck with a snap and pressed play.
That's when I heard Bowie for the first time.

There's a brand new dance
but I don't know its name...

I remember being thrilled by that Bowie bass line, by the dirty glamour of it all. We strutted through the lounge room. We turned to the left. Fashion! I begged Marty to rewind the tape, to play it again. From then on, Bowie and his cast of characters would drip feed into my life. The Jean Genie. Ziggy. The Goblin King. Major Tom. Through his multi-coloured eyes, I saw the world projected on a screen bigger than ours, with edges that were darker, blurrier, more interesting.

I put the newspaper and Bowie's vacant face back down on the bench. I heard a smack. The braking of wheels on the bitumen. And then a scream, and this time it wasn't a fucking curlew.

We had steps leading down to the drive way, but my feet didn’t feel them. Maybe I flew. A car had stopped and a stranger was on his phone, gesticulating wildly. And there he was.

On the road, a splay of limbs in a puddle that was thick and dark. I flapped my wings again. Circled above and then landed. He wasn’t moving. If he was breathing, I couldn’t feel it. I pressed my hands into the ashvalt so hard my skin broke. People were talking to me and then they stopped, because I started making sounds the cow never did when she gave birth to that body bag with the calf inside.

When I opened my eyes, I could just make out three paramedics in high vis. There were a couple of police officers and a man who kept apologizing, sweat dribbling over his top lip. I closed them again. At the hospital, someone put a cup of tea in my hands. It was from the staff room, rather than the cafeteria, a pixelated photo of someone’s cat was printed along the outside.

Grandpa slumped in the chair beside me.

"Tilly."

I stared at him.

"I just, I'm just...I'm so very sorry."

Grandpa's face was white underneath the fluorescent lights.

"It should have been you."

He looked at me, broken. I bit down hard on the cat mug; I said it again. Grandpa got up from his chair. He muttered something about the vending machine, getting something to eat.

They let us into the room where Mischa was lying still on the bed. The doctors said the induced coma was a precaution; they said we could stay with him. Steve fell asleep in the chair. I lay awake on the floor, refusing the pillows and blanket the nurse offered me. I shivered all night in the hospital's overzealous air-conditioning.

When I went home to pick up some things, Grandpa was long gone. No note. Just the outline of his suitcase in the dust I hadn’t cleaned off the dresser, his razer left behind in the bathroom like an angry calling card, though I knew he'd just forgotten it. I picked it up. There were stray whiskers left in the blunt blades. I ran my fingertips over them until the skin broke again.

There were weeks of scans and second opinions. A broken leg, a fractured wrist, the rest we couldn’t be sure of. Not yet. Mischa abandoned the few words he had at his disposal: No, Dada, Mama. Bird. There. They disappeared along with the wet season. I traced the scars on his head every night, like lines on a map.

In the right light, I could still see a Mischa-shaped stain on the road. I tried to erase it with the wheels of our car, driving between our house and the hospital.

Finally, I saw them. The curlews. The mother stood like a statue in the garden. She loomed over her hatchling, its feathers grey and charcoal, soft and smudged. She jutted her head forward, raising her scalloped wings like a shield when we got too close.

"Look, Mischa!” I said. “Bird!
He smiled back at me.

It should have been you. The words were still rolling around my mouth like a hard toffee. I thought about calling to apologise. I didn’t.

Someone called me instead. My Aunt Helen. Grandpa was in hospital.

When we arrived, Grandpa’s face was waxy. His breath was slow on the inhalation, scratchy and rattling on the exhalation. I sat down on the edge of his bed, and the springs almost gave way.

“We need to talk about end of life care,” the doctor told me.

On the first day, I sat there holding his hand. Steve and Helen took Mischa to the gift shop to pick out a balloon. I stared at the print above Grandpa’s bed. A man stood at the edge of a shearing shed verandah, his eyes vacant. Waiting.

On the second day, Grandpa opened his eyes once and did a roll call. Tilly, Steve, Mischa. Helen. Pamela and Bob. He numbered us off and went back to sleep.

On the third day, he was awake when I walked in with an orange juice from the cafeteria. He asked me what day it was. “Thursday,” I said. Mischa was eyeing off the chocolates on the side table. “Do you remember Mish?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s right. Your mum was in the hospital; we were looking after you. You wanted to call the calf Baby David.”

After my brother. That piece of the story was lost in the ripping membrane, the shaky calf covered in blood, the childhood tantrum. Because David never came back from the hospital. Mum left home two months later. She said she was driving to Cairns to figure things out, though we heard later that she didn’t get further than Pennant Hills.

It should have been you. As if I could have exchanged Grandpa for Mischa. Swapped the poddy calf for David. Stopped Mum. No. Death stands on a lazy susan in a busy restaurant and spins. You. Not you, but you.

When I arrived at Grandpa’s house, after his funeral, my aunts had already picked it over for valuables. Just the flotsam of my childhood remained. Old tennis rackets. Cupboards bursting with crockery, drawers filled with mismatched cutlery. There was a copy of the Karma Sutra and a jar of dried salad herbs from the ‘80s, judging by the font and peeling label. In one of the wardrobes, I found my old CD soundtrack to Dawson’s Creek and a chess set painted up like the family of the last Russian Tsar.

A jumble of vinyl sat next to the old record player. I flipped through the covers. Tchaikovsky, Verdi, Vivaldi. The Very Best of the London Symphony Orchestra. No Bowie, of course, but Grandpa had his own space oddities. I was about to lock the door behind me when I saw one of mum’s old toys, still sitting on the shelf. A silver bird that balanced on a nail by its beak, wings outstretched. Mum showed it to me when she was pregnant. She tapped on the bird’s rump and it bobbed up and down, cradled mid-air by physics, an invisible thread, and the universe. I left everything else behind, but I took the bird home for Mischa.
The Creek
Zac Edgar

The envelope was yellowed and stiff, the navy ink faded and bled at the edges. There was no postage stamp. No return address.

Harrison turned the envelope over and over in his misshapen fingers as though the source would surely reveal itself. He checked the mailbox one more time for a clue - nothing.

Sweat dripped from his brow to the gravel, reminding him a sick old man had no business in this buildup heat.

Inside, under the air-conditioner, Harrison slumped into the chair at his wooden kitchen table.

He was alone, of course.

Diane, his daughter, would arrive unannounced every year or so to see if he was finally dead, but she was always disappointed. He was sure she was disappointed. She had every reason to be disappointed. Hell, even he was disappointed.

Other than Diane, the monthly cleaner and the occasional God botherer, to whom he never opened his door, no-one stopped here, and for this he was glad.

He had no telephone callers, and for this he was doubly glad.

And now an old letter in his mailbox.

Harrison snarled as pain streaked through the back of his brain and ebbed out the front.

Something was wrong in his head. He knew it. Hopefully it would kill him soon enough.

“Soon enough,” he said out loud as the last of the pain disappeared.

In that cool and empty kitchen, Harrison removed from the envelope two sheets of yellowing paper and looked immediately to the bottom of the last page to reveal the sender.

Elford.

Elford? He had known only one Elford, and it was so long ago. It could have been eternity filling the space between this lonely kitchen and Elford’s small hands on Harrison’s shoulders.

“We parted without goodbyes, acknowledgement or apology,” the letter began.

A flash – or was it a shimmer? - behind Harrison’s eyes.

His chest fell away and into the space rushed grief, an old friend, the twin of shame.

Harrison closed his eyes. The footbridge had collapsed and the two boys were in the swollen creek again, flailing amid their own screams and gasps for air.

Harrison could see Elford’s panicked wide eyes and feel his hands grasping at his shoulders to stay afloat. Harrison felt the water over his face as he went under and sun on his face back at the surface.

He saw his own hands clenched into fists hammering at Elford’s forearms and he felt Elford release, the boy’s dying mercy.

Harrison opened his eyes to find he was already holding the second page of the letter.

The sign off: “I’m sorry, Elford.”
Harrison set the pages down and stared at their bleeding script: The childish, careful handwriting of a boy dead nearly 80 years.

Elford? Why, and what is this?

Harrison shook away the grief and anger took the cavity for itself. Who did this? How dare they abuse the memory of this sweet, dead child? Who was behind this sick joke?

Who was even alive now to remember Harrison and Elford were friends? For that matter, who even knew of Elford? That family moved south decades ago, and so far as Harrison knew all were dead, including Elford’s younger siblings.

Elford’s cement-block memorial was still beside the river in a small clearing, but no-one stopped there.

The only thing people would bother to look at now should they chance by was the Crocwise sign, not that there were any crocs around the city these days.

That wasn’t the case when Harrison and Elford were kids. Once, from the school oval opposite the clearing, the boys and their other mates watched a drunken itinerant, apparently trying to wash himself, disappear under the water with a yelp and a vicious splash.

Returned from his reverie, Harrison decided to throw the paper away, even better, burn it and forever remove all trace.

On the table like that it mocked him. He was a joke, a failure, a coward, a fraud and someone was trying to remind him.

He lit a match at the corner of the yellowed and stiffened paper. It took quickly and he flung into the fireplace. It was gone. It never existed and never mattered.

Harrison woke the next morning to a throbbing head and pins and needles in his fingertips.

"Soon enough," he said, stepping out of bed and into his thongs.

He ambled up the driveway to the letterbox for his daily dose of flyers and discounts and underneath the half-price this and two-for-one that, another letter was waiting.

He looked down the street for the culprits, but mostly to make sure no-one caught his pain or his panic. He was a miserable coward, but he had pride. It was because of his pride he was so damn miserable.

He opened the envelope at the wooden kitchen table to see the same script as the first letter – childish, exaggerated, careful.

He immediately turned to the second page. "Elford."

He wanted to burn it immediately. Why play these scoundrels’ games? Why let them torment him like this? It was cruel, and Harrison knew about cruel.

Still, he read the first line.

"I am a coward and I am sorry," it began.

Harrison closed his eyes.

He saw the blood of the mother’s smeared nose rolling down her cheek to the linoleum floor.

He saw the blow of the old man’s foot knocking her against the lower cupboards.

He saw her eyes rolling white into her skull and her arms raised 45 degrees toward the boy in twisted unconscious supplication.

Then there was the boy; sobbing through snot and tears, paralyzed in arms and legs and voice.

Then the boy running, not to the woman, but toward a horse-drawn wagon full of people.

He saw the boy, now a young man, toss a letter from his brother into the fire for fear of what it would reveal of his mother’s fate.
Then he saw the soldier – a private - prostrate on his back.

The private’s eyes searched for the young man standing over him. They were wide and wild, like a snared animal.

The blood seeped red and thick from the private’s stomach wound, through his trembling right fingers and disappeared into the black mud.

It could have been either of them in that mud, but today it was the private.

The two men regarded each other in the same shade of horror.

For that moment they were alone in life in a black paddock of only bullets, breath and the wild and wide snared eyes.

The soldier raised his left arm from the mud in a plea, for the mercy of one final bullet.

A shell shook the mud and broke their gaze. That’s when the young man turned and made for the safety of the trench.

The young man couldn’t see the private’s eyes when he turned, but he saw them every day since. He had heard the private’s moans for water and smelled his rotting body.

The smell was in Harrison’s nose when he opened his eyes, again at the end of the second page.

Elford.

A rat must be dead in the wall cavity, he thought as he came to.

Whoever was playing him with this letter business knew his buttons.

Harrison sat the letter down and leaned back on his chair, eyeing the pages and hoping they would stop making sense.

He lit up the evidence and threw it in the fireplace.

What was all this? Elford couldn’t have survived. Harrison saw the bloated, chewed and limbless body as it was being retrieved by police the next day.

Harrison saw the sloping, lazy eyelids, never to struggle open again. It was Elford and Elford was dead.

The next morning, as he rose from bed, the clot in his brain finally exploded.

Harrison moaned to the picture-less white walls and there was no reply.

He caught his reflection in the bedroom mirror. His right eye and the corner of his mouth were drooped. This must be it now, he thought.

It can now all be put away. All the memories: Elford, the mother, the private, all scattered to space.

He shuffled to the kitchen and saw another letter already on the table.

Three words: “At the creek”.

Harrison knew the spot, it was the clearing, where the footbridge once stood, where the crocodile ate the drunk, and it was only about only about 200 meters from his house. He could make it.

For the first time in years, and still in his nightgown, Harrison crossed the threshold of his driveway.

The streets weren’t exactly bustling, but there were people, Harrison could sense that. He could sense their stares and he was sure someone asked if he was okay.

He wobbled and stumbled and dragged his right leg forward, but he was sure he was floating.

He floated all the way to creek, and there in the clearing was the cement block memorial, blackened by dust and fungus.

Weather had eaten at the chiseled words: “In memoriam. Elford Edgar Jones. Our darling boy. Lost to this earth, forever loved.”
He sat on the block and faced the creek.

Back at the house, Diana looked through the open door and called for her father. No answer. Something was wrong. Dad was too distrustful of people, anyone, to ever leave the door open.

She walked inside and smelled urine, rotting meat, smoke and rubbish.

The sun through the windows caught something in the fireplace. She moved closer to inspect.

It was her father’s war medals. The old man had tried to burn them.

Next to the medals were other charred artifacts of his life: an unopened envelope addressed to her father from his brother and blackened certificate of commendation from the Administrator recognising Harrison’s bravery in trying to rescue the ‘late Elford Jones’.

"Dad," she shouted again and moved through the rooms expecting to find his body.

She came back to the kitchen and saw the papers stacked neatly on the table. She recognised the childish exaggerated writing of her father and sat down to read.

He was saying sorry, for the first time in his miserable life, he was sorry.

On the last page: "At the creek."

At the creek, Harrison blinked and a tear ran down his cheek. Then he saw him coming up the bank.

He was dry, the boy, and dressed in those familiar grey shorts, shin-high socks and blue shirt that all the boys wore.

There Harrison sat, hands on his lap, mouth open in wonder as his old friend moved toward him smiling the toothy grin hidden from the world and all earthly loves for more than 80 years.

"Hi Harry," the boy said, stopping just a few feet from Harrison. "It has been such a long time."

Harrison took the boy in – the smooth skin, shapeless face, soft and miniature features, green eyes peaking through the heavy, downward slanting lids.

The two tragic figures - one standing, one sitting; one ancient, the other forever young – regarded each other level height.

Elford looked so clean he almost glowed. He was so white, so pure, untouched by traumas and joys, forever frozen as the little boy on the wrong spot on the bridge; the little boy who found the wrong shoulders to cling to in crisis.

Harrison, slumped, his mouth collapsing on the right side, physical pain beyond even memory in the gleam of the undead Elford, managed one word.

"Sorry."

“You don’t need to be sorry about anything, Harry,” Elford said. “It is all done now.

"We are both at the creek. As here it ends for me, so too does it end for you."

"But I lived," Harrison said. "I am old."

"Now you’ve lived your life and know your life, would you trade it all back to let me climb on your shoulders?"

"I would," Harrison sobbed, reaching out to the boy, but only his left arm would move.

"I would give all my days back. All my joy, my fleeting, wasted joy, because the sum of my days is misery.

"I am a coward. I left the private and my mother to die the most agonising deaths."

"But what does it matter?" Elford asked. "After all that has happened, it is, after all, happened. Here we are, by the creek, equals, lives wasted, opportunities wasted, love wasted, but here we are.
“At the end, we are all here, by the creek.”

Elford moved backward toward the bank.

Every day was all there ever was for everyone. And now, at the creek, everyday no longer mattered.

“Come,” Elford said, and Harrison stood. He was back in his grey shorts and navy shirt, socks midway up his shin.

Elford smiled excitedly, “come”.

Harry looked down at the cool rushing waters and back up at Elford, who was now in the creek.

“Come,” Elford said, “And none of it will matter. There is redemption in the water.”

Harrison’s stooped over the water and saw his face. It was the face of a boy.

He let himself fall forward into the creek and all was cool and dark. The screams of the Elford were laughter. The hands of supplication were a mother’s hug. The hand of the soldier was stretched in congratulations.

Nothing mattered.

He was taken by the current and was one with the sand and trees and the sky and the drunken itinerant and Elford. There was bliss and there was eternity.

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TJAMU TJAMU
Ralph Folds

‘Which way you thinking Uncle? Might rain today, maybe?’ asks Napaltjarri casually. She is sitting next to Rob on the school veranda, drinking a cup of tea. Her slight smile tells Rob that his fellow teacher already knows the answer, and has every confidence that he does not. The question is part of a familiar game; covering those many aspects of life in the desert he has been unable to master, despite his two years in the community.

Napaltjarri waits patiently for his response. Rob tries to remember the morning’s weather report; after two weeks of desiccating temperatures over forty degrees he would surely remember a forecast of rain. He is certain none was mentioned, but this answer seems too obvious. Rob looks towards the west, where storms are heralded by a bruised smudge on the horizon, an omen of wet weather he takes some pride in being able to discern before the other, newer, whitefellas. The horizon is unblemished, the sky painted azure blue to the edge, not a single white cloud marring its perfection. He can find no clue of the rain implied in Napaltjarri’s question and, if he answers yes, she will surely ask him how he knows. He decides to throw his lot in with the meteorologists.

‘No way,’ he bluffs. ‘It won’t rain today, no clouds anywhere!’

Napaltjarri’s smile broadens. She half turns and fires a burst of her own language, incomprehensible to him, at some women sitting with their babies and toddlers under the school’s shady mulberry tree. They scream with laughter and call out to a group of women passing by the school fence on the way to the store. While he can’t understand many of the words, the tone is obvious, and he catches numerous perfectly mimicked repetitions of his own confident, ‘No way!’ His humiliation is going to be as public and entertaining, as is everything that happens around here.

‘So you think it’s going to rain?’ he asks Napaltjarri.

She wrinkles her nose at their audience.
‘Yuwo’ (emphatically yes), she says flatly.

Rob looks again at the western horizon, still seeing nothing. ‘How do you know?’

After a dramatic pause Napaltjarri says solemnly,

‘Weather report.’ Some of the women snigger at this, but most listen quietly.

Rob laughs. ‘It must have been different from the one I saw on TV this morning. Do you mob always watch the weather report to find out if it’s going to rain?’

‘Sometimes!’

‘And you always believe the weather report?’

‘Yes’ Napaltjarri replies primly, ‘It’s science!’

Rob is unconvinced by this assertion from a member of Australia’s last contact tribe, celebrated for having an intimate knowledge of their remote desert environment.

‘But don’t you have your own ways of knowing what the weather will be like?’

Napaltjarri is silent.

‘Don’t you see something, maybe the ants building their nests higher to keep them from flooding?’ Rob surreptitiously glances around the schoolyard for ant nests seeing nothing unusual that might indicate rain.

Napaltjarri shakes her head dismissively, and resumes her skit, in which Rob hears the word ‘minga’, which he knows, means ‘ants’. The women chuckle again, but it is hard to take offence when their friendly glances invite him to join in their laughter.

At the same time he reflects on the mistake it had been to let Napaltjarri choose his kinship ‘skin’ name ‘Tjangala’ that made him her uncle. The desert Aboriginal people are all related to each other through a kinship system but he’s ensnared in a complex relationship with Napaltjarri that he barely understands. The dance of Uncles and Nieces, which includes making fun of him, is meticulously choreographed by Napaltjarri, who seems to twist and turn the relationship to her own advantage in every situation.

‘Of course Napaltjarri, I’m not really your Uncle’ Rob declares, as he occasionally does, just to remind her that while he plays along with the kinship system to fit in, they are really just teachers working in the same school. That’s their real relationship. Napaltjarri doesn’t respond but walks off to join the other women.

After dinner Rob sets off on his daily walk out of the community. As he passes Napaltjarri’s house she appears in the doorway. ‘Uncle! Wanampi coming, water snake, big rain!’ She purses her lips to discreetly indicate a wisp of cloud on the horizon. ‘Go home!’

‘So Wanampi the water snake is on the weather report now, is he?’ asks Rob. But his sarcasm is lost on Napaltjarri, who has already shut her door. Rob glances up and the sky is almost clear although on the horizon there is a thread like cloud. He stares at it, the cloud looks so innocuous and must be a long way away. It couldn’t possibly be a problem he decides and Napaltjarri is probably teasing him again, but just in case he speeds up.

Rob is walking quickly as he reaches the edge of the community. There is an eerie silence over the camps. Even the cheeky dogs that usually greet him with a snarling assault as he rounds the corner by the church are nowhere to be seen.

Rob is passionate about running but for weeks the weather has been too oppressive to contemplate it, but now is his chance. He sprints off towards the hills, exhilarated by the sudden fall in temperature.

The cloud seems much closer now but etched in the sky it gives an impression of stillness. It’s an unusual formation he notes, some sort of cumulus perhaps, or maybe nimbus, he never can remember the different cloud types. He should Google it when he gets home; it could make a good science lesson. Rob considers going back for his camera to capture this strange phenomenon for his class, but he decides to keep going.

A few fat drops of rain hit his bare arms as he runs and he is surprised at how icy they are. He continues on the sandy track running east from the community, slowing down as he rounds a gentle bend between low sand dunes, blood red in the strange twilight. Here at last he can feel the vastness of the desert, see right across to the edge of the world without a sign of human habitation. But there are other potent signs in the landscape and the locals have started to teach him what the features mean and how they came into being in the Dreamtime.

At last he stops to catch his breath and looks around. Everything has changed; the desert air is perfectly still, the sky gleaming pewter above the black cloud. There are no bird sounds, nothing moves; the land is holding its breath. Rob shivers as dank,
rain-scented air, chilly as a winter night, suddenly envelops him. A cold front must have passed over, something else to discuss with the kids in tomorrow’s science lesson.

Rob now sees that the cloud has become long and jagged, sooty and menacing, hanging with its belly close to the ground. He runs on again while the inky cloud is sliding even closer, its heavy darkness delineated against the luminescent grey of the sky. Rob sees he is now beneath what looks like the outstretched tongue of its serpentine body.

He is aware of a hissing roar drowning out the growling thunder. Moments later he is engulfed in a wild sandstorm accompanied by a swirling cannonade of thunder and lightning. Branches whip back and forth and small trees are bent to the ground under its onslaught. Rob’s skin is burning and his mouth and eyes are full of grit before the sandstorm abruptly gives way to blinding sheets of freezing rain.

Turning to dash for home Rob feels his skin prickle a warning as the crackling air explodes into incandescent light, knocking him to the ground. Pounding hailstones bruise his body as the squall rages above him. Powerless beneath the violent bombardment, Rob huddles into a ball and waits for the storm to abate.

When the hail finally lightens into driving rain and the thunderstorm is no longer directly overhead, Rob staggers to his feet and heads for home. Around the bend the community is invisible, veiled behind dark sheets of rain. His wet clothes cling uncomfortably to his tired body; the gusty wind chilling him as he slowly makes his way, crunching through a white crust of hailstones. Lower down, the track has become a muddy creek full of unexpected potholes and currents. Rob is forced to wade along its edge, each step filled with dread at the thought of stepping on a venomous snake that could have been flooded from its home. In the deepening darkness Wanampi can still be seen travelling away to the west, flickering with soft lightning that breaks free in spectacular forks spearing across the sky or impaling the ground.

Suddenly Rob realises that the track he has been walking along has dissolved into the landscape and become unrecognisable. He automatically looks for his footsteps to retrace his steps home but not a single trace is visible. His mind races, what direction is the community? If he gets lost how could anyone possibly find him and what would it be like spending a night in these conditions? He stops to try to get his bearings and realises how cold he is.

Rob moves off again in the direction he hopes is towards the community but now it is totally dark, there are no stars or moon just a misty watery darkness. He is so tired he wants to sit down but the ground is waterlogged with large pools everywhere. He peers into the blackness to try in vain to see the community lights and now it is raining again, cold and hard. Exhausted, he staggers on.

He’s been walking for a long time but still he can’t see the community lights. Suddenly Rob thinks he hears a sound, a long way off, fading in and out. Yes it’s a vehicle coming from a great distance behind him. He strains into the darkness and sees the faint bobbing glow of a distant single light, moving slowly through the night. He shouts out but the light is moving past him so he yells again and again. Now the light moves in his direction and soon he hears ‘Uncle, Uncle’. The vehicle comes closer and he sees that it’s Napaltjarri’s white four-wheel drive utility with its one headlight. He calls out ‘Niece over here’.

She’s with her brother. ‘Quick’ she says ‘Jump in, before the wheels sink’.

Rob leaps into the back where a pack of wet dogs snarl but make room for him. The utility starts off but the wheels are spinning and it’s only just moving. Then it stops and he feels the back wheels sink into the liquid sand. ‘Everyone out’ yells Napaltjarri. Rob and her brother leap out and start pushing. The wheels spin but the vehicle is moving ever so slowly and then it is free and they leap back into it.

They slip and slide back to the community in exactly the opposite direction that Rob was heading. ‘Thanks Niece’ he says when they reach his house. She smiles, ‘can’t leave my Uncle alone in the desert, you’re family. I watched for you to come back past my house and when you didn’t I checked your house and guessed you had got lost again’.

‘Lost again.’ Rob laughs, Napaltjarri liked to characterise him as having no sense of direction in the bush. She’s referring to an incident soon after he arrived when he was temporarily disoriented while bush walking. He was rescued but he was sure he would have found his own way back to the community.

Next morning Rob, still bruised from his encounter with the storm, sloshes and slides to school across the flooded community. He passes kids splashing happily in deep pools of water and, relieved that he will not have to teach the lessons he was too shattered to prepare the previous night, he makes no attempt to herd them towards
school. Apparently surprised by this unusual reticence, groups of excited children run after him, splashing and giggling as they chorus his regular refrain of ‘School-time! School-time!’ before returning to their squealing water play. By the time he reaches the school his trousers are red with mud and his shoes and socks are uncomfortably wet.

At midday Napaltjarri tells Rob to close the school, the water snake is sniffing around again. This time Rob instantly heeds her warning. He locks up and heads home, just ahead of another torrential downpour and winds that lash the community for hours, plunging everyone into darkness as power lines are ripped down. Rob watches the spectacular lightning show, safe behind his lounge room window.

Friday morning is heavily overcast again, but Napaltjarri tells Rob that Wanampi has gone to a community over the border.

‘Great!’ declares Rob. ‘I have to drive to Alice Springs today.’

‘You’ll be right,’ Napaltjarri assures him. ‘Rain finished that way.’

At lunchtime Rob finishes packing his Troopie, but the leaden sky to the East worries him and he wonders if he should postpone the trip. He hates getting bogged, but he hasn’t been to town for a month and feels in desperate need of a break from the community. He has run out of all the little treats that he enjoys in the bush, and his new girlfriend Sarah has made it clear that if he misses her birthday party on Saturday she will have no trouble making other arrangements.

Rob tunes into the weather report once again, but there is still no mention of rains easing towards Alice Springs. As he struggles with his indecision he spots Napaltjarri walking towards the school, a box of groceries balanced on her head. He beckons her over, calling out, ‘Niece’.

‘Yes Uncle?’ She veers away from the group of women and children walking with her and slowly comes towards him.

‘So, true story, will I get through to town? Has Wanampi really gone to Western Australia?’

‘Yes Uncle, I’m not tricking you, Wanampi has gone, he’s sniffing around that other place now, looking for one man there.’

After Napaltjarri’s denial of any tricks Rob realises that not leaving for town will be tantamount to distrusting her. Despite his lingering doubts, he checks for his keys and jumps into the Toyota.

‘I’m heading off now, Niece.’

‘Uncle!’

‘Yes Napaltjarri?’

‘In town you should get a football for your Tjamu Tjamu.’

‘My Tjamu Tjamu?’ Rob queries.

‘Yes! You are the grandfather for my little son, Johnnie.’

Rob wonders exactly what’s involved in a Tjamu Tjamu relationship in Aboriginal society.

‘OK, Napaltjarri. I’ll see what I can do, but I’m pretty busy already.’

On the way out of the community Rob stops at the school and borrows the high lift jack, mud mats and a jerry can, which he fills with drinking water, just in case. Despite his doubts, there is little rain and, although the trip to town is slippery and tedious he makes it without getting bogged.

That night in his hotel room Rob has just finished talking to Sarah and he watches television as he glances through his diary, with its extensive list of things to do in town. He sees a news flash reporting a terrible storm in Western Australia, near the border, exactly as Napaltjarri predicted: a community is totally flooded, cut off by road, and there is even talk of evacuation if the rain continues. Onto the list he adds, ‘football for my Tjamu Tjamu’ before falling exhausted into bed.
BLOOD MEMORY

A’Mhara McKey

Darwin, 1983

It was still dark when the police rang. They’d found Tom’s body inside a termite mound. ‘What?’ I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and plucked at my nightie where it clung to my skin.

‘They’re building a new road near Peppimenarti,’ the detective went on. ‘A grader driver found the remains a month ago but they’ve only just been identified. It looks as though he died from a stab wound to his leg.’

‘How?’ I said.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘How the hell did he get inside a termite mound?’ ‘We don’t know yet.’

‘You don’t know?’ I didn’t recognise my own voice, it was tight, angry. ‘Three years ago you told us he drowned. That we’d never find his body.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again.

‘We’ll call you when we know more.’

I hung up the phone. My hands trembled. There was a silver-framed photograph on the wall by the kitchen. I stared at it. It was Tom, lean and straight and proud in his khaki police uniform. At once, my whole chest tightens up and I can’t breathe. God, I miss him.

I remember my little brother’s funeral and see again Mum and Dad’s red-rimmed eyes. I see the empty coffin and feel the grip of my sister’s hand on my own. My nostrils flared.

It hadn’t been an accident. Tom hadn’t been lost in floodwaters like they’d told us. He’d been murdered! His body stuffed inside a termite mound in the middle of the bush. Bones picked clean. His slow sweet smile gone forever.

I took a deep breath and glanced at my watch. Not yet 7am, but I knew Joanne would be up getting her kids ready for school.

Jo answered on the second ring. ‘Hello?’

‘Hi Jo, it’s Kate,’ I said. ‘I need a few days off.’

It was almost noon when I arrived at the road workers camp on the outskirts of Peppimenarti.

‘Excuse me,’ I said to a group of men eating smoko. ‘I’m looking for Barry Muir.’

A short, wiry man raised his hand, still clutching a half-eaten corned beef sandwich. He was probably about my Dad’s age, sun beaten and wearing faded blue stubbles and a singlet.

‘That’s me, love. You the girl from Darwin?’

I nodded and introduced myself. ‘Constable Shaw at Daly River said you could show me…’ I faltered.

‘Where I found the remains?’ Barry said. I nodded.

He crammed the last of his sandwich in his mouth and gestured for me to follow him. ‘You’re building a new road then?’ I asked.

‘Yep,’ he said. ‘Road into Peppi gets flooded every year. The locals get stuck here or on the other side until the river goes down.’

I pushed through a thick stand of spear grass that caught on my skirt and left thin, itchy lines on my legs.

‘The new road will sit higher,’ the grader driver continued. ‘Should improve things a bit.’ We stopped shoulder to shoulder, on the edge of an expanse of upturned trees.

Barry explained that when they clear for a new road, they hitch an immense chain between two graders and topple everything in the way.

‘Termite mounds too,’ he said, gesturing to the piles of honeycombed earth.
I caught sight of a huge mound on the edge of the clearing. It still had yellow police tape picketed around it, and one side had sheared off to reveal the inner tunnels and chambers.

There was one large chamber, near the bottom, that was big enough to hold a man curled up.

I swallowed hard.

‘Why’s that one still standing then?’ I asked, my throat catching on the words.

‘Well, we didn’t actually hit that one. I reckon the vibration of the graders and the trees going down made it break apart.’

I moved closer until I stood in the puddle of shade at its base. The thing was immense. At least four metres tall and probably two across at the base. You could hide a dozen bodies inside and no one would ever know.

I turned to Barry. ‘How did you find it?’

‘You can thank my Granddad for that,’ he said with a smile. His teeth were white in his tanned face. ‘You see, I’ve got what the doc calls an enlarged prostate.’ His thumb and forefinger curved into a circle, about the size of a tennis ball. ‘Just like my dad and his dad too.’

I blinked at him, still not taking his meaning.

‘Means I’ve got to take a piss every ten minutes,’ he explained. ‘I got out of the grader and saw the bones then. Thought it was just a feral pig or something until I saw the skull.’

I took a deep breath and tipped my head back to stare at the sky. High overhead, a plane drew a long, soft line of vapour across the blue.

‘Do you think someone put him in there?’ I asked. My hands were clenched so tightly that I could feel the bite of my nails on my palms.

‘I reckon so,’ Barry said. ‘A mate of mine works over near Kununurra. Says the Aborigines there used to bury trespassers in termite mounds and let the little critters rebuild over the top. Hiding the evidence, I suppose you’d call it.’

He met my eyes.

‘That was back in the old days though love, before us white fellas came along.’

When I didn’t reply, the wiry little man lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag.

‘Tell you what, why don’t you meet me down at the pub at knock-off time? You look like you could use a beer.’

I took one last look at the red monolith that had marked Tom’s grave for the last three years. Why would someone do this to him? I thought, and my eyes filled. I rubbed at them with the heel of my hand and followed Barry back to my car. I was going to find out.

The pub turned out to be little more than a shed penned in by a tall fence and lit up by floodlights and a string of coloured bulbs. People sat on plastic chairs and children played barefoot on the grass.

I spotted Barry on the far side of the yard. I got a beer from the bar and made my way over to him. Once I’d taken a seat, he introduced me to a silver haired Aboriginal man who had a battered Akubra resting on one knee. He was dressed neatly in jeans and a long-sleeved, button up shirt despite the heat.

‘Nev, this is Kate Roberts, the lady I was telling you about. Kate, this is Neville, he’s one of the Old Men out this way.’

‘Old Men?’ I asked.

‘An elder,’ Neville replied.

‘The boss,’ Barry said, with a wink. ‘Nah, my wife’s the boss.’

I laughed and took a welcome sip of my cold beer. The sun had set but the stifling humidity suggested a storm on the way. As I wiped the tickling sweat from my top lip I caught sight of a toddler sitting on the grass behind us. She was laughing as she tipped the contents of a stolen beer into her lap. I smiled and admired the mass of curly hair topping the little girl’s head. She was a dark-skinned Shirley Temple. My smile faltered as I remembered Tom at that age. He’d hated getting his hair cut so Mum let it grow until people started commenting on ‘the pretty girl’s hair’.

I coughed to clear the thickening in my throat and took another sip of beer.
It was then that I noticed the young woman sitting with the girl was watching me, her expression intense as she chewed her bottom lip. Our eyes met. Her mouth opened in a little 'o' of surprise. Taken aback, I watched as she scooped up the little girl and quickly left the yard. Soon she was lost to the shadows of the unlit street.

I turned back to the men and caught Neville looking at me.

‘My granddaughter,’ he said, nodding his head towards the gate. ‘She gets shy sometimes.’

‘Do you think she knows who I am?’

He nodded. ‘It’s a small town. We all know. Tom was a good fella.’ ‘Yeah,’ I said quietly, ‘he was. Do you know what happened to him?’

The old man shrugged and lifted a hand to scratch the back of his neck. ‘He was a good fella,’ he repeated. ‘Better than most of them coppers we get out here.’

‘Had some bad ones, have you?’

He finished his beer in one long draught before answering. ‘Some are bad. Some don’t really care. Some are good, like Tom. He treated us fair. Didn’t act like he was better than us just because he had that uniform on.’

My chest swelled. ‘I’m glad,’ I said, and turned as I heard my name called from the carpark.

‘That’s my friend Susan,’ I explained to the others. ‘I’m staying at her place.’ ‘She’s the blonde nurse at the clinic, yeah?’ asked Barry.

I nodded.

‘If only I was ten years younger,’ he said with a sigh.

I laughed and bid the men goodnight. As I slipped through the crowd and out the gate, I was acutely aware of Old Man Neville’s eyes on my back.

‘So what did you think of our fancy pub then?’ asked Susan, as we ate dinner. ‘Um, it was nice?’

Susie scoffed. ‘The place is a dump. I only go there if there’s a cute new doctor I want to impress.’ She gave what was supposed to be a saucy wink and we both laughed.

The phone rang as we were washing up and Susan disappeared into the living room to answer. I put on the kettle and pulled two mugs from the cupboard but when Susan came back it was to apologise and say that she had to go back to the clinic.

‘Nothing serious I hope?’

She shook her head and hunted for her car keys in the clutter on the kitchen bench. ‘Not really, just a spearing.’

‘A what?’

‘A spearing. When someone steps out of line, does something against the rules, the Old Men spear him in the leg. Ah-ha!’ She held the car keys aloft in triumph.

‘That’s awful!’

‘Actually it’s not that bad. They’re not trying to cause him proper damage. Just hurt him a bit and put him back in his place. Most of the time they only come to me if their mum or wife makes them.’

‘And the police turn a blind eye?’ ‘Basically. It’s how they’ve always done it.’

‘So what did this man do, the one at the clinic?’

She shrugged. ‘Most of the time when it’s a young one it’s because he’s been seeing a girl from the wrong skin group or stirring up trouble.’

Susan kissed me on the cheek.

‘Sorry I have to bail on you Katie, I shouldn’t be long. We’ll have that cuppa when I get back.’

I locked the door behind her and settled into an armchair with an old issue of The Australian Women’s Weekly. I tried to read for a bit but I couldn’t relax.

I wasn’t any closer to finding out what had happened to Tom. Maybe I shouldn’t have come. I should have just let the police do their job.

I closed my eyes and pressed my thumbs into my temples, trying to erase the tension that was building there.

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What kind of place was this anyway? Who the hell goes around stabbing people when they get in trouble? ‘The Old Men’ Susie had said. So, does that mean it’s Neville who does it? That sweet old fella with the Akubra and buttoned up shirt?
I sat up straight in my chair.

I thought back to the phone call I’d gotten from the police. Hadn’t they said that Tom had died from a stab wound to his leg? Stabbing, spearing, basically the same thing, right?

I got out of my chair as Susan’s car pulled up outside.

‘Susie?’ I said, as she came in through the kitchen door. ‘Tomorrow, can you show me where Old Neville lives? He and I need to talk.’

Neville and his wife lived just down the road from the clinic, in a solid brick house surrounded by gums.

‘You sure you don’t want me to come with you?’ asked Susan, as she dropped me off at the gate.

‘I’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘I’ll walk up to the clinic when I’m done.’

I let myself into the yard. Two skinny dogs ran out from under a tree and I pulled away as they tried to lick my hands. They smelled like meat and tick wash.

‘Hello?’ I called out.

There was a shout from around the back. I found Neville and a woman with grey streaked hair sitting on the veranda.

The old man smiled in welcome but the woman was stone faced. She barely nodded her head when Neville introduced her as his wife Bess.

‘It’s nice to meet you,’ I said. ‘What do you want?’ asked Bess.

I took a deep breath. ‘I want to talk about my brother Tom.’ ‘Why?’ asked the old man.

‘I think you know how he died.’ Neville and Bess exchanged a look.

‘Why would we know anything?’ Bess said. ‘He was stabbed in the leg.’

‘So?’

‘I know that young men are punished with a spear in their leg. And that it’s the Old Men who do it.’

Neville was watching me closely but I couldn’t read anything from his face. Bess’ hands clutched her skirt so tightly that her knuckles were white. She opened her mouth to speak again but Neville put a hand on her arm and shook his head. The old lady’s bottom lip trembled. She stood up and walked away, her back straight, green skirt rustling around her legs.

There was a moment of quiet as we watched her leave.

‘When Tom came here, we knew straight away he was a good fella.’ Neville said into the heavy silence. ‘He treated the Old Men and Women with respect. Played footy with the kids and helped the young fellas fix their cars when they broke down. All the girls had their eye on him.’

‘Your granddaughter too?’ I said. Neville’s eyebrows went up.

I shrugged. ‘Just a guess, after the way she looked at me at the pub.’

‘Tom had only been here a month or two when they started seeing each other. Bess and me, we didn’t mind, he was a good fella. But one of the other men, Kelvin, he wanted Maggie too and kept picking fights with Tom. It got so bad that we had to do something about it. I took Tom and Kelvin out bush to put things right.’

I sat forward in my chair, hands knotted together so tightly they hurt.

‘It was a spear in the leg for each of them,’ he went on. ‘And then we sat down for a bit. We talked about the footy and where we should go fishing the next day.’

He paused, eyes focused on a line of green ants that trailed the edge of the concrete. ‘But then Tom went real white, talking like he’d drunk a carton of beer. When we tried to get him up we saw the big red stain in the dirt where he’d been bleeding.’

I pressed a hand over my mouth, hard, my eyes fixed on the old man’s face.

‘He stopped breathing before we got him back to the car. We knew right away, me and Kelvin, that we couldn’t tell the other copper what happened. He wouldn’t believe it was an accident.’

‘So you hid his body,’ I said. I was surprised that I sounded so calm. The anger that had brought me here was dissolving. Washed away with the tears that ran hot down my cheeks.
Neville nodded. ‘We dug a hole in a termite mound and put Tom inside. Then we rolled his car into the river.’ He reached over and put a hand on my knee. ‘I’m sorry, miss.’

I looked down. There was a small, star-shaped scar on the back of one of his fingers. I took a deep breath, wiped my face on my sleeve and placed my own hand on his with a little squeeze.

We sat together in silence for a while until the sound of footsteps on the driveway brought us back to the present.

Bess came around the corner, followed by Maggie who was carrying her little girl. This time, the mass of curly hair that brushed the toddlers’ shoulders carried a new significance. I drew in a little breath of recognition. Neville met my eye with a little nod and goose bumps rippled over me.

Maggie set her daughter down and the little girl took off into the grass to play with the dogs.

‘What now?’ Neville asked, as his wife resumed her place beside him, their granddaughter a pace or two behind.

‘I’m going to go home,’ I said. ‘Give Tom a proper funeral and then maybe visit my parents in Adelaide for a bit.’

‘You going to tell the police?’

I shook my head and got to my feet.

‘The police will work it out sooner or later, but they won’t hear it from me.’

The grass was soft and damp under my feet as I joined the little girl in the shade of a towering gum. I bent and picked up a fallen leaf, delicate and laced as a butterfly’s wing, and offered it to her.

‘Hello,’ I said, as she plucked the treasure from my open hand.

She gazed up at me, her eyes clear and dark, framed by thick lashes. I smiled. ‘My name’s Kate, and I’m your aunty.’

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**THE LEMON TREE**

Romany Maunder

Early Spring for many is a time of joy. But not for Ms Stone. The fresh blooms always stirred up her hay fever and she locked herself indoors for four weeks only venturing outside for essential commitments. Any other time of the year she seemed to be able to keep her allergies in check. Her house certainly didn’t give the impression of someone afraid of pollen, a quaint wooden cottage nestled in the middle of suburbia. A mesh fence ran along the perimeter with rose bushes pressed hard against it. The old brick walls of the cottage were covered in bougainvillaea and Tom from down the street would have to climb up on a rickety ladder and trim the vines every Spring to stop them from tearing off the old guttering. Ms Stone would instruct the young man through her glass windows with a tissue pressed to her face to ward off any pollen. Tom wondered why someone so allergic to pollen would have so many flowering plants in their own garden but put it down to being a single middle aged eccentric. She certainly had enough cats. This particular Spring, Tom was so enthralled in his own adolescent mind that Ms Stone’s weird allergies never crossed his mind. His mind was preoccupied with girls and it was while he was planning what to say to Claire that he pricked his hand on a particularly sharp and long bougainvillea thorn. It pierced his sturdy gloves and found the soft fleshy part of his thumb causing him to curse softly. After all he was almost 16 now, almost an adult. He roughly pulled the glove off, headless of how his ladder swung too and fro.

Ms Stone watched the legs of the ladder wobble and Tom’s feet shuffle with one hand tightly pressed to her nose and the other against her heart. The legs stopped wobbling and she heard Tom swear just before she inhaled half her tissue is a great sigh of relief. When Tom climbed down from the ladder and knocked gently against the glass he was greeted with Ms Stone’s bleary face. Her eyes were bulging and the skin around them was red and wet. He paused for a moment feeling sorry for someone who was obviously so allergic to the outside world. She ran her sleeve over her face which only seemed to make it worse as she wiped snot across one cheek.
Tom held up his bleeding thumb and Ms Stone waved him towards the back door, along
the way pulling another tissue from her sleeve to press to her face. She undid the dead
bolt and gently pulled the door open. It squeaked as the rubber seal rubbed against
her lino floor. A gentle breeze ran through the bougainvillea and brought with it the
unmistakable scent of lemon blossoms. Ms Stone stood transfixed holding the door
open as Tom ambled in sucking his thumb. He pulled out a kitchen chair and flopped
don it. Stretching his long limbs out, still not quite comfortable with their new
length.

“Jeez Louise Ms Stone it’s hot out there. ” He sighed. ”I’m parched.” He glanced up to
notice that Ms Stone was still holding the door open and staring out at her backyard.
From leaving the door open for such a prolonged time her hay fever had grown
significantly worse. Tears were streaming down her face and her breathing was so
laboured that her shoulders shook. Tom leapt up and rushed to close the door before
ushering her to a seat. She sat numbly down and stared blankly at Tom before he
reached out and gingerly touched her hand. The contact jolted her back to reality and
she tried a trembling smile on Tom. With relief Tom relaxed back into his chair, safe that
their roles had returned to normal.

“I cut my thumb bad on that fu..damn bush.” Tom proffered his thumb for her to look at.
“That’s terrible! Absolutely terrible. I’ll find you a band aid.” Ms Stone replied leaping to
her feet and opening the pantry cupboard. She pulled out a biscuit tin and set it down
on the table before pulling out an assortment of different sized band aids to compare
with Tom’s thumb. “This one looks like it will fit.” She pronounced before peeling off the
backing and sticking a Wiggles band aid across his thumb, ignoring his protests in the
process.

She stood back and looked expectantly at Tom. Eventually he pulled on his glove and
stood to leave. As he did so he glanced through the kitchen window and saw the lemon
tree heavy with blooms. He stopped as a thought occurred to him.

“Ms Stone, not meaning to like intrude or anything but my Mum said that now is a good
time to fertilise lemon trees. I could after I’ve trimmed the bougainvillea if you want?”
He asked raising one shoulder.

Ms Stone stood still and stared at him before slowly moving her gaze out the window
to the tree. She stood so still for so long that Tom began to feel uncomfortable and
slowly edged out of the room. Just as he reached the door, Ms Stone snapped out of her
reprieve and turned bright dry eyes towards him.

“Yes maybe now would be a good time.” She said and left the kitchen, walking deeper
into the house. Tom stood awkwardly at the door for a moment more before shrugging
his shoulders.

Outside he stood with a pitch fork in hand and his boot pressed firmly on top. He
increased the pressure until the forks were completely buried then pulled it out with a
twist which dropped the lower dirt on top. He continued like this until he was halfway
around the tree and obscured from the kitchen window. He took a short breather and
grabbed a drink from the water bottle nestled near the trunk. He wiped his lip and
picked up the pitch fork again. As he sunk into the soil it hit something hard. He moved
the pitch forward to the left and right trying to figure out how big the rock was. It
seemed to be narrow but he couldn’t find the end of it. So he sank down onto his knees
and brushed the dirt aside only to reveal a barrel. He fell backwards and scrambled
away. Shaking his hand as if burnt. After a moment when he was to get his racing heart
under control he crawled forward and gingerly brushed the dirt away. He exposed more
of the barrel then finally the stock of a very old shotgun. Having never handled a gun
before, he sat still for a long time worried that any sudden movements would set it off.
Finally he reached down and pulled it from the dirt. It seemed old but that could have
just been from the dirt and rust.

“Tom.” He jumped and dropped the gun before shooting upright. He couldn’t see Ms
Stone standing at the kitchen window. “What are you doing?” He stared at the gun at his feet, wondering what to do with it. “Umm, Ms Stone,” he
began walking around the tree so that he stood facing her. “There is a… I mean… I found
…” He trailed off looking down at his feet.

“It’s ok dear.” She said. “Come inside for a bit. It’s so hot outside.” She beckoned him in
and closed the window. Tom slowly walked towards the back door, rubbing his hands
down the front of his pants. Once inside she sat him down and poured a glass of icy
water for him before seating herself opposite.

“Any rubbish you find under that tree, just throw it away.”

“Mmm, yeah but…” He sat staring at his hands.

“Tom. I know. Just place it in the bin. It will all be ok. Do you want to hear a story?” Tom
glanced up for a moment then down at his hands again. Conflicted, he wanted to know
how a shotgun came to be buried under a lemon tree but at the same time wanted to know nothing about it at all.

“Sometimes objects hold memories. I don’t mean they can physically hold memories obviously only our minds can do that but sometimes objects can remind you of good times and of bad times. What’s exceptionally hard is dealing with objects that have both good and bad memories. What do you do with those? If I throw it away I lose the good memories but if I keep it I’ll be reminded of the bad times. Do you understand what I’m saying?” Tom nodded his head with a bemused look on his face.

Unconvinced she continued, “What I’m saying is. This sounds stupid. If you can’t explain something to a teenager you’re just making your adult life difficult. Tom can you bin that thing for me?”

Tom jumped, not expecting such an open and honest plea. He wasn’t concerned with the legality of any of it, because those thoughts had never crossed his mind. “Yes?” He eventually answered. Finishing the last of the water as he tried to do something with his hands to stop himself from fidgeting.

“Thank you Tom.” Ms Stone breathed. Her hands briefly fluttered over his to rest gently on top. She quickly pulled them away and pushed her chair away. Tom followed suit and walked to the door before stopping and turning back.

“So just like put it in the green wheely bin?”

“Yes. Yes that would be perfect.” She intoned breathlessly. Resting her hands on the back of the chair to steady herself, her tissue hanging forgotten from her hand.

He picked the shotgun up and swung it into the crook of his arm. His finger slid down to the guard then the trigger. He took a deep breath and violently pressed the trigger. It coughed and his arms kicked up. He almost dropped the gun from shock. Relieved that there hadn’t been any actual bullets in there or he would have made a right mess. He moved the gun from his crook so that he was holding it in front of him with one hand around the barrel and the other the stock. He placed it down in front of the bin and stood up to see if anyone had noticed. He scanned the fence line but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Disappointed he lifted the lid and bent back down to retrieve the gun. It was heavy in his hands but not heavy enough for what he felt it should have been. It just felt like some metal and wood. Not a dangerous weapon that had spent years buried because it meant too much to destroy but not enough to cherish. He dropped it atop the other rubbish and it landed with a soft flop upon an old vacuum bag. Dust rose up and Tom coughed. Quickly dropping the lid back down.

As he left that afternoon Ms Stone pressed two jars of lemon butter into his hands in lieu of payment. “Thanks Ms Stone, Mum and Valarie love this stuff!”

“When life gives you sadness, make lemon butter.”

“I’m not sure that’s how that saying goes.” Tom tried to protest as Ms Stone propelled him out of her kitchen. He walked down the hall to the front door and stopped to look at a photograph he hadn’t noticed before. It must have always hung there because it was the first time he’s noticed it. The most striking part of the photo was a woman holding a shotgun to her chest. He felt a shiver creep up his spine. An identical shotgun to the one he’d just dug up from the lemon tree. He peered closer and thought he could see Ms Stone’s features in the women in the photo, though she was the same age as Ms Stone so it must have been her mother. He looked at the other faces and saw a cheerful man surrounded by five children. All of them beaming at the camera. The youngest child, a girl with curly hair had a similar face to Ms Stone and Tom guessed that that must be her in the photo posing with her family in front of the lemon tree. He looked up again at the mother’s face and swore even though she was smiling that he could see a great sadness in her eyes. He blinked and she looked happy again. The hallway although filled with the afternoon sun’s warmth suddenly felt cold and Tom turned on his heel and strode to the front door, roughly yanking it open. Outside the neighbouring houses cast long shadows on the street and children were still outside playing in the dying light. He shook himself and gently closed the door behind. He had a feeling that Ms Stone wouldn’t be needing his help next Spring.
WINNER
Michael Giacometti
*In the soft light of dawn*

FINALISTS
Susan Fielding
*Duck hunting on the Coolabah Swamp*

Johanna Bell
*I saw myself*

Kaye Aldenhoven
*Thai sweet and sour*

Lynelle Kendall
*Monarch*

IN THE SOFT LIGHT OF DAWN
Michael Giacometti

0. Artist statement

*What is art?*

*A confession: love and sacrifice.*

Andrei Tarkovsky

Impale those concave corners
like pious palms
to the wall
Unfurl the length of two lives
and — Cut!

My vision is as insistent as an erection

The art of creation is butchery
(I believe da Vinci said that
or was it Picasso?)

I excise some small part of me
(an earlobe, a fingertip)

Like a slurry of sourdough starter
that thing greeds feeds grows larger than a canvas
and metamorphoses into some something

that is sliced
and buttered
and devoured by others
(not me)
Step back here beside me
so you can appreciate the proportion and scale
(in one word overheard: Overwhelming!)
of this conjoined triptych in
wide screen Cinemascope

As frantic brushstrokes fill hours of canvas
and long shadows invert the vision of sunrise
I leap unwillingly
into the static reflection
whose Deuteronomy diminishes
my bold embedded-ness within the narrative
(A failing of yours, you would say)

Who am I in this?
The moral crusader of an inverted colonialism
(that’s how one critic summed me up)
By whose authority
does he interpose the archetypes and aesthetic of Renaissance Europe
upon the physical-spiritual landscape of the Dreaming?
(Another failing, no doubt)

But look at them
Look at these apparitions dressed by acrylic and graphite
just being themselves —
What can be gleaned from
hours of archival film that spills
from the killing table
like the guts of shot-gunned kangaroos
scavenged by scrawny camp dogs?

You can examine their wanting in knocked-out canines, go on

Divine their needing by the lint plucked from fragrant folds of hairy arse cheeks
What have you learned, eh?

This is just to say —
too much I know I have said too much
(but have I given enough?)
Possessed as I am by
(symbols and cheap illusions)
an everyday kind of existential torment
(allegory allusion metaphor)
to prove over and over I am worthy
of something
(but what?)
or someone
(but who?)
— Enough!

Now observe:
On this kite-hawk hill Apwelantje
(that we all knew as Snogger’s Lookout)
I light a fire for all lovers
and into the flames
I toss off this —
the song that once was ‘us’
1. *Song of the Crested Pigeon*

The grey-crested pigeons are coming to the clearing
On whistling wings they come into the pigeon clearing
The sharp-crested pigeons are cooing and chanting
In the crested clearing the pigeons are cooing and dancing
Bowing low and cooing loud my crest is a spear upright
Bowing low and cooing loud his crest is a stone-tipped spear
The feathered fan snaps open — snap! to stop the kungkas turning away
Bowing the feathers snap and flare to keep them from turning their back
Bowing his feathers flare and snap! His wing colours shine like mica
My red ochre skin glistens
His skin shines like fire — snap!
My feathers fan — snap! — as I bow
Bowing his fan encloses — snap!
I bow and bowing dig
She opens a hole with her stick
A hole is opened in the ground
The waters seep in — snap!
A hole is cleared
The water flows clear

2. *This oblivious kiss*

This oblivious kiss arouseth the dragon
My nature I slay

3. *To kiss or to kill*

Come on, Red. — *Back off!* No apology
can still this clay whirlpool. You double-cross
-ing snake: your white winged wagon, that 'big hole',
your hard rod. Our love dries like moss. I flee.
Your little death toss killed 'us'. Come rut me now you necrophile. Ptuh! Mourn my loss.
My palm, your cheek, mine—your fist. In the coal hearth flickered the whole of this elegy.
Oblivious to bliss, the precipice at dawn’s abyss swallowed our shadow.
The cowering memory hunts me still.
The focal point (see, I know art) is this:
our beastly nature knows but two modes—we desire to be kissed ... or to kill.
99. End Credits

Cast (in order of appearance from left to right)

Anthropologists  Dominic Gorey  Adrian Hayes
Lovers  Rod Moss  Elaine
Stallion  white Holden Commodore wagon
Dragon  campfire
Cinematography  Adrian Hayes
Directed by  Andrei Tarkovsky

Adapted from  Anthropology: being themselves (1994, 106 x 296 cm, acrylic and graphite on archival paper) by Rod Moss (1948–), collection of the artist, Alice Springs

&

Saint George and The Dragon (1555–58, 158 x 100 cm, oil on canvas) by Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–1594), National Gallery, London

MMXVII

The painting which inspired this poem can be viewed online at:
http://rodmoss.com/gallery/Anthropology_being_themselves.htm

DUCK HUNTING ON THE COOLABAH SWAMP

Susan Fielding

In days of rain, ducks came to nest in saltbush along the silty edge of Ankerre Ankerre.

Sometimes young fellas took one home for dinner. Or fished for shrimp, and frogs that tunneled out of their cool chambers.

Trees flushed green, and grasses put on seed. Billybuttons burst from every open place, in a yellow carpet of blossom.

Families picnicked by the Grandfather tree, and kids ran free in the drift of laughter and talk.
These were the days before
the road
that cut the swamp
in two,
that took a line of trees.
Each one country.
Each, a story.

The first sign of salt
is in the leaves.
They burn,
like someone’s lit a match
to the tips
and held it there.

And it travels up
through roots
and along the veins,
sapping life
like the north wind.

Some of the trees turned grey
and died,
their arms outstretched
to the sky.

When Council drained
the Coolabah swamp,
things turn to dust.
The ducks flew away,
and kids found another place
to play.
But when a big rain
backs up the drains,
billybuttons return
to places lovingly cleared,
and open their yellow frock
to the sky.

Life persists
in the sleeping seed,
in hard-packed clay
and the solid grey
of the long-dead trees.

Country breathes
under bitumen and drains,
and offers its story.

This is what remains.
I SAW MYSELF
Johanna Bell

I found a bee on the edge of the pool, all stung out, whirring its last whirr, round and round on one wing it went. I opened a packet of prawns on the wharf, their ink stained heads and frosty eyes staring out. I stopped the car just outside our place to look at a plover freshly hit. Its grey wings fluttered in the breeze and when a gust picked it up, it looked as if it might just take flight. I walked down near the yellow bridge and saw the diggers breaking earth, whole walls of it they took and in the clumps I saw the burrows that the bee-eaters dig, where they take their rainbow feathers in exchange for mud. I watched a news report from the Yellow Sea, shorebirds at least knee deep, all dead. Flown from New Zealand they had without food or sleep, en route, but when they went to land their mud had been turned into housing estates. I found a turtle dead on the mudflats, its neck splayd out. When I bent to get a better look, I saw a plastic bag had mistook. I saw a YouTube video of a man strangling a chimpanzee and a child shot up close to prove a point. I saw my own daughter’s face, wet on the back step, when I told her I was leaving this place.

THAI SWEET AND SOUR
Kaye Aldenhoven

A pair of spotted doves
cuddle in the curve
of sagging thatch roof

from neglected mango trees
drowned in creepers
koel calls insistently

Black collared starlings
collect kapok wool
to line their rain tree nest

Chinese pond herons
maintain agreed social distance
Little egret hassles

a skin and bone dog sleeps on the bridge
I step over her, a dog nobody loves
dying on the bridge

On the banks of the River Kwai
Quan Yin stretches her arms
Offers mercy to pilgrims, grievers

butterfly para-planes down
through newly burnt, drought-deciduated
kapok, kurrajong, bamboo
Ganesh plays flute by the pool
garlanded with concrete cobra
his concrete foot taps a silent song

case moth larvae
cling to rice leaves
at home I feed them to gliders

long, lithe, alert
ruddy otter jumps onto padi wall
slides into grass thicket

woman flings fertilizer
dry monsoon forest burns
Mountains? Not a hint in smoke

Sweet perfume, minute flowers
longan trees waste their bounty
on parked cars with closed windows

amidst white robed nuns raking, cleaning
washing, smoothing, arranging marigolds
an anomaly - a white clothed novice - a man

a skinny orange-wrapped monk
crosses the green padi
through mist that has erased mountains.

At Dairy Goat Café the kids bleat
Youngest maid brings baby bottles
The kids suck two each

Oldest maid sings as she makes my latte
the way I have trained her
brings yoghurt for my strawberries

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MONARCH
Lynelle Kendall

Pearl on a milkweed bed
...breakout...
Green translucence,
Wandering, grazing.
Tiger print tattoos,
A quinary of molts.

Silk adhesive,
Latched legs.
Spine traces a parabola across the void.
Dangle precarious,
Firm ledge above.

Exoskeleton encased,
Gold studded pod.
Coffin or portal?
A morphing stillness takes hold.

A lesson in inhalation.
Abdominal balloon
Splits the seam.

The final push to freedom,
Eclove, unfold, aviate,

Lay a pearl on a milkweed bed
I’m in the outback, miles from civilisation, under the scorching midday sun with three mildly intoxicated men I don’t know well, and four dead people I never knew at all.

Flies hum casually around my face. My skin is slick with sweat, my shirt sucks against my back and my feet slide in my thongs, forming a paste with the red dirt in the shape of double-pluggers. It’s 40 degrees, maybe more.

These men probably won’t kill me, but the heat might.

I don’t want to die in Larrimah.

A few weeks before I went out bush, I was at the Hilton for a wedding. Apart from my husband, I knew no one, not even the bride and groom.

We sat with my husband’s work colleagues, a glittery centrepiece creating an awkward tower to talk around. I gave up on cross-table conversation and turned to the bloke next to me, Ben.

"Are you originally from Darwin?"

"Nah. I grew up in a place 200-kays south of Katherine."

My eyebrows raised. "Where?"

"A place called Larrimah."

"Larrimah! I’m going there!"

He looked genuinely aghast.

"Why the fuck are you going there?"

I arrive on a Sunday afternoon as the sun is descending, the heat relenting. The landscape on either side of red-rimmed highway hasn’t offered much since Mataranka,
almost 80 kilometres ago. Low shrubs. Crusty grass. The occasional termite mound someone has dressed in a t-shirt.

Eventually some battered billboards tell me to turn right onto a dirt road. I pass a house and an enormous shed, and after 100 metres turn left. The old railway track is on one side, the back of the pub on the other. After another 100 metres I take another left and pull into a car space at the front of the Larrimah Hotel. I've already completed a tour of the whole town.

The smell of frangipanis and bougainvillea sweeten the air, the blooms as bright as the pub which has adopted the Pink Panther as a mascot. On my way into the blushing building I pass a life-sized homemade pink panther in a gyrocopter, and budget sculpture of another one lounging beside an enormous Darwin Stubby. Inside, a pair of large stuffed pink panthers ride a triple tandem bike amid rusty ice-skates, crusty saddles and dusty kettles.

The man at the bar looks up and points me to the drinks fridge, the only reason people stop here.

"Actually, I'm staying."

"Just the night?"

"For two weeks?" The upward inflection reveals we are both confused by this scenario.

He leafs through a book and finds my name, takes me to room 9. Andrew's room.

Larrimah is where author and journalist Andrew McMillan came to write. In the spacious room at the end of the pink block, he'd bash out books, short stories and essays on one of his collection of typewriters. Apparently when one of them broke, he'd simply throw it on the floor and pick up the next one in line for duty.

Andrew has brought me here on a two-week writing retreat. At first it seems like an odd location, but its appeal soon becomes clear: there is nothing much to do here except write. But that's not to say there's nothing going on.

I run a shuttle transferring all my things from my car to the room (except for a yoga mat, which melts in the backseat overnight), then wander back to the bar. Despite being the only store in an 80-kilometre radius, there isn't much on offer. Two drinks fridges, an ice cream freezer, a stand with seven packets of chips, a rack of Pink Panther shirts and one shelf of canned goods. Of the 19 tins, 13 of them contain asparagus.

"Is Barry around?" I ask the guy at the bar.

"He's up the back with the animals."

"Pull ya head in ya mug!"

Barry wipes the seeds stuck to his palms on his khaki shirt and shorts as he emerges from an aviary. A large green parrot flaps and squawks.

"Does he say anything else?" I ask.

"Yeah, he'll call you a dickhead."

I wander around the maze of cages – more than 500 birds, 20 squirrel gliders, a dozen reptiles, three crocs, two emus and a handful of wallabies all call Larrimah home, meaning domesticated animals outnumber humans about 50 to 1.

A little later, over a beer, Barry tells me he's been in Larrimah for two decades. Twelve years ago he and his late partner Anne rescued the pub from ruin after the previous owner gave up on it. Now it's on the market.

"I'm crook," he explains.

But Barry is in his 70s and I get the sense he doesn't really want to sell. He wants to stay here till the end, overseeing the pub and his beloved animals, living in his donga out the back, where the emus peek through his windows and he can hear the chatter of his birds.

He already has Karen and Mark, the guy from the bar. The couple, aged in their 40s, planned on staying in Larrimah overnight, but Barry persuaded them to stick around and run the joint for him. That was 18 months ago. They're talking about moving on.

We chat about Andrew. Over years of self-imposed writing retreats in Larrimah, he and Barry became mates. Barry enjoyed his company over a drink at night and feels terrible he hasn't yet been able to take Andrew's tombstone out to the little bush cemetery where he's buried. Perhaps I can give him a hand, he suggests.

We discuss the relics in the pub. On a shelf above my head is a large iron lump.
Barry tells me it’s what they used in the war to see their targets from a plane. He gets it down for closer inspection. It’s ridiculously heavy. When he heaves it back up there, I spend the rest of the evening worrying it will fall and clonk me in the skull.

“I met someone who grew up here,” I tell Barry. “Ben.”

Barry pauses, breaks eye contact. “Oh yeah. Ben.”

“I said I’d visit his grandparents while I’m here. Where do they live?”

Barry nods his head at a high-set house bordered by a burst of frangipani trees across the red rubble that passes for a main street. He shifts in his seat, asks how I know Ben, then changes the subject.

Everyone seems friendly, but a lot of things about this town put me on edge: signs of imminent death and decay are all around. This place and its people are falling apart.

The next day Karen reveals no one likes “that mob over the road”. They also don’t like the lady who runs the teahouse up the road, or the hermit down the road who makes unwarranted complaints to the local council.

I am surprised to hear of tumult. This is the kind of place where you might need your neighbours. Where you might need the shop in a late-night asparagus emergency. Or you might just need the company. There isn’t any mobile phone reception here since they replaced the 3G phone tower at Mataranka with 4G last year.

There is, however, wi-fi in the bar, and Karen tells me Andrew has written about Larrimah. Curious, I go online and find the article from 2006. It reads like fiction: an outback town of 20 people; two rival progress associations; a family set on sabotage; feuds over stolen recipes for homemade buffalo pie; and a pink pub that seemed to be both the centre of controversy and the only saving grace in this desolate furnace. Back then, he predicted civil war; a decade later that battle has come and gone, though the stubborn hostility endures and mild aftershocks still erupt from time to time.

Since Andrew’s article, Larrimah has continued its slow slide into nothing. The population has declined by almost half. With them, businesses have evaporated – there is no more petrol station, second caravan park or roadhouse. But mostly the town has stood still, paralysed in the dry heat. The residents despise the same neighbours they despised a decade ago. Some have added a few more to their blacklists.

It wasn’t always like this. The town experienced brief booms during the construction of the overland telegraph and the transcontinental railway, and as a staging camp for the Army during World War II. But the railway was never completed and once the war wrapped up, the soldiers disappeared, taking the town’s prosperity with them. Now all that’s left is the pink pub, a handful of houses, a bunch of rusty war relics and 11 people who mostly hate each other.

Ben’s grandparents are right in the middle of it. When Barry goes to Katherine for a day, I stink over the road to meet them. Karl and Bobbie’s overweight little dog sits in a plastic half-shell paddling pool while we have a cup of tea in the shade of the carport.

“Woke up the other night with a death adder in my bed,” Karl tells me. “I felt him crawling on my chest and flung him across the room.”

Bobbie had been away at the time visiting her new great-grandson in Victoria. It took a five-hour drive to Darwin, four-and-a-half hours on a plane, then a few more hours in the car to get there. It wasn’t so long ago their children and grandchildren also called Larrimah home. Andrew wrote that Bobbie’s daughter Di ran the pub into the ground, then did the same with the roadhouse. In 2006 she still ran the petrol station and Green Park caravan park, but both have since burned down, their gutted remains fuelling gossip that Di struck the match herself before she cleared out. An insurance job.

But things had turned sour in Larrimah before the 2009 fire. Most of the town was already furious with Di for shutting the hotel. Then, according to Andrew’s article, Karl, Bobbie and their family were involved in a hostile take-over of the Larrimah Progress Association. The town had just established a mini train station and a cable car to take punters on little trips down the track to Birdum, paying homage to the area’s rich rail history. But the Association put a stop to it. The platform is now a crumbling, cement stage, the pots are empty and the rusty cable car is parked further up the track.

When the rail idea fell over, the battle lines were drawn. Karl and Bobbie became the most disliked people in town. But recently, a new contender has emerged: Fran. The elderly lady runs the teahouse in the first home I passed when I turned off the highway into Larrimah.

For years the novelty of a buffalo pie and a hot cuppa in the middle of nowhere had caused travellers to break. Her homemade Devonshire tea and pleasant eccentricity
was once whispered about fondly in grey nomad circles, but Fran is now credited with “giving the town a bad name”.

“Don’t even think about going in,” writes Gormiekid from Davenport on TripAdvisor. The site is filled with reviews from travellers complaining about overpriced, stale food and Fran’s lack of manners. Even the good reviews mention this. Most people in town refer to her as “The Bush Pig”. She’s even gone to war with her long-time partner, Bill. They split up a while back, and he now lives in a caravan 50 metres from his old place, in the camp ground attached to the pub. A dispute over the house is due in court soon.

Fran also tried to sue Paddy, a smiley, moustachioed fellow who lives on the other side of the highway with his dog Rover. She claims Paddy poisoned her plants. The case goes to court while I’m here, and Paddy wins. Everyone hopes Bill is as successful; that he will get his house back and The Bush Pig will have to leave town.

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One night, Mark and Karen go to Darwin, so dinner is a ‘Barry special’, an unusual combination of silverside, pasta, sausages and what is supposed to be cabbage but I suspect may be cooked lettuce. It’s actually delicious.

Every night at the pub is the same. Bill ambles in from his caravan and melts into a bar stool beside Barry, and together they drink beer and watch ABC in silence. It starts with the news, but they’ll keep watching whatever comes on the national broadcaster after that. At 7.30 the Greyhound bus headed south pauses outside the pub. No one ever gets on or off. But there are an odd collection of road-weary tourists who stop in for a night or two, trying to break up the nothingness through the guts of the country.

There are a few young fellas from a road construction crew here the first few nights, then Dave, an old drover, comes to stay. He knows Barry from years ago but he’s not here for sentimental reasons. His car’s broken down and he’s waiting for a part from Katherine. He’s supposed to be meeting a mate from Kunnunurra to go looking for treasure out on Gorrie Airfield. One of the busiest runways in the North during World War II, Gorrie is now just a sign on the highway pointing to a stretch of red dust. Dave’s heard American troops buried motorbikes in bunkers out there at the end of the war.

“They’d be worth a fortune now,” he says.

A bloke from central Australia saunters over one night after seeing me take a million snaps of a brilliant sunset overwhelming the bush. “Like sunsets do ya?” he asks. Sure. Who doesn’t? “I’ve got some good ones on here.” He hands me his camera and makes me scroll through a year’s worth of family photographs to get to an outback sunset. I pause on a picture of some boggy grass. “Crop circles,” he says. “Heaps of ’em out there.”

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Karen and I stand in the courtyard, eyes pointed up. The big African mahogany at the pub’s core is dripping with stinking, screeching, shitting bats. There are hundreds of them. They weren’t here yesterday, they flew in overnight and took up residence.

Mark is firing an air-horn at them, the sky above flaps to life as hundreds of them escape. “Fly my pretties!” he yells.

The screeching mob take off over the road to Karl and Bobbie’s place. A little while later we hear Karl firing a slug gun, they come swarming back. Barry shakes a box of leaves at the foot of the tree and they depart again. Karl sounds a loud siren and back they come. Barry blasts them with water. The war is back on.

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At night I join everyone in the bar for dinner and the news. Sometimes I stick around for whatever the ABC offers next. One evening, Barry and I watch Grand Designs while we eat curried sausages.

“The owners of this grand clifftop mansion are using a bespoke design of glass and steel to give the renovation a sleek, futuristic look,” the host says.

I look up at the network of spider webs overhead. A frog leaps on to a dusty ledge near the television. Pink paint peels from the wall behind it.

“Just like here, hey Barry?” I say.

“Pretty much exactly,” he replies.

***

My two weeks are almost up. Barry takes me to Andrew’s grave. We’re joined by Drover Dave and Paddy, who have been drinking at the bar. Paddy was a mate of Andrew’s but Dave’s just a ring-in. He’s got even less stake in this than me.

Barry drives confidently through the scrubby bush along a bumpy track, the two
blokes ducking overhanging branches from the ute’s tray. We move through a gate and onto a station, a fencepost painted green is the sign to turn into the trees. A little way in is a small cluster of graves: the eternal home of a telegraph worker who died in 1899 and two old station owners. The unmarked tiles are Andrew’s.

We heave the tombstone onto the grave, mix glue and assemble. Glen Campbell provides a soundtrack through the tinny car speakers. The country singer’s rendition of Amazing Grace comes on and Barry pauses.

“They played this at Andrew’s funeral,” he says. “What a day that was. We took him down to the bridge on the cable car, there were bagpipers, and all his mates who came down from Darwin chucked his typewriters in on top of the coffin and buried them with him.”

When the job is complete, Paddy and Barry wipe off the excess glue and shine up the monument.

“Here we are Andrew, give ya head a wash,” Paddy says.

“Yeah mate, clean yourself up, would you?” Barry chimes in.

Andrew didn’t die here. He didn’t even live here. But he loved here and chose to be buried here.

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As I gather speed heading north on the highway, my time in Larrimah up, I still can’t quite see what Andrew saw in the place. In my rear-vision mirror, all I see is an assembly of retirees living amid the rubble of a place in its final death throes. No one is prepared to wave the white flag and live out their final days in peace, but leaving would be admitting defeat.

I’m grateful to Andrew for bringing me here - Larrimah is the perfect place for a writer wanting to get words on a page. Perhaps I’ll even come here again. But as the sun sets on this collection of outback weirdness and I look back at this town on its last legs, I can’t say how much longer Larrimah will hold on, and I’m not sure who will be left to mourn it when it’s gone.

MY CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD FIDLER

James Murray

When I think of Richard Fidler, I think of Eric Idle in that ‘nudge nudge wink wink say no more’ Monty Python skit. In the end, the other guy says, ‘what exactly are you saying?’

‘Well, you’ve had sexual relations with a woman?’

‘Yes.’

There’s a pause, then Eric Idle says, ‘what’s it like?’

I don’t know how it came about; it’s still a mystery to me, ten years later. His producer rang me out of the blue, and asked me to come on the show, and we set a date later in the month. It was for an hour, she told me.

‘Wow!’ I said.

‘Throughout Queensland and New South Wales.’

‘Wow!’

I’d not heard of Richard Fidler − he wasn’t on Radio National then, and all I listen to is RN, and, anyway, I lived in the NT − so I sought him out on the ABC website. That day, he had talked to the playwright David Williamson. In the days before, he charmed other household names. I couldn’t understand why he’d want to talk to me. ‘We’ve read your book and we love it,’ his producer had said, as if that was explanation enough. I assume they do better vetting nowadays.

I was completely unprepared for the interview. I reasoned thus: I have no idea what questions he will ask, so I can’t possibly prepare for them. I figured I would stay relaxed, and answer as clearly and as simply as I could, like I was being questioned by a cop.

I wasn’t helped by the producer ringing me the day before our engagement. ‘Don’t mention the book,’ she told me.
'What?'

'Don’t mention the book.'

'But you’re talking to me about my book.'

'No, no. We’re going to talk to you about bushwalking.'

'Bushwalking? But…' and I explained. In my book, I go on a bushwalk, and from there I have my say to the reader. The bushwalking bits take up only a small fraction of the word count, and are used as brief interludes between the main action, the main thesis.

'Yes, but that’s what we’re interested in.'

I didn’t get it, and said so, in various ways over several minutes, and she didn’t say anything that made things clearer for me – perhaps she hadn’t realised anyone could be so thick. But she took from me my one assumption (they wanted to talk to me about my book), like being thrown from a plane.

For some reason, I imagined him in his sixties, with silver hair and moustache, so I was surprised when Richard Fidler came up and introduced himself, dark-haired and youthful. He led me into his studio and got me into a corner, all the while talking to me about my book. Obviously, he’d read it, and he liked it, and he understood it, getting (I felt) to the nub of it, like no one else has. He had his questions on two sheets of paper, double-sided, and he told me, ‘I’m going to ask you about…’ and ran through the list. I sat and nodded. It was all stuff from the book, of course.

Then the News was over, and he introduced me. His first question was How do you feel when you’re bushwalking?

I was stunned. I didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then said, ‘aaaah.’ I was thinking, ‘what’s he talking about? Does he mean, I feel with my feet? I feel with my five senses? I feel the weight of my pack? Does he want me to talk about nerve receptors and electrical charges?’

He tried to help. Carefree? he said.

‘Oh,’ I thought, ‘he’s talking about how I feel emotionally, when I’m bushwalking. Okay.’ And I said, ‘…um…ah…carefree?… um…’

Richard Fidler showed me his teeth. I’d just met him, and didn’t know how he normally smiled, but I felt this broad smile might have started as a message for me to lighten up, but morphed over the seconds into a grimace of great horror and alarm.

‘…Ah…’ I said.

No one had ever said to me how do you feel when you’re bushwalking? Not in a million years could I have guessed he would spring such a thing on me. I never talked about bushwalking. No one asked me about it. If I was away for a while, and someone said, ‘where’ve you been?’ I might say, ‘bushwalking,’ and people don’t know what that is, and don’t know what question to ask, even if they were in the mood for chit-chat. In my book, I breeze through the bushwalking bits, before the reader loses interest. So, how do I feel? And I went to my memories of bushwalking, and tried to remember how I was feeling, and then think of good words that would go with that feeling.

Carefree is not the right word for it. I see that now. I wouldn’t have thought of it unless Richard Fidler suggested it to me, and I was his guest and it would have been rude not to mull it over for a while. ‘Um… that’s…’ I managed.

Someone had to take charge. Back from the brink, back from the valley of death, he asked his second question.

I could listen to it, of course. I listened to it a couple of times in the days afterwards, ten years ago. It was on the website within hours. It’s still there – once a year I google the title of my book, and the first entry is always my Conversation with Richard Fidler. I could listen to it again. It would be excellent research for this story, you would think. But I don’t want to listen to it, ever again. It’s awful. As it is, I’ve played it out in my head a thousand times, and each time is the same.

How do you feel when you’re bushwalking? he says, and I am caught in the headlights.

When, a few years ago, Radio National started to put Conversations on after the midnight news, I was in trouble. If I fell asleep during Philip Adams, I might wake up to Richard Fidler, and be sent back months in my recovery. I had to change over to News Radio, and get the excellent BBC World Service, so that was okay, but I missed the Planet, and I hated the fear, hated the thought of hearing Richard Fidler, hated remembering to change the station because of him. It’s only this year, 2017, with Conversations on at three in the afternoon (instead of the excellent Inside Sleeve) and eleven at night (instead of the excellent Planet), and my current radio in my current location not picking up News Radio, and my rehabilitation having made fits-and-starts progress over ten years, that I’ve faced my demons head on, and have listened to his show, in bits, before I turn him off. And I must say, from what I hear, he does an excellent job.

What he wanted with his How do you feel when you’re bushwalking? was for me to talk
about bushwalking for five minutes without him getting a word in. He wanted me to be entertaining, in that Entertainment/Show Biz way. If I wasn’t such a lamb, such a naïve-to-the-point-of-autism hermit from the Outback, always hating all media but tolerating Radio National, if I had some friends and family who wanted me to do well and had given me some advice, I might have realised that earlier, maybe even before I went on.

Here’s a scenario: I see what a media coup it is, and I hire a team of experts (acting coaches, media professionals, speech writers) and I train ten hours a day for the fortnight. We make up fifteen-second, thirty-second, one-minute and two-minute ‘grabs’ on twenty-five different subjects, polish them, put them through the focus groups, and I practice pivoting to them, regardless of what they ask me. We record one-hour sessions with a few pretend Richard Fidlers, we listen to the playback, we put it through the focus groups, we work on my delivery. Every answer is a neat eloquent construction, abounding with wit and wisdom, and each one paints a beautiful picture or tells a gripping story.

Because it was consensual – that is, they asked me to come in and I said ‘yes’ – the ABC have the legal right to put the entire train-wreck on the internet. Because the entire train-wreck is on the internet, my writing career crashed on the first leg. My publisher flew me to Melbourne a few weeks after my Conversation, and put me up in a swanky apartment for three days, telling all media outlets I was available. In total, I got two interviews, both radio, both for a few minutes, both with people who hadn’t read my book. John Faine said nothing that had anything to do with me or my book, and I guess he mistook me for someone else. After a minute into my time with Neil Mitchell, I looked onto the screen he was looking at, and all his questions related to the blurb on the back cover. The book sold zilch; I’ve failed to get my next two books published, and I reckon any prospective publisher or Industry Insider would google me, then decide I don’t have the legal right to put the entire train-wreck on the internet. Because the entire back cover was my blood pulsing in my ears, so I tried to listen between the pulses, but I couldn’t hear anything, and I thought, ‘if I slow my heart rate down, there’ll be longer gaps in my blood pulsing in my ears.’

I remember fragments. There was a scene near the end, where he said What do you hear when you’re bushwalking?

‘Well, it depends on where I am,’ I said. He groaned – I think you can hear the groan on the recording – then he rolled his eyes upwards, and while I was saying, ‘I might be camped by water, by a waterfall, say, and all I’ll hear is the waterfall,’ he was rolling his head anti-clockwise, showing only the eye-whites. When his head had done the full rotation, he lifted his two sheets of questions and frantically turned them back and forth, searching for something. Next thing I know, he was saying my name, and ‘thanks very much.’
between the deafening pulses of blood, and maybe I could pick out the deep bass of road-trains rumbling across the vast stillness,” and I pushed my awareness deep into the lengthening spaces...’ And my talking would get slower and slower, with longer and longer pauses between phrases, between words...

But I was dealing with a professional, with the standard seven-second shot clock, and instant forfeiture for beginning an answer with a qualification, such as ‘it depends.’ People expect the rules to be followed.

Richard Fidler talked to me about my book as I sat and faced him from the chair he put me in. ‘You take the reader on a journey,’ he said. ‘It’s a wild, deep trip. I felt layers of myself being stripped away, and in the end, I faced the Void.’ When he said Void he widened his eyes. I just sat and nodded. ‘And that’s what it’s all about,’ he said, ‘your book. The Void.’ I knew exactly what he meant. ‘This is promising,’ I thought. But then he didn’t go near such stuff on air.

Richard Fidler was a rabbit in the headlights, his entire known world gone, and a great emptiness, a great void upon him, in the great and unimaginably horrible dead air being broadcast live throughout Queensland and New South Wales, interrupted occasionally with me saying, ‘...aah...’ He thought, ‘Oh, God! He’s thinking about my question!’ No one had ever treated him like that before. Everyone always had a neat summation. And the great universe beyond human construction was opening out for him.

I don’t follow the NFL, but I’ve heard of Tom Brady, the legendary quarterback, who orchestrated a miraculous come-from-behind to win the most recent Super Bowl. I don’t know what Tom Brady looks like, but I imagine he looks like Richard Fidler, the Richard Fidler I know, dark-haired and youthful, who faced the void but took control, asked all his questions and got me out the door and scurrying down the street, well before half-time. He might say, modestly, ‘all my training kicked in.’

‘What’s it like, bushwalking?’ he was asking me. I believe he was genuinely interested. I reckon he had no idea at all. And it’s a very good question. I’m sorry I couldn’t help him with it.

RE-READING THE COUNTRY
– A SETTLER GENEALOGY OF PLACE
Kate Leah Rendell

‘Oh’ –

‘Hello’

‘Hello,’ we say –

‘Where you come from?’ –

Paddy Roe, Reading the Country

‘Isn’t it a very basic and important thing to know, from someone’s tracks, where they have come from and which way they are going?’

Stephen Muecke, Reading the Country

Last year my father and I made a trip to the farmlands adjacent to the Murray River in north-central Victoria. Traveling through the communities of Barmah, Picola and Nathalia, we mapped our historical tracks of ‘settlement’ and ‘selection’. It was simultaneously a journey of return and first encounters – an attempt to retrace our genealogy of place, and for me at least, to interrogate the implications of its history. Central to this pursuit is the late Nyigina Elder Paddy Roe’s evocation: ‘You people try and dig little bit more deep — you bin digging only white soil — try and find the black soil inside’. On this journey I take Roe’s appeal not as an invitation to simply piggyback onto Aboriginal readings of country, but rather, for Settler Australians to dig more deeply and interrogate more fully our own narratives of place in relation to Aboriginal sovereignty. It is an interrogation that requires us to question our comfortable narratives of arrival, settlement and homemaking, which continue to evade the colonial implications of our presence.
I embark on this journey with my father, Rob. Not only most connected to the rural tracks I seek to follow, he is also a knowledgeable companion – keen to share this story with me. A fourth generation Anglo-Celtic Australian, my father grew up on a mixed sunflower/sheep/wheat irrigation farm in ‘Baulkamaugh North’ in the Murray-Goulburn region and honed this experience into a long and successful career in agricultural consulting. Somewhat of an expert on all things irrigation, salinity and agriculture, Rob jumped at the opportunity to show me around the farmlands of our ancestors, to offer his reading of this country.

Following the tracks of the paternal line we drive first to ‘Longfield Farm’ – a parcel of land at the edge of the Barmah Forest on the Victorian side of the Murray River. Situated between Picola, Yielima and Yalca South on Yorta Yorta country, ‘Longfield’ is the original Rendell ‘selection’ – ‘taken up’ in 1876. Although not the farm my father and grandfather grew up on, ‘Longfield’ is still farmed by a Rendell and thus continues to mark and the name the Rendell history of place. We are greeted at ‘Longfield’ by a distant third cousin of mine, who is most obliging of our request to see the farm, if not a little reticent (no doubt wondering what exactly it was this young woman from the city wanted to know). We are shown the paddocks, the old dairy, remnants of the first buildings, and the original gate declaring this property: ‘Longfield’.

While walking across the one of the paddocks, the Rendell farmer reflects his desire to see the land as it had been: ‘wouldn’t you love to see it before it was cleared’. We had just been talking of the effort required to clear the land ‘all by hand’, and I got the sense that his comment did not express a desire to bear witness to Yorta Yorta land management practices, or register the full extent of dispossession enacted in our family’s clearing – but rather expressed a yearning to relive the struggle, to revisit the land management practices, or register the full extent of dispossession enacted in our family’s clearing. Yet I could not help but look over at the protected forest of Barmah and think of what was felled – the canoe trees, hunting grounds and gathering places that once proliferated on this property; the other narratives worthy of pride and wonder in this land.

This was the first journey I had ever made to the original Rendell farm. Despite playing a significant part in my genealogy of place, I had never considered its story relevant to my contemporary urban identity and certainly hadn’t sought out the history of its ‘selection’. This kind of genealogical ahistoricism is a powerful phenomenon within Settler Australia, particularly for young third, fourth and fifth generation white Settlers. It’s an ahistoricism that became particularly evident to me within Indigenous Studies tutorials at the University of Melbourne where in the interests of working towards safe and open discussion I would ask students to introduce themselves with reference to their identity and positionality. White Settler Australians struggle with this request to position themselves: “I am Australian,” we say or “I suppose I am Anglo-Saxon” – with little reference to specific heritage or place. What is clear is that very few white Settlers could answer the genealogical questioning that our nation-state demands with any identification of Aboriginality. We could not map the familial lines. We are not asked to. This is not a passive unknowing, it is a complacency made possible by the imperatives of colonialism and the necessity to forge new ‘Australian’ identities. Re-reading country in relation to Aboriginal dispossession therefore means being prepared to inhabit the colonial implications of your presence and the histories your lineage carries. It includes a responsibility to track these histories and unravel the mythologies that surround them.

For me, it is about coming to terms with my own Settler genealogy of place as an ongoing enactment of usurpation. In my case it is a remarkably uniform heritage: all sixteen of my great-great-grandparents arrived from England, Scotland and Ireland around the 1850s and all eight families ‘took up’, ‘acquired’, ‘selected’ properties across Victoria during the land grab made possible by the Land Act of 1869. This was the Act that divvied out the last remaining uncleared land across Victoria. Divided into 320 acre ‘allotments’, unprecedented tracts of land became suddenly available for public sale. With the only requirement of purchase being that all ‘selections’ be fenced and cleared within two years of possession, ‘selectors’ set to work with little regard for Aboriginal occupation. At £1 an acre, these allotments presented to my ancestors, many of whom had been poor tenant farmers in England, a golden ticket of property ownership. In particular for Andom Rendell, a convict transported for arson and my first ancestor in Australia, the Land Act presented an unimaginable opportunity for reinvention. For Aboriginal people across Victoria, however, the Land Act and subsequent ‘selections’ represented a method of terrible and irrevocable dispossession, as people were forced off the last remaining pockets of uncleared country into missions and reserves.

To uncover our own role in this history of ‘selection’ and dispossession, my father and I trace our familial lines. We draw directly onto a map of Victoria - encircling properties in Yorta Yorta, DjaDjaWurrung and Taungerang country, we track my ancestors’ possession of land in Yielima, Waai, Carisbrook and Gerang Gerung. My father seems to genuinely enjoy this tracing – mapping the generations of farming that
have shaped him. It is the similarity, the consistency, of the farming story – the agrarian lineage – that animates him. It is the very same aspect of the story that unsettles me.

It is not an easy thing to interrogate our family’s history in this way. Walking the paddocks of ‘Longfield’ felt awkward, even conspiratorial. As did asking questions of my family – querying their knowledge of Aboriginal sovereignty and their sense of complicity in dispossession. When I think of those in my extended family who have not read or heard me speak of this project, it still does.

Tracking our genealogy of place in this way is an interrogation of history and identity that has implications for both my father and I, but more explicitly for him. My questions are a direct challenge to his proud farming background. Reflecting an identity woven into place and drawn from a real affinity to the land, Rob describes it in an email:

Despite a totally different concept [to Aboriginal people] I certainly had an affinity with the country, the moon at nights while walking around the paddocks irrigating - some of the trees particularly the yellow box, the sheoaks and the Murray pine… I think the summer nights were the best… the experience of seasons and the dust and the wet and the spring.

Yet, he stalls when I suggest that his own affinity to the land is completely reliant on the erasure of Aboriginal presence, history and sovereignty. I have put him on the spot. Who am I to criticise? As Stephen Muecke writes in Reading the Country, ‘we are all spinners of texts’ – and as my father would say, I too am in this ‘up to my neck’. Nevertheless, my father considers my questions, grapples with the implications.

In one email, sent after reading an early draft of this piece, my father writes: ‘Couldn’t sleep for thinking of the story… asking the question why does the settler story totally exclude the Indigenous history.’ I want to explain to him that our micro-history does not exist in isolation; that our narrative relates to the wider colonial project. I want to say that this love of the land is precisely why it’s so difficult for many Settler Australians to acknowledge Aboriginal dispossession. And I do. But it seems such a personal attack.

So we start at ‘Longfield Farm’ – because this farm, as the first Rendell property, represents the strongest symbol in our familial lines of possession. We seek out the narratives of this place and look for the gaps, the silences and the erasures. I am lucky that my father joins me.

Profiled in the local newspaper, the Nathalia Herald, in 1887 - Andom and Walter’s ‘selection’ of ‘Longfield’ was clearly a successful one: ‘It is not often that a farm so far out is so far advanced.’ The profile presents the ‘well-ordered’ state of the farm and emphasises the strong work ethic of the Rendell farmers:

The place gives one the impression of well-ordered plenty and content; the plenty was not conducive to sloth, as the tidiness of the place showed; nor the content to idleness, for the hum of the winnower and the thresher was heard on the land as we arrived.

Poetic references to toil, cultivation and productivity abound in the description. It is a depiction of farming that reinforces the Lockean principle of production as value – a philosophy so central to the Western-imperial concept of property ownership and the colonising project in Australia. In many ways I had anticipated this, yet I had also assumed that this representation of agricultural ‘advancement’ would rely on the total silencing of Yorta Yorta history. It was surprising therefore to read references to Aboriginal presence in the profile of ‘Longfield Farm’ in 1887:

Half a mile across the road Mr Rendell has another property boarding the inundation of the Murray. On this which is ringbarked, but not yet cleared, some dairy cattle are kept. Kangaroos are not rare, and the trees bear many traces of the black fellows, where they have notched the trunk to climb the trees, and here and there openings have been cut in the trunks.

I text my father to ask what tools exactly Andom and Walter would have used to clear the new paddocks, now part of an expanding Rendell property domain – how was it done? The text comes back abrupt and matter of fact: ‘Axe to ringbark the tree to kill them – then cross cut saw with two people to drop the tree – then burn the stumps and wood’. It seemed so final; so violent. I think of the trees slowly dying then so wastefully burnt on site. I think of ‘the many traces of the blackfellows’ that were felled in the process. I think of ‘the many traces of the blackfellows’ that were felled in the process. I think of the research conducted by Yorta Yorta Elder Wayne Atkinson – which records that the Yorta Yorta population was reduced by 85% in the first generation of white contact and by 1863 there were only 365 survivors.

In tracing the history of ‘Longfield Farm’, my research reveals that the farm is within the country of the Bangerang clan of the Yorta Yorta people. When I mention this to my father, he responds that he knew of Bangerang – in fact his high-school magazine was called that. There is a cruel irony in the recognition – to have the name...
but no connection with the people. In 1876, around the time of Rendell possession of ‘Longfield’ surviving Bangerang people would have been mostly living in camps on the fringes of pastoral stations, supporting themselves by hunting and fishing in the Barmah Forest. Self-subsistence was supplemented by contact with the local stations, missions and reserves.

One such mission was ‘Maloga’, established as a school and mission station near Echuca in 1874 by Daniel Matthews. Residence at the Maloga in the early years was intermittent. Most of those at Maloga in the early days moved between the mission, a camp at Moira Station and camps around the Moira Lakes and Barmah Forest. Yorta Yorta Native Title research records, however, that the numbers at the mission ‘increased steadily during 1877’ and that peaked ‘in 1886.’ I am struck by the very direct correlation between the population increase at Maloga Mission in 1877 and the establishment of ‘Longfield Farm’ in 1876. Such effects seem so obvious now, given the widespread dispossession enacted by the Victorian Land Act selections – but stories of Maloga Mission and the Yorta Yorta people forced off their land into residence there, were completely absent from my family’s founding narratives. Similarly the salient correlation between the Victorian Aborigines Protection Act of 1869 (which gave the government discretionary power to relocate Aboriginal people and remove children) and the Land Act also of 1869 – are palpably omitted from our stories of successful ‘settlement’.

On the final leg of our journey my father and I make a stop at the Nathalia Cemetery to visit the graves of Andom and Walter, as well as other family members buried there. It is here on Walter’s grave in the Rendell family plot we find a plaque which reads:

The descendants of Walter Rendell and Margaret Flett
commemorate the settling of this land
5th June 1876
Lot 54 “LONGFIELD”
5th June 2000

My immediate family had not been present at this ‘commemoration’, in that auspicious millennial year. My father could not remember why. Yet he did not seem adverse to the sentiment of the event. In fact he seemed disappointed we had not made it. Standing in the cemetery we discussed how the feat of our ancestors is one worthy of commemorating – that it is their journey across the seas, their toil on the land that we continue to benefit from. Yet I asked, and to continue to ask, what does it mean if this is the only version of the story we tell ourselves? Our story ‘of settling this land’ is a comfortable narrative in our family, it does not challenge our Settler ‘innocence’ nor does it speak to the profound dispossession enacted throughout our genealogy of place. If we seek to re-read the country in relation to Aboriginal sovereignty and dispossession, our story is far more complex.

In contrast to our story of ‘settling this land’, Ina Yillian is the Yorta Yorta creation story of Dungala [the Murray River] which tells of Biami the Creator Spirit, Gane the Rainbow Serpent and the old woman Gumuk Winga – and her weary journey to find yams with her digging stick. It is a story in which Gane, following Gumuk Winga through country, creates deep tracks as his body moves across the land pushing the earth into hills and valleys – culminating in the creation of the river:

Then Biami called out in a loud voice and thunder cracked as lightening flashed across the sky and rain fell... Then the rain stopped and the mist cleared and the river Dungala was formed.

Published in the powerful collection Nyernila – Listen Continuously: Aboriginal Creation Stories of Victoria, this story is inscribed in Yorta Yorta language (spoken by Yorta Yorta clans including Bangerang) and is translated into English by Djetcha Zeta Thompson. This story of Dungala, as the tracks of Gane engraved from time immemorial, expresses a sovereignty far stronger and infinitely deeper than the fresh tracks of my own family’s ‘settlement’. Both tracks can be read in the country – but it takes openness and humility to be able to read those deeper tracks from time immemorial – one has to a dig little bit more deep and to ‘try and find the black soil inside’.

My father’s own reading of country has altered in the process of this project – in a recent chapter he authored for the collection Decision-Making in Water Resources Policy, Planning and Management – The Australian Experience he writes: ‘the history of agriculture and irrigation in northern Victoria is a story of farmers overcoming hardship and seizing opportunities. However, this was only possible at the expense of the indigenous Aboriginal inhabitants’. He acknowledges that his version tells the: ‘post ‘selector’ evolution of irrigation, because in reality, the Aboriginal peoples have been denied their rightful part.’ It is an unusual deviation, a side step from the ‘objectivity’ demanded in his line of work. I am moved by the inclusion of these acknowledgements and I am glad that he’s come with me on this journey.
Re-reading our genealogy of place in relation to Aboriginal sovereignty is a project that my family are only just beginning, yet there is profound transformative potential in such re-readings – as my ninety-five year old grandfather’s recent response to this essay suggests:

Kate, it is a very challenging article. Perhaps for the first time in my life I have been challenged as never before. I certainly was never made aware that we were living at the expense of a people who had lived where we were now living. And, without even a whisper that we were (there’s a word I want to use --- usurper and I don’t even know to spell it.) I was blissfully unaware and this is a wake up call.

John Rendell

References:


(pp.4-5) “Longfield” in the Parish of Yeilima, the Property of Mr. Andom Rendell’ Nathalia Herald, 10 February 1887.

(p.6) Federal Court of Australia, Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria & Ors, FCA 1606, 18 December 1998.


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A WELL-TOLD LIE: A MEMOIR
Kaye Aldenhoven

I must confess that the book is not a history ... I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts.


Our memories

Our memories are our own, aren’t they?

My memories are constructions and reconstructions.

I rebuild them every time I eye them off.

Mind you, my sister is active in embellishing our childhood, demonising our wickedness to amuse us, to scandalise our children.

My grandson is mesmerised by her animated wrinkles.

Our memories are collections

of our mother’s and our grandmothers’ memories.

Remember? They’d say

and dawdle off to tell us things

that they wanted to remember.

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References:


(pp.4-5) “Longfield” in the Parish of Yeilima, the Property of Mr. Andom Rendell’ Nathalia Herald, 10 February 1887.

(p.6) Federal Court of Australia, Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria & Ors, FCA 1606, 18 December 1998.

What can you recall
that our grandmothers chose to forget?

Send him crazy

You don’t like doing this. “You have to,” she said.

When Nanna puts her arm in, her skin bleeds. Her skin is old and thin, and it breaks easily and has brown, ugly spots. You don’t like the damp brown paper turned down around the brown mouth. His lips have been sucking here. You don’t like the smell of the stuff, the stuff leaking from the neck of the brown bottle. You do like the pungency of the crushed leaves. You do not like thrusting your arm through the twiggy branches. Your fingers find the hidden booty, pass it to her. She tugs the cork, empties the stuff on the ground. You wait, leaning your weight on the diosma, breathing in the herby smell. She passes it back. You hide it exactly as you found it. You check your arm. Your skin does not bleed.

“He will think he’s drunk it himself. Not being able to remember will send him crazy in the end. Good girl, Kaye.”

Another girl waits on the top step of the cellar stairs. One scuffed black boot rests below her white long apron, not quite level with the stone flagged verandah. Her round face is anxious, her lips purse in a grim line. When she holds her mouth so, she looks like Matilda, and I make a wish she grows up to have a better life than her mother, less worry, less disappointment, less public humiliations. Her pale arms hold out a dark sherry bottle, passing it to her sister Amy, who conceals the bottle under her own long grubby apron. She must put it back in exactly the same place after Mother empties it.

“Why must we work in pairs?” asks Florence.

“So we can tell tales when the other one gets up to mischief, Miss Florence Ada.”

“I don’t tell on you.”

“Mother doesn’t know that yet.” Amy smiles. It worked both ways, she didn’t tattle on Florrie either. They know they need protection - from their intelligent, diligent, alcoholic father and their intelligent, obsessively controlling mother, though they are not yet old enough to assign all these adjectives to describe their parents’ actions. From studying Latin they both understand adjectives. In their shared bedroom at night, in the dark, they whisper to each other, trying to work out the why of their lives.

“Why did they come to Australia? Did Father do something wrong in Kent?”

“I think that might be true, Florence. Did Mother make him come here? To this hot dry town with a beautiful name? It’s ironic the way she always says Laura has a beautiful name, before she says she hates it. She hates the dryness, the dust, the heat. Goes on and on. I don’t mind it.”

“And how can cows in Kentish fields be different from the black and white girl you milk in the back paddock, Amy? Mother misses England. Sometimes I see the tears. She is angry that we have to live here in Laura, very angry.”

“Florrie, don’t say this to Mother, promise. Father’s friend, Mr Heinrich, told me Father drinks plonk because . . . what he said . . . he said, It’s your mother’s fault. Your Mother nags Benjamin and it’s the only way he can get away from her.

Mrs Heinrich was cross, and told Mr Heinrich he was ridiculous. Your mother is a saint.”

“Amy. I’m scared, Amy. I know a saint is good, but there is something else. Saints are dead. Will Mother die like our baby Prudence?”

“Prudence died because she was too little to live. Mother is big and strong. She can’t die,” lies Amy, choosing between evils.
“Please let me sleep in your bed tonight. Please Florrie. So the bad dream can’t come.”

“You wriggle too much. And you’re supposed to be elder sister, Amy.”

“I promise I’ll lie still.”

When Florence said not one more word, Amy slid across the narrow gap into arms that wrapped her safely.

“Tomorrow, when we have finished housework, let’s run away with Bert and go up into the ranges.”

“We’ll get into strife.”

“It will be worth it, Amy. And there’s only a few more days of school holiday, and then we’ll be locked up in class by Headmaster Donkey Bray.”

“Go without me Florrie. Last time Mother’s belt hurt so much. She flogged me. Said it was for my own good. Said I’m too old to go up into the ranges with boys. You go. Head out early, before Mother can see you. I will do your cleaning.”

I remember my grandmother when she was a girl walking up into the Flinders Ranges for picnics and returning with armfuls of pungent wildflowers that her English born parents had no names for. She taught me aboriginal words for them.

My grandmother travelled by wagon to play hockey at Booleroo a young woman studying Latin, with a stern alcoholic father who certainly did not intend to allow his daughter to attend university. He apprenticed her to the local tailor. She stitched her disappointment into the woollen serge of men’s dark suits, that they wore in the heat and dust to Sunday church and funerals on the edge of Goyder’s Line.

Five extras, God help us

This younger sister who comforted her older sister grew up to become my grandmother, my Dad’s mum. Nanna’s brother Albert lives with her and her husband Jack, and we do too. “Five extras, God help us.” Her arms daily wrap around me in comforting love.

The shadow of Matilda blackens me too. I am taught to find the bottle of sherry hidden daily by our neighbour on his way home from the pub. He shoves his sherry into the diosma bush. I, great grand-daughter of Matilda Lowe nee Plant, who migrated to Australia, screw my nose up at the sickly smell as Nanna pours sherry on the ground, and replaces the stained cork. I place the emptied bottle back in the exact spot.

“The exact spot, Kaye, so he won’t know it has been touched, emptied. Mr Rossiter the drunk, will never know we did it. He will think his mind is failing. He will begin to go crazy.”

Matilda’s grim lips had taught her daughters. Now Florence Ada, taught to send her father into madness, repeats these cruel words to me. The hair on my neck stands up every time I hear her say the words. I am certain this is cruel, even though I cannot understand why.

I want to call her Florence Ada, but it is Uncle Bert, Nanna’s brother, who calls her Florence Ada. I have been told I may not, not to her face. I am not allowed to be cheeky, I have been told to be good. Good, Kaye. She pinched my cheek when she told me.

Grandfather teaches me to say insolence, and disobedience.

“They rhyme.”

“You’ve got it, Professor Murdoch,” he says.

Uncle Bert scowls at my grand-father, and invites me to come and draw on his new cartridge paper. Yesterday he told me to keep my grubby little fingers off it! Some-thing . . . I don’t know what’s going on. Adults playing games? That’s my suspicion.

My early life was at one and the same time so common as to be unremarkable and so strange as to be the stuff of fiction

Stephen Fry in his biography Moab is my Washpot.
Why I love fern

"The little curl at the end is my favourite bit, Nanna."

"You can eat them but they are not delicious."

"I will tell you what I love best if you promise not to get angry."

"Hmm, don’t like the sound of that, Little Missy."

"Yes, but if you don’t know you can’t be angry, can you, so it won’t cost you a shilling if you promise, and then you will know."

"Too much philosophy for me, Miss. Go and humbug Uncle Bert."

"This is what I like doing to fishbone ferns. Watch."

I grab the base of one long leaf and in a single swift strong smooth pull I strip every leaflet off, and toss the handful of green confetti into the air, so it drifts into Nanna’s hair.

"You little wretch!"

I giggle and run inside. "Mum, where’s my breakfast?"

"Please."

"Please may I have my breakfast now?"

"Don’t give the cheeky little blighter anything,” called my grandmother, “Kaye doesn’t deserve breakfast."

"What have you done now, to ruffle your grandmother’s feathers?"

"Told her the truth."

"About what, Kaye?"

"Why I love fern."

After lunch my grandfather taught me two words that I had to repeat till I knew them perfectly: deliberately destructive.

The past, individual or collective, is always messier and more complicated than any account we can give of it.

Amanda Kurtz, The Monthly 2014

Necklaces

I have a thing for necklaces.

I chain daisies, dandelions they are, by splitting the stem with my hair clip, linking heads through stems. Yellow pollen dust itches my skin, but there is a price for every pleasure. At least daisy chains are safe, no angry woman will be accusing me of stealing her treasures.

I threaded blue jacarandah flowers to beautiful effect, but this was time-consuming. Red hibiscus threaded faster, but Nanna had slapped me hard for pinching all her flowers. The beach is productive, and I revel in the coolness of red seaweed softly curved around my throat, and these last all day, while flowers bruise and wilt after an hour or two. Globular sea grapes are fun, though my brothers want to snatch and squirt them at me, but I am not enthusiastic about their khaki brown plainness.

When my grandmother and my mother go visiting for lunch, I am taken too, in my best dress. Mum visits her mother, her sisters, her friend Eileen. Nanna visits her sisters, her uncles from the Plant side of the family. I am taken on all these excursions, by tram, by bus, by train. I get double outings.

I sneak into bedrooms to check out the jewellery that belongs to the woman whose house we are visiting. Nervous, I open drawers silently to locate the loot. I lift glass lids, slyly slide open mirrored boxes. Rings do not interest me.

I hold strings of pearls against my neck. Often I do not understand how to open, or to close the clever little catches that secure beads, and if it is closed it might sit nicely in my hair, like a tiara on Elizabeth. A pendant I hang in the middle of my forehead, like I am an Egyptian belly dancer. I enjoy the weight of heavy glass beads, don’t fancy light gold chains with delicate designs of precious stones. The bigger, the better is my credo.

After I have been caught in Auntie Nell’s bedroom with the door shut and her flashiest fake pearls around my throat Grandfather teaches me ostentation.

The Phantom

I sat on the step of his wheel chair, between his useless feet resting my palms on slippers of soft brown leather.
Weekdays we watched the factory workers cycle home in tired lines, greasy navy overalls. No-one had money for cars. We had no car. Saturdays the flash punters came, by bus, tram, by taxi if they were rich, or just felt lucky to the racecourse over the road. Saturday women wore high heels. The poor filed through turnstiles.

Fools! he muttered. Stupid, greedy fools. Thursday was Comics day. He gave me two bob and anxiously watched me cross the road to buy the latest Phantom comic. My teacher could not believe that I could read. I took my Phantom to kindergarten to show her. Every afternoon I walked across to the newsagent to buy the rubbish evening News. Uncle Bert often said:

"Kaye, buy a packet of lifesavers for yourself, too."

On Thursdays he always said:

"Kaye, buy the Phantom comic for yourself." I didn’t get lollies on Thursdays. The Phantom cost one shilling! I perched my skinny body on the wooden step of his wheelchair, and he leaned down to share his newspaper, showing me the cartoon, which had to be explained because I knew little about our Premier Tom Playford, or Pig Iron Bob who was still Prime Minister despite how bloody bad he was.

We did the crossword. Uncle Bert leaned forward a little, and stretched his arms down to hold the paper under my sharp eyes. I learned the alphabet from Uncle Bert spelling out the word, and me writing with the stubby little lead pencil he kept in his jacket, inside pocket on the left. It had a little round knob of rubber so I could correct my errors. He made me feel very important writing the letters for him. I was helping him. He encouraged me to believe in my role. I also kept his poor old feet warm on winter days.

Phantom days he deferred the crossword, and I wriggled between his leather slippers, looked first at the comic cover, read the title. He sounded out the words, talked about the meaning. At his bidding I opened the page. We nutted out the story slowly, using picture cues and syntax and semantics, as well as spelling. When we’d finished decoding a page, we’d read it again, his mouth close to my ear, then we proceeded to the next.

Voices merged, we read the story again together until we reached the last speech bubble. Sometimes I wanted to read it a third time. Sometimes he took out his crossword then, and only pretended he was listening to me.

A winter bath in the kitchen

After tea, Mum lifted down the cream enamel basin from the high shelf, quarter filled it with boiling water from the stove, topped it with cold water, tested the temperature with her elbow, placed the basin squarely on the kitchen floor. Nanna placed a white face-washer and a cake of pink soap on the table. The clean dry soft Egyptian cotton towel hung warming on the back of a chair. Dad had brought that special towel home for me.

Grandfather leaned forward, his elbows on the table, his face resting in his palms, black eyes on me. I don’t like it when Grandfather’s eyes turn black.

"It’s too cold. Don’t take off my cardigan. Don’t, Mum!"

"Won’t take long. Your new nightie will make you warm again."

"My prettiest nightie. You sewed it for me, didn’t you? I like the pink and red silk smocking."

"Turn Kaye, let me undo your buttons. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven."

My dress slid to the floor.

My knickers slid to the floor.

My small fingers gripped Mum’s shoulders to balance, and I stepped into the basin, stub toes wiggled in the warmth as Mum rubbed the soapy face washer over my arms and body.

"Not my face. Soap hurts. It burns my cheeks.”
"Move your feet open, Kaye."

"No. It stings between my legs. Wash the soap off first."

My grandfather’s black eyes stared. I stared back.

"Now there’s no soap, I’ll let you wash my face too. Not hard."

"Good girl. Lovely clean girl."

I stepped onto the green chenille bathmat.

"There, if I rub hard, I’ll erase the blue, and make your skin a healthy warm pink colour."

"The silly, skinny thing’s shivering. Listen to her teeth."

"Grandpa should mind his own business," I whispered into Mum’s ear.

Grandpa still stared. I stared back, right at his black eyes.

"You’ll never raise her."

Mum flushed red. She grabbed the itchy grey woollen blanket from Uncle Bert’s empty wheel chair, dragged it roughly around my body, hoisted me onto her shoulder, and stepped out into the dark night, arms wrapped tight around me. I kicked half-heartedly.

"Put me down. I’m scared. It’s cold and dark out here."

Mum strode down the path, clutching me, along the footpath, past the butcher, across Addison Road, past the dentist, the chemist. She shoved Dr Finger’s door open. The waiting room was empty.

"Come in."

Mum strode in, still gripping me.

"What’s wrong Roma? Are you all right Roma?"

Wordlessly Mum stripped the blanket off. I shivered naked, bare white feet on cold brown lino.

"Old Jack said, he said... You’ll never raise her. I didn’t know what to do. Look at her. She’s skin and bones."

"Grandpa should stop looking at me."

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**AN UNSENT LETTER FROM INDIA**

Julie U’Ren

I found this letter and am sending it to you now. I’ve wanted to tell you about the day we arrived in Udaipur, yet I have found it hard to explain, the beauty mixed with unexpected sadness.

On our third day, we left the town centre on a bike ride around the city, lakes and villages. It was early morning and businesses were opening. It was easier than I thought, riding, dodging the slow-moving cows and being passed by tuk tuk. I was getting used to clicking through the gears as we climbed a hill on the narrow street passing children in freshly pressed uniforms. It wasn’t fast, and we were going in the same direction.

A kid on a flash red bike joined us for a few kilometres outside a village. He rode alongside, without saying a word. When a section of the road narrowed, and became a muddy track others in the group rode confidently through the slush. I dismounted and wheeled the bike.

We stopped to look at brick makers. Rows and rows of hand-made red clay bricks lined the ground. A thin woman doubled over scattering sand on them. Nearby an uneven, smoking brick pyramid towered. The workers were mostly women and children. It looked dirty and hard work. The children ran over to us yelling and waving their hands. An older boy in stained flares stopped working and stepped forward, posing for a picture. He smiled, pushing his hips forward like a rock star.

We passed funeral pyres on our way up the next hill. I remembered seeing funeral pyres at Varanasi on the Holy river Ganga years ago. Walking past the stacks of firewood, smelling the burning, listening to bells and the priests singing. People were stepping onto the Ghats and dropping offerings into the dirty, sacred river. Death was all around, yet it was calm and moving.
What I really want to tell you about though, is the day we arrived in Udaipur. We’d stepped off the overnight Mewar Express, after sleeping off and on through the night travelling south. We’d left a rain drenched station at Sawai Madhopur at midnight, where people lay huddled in blankets and tarps beside huge puddles of water. In the dry sleeper carriage, we curled on the firm bunks wrapped in sheets and a coarse grey woolen blanket. At day light a chai wallah passed through the carriage calling out, ‘Chai, chai, chai!’ A steel flask of chai is in one hand and a tower of small paper cups in the other. I roll over and close my eyes trying to get more sleep.

Udaipur station is lively, taxis and tuk tusk cram the road. Drivers approach travelers offering rides. Our taxi delivers us to an address in Lal Ghat. It’s still early morning but we check into a hotel perched on a bend in the small street. There’s a winding marble staircase outside our door, and the passing footsteps of other guests echo loudly in our room. Water gurgles in the walls as someone above us showers. The passing tuk tusk and cars outside rattle our closed window. We wait half an hour for hot water before we can shower. More than anything we long for a quiet room.

We step into the streets in clean clothes and our hair is still wet. A small café is just opening around the corner, the staff are pulling down chairs perched on the tabletops. We eat masala omelette, drink chai and feel our energy return. Then I remember a place nearby from years ago, a haveli, an old decorated house, rooms with arched timber doors and window seats, away from the street. I’m confident I can find it. We walk past shop keepers sweeping the paths, preparing for the day. Slatted roller doors rattle loudly as they open and light pours into the tiny shops. The city is slowly waking. We find the haveli with the arched entrance at the end of a small street. It is beautiful and quiet there. The polite, uniformed staff tell us there are no vacancies. We walk away from the white walls, arched entrance and water bowls brimming with marigolds.

We walk around visiting different hotels with promising names like Pana Villas, Karohi Palace, Lake View, and Sunset View. There’s nothing available for the four days we’re in town. A young shop keeper points across the road, suggesting we ask the travel agent. We step inside the small office, the man behind the desk is reading his phone. The walls behind him are plastered with posters of temples, hills, and lakes with tour prices in rupees. We chat to him about our search for a quiet room for four nights. He walks outside and we stand together in the warming sun, he waves across to the right.

You should look at the other side of the Lake, there’s some good places there too. It’s not far away. You can walk across each day if you like.

Just then, there’s a thump and a scream. A few metres in front of us a baby is face down on the road. A young woman standing close steps slowly backwards, with her hands to her face. The child lies still. These moments move like images on slow shutter speed. Someone yells out and moves forward toward the child. The travel agent rushes past us and scoops the floppy baby from the road and carries her in his arms. She is quiet and blood is coming from her nose.

The travel agent places his mouth over the limp child’s mouth. Then he is calling out loudly, in distressed gulps. Another man rushes over, takes the baby and climbs in a parked tuk-tuk. People are calling to the driver, urging him.

Go go, to the hospital!

Everything is spoken in Hindi, but what else was there to say? The small sound of the tuk- tuk engine rattles up the street. The woman standing close to the child has stepped away and is leaning into her husband. We are all stunned, our language is stunted, our thinking frozen.

No, No, the poor baby!

The young shop keeper points up to white framed window gaping open, six metres above the street.

I saw her fall. Her mother was sitting in the window, holding her, and she fell. I saw her fall!

He was crying, talking to everyone and no one.

A woman runs into the street from the hotel screaming, waving her phone in her hand. She’s calling out, and pleading. People point up the street, push her into a tuc tuc, again telling the driver, Go, go! In the back seat of the tuk tuk, the crying mother is punching numbers into her phone. The tuk tuk with the mother leaves and everything is still and silent.

People move slowly, some talk quietly to each other. We walk over to the stunned woman. Her husband is holding her arm, she’s staring ahead.

The baby just fell, right in front of me!
It’s so awful, the poor baby, the poor mother.
I just saw her! What will I do? What can I do now?

We’re standing together in the street crying.
What can I do now?
I’m so sorry, it’s so sad...

The young couple walk away slowly up the street, his arm around her shoulders. The tour operator wipes the baby’s blood from his mouth. I try not to stare at the white handkerchief smeared red. He is shaking his head.

This also happened to my daughter when she was one, she fell.
On no.

Well, yes, it was awful, she also fell from a window. She’s three now, she’s fine. But I can see it all again, right here now, before my very own eyes. I can’t talk anymore. Come back later. I’m so much in shock.

Yes, it’s so awful. OK we will come back and talk later.

Slowly people move away. We pass the stunned woman and her husband further up the street sitting inside a small café. Their heads bowed silently over tea cups.

After that we see babies everywhere; on the boat trip across the lake, at the market, peering over their mother’s shoulders, playing with their fathers. Dark eyed babies, gazing back at me.

We visit Lal Ghat later and speak to the same store owners and ask about the baby. The tour operator is at work.

I am still in shock, but I’ve come back to work. The hotel owner is visiting the hospital. He’s looking after the parents. But we think almost, 100 % the baby girl has died.

We visit the Jagdish temple still dazed and make an offering of bright orange marigolds. We sit and listen to the music and singing, unable to tear our thoughts away from the small dark eyed baby and her mother.
POETIC JUSTICE: A WRITERS RESPONSE TO GRAFFITI IN DON DALE’S YOUTH DETENTION CENTRE
Adelle Sefton-Rowston

We ought to read only the kind of books that wound us...
Franz Kafka (1904)

Darwin’s old Fannie Bay Gaol is hidden behind high brick walls but is open to tourists wanting to visit its small cells, sensing what it may have once been like for prisoners’ incarcerated in such a hollow and unforgiving space. The prison however is not how it once was, and cell walls have been freshly painted white. No graffiti remains. Tourists’ come and go – reflecting perhaps on a time when Darwin was still being ‘settled’ while the rest of the country ‘progressed’ into white Australia. When Four Corners program aired ‘Australia’s Shame’ we entered into the prison cells of Don Dale Youth Detention Centre and witnessed through CCTV footage the torture and abuse of mostly Aboriginal inmates, barely surviving a system obsessed with ‘settling’ them down. Spit hoods, restraint chairs, isolation cells – all these were used to control and dominate boys to the point of cationic states. We hear one prison officer ask Dylan Voller after he has spent two hours in a mechanical restraint chair: ‘How are you going to spend the rest of your night, nice and quiet?’ Prison systems are yet another design by colonisation to silence the subaltern through ongoing control of who can and cannot speak. If a prisoner writes on walls they are further punished and their text disappears. Graffiti suggests however, that colonial constructs of silence and punishment are being met constantly, and bravely, with Aboriginal resistance – creating enduring tensions – not silence and compliance. But is there a way to ‘read’ graffiti as resistance, and if so, can there be a poetic response to colonial violence in the NT’s prison systems?

The purpose of literary criticism is to expose injustices, point to societal wrongs and unsettle racist constructs as they appear textually. This essay is experimental in the ways it will analyse graffiti from inside Don Dale detention centre as textual object that redefines graffiti as more than ludic scribble but poetry of the oppressed. More than that, these textual objects call to be met with thoughtful poetic analysis and response. Graffiti has often been likened to art, and Brassai worked for over thirty years as a photographer to capture, interpret and preserve graffiti from the walls of Paris. He described how words and drawings appealed to the photographer, saying, ‘Save me, take me with you for tomorrow I’m no longer here’ (Reisner 96). I will argue that particular graffiti has poetic rather than artistic functions, and it is only when we read words that wound us that we are open to poetic workings that stir empathy and guide us towards political transformation. Like a page, a concrete wall can operate as an interface for reading and writing that is encountered as bodies and texts. Poetry experiments with language – it tests boundaries of how thoughts and ideas are articulated and received. While an author assumes ‘authority’ to speak, it is graffiti that tests authority and deliberately disrupts the mechanics of society.

Despite being locked up in an isolation cell under maximum security, Dylan Voller found a way to resist prison staff by writing from floor to ceiling on the prison’s walls. Footage from the Four Corners program shows Dylan carving his name over and over again into the concrete walls of BMU1. We bear witness to a boy who is clearly destressed, calling to be witnessed, acknowledged and saved from the tortures of a concrete box working to destroy his inner self. Text captured from a freeze-frame of the isolation cell’s wall reads:

Dv
D.VOLLER
Dylan

Like poetry, the graffiti here offers an utterance of lament and speaks from Dylan’s self-conscious. All three versions of Dylan’s name work to disrupt habitual aspects of language, yet does not distract from who he is – that his subjectivity and what he has been subject to – matters. His name appears like a stream of consciousness yet there is somewhat structure and rhythm – the first line reads as two syllables, then the second line has three, then two syllables again. But as a poem, it still exhibits architectural absence, lacking predictable form such as verse or stanza. There is limited punctuation and a mixture of capitalized lettering that is unfamiliar to readers, as if it was only loosely put together. The narration (or lack thereof) is non-linear and devoid of resolution. Yet the poem is not without outline – as readers we can make sense of a hidden presence, margins of silence, and how a ‘white’ space can be framed on a concrete wall. The context provided by the Four Corners program indeed makes the...
poem’s linguistics audible and Dylan’s name is rarefied as it reaches an intense public
stare. Reading his work as ‘poetry’ illuminates intertextual meanings that are powerful
because the writing, and its analysis, is unconventional, atypical, anti-canonical and
anti-textual. The poem defies many notions of what we consider ‘literary’ or who is
considered an author, since Dylan is not permitted author-ity to speak.

A theoretical interpretation of graffiti poets asks us to defy fundamental concepts
underpinning literary theory as well. Roland Barthes well known conceptualisations
of the death of the author for example is a framework that cannot be easily applied
to graffiti poetry written in prisons and published on walls. Barthes’s argued in his
essays, ‘The Death of the Author’ and ‘From Work to Text’ that an author is reduced to
a material object and that the biographical context of an author is irrelevant because
it only detracts from a more revelatory reading of a text (McQueen 2012). In Foucault’s
theoretical expositions of ‘What is an author’ however, he reasoned that a text did not
imply an author and that a text could be simply anything written or printed (Wilson,
2004). Foucault asked himself, and that of intellectual opponent Roland Barthes that,
‘If an individual is not an author, what are we to make of those things he has written
or said, left among his papers or communicated to others?’ (1994 218-19.) During the
toing and froing of their correspondence, Barthes insisted: ‘Writing is the destruction
of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique
space where our subject slips away...’ (1994 277). Yet as a matter of life and death the
opposite must be true when analysing graffiti in prisons – we cannot separate what (was
written) from who (has written it) if we care about the wellbeing of Aboriginal people
in custody. We read with hope that the subject does not under any circumstances slip
away. As inquirers of texts, not knowing who, what or why particular graffiti has been
written in a prison like Don Dale is a dangerous business because it concerns the literal
death of vulnerable young people. Thus it is necessary to ‘read’
the space, both taking back the space from the graffiti writer, and returning
the space to a condition of proprietary (175).

The decision to remove the graffiti inside Fannie Bay Gaol was made by the site’s
administrative board after apparently ‘careful consideration of inmates’ privacy
concerns’ (Wilson 2008 68). Yet what has inspired such a gravitas response to the
plight of Dylan Voller is that we know who he is – he has subjectivity, while the prison
officers are many and not widely known. News of the child abuse in Darwin’s Don Dale
Youth Detention Centre spread far and wide – making international news as well as the
more local in Northern Territory communities. Finding the right words from different
platforms however proved difficult, and when Yolnju radio station reported the story the
newsreader became unstuck: there is no Yonju word for torture (Thomas 2017).

For Nicholas Rothwell graffiti however is the vernacular of the Aboriginal domain.
Words and drawings can be found all over remote Aboriginal communities in the
Northern Territory – walls, wheelchairs, baby cots and church louvers are scrawled with
messages for insiders and outsiders in distinct ways. Rothwell’s article ‘The writing’s
on the wall’ notes how graffiti pieces from across the NT share ‘the same vocabulary’:
they are sketched out by young community people, deal with romance, social status
and the troubles of their maker (2013). Graffiti, he writes, has the potential to reveal
more than a hundred government reports about remote community life in the NT:
‘words and slogans seek to testify, what their writers want is to be read, seen, noticed:
to communicate with each other, in code, but a code so transparent it only heightens
the message’(Ibid). Marking walls with heightened messages belongs to Aboriginal
cultures of new and ancient times – symbols and images marked in ochre has always
been part of the Australian landscape. Malarra is a site of rock art in Arnhem Land for
example that traces the first European arrivals by boat and is the first Aboriginal history
of Australia’s colonization (Woodford 2008).
Since the Four Corners program there has been an extensive response from Aboriginal people from all over the country. Mass rallies and protests were organised in most capital cities to spread a message that children should not be held in detention. Social media assisted organisations like Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) to gain solidarity in Adelaide, Darwin, Canberra and Perth. Placards read: Justice where the bloody hell are ya? And STOP Stealing Our Kids. Emotions of hurt and anger have been mixed in Aboriginal communities. Acclaimed Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara writer and artist Paola Balla’s poem first appeared on Facebook but was recently published in Westerly. It reads:

Every jangled, ragged strand of traumatised DNA hurts
I had nightmares about boys dying in front of me last night,
Kissing the tar and concrete with their last breath
Crying for their mothers and grandmothers
I rush to their little bodies, rubbing their backs and whispering comfort and love
I woke up nauseated and sore
13 year old Dylan Voller looks like my little 12 year old son in
The footage of him being choked and lifted by his little neck
And then held down on a mattress and stripped by grown men
I sob while trying to avoid the footage yet again
My fears are not just for the boys and girls inside, but for the knowledge we have developed that
Nothing ever changes
And in fact just gets worse
This place feels and looks and sounds like the penal colony that it is

It has been almost 100 years since Franz Kafka’s short story ‘In the Penal Colony’ was published in German. The reference to the ‘penal colony’ in Balla’s poem is harrowing when recalling the synonymous images of Dylan in a restraint chair with that of the prisoner in Kafka’s story who is sentenced to be executed by machine. There are two main characters in his story – an officer who is to carry out an execution, and a traveler invited to observe the workings of the machine. The machine was designed by a former commandant who organised the entire penal colony and whose work we are told, will not ‘be able to change...for many years’ (76). The machine has a ‘bed’ that the ‘condemned man is laid on this padding face-down, naked’ (77) while a small stump of felt is forced into his mouth. Then there is a marker two meters above the bed and a harrow suspended by a strip of steel to carve script into the prison’s back, writing deeper and deeper over twelve excruciating hours before executing the prisoner at the end. The particular script that is carved into the body however, "is not easy to decipher with one's eyes"; but instead the man "deciphers them with his wounds" (78). It is inferred that the condemned man is being punished for his own flesh because it marks his racial difference. By the end of Kafka’s story the officer becomes influenced by the traveler who does not believe the prisoner is being justly treated. The officer then removes his clothing before turning to the machine and strapping himself in. Suddenly the machine malfunctions and begins stabbing at the officer’s back. The solider and the condemned man stay to watch the officer’s execution before the traveler is set to return home by boat. As the traveler’s leaving however, the soldier and the condemned man come running towards him and attempt to jump in the boat too. But the traveler grabs a heavily knotted rope and threatens that the men must stay (99).

Words can tremble when put into discourse. Like the inscription carved upon the human flesh in Kafka’s story, Dylan’s name metaphorically cuts into our own skin and wounds us as we read a name that crosses space and time, leaving not only a wall, but many of us permanently marked. Skin is the surface of our many colonial wounds, and like the traveler in Kafka’s story, when we witness such injustice we should question why. To awaken the typographical silence that calls for further exploration and more talk. The act of reading Dylan’s name over and over again as he carves it into the cell’s wall, calls us to read ourselves, our nation, and the distances between many of us. As Ashley Montague writes in Touching the human significance of the skin, ‘it is feeling that bridges the spatial gap that separates us from others, and puts us in touch with them.’ (125) The Four Corners program has for the first time provided us a virtual space in which incarcerated bodies can ‘impress’ upon many of us and bring us closer to feeling the wounds inflicted by colonial violence. Sara Ahmed argues that ‘emotions become attributes of collectives’ and that the ‘national character (what the nation is like) is a direct result of how bodies move away or towards other bodies in culture.’ (2004 130). Reading graffiti as textual objects can either motivate us towards others in the form of political action or away from others if we cannot find a way to respond. If we cannot articulate the need for reform we are at risk of becoming the traveler in Kafka’s short story, living in a state of innocence and failing to let others on the raft to freedom. We
are found guilty.

So how does a writer respond? The very fact that graffiti exists in the first place suggests an absence of social dialogue. Social media has captured many and varied racist responses to the Four Corners exposé. And when scrolling through mainstream news feeds there were only a few responses that were more reflective and empathetic for the young boys who were abused in Don Dale Youth Detention Center. Individually these three responses below seemed to speak in a vacuum of loud noise but when presented as a collage, perhaps their words inspire poetry or perhaps even prayer:

*He might not be a saint, but he is still a victim*

*Who do you blame for toy soldiers??

*The boys?*

*Or those that turned them into soldiers?*

*Not all parents are up to the job, but if you’re going to take that job away, you have to do it better*

This essay has experimented with the profound ways that graffiti may ‘poetically’ test the ways we ‘read’ colonial violence in our most secured institutions. Textual objects like graffiti carves meaning upon civil constructions, leaving them, and citizens, permanently marked. The effect of such poetry wounds us when we realise the conditions where vulnerable people must write. Graffiti has scarred Don Dale Detention Centre, speaking to a world that is still learning how to ‘read’. In Timmah Ball’s article ‘In Australia White people write my culture for me’ she discusses how a single word in one poem can misrepresent Aboriginal people, thus decrying the position that white Australians are ever ‘expert’ on writing about Aboriginal culture. She finishes her article to say: ‘white people always have the final say’ (2016 35).

I would like to close with two poems written by Dylan Voller. The first is titled ‘Justice for Youth’ and was published by Honi Soit online (2017):

*Justice for Youth*

When I close my eyes I feel the hits to my head. But don’t get me started on all the abuse and torment.

I was only eleven years I didn’t know If it was Right or Wrong. But what I know now is thesee Assaults went on for way to Long.

Sitting in that chair with a hood over my head. For the whole two and a half hours I was Just wishing I was Dead.

I remember that time [name removed] told me to kill myself. I thought about it for days If only you could feel the pain I felt.

I’m not gonna lie there’s been times I have cried. And thought to myself am I gonna die in side.

I have a lot of questions I really want answered. Like why wern’t my first cry’s out for help ever answered.

Does [name removed] Really not care. Or is [they] telling the truth and [they] didn’t know what was going on in there.

Why can’t [name removed] Admit [they] was wrong. Instead of pointing fingers and passing the Blame Along.

Dv

D.VOLLER

DyLAN
"WHERE WOULD THE NT NEWS BE WITHOUT CROCODILES?"
AN ANALYSIS OF HUMAN-CROCODILE RISKS AND PORTRAYAL OF THE RISK BY THE NT NEWS
Tracey Diddams

Introduction

Until 1971, estuarine (saltwater) crocodiles (crocodylus porosus) were almost hunted to extinction in the Northern Territory’s Top End. Since this time, they have been a protected species which has seen incredible population growth and are now considered to be near full species recovery. Britton and Campbell (2014) report an estimated 100,000 estuarine crocodiles in Australia’s Top End alone today. As both the estuarine crocodile and the human population flourish, so do the amount of human-crocodile encounters in the Northern Territory. Waterways locals used to swim in or use to gather resources from have now become large crocodile habitats. Fukuda et al. (2014) report that between 1971 to 2013 in the Northern Territory, there were “18 fatal crocodile attacks and 45 non-fatal attacks” (p. 1239). In 2014, there were a record four crocodile related human fatalities in the Top End which inevitably saw a significant growth in news media reports on crocodiles.

Various crocodile experts have analysed the factors involved with human-crocodile interactions both worldwide and specifically to the Top End. Manolis and Webb (2013) have captured valuable data on location of attacks, gender and activity during attacks (swimming, hunting and fishing). Their data overwhelmingly shows that majority of attacks affect locals (not tourists), over 40% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons during traditional activity, almost 75% were males and majority of incidents occurred while people were physically in the water. Alcohol consumption prior to attack constitutes for approximately one-fifth of attacks.

In contrary to the risk they pose, estuarine crocodiles are an “important and valuable natural resource in the Northern Territory, exploited through commercial farming and ranching, tourism, and customary use” (Fukuda et al. 2014, p. 1240).
With such a risk, how does the Top End achieve this balance to ensure human safety but also continued protection and conservation of Crocodylus porosus? The collection of data by Manolis and Webb present clear target audiences for messaging but is this messaging consistent across government agencies and how does the Top End’s local newspaper the NT News convey the risk?

**Previous research on crocodile risk and the news media**

Both quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted over the years relating to the news media’s portrayal of crocodile attacks on humans. The news media can play a very positive role towards the risks associated with human-wildlife interactions from supporting wildlife conservation and protection, education of the risk and how to avoid it and serves as a reporting mechanism for researchers to assist with documenting number and frequency of wildlife attacks on humans. The news media however has also negatively impacted on the preservation of animal species that can cause threat to human life, which has often resulted in calls for culls and Government intervention, not to mention negative portrayals of certain animals with word association such as “man-eater” and “monster”. With relation to the risk of crocodiles in the Northern Territory or indeed Australia as a whole, no real analysis in the news media’s role has been conducted. This is surprising given that the NT News frequently publish crocodile related stories - in 2014, the NT News published 98 crocodile related articles, “where would the NT News be without crocodiles?” (NT News, 2014, p. 1).

General previous analysis done on the news media’s portrayal of crocodiles internationally includes Sidelau and Britton (2014) who resolve that the news media plays an important role in documenting crocodile attacks but cannot be the sole reliable source as in some instances “error and exaggeration may be expected” (p. 111). They propose the development of an international database to accurately capture crocodile attack information which will in turn assist with the media accurately reporting statistics and aiding in conservation and education messages.

**Discussion**

The Northern Territory’s Top End local newspaper, the NT News (2014) proclaims it is the newspaper that relies on the “3 Cs – crocs, cyclones and crime” (p. viii). Crocodiles are an important part of their news stories as “there are more crocs in the NT than there are people in its capital city of Darwin. So it makes sense that they would feature on the NT News’ front pages more often than people do” (p. 1).

Given crocodiles are such a predominant component of the NT News’ media content, how is this risk portrayed by the paper? This essay will review a selection of NT News articles focussing on crocodiles during 2014. Analysis will be based on study methodology adopted by Holland et al (2011) and will cover four key areas – 1) reviewing the importance of analysing the NT News’ role in crocodile risk coverage, specifically investigating public perceptions and the NT News’ advice on appropriate behaviour to respond to the risk, 2) who their chosen experts are, 3) what language is used to frame the risks and 4) how is the contested issue of to cull or conserve presented?

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) can be applied to risk issues relating to crocodiles relevant to this analysis;
### Risk Event & Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Event</th>
<th>Event Characteristics</th>
<th>Cluture/portrayal of risk</th>
<th>Risk Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile attack</td>
<td>Males, in water swimming/fishing/hunting (both Indigenous/non-Indigenous persons)</td>
<td>Crocodiles celebrated in the NT News, possibly creates false perceptions of safety. Crocodile related fatalities are not a regular occurrence (21 fatalities in 30 years). People attacked have all been in the water or in very close proximity – all in known crocodile habitats. Media always includes imagery of crocodiles who are portrayed as iconic, Territorian.</td>
<td>Affects tourism industry – fear in visitors (especially international) &amp; also calls for governments to create safer swimming environments. Locals – motivated to call for culls traditional owners – mixed views, some support protection, others call for culls for safety of continuing traditional practices (swimming, hunting). Environmentalists/researchers support conservation messages. Politicians – take up the to cull or conserve debate.</td>
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**How does the NT News portray public perceptions and what is their advice on appropriate behaviour to respond to crocodile risks?**

The NT News often covers stories of locals behaving badly in and around crocodile habitats. Headlines and front page articles have included text such as; a local who “played chicken with the potentially deadly beast” (22 April 2014), “Croc trap fools tempt fate just days after fatal Territory attack” (10 August 2014), “A Darwin journo has become the subject of news after being chased out of the water by a crocodile while surfing” (9 February 2014), “Darwin couple take their pet crocodile Fluffy out for a walk before saying good-bye” (6 November 2014), “Top End man attacked by croc, escaped by wrestling and poking it in the eyes, then drank beer as first aid - like a true Territorian” (20 September 2014).

Articles like these although supposedly portraying the extreme risks of each situation, in essence could be perceived as actually promoting such behaviour. The case of people posing and taking selfies on top of crocodile traps became a popular activity with several repeat performances occurring on Facebook. The NT News even included copy-cat performances in their article and a quote from one Facebook fan who commented on the photo “sending this to NT news!!!!!!” with another replying “please do, it’ll be so funny”. Seems like the perpetrators got their wish – did they or others learn anything from this article? Obviously not as the activity continues.

With reference to crocodile attacks, the NT News also quotes regular NT locals who could be considered “lay experts” Wynne (1996). These have included such comments as “More people get hurt playing football” (9 June 2014) made by Graham Webb owner of visitor attraction Crocodylus Park, “People go out and don’t think about it. It hasn’t scared anyone off fishing...They know what the water is like...People that come out here, they’ve come here for years...They’ve learnt to fish with the crocodile...They have got to become one with the crocodile” (9 June 2014) quoted by Mr Bathis, owner of the Corroboree Tavern after the death of 62 year old Bill Scott in June 2014 whilst fishing. Such comments can be perceived as minimalising the risk.

Using Holland et al’s approach we can then investigate this further.
Who are the experts?

The NT News often seek advice from a range of experts. These include representatives from the NT Parks and Wildlife Commission, NT Police and Kakadu National Park. A fatality or search and rescue is classified as a police controlled incident, the police therefore are responsible for providing all information to the media during this time. Inevitably, the fatalities during 2014 saw the NT News quoting police frequently as their experts.

A sample of police messaging around crocodile risk included a quote by Sargent Hocking during a search for missing fisherman Bill Scott; “(There is) always a potential for crocodile attack,” he said. “I encourage people to think carefully about their safety at all times. “The water is deep in this billabong ... a number of large crocodiles obviously frequent this area.” (9 June 2014).

NT Parks and Wildlife ranger Tom Nichols is used in several crocodile related articles as the experts responding to issues of public safety. “Most of those deaths were due to negligence in crocodile-infested waters’, he said, and it was possible residents were becoming complacent, with more people out on the waterways, and high crocodile numbers...All we can do is say people have got to be aware” (31 December 2014).

Interestingly, none of the articles contain quotes from scientists or researchers such as Adam Britton who have conducted extensive research on crocodile attacks internationally and also on general crocodile information and behaviour. Does the NT News consider that such statistical information is not of value or interest to their readers?

What language is used to frame the risks?

Crocodiles are depicted in the NT News as characters. Crocodiles are branded as “deadly monsters” that are “massive” and have “stunning power”, “No other animal on the planet has a comparable bite force to a crocodile” (19 December 2014). Supporting this characterisation, there are articles where crocodiles are personified – a fatal attack in August 2014 in the Adelaide River was by estuarine crocodile “Michael Jackson” an “unusually coloured...pied, half-albino crocodile” (19 August 2014). Another crocodile known as “Brutus” received fame on the front page of the NT News during his photographed battle with a bull shark ‘Monster Croc Snacks on surprised shark’ (5 August 2014). Brutus was celebrated as the “true king of the waterway” and a “Monster crocodile” enjoying “a tasty snack”. “The 5.5-metre croc has become an international sensation, one of the Top End’s biggest tourist draw cards and a frequent star of the NT News”. In the article titled ‘Darwin couple take pet crocodile Fluffy out for a walk before saying goodbye’ (6 November 2014), Fluffy is likened to a standard domestic pet “Everyone loves to take their pet for a walk, and saltwater crocodile Fluffy is no different - he loves to frolic on the sand at Mindil Beach”.

Ryan and Harvey (2000) reported that saltwater crocodiles form an important component of the natural attractions offered by the Northern Territory of Australia as part of its tourism product. Braithwaite et al. (1996) noted in their study “Saltwater crocodiles are treated with a mixture of awe, fear and grudging respect as survivors from the period of the dinosaurs” (p. 426). It is clearly evident that the NT News understand this value and this is displayed in the language used to frame the reality of crocodile risk.

How is the contested issue of to cull or conserve presented?

Calls for crocodile culls inevitably came after the spate of fatalities during 2014. From the perspective of one Indigenous association after the death of a young boy in January “For the past 30 years many Traditional Owners have been saying there are too many crocs and that the numbers need to be managed...Mirarr are calling for a review of the management of crocodiles around their communities in response to their increasing numbers and safety concerns” (26 January 2014).

The NT Government also lobbied the Federal Government to allow crocodile safari hunting in the NT. The proposal was not supported. Prior Land Use Minister for the NT Government Minister Willem Westra van Holthe stated “Canberra needs to take its foot off the Territory’s throat. Crocodile safari hunting has the potential to create real employment for indigenous people in remote parts of the Territory” (27 March 2014).

Taking up the conservation debate were representatives from the tourism industry and also rangers representing the NT Parks and Wildlife Commission. “It’s all about education.

We’ve got to learn to live with crocs. We can’t shoot them all.” Peter Saltmarsh, owner
of Spectacular Jumping Crocodiles (19 August 2014). Ranger Tom Nichols reminded the public that culls could also “negatively impact the NT crocodile industry, which is worth about $20 million per year, he said, and could lull people into a false sense of security”.

The conserve or cull debate is given limited air time within the NT News’ crocodile articles. Majority of articles covered the information of fatalities, how they occurred and who was involved. Articles outside of the fatalities were more representing crocodiles in impressive situations.

Implications for risk communication

What is the impact of the NT News crocodile reports on the actual human-crocodile risk? Holland et al. (2011) suggest that members of the public are often resistant to reports they perceive to be telling them to panic and this can lead them to distance themselves from the risk. Is there a case that the NT News are overly saturating their newspaper with crocodiles and the risk is not perceived as even being real? Outside of crocodile attacks, crocodiles are portrayed as larrikins, photographed in impressive battles with other animals or in the proximity of daring humans within their habitats. The bottom line is, crocodiles sell the NT News. Crocodiles are certainly not depicted in a negative light, they are if anything celebrated. They are the essence of the Northern Territory, a core component of the NT News which sells their newspapers and indeed a significant drawcard for visitors to the Top End. Given this fact, the NT News wouldn’t want to publish negative crocodile stories portraying deadly risks or even focus on the cull debate. The importance of crocodiles to the Northern Territory and the NT News can be summed up in the following quote from one member of the public upon viewing her first crocodile in the wild stating “I feel like a true Territorian now” (9 February 2014).

Outside of the news media, there is work to be done by the various governments promoting crocodile safety messages. Scientists like Manolis, Webb and Britton have provided us with an extensive demographic of attack victims and various other research both relevant to Australia and internationally which should aid in targeted messaging to identified groups.

There is also currently no collaboration between the NT Government, Federal Government and other Australian states such as Queensland and Northern Western Australia with regards to crocodile risks and public safety. Each has their own crocodile management strategy and communication campaigns – signs are different, safety information is different and methods of trapping and removing are all different. This inconsistency also has the potential to create further risks and inaccurate reporting by the news media.

Future consideration should be given to a collaborative approach between state, federal and territory government agencies ensuring key safety messages which also “celebrate” the value of crocodiles in the Top End, particularly from a tourism perspective. Champions should be identified including researchers, park rangers and traditional Indigenous knowledge to help communicate these messages supporting both the risk factors as well as the unique value of estuarine crocodiles.

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DIGGING DOWN THROUGH MAYHEM AND MYSTERY
- JAPANESE COMBAT REPORTS REVEAL THE HUMAN FACE OF AIR WAR ACROSS THE TOP END

Tom Lewis

An examination of Japanese air records from World War II has revealed a much bigger picture of warfare across the Top End than previously thought.

In addition, the stories of how scores of aircraft were brought down has for the first time revealed a human face in the two year fight for aerial supremacy. The struggle was first won by the Imperial Japanese Navy, but then wrested from them by Allied forces.

We now know for the first time the names of nearly 200 enemy aircrew whose remains still lie in Australian soil or in our country’s coastal seas.

The Pacific War first came to Australia in January 1942. On the 20th a short sharp battle was fought outside Darwin Harbour between a big 80-man submarine, and an Australian corvette. HMAS Deloraine prevailed, and the submarine was smashed into the seabed by depth charges. The I-124 remains outside the Harbour to this day, and her three companion submarines fled. But the Japanese High Command still wanted to close down Darwin’s extensive facilities, including a massive protected harbour and airfields, and so the next month they sent four aircraft carriers south.

Before that attack however, an aerial action fought on 15 February saw the first Allied loss of life together with the death of the first Japanese airman. To the north of Bathurst Island, a lone P-40 Kittyhawk fighter pilot took on a four-engined Japanese seaplane. The aircraft shot each other down, and Lieutenant Robert Buel of the United States Army Air Force, and radio operator Kinichi Furakawa, died as a result of the fight. Neither aircraft nor the body of either man was ever found. It was a lonely death for both, thousands of kilometres from their homelands, and it signaled the start of many a similar aerial fight.
Four days later the Japanese Navy trounced Darwin in a massive airstrike, flying off 188 aircraft from four aircraft carriers. The Zeroes shot down nine out of ten of the defending Kittyhawks, and the Kate and Val bombers laid waste to the town, harbour and airfields. Two hours later the shattered survivors of the northern capital were hit again, this time with 54 heavy bombers flying from land bases. Eleven ships were sunk, 30 aircraft destroyed and 235 Allied people killed. Two of the Japanese aircrew died.

Both Buel’s story and the air raid of 19 February had been told before, however. So why is it important to cover them again using Japanese records? It was to separate the truth from myth; to tell the enemy’s human stories, and to publish the findings so all can know of a previously obscure part of World War II.

A Much Bigger Fight Than Previously Thought

So what did the Japanese sources tell us?

Using Japanese records the new research shows previous estimates of the attacks made on northern Australia have been well understated.

There were in total 1,883 enemy flights over northern Australia in World War II. This was in 208 combined missions – some of which saw more than 50 aircraft attacking the same target.

There were 77 raids on the Northern Territory reported, rather than 64 often previously claimed.

The first raid, the devastating strike on 19 February against Darwin, saw 188 aircraft within the strike force: 36 fighters, 81 high-level bombers, and 72 divebombers.

The attacking Japanese forces then settled down to a pattern of raiding regularly over the next two years.

The numbers of enemy aircraft being brought down by the defending Allied fighters, anti-aircraft guns, radar and searchlight combination are startling too. The Japanese lost 62 aircraft, their remains scattered across the waters and arid bush of the north, with many remaining lost and most of the 186 aircrew who died unburied.

The bombers kept coming. Every week, from Exmouth to Townsville, there were air raids, often involving scores of incoming enemy aircraft at a time.

The Human Face of Battle

The Last Zero Pilot

The individual combat reports, seen through Japanese eyes, bring an understanding of them as humans, not only enemy.

Their stories include that of “the last Zero pilot” Kaname Harada. Harada flew in the first raid on Darwin, and was disappointed to find on his arrival in the rear echelons of machines that all of the defending Kittyhawks had been vanquished. Such aggression was a most necessary part of being a fighter pilot. But Harada found blood later on in his military career. He was involved in many aerial dogfights, and shot down too, surviving a crash-landing on a Pacific island. He lived through the final savage months of the Japanese Empire’s devastation, and returned to a shattered Japan.

Depressed at his deeds and his rejection from society, by the 1960s Harada was in despair. His wife suggested that embracing humanity rather than destroying it might make a new man of him, and Harada put his personal money into the building of a kindergarten in his native Nagano, three hours north of Tokyo.

He went on to preach against the folly of war, and only died in 2016, although I was able to interview him for his story before that, in his home where he was looked after by a daughter. He was a philosophical man: open about the war, and still sad too about the loss of both his comrades and the enemy fliers he fought.

The First Captured

One of Harada’s friends, downed on 19 February over Darwin, was also flying an A6M2 Zero, from the carrier Hiryu. It was flown by Flyer3c, Hajime Toyoshima, a graduate of the 56th Class Oita Air Group in July 1941.

The aircraft had its oil tank holed by a .303” round over Darwin and was nearing Melville Island, returning to the carriers, when the engine seized and the propeller sheared off. The naval flier chose to force-land his crippled aircraft with a wheels-up landing in a lightly timbered valley, striking his face on the gun sight and suffering facial injuries but otherwise unhurt.

Wandering aimlessly for some time Toyoshima came across a group of young Aboriginal
women and children. The pilot was soon captured by a young Aboriginal, Matthias Ulungura. Matthias was with some friends but carried out the deed alone, thus becoming the first Australian to take a Japanese prisoner of war on Australian soil. A statue was recently erected to Matthias on Bathurst Island, a full-size bronze which hopefully will be part of a new interest in how the northern Aboriginals joined the fight for Australia in the time of great national need.

Toyoshima, giving a false name when he was handed over to Australian Army sergeant Les Powell, was transported south to Cowra, NSW, where a vast Prisoner Of War camp had been set up.

Many months later the Zero pilot was one of the leaders of the mass breakout of Japanese servicemen. Toyoshima took his own life outside the wire, when it became obvious the prisoners’ escape was not succeeding. Rather than suffer to what Japanese eyes was the terrible dishonour of being captured a second time he slashed his own throat with a borrowed knife. Toyoshima is buried nearby in the Japanese war cemetery at Cowra along with hundreds of his countrymen, thousands of kilometres from their homeland and their families.

Down for the Count North of Darwin

Another human story concerned the family of another pilot shot down north of Darwin. Shinji Kawahara died off the Northern Territory coast, on 17 August 1943, in a fight of Point Charles, north of Darwin Harbour. His Dinah twin-engined aircraft with its two crew were downed by two Spitfires.

The Dinahs were fast, armed, and maneuverable. Their mission was to photograph a target, and the developed pictures would provide an attack target – or not – for the bombers. On this occasion the Dinah was not fast enough: the plane was brought down and its two aircrew – CPOs Tomihiko Tanaka and Shinji Kawahara – were recovered.

Airman Kawahara’s wife Miyoko survived the war with her two children. But she never forgot her husband, Decades later when she died her family were well aware of her wish to be re-united in death with Shinji. Miyoko was cremated. The family then set about trying to find out how to have her ashes scattered in Northern Territory waters, in a land far away from Japan, where their language was little understood. Imagining trying to arrange such a matter for your own family, in perhaps Nigeria, might give an idea of the depth of the problem.

But in a combined effort from the Australian-Japanese Association, the Federal and Territory governments, and the Darwin City Council, success was achieved. Several family members journeyed to the Territory for a cautious meeting: would they be welcomed or rejected? The knowledge of the Prisoner Of War camp stories is well enough known to Japan’s older generation.

But success was achieved. A boat was arranged, courtesy of the Navy. A reception was arranged in Darwin’s Parliament House. An afternoon tea was arranged, courtesy of the Council. One calm Dry season afternoon off a Steber launch the ashes of a Japanese lady joined her husband’s body in the sparkling blue waters of the Top End. A Japanese family returned home, and a bridge had been built between two countries, once long ago enemies but now trying to cautiously be friends.

Mum’s Memento Never Makes It

Another curious story concerns an ace brought to earth near what is today a popular fishing spot. On 17 August 1943 Squadron Leader KE James, CO of 457 Squadron of Spitfires, intercepted and shot down another Dinah.

Ken James intercepted the enemy aircraft at 30,500 feet and effectively machinegunned it. Killed in the crash were Lieutenants Shin-ichi Matsu-Ura and Kyotoshi Shiraki. Curiously, in the wreckage, when the Intelligence team got to it, was found “a big Japanese doll”.

Subsequent investigation found that the doll had been provided by another airman’s family. Captain Shunji Sasaki’s mother had sent the doll to be released “where she believed her son had died on 18 July. She had also donated ¥3,000 towards a new aircraft.”

Sasaki, a well-known Japanese ace, had himself been brought down some weeks before, with his navigator, over what is today known as “Shady Camp” – a well-patronised fishing and camping location. Both crew members were buried on site by RAAF
personnel overseen by Intelligence Officer, Flying Officer CD Pender.

Captain Shunji Sasaki was the Commanding Officer of the 70th Dokuritsu Hiko Chutai. This unit had their headquarters at Malang in Java. Sasaki, while only 26 years of age "...was a very excellent air officer," his biographer wrote, "...and flew many times over Australia by Dinah. It was natural that he was awarded a special citation after his death and this reached the Emperor's ear (highest honor)."

Sasaki's accomplishments were further extolled in a radio broadcast from Tokyo on September 19th:

The Emperor has been informed of the citation granted to...the Sasaki Air Squadron by the Commander in Chief of the Army Air Force in the Southern regions, for meritorious service rendered in the Southern campaign and Australia region.

The citation says that the Sasaki Air Squadron has thus far carried out 70 raids on the Australian mainland. That Squadron participated actively in the big offensive against North Australia in the last 10 days of June of this year...

The Sasaki unit contributed much to the close cooperation between the Army and Navy air combined attacks in the Australian region, and the success of the raid of June 20th by the Army Air Force was due largely to careful and accurate information obtained by that unit.

Following Rangoon, the unit performed miracles in Burma, India, Java, and Australia battles. Sasaki perished in an air reconnaissance mission to Port Darwin on July 18th.

The deaths of all four of the Japanese airmen must have been a profound mystery to the families concerned, with them disappearing into a tropical environment thousands of kilometers away, with not even an attempt at a memorial of a sort being successful.

Two years of attacks

The Japanese air raids had begun to keep Darwin from not being a usable base, but they never achieved that. Within weeks of being blasted, the northern town was flying out deterrence patrols; the radar that had been being assembled on the 19th was operating, and the wreckage cleared away from the streets. The concept of detection of the incoming attackers; getting fighters up to height, and attacking the bombers, had begun. It worked, although not every time.

The Japanese attacks consisted invariably of an overflight a day or hours before a raid. A single aircraft, usually too high to be spotted or shot down, flew over and photographed the possible targets: the airfields dotted around Darwin; the ships in the harbour, the aircraft on the runways. Then the Betty bombers would take off, big lumbering long-range twin-engined machines. They would meet up with their escort of Zero fighters, and together they would approach the target.

If the RAAF and USAAF fighters could coordinate with the electronic eyes of the radar systems, and communications were working well, the Allied fighters could climb northwards to height. Once the enemy was visually detected, then the fight was on. It was always better to down the bombers before they dropped their ordnance, but that wasn’t always possible. Dogfights between the P-40 Kittyhawks and the Zeroes developed, and while the Japanese fighter was the better machine, the Allied pilots learnt to use height to advantage, diving down and through the formations.

The raiders did well though, penetrating as far south as Katherine, and often bombing with considerable success while the Allied initial organisation scramble to keep up. The attacks widened, with Broome seeing the second biggest raid in terms of casualties in Australian history: 86 people dying in flying boats on 3 March in the harbour as they readied for takeoff.

In Darwin itself the dead had been buried; trees cut down to improve fields of fire, and the administration of the Territory moved south to Alice Springs. Evacuations were still continuing, this time by road and train, with everyone not essential to the war effort being sent south. The military took over the Top End, and that included newspapers too – for the rest of the war the only media was Army News.

Spitfires eventually arrived, a much better machine than the Kittyhawk, and airfields by the dozen were hacked out of the bush and manned. Soon the Territory was home to over 50, most of them constructed by the United States forces.

Eventually the Allies pushed the raiders back. Using radar, searchlights, and fighters in a fused network of defence, the Spitfires and Kittyhawks met the Betty bombers and their Zero escorts head on – and triumphed.

By that time scores of Japanese bodies had been recovered. They were buried to the east of Darwin at Berrimah, then the very outskirts of the town. Today a modern
secondary institution stands opposite the site, but Kormilda College’s students probably have little knowledge of the grim rows of grave markers that once stood across the road from their grounds. The graves were all moved in the early 1960s, and the Japanese airmen joined hundreds of their countrymen in Cowra, where they remain today.

An end to the war, but a beginning to obscurity

By the time the smoke had cleared the Japanese had lost aircrew in the hundreds, and aircraft by the score. Many of these men met their deaths in the searing heat of the bush, or the sparkling blue tropical seas of the north. Only sometimes were their bodies found. The aircraft were scavenged for intelligence purposes, and the dead aircrew hastily buried at the site.

They were sad and lonely deaths. There was of course little sympathy for the Japanese fighters, as by the time the Prisoner Of War camp stories were coming out. So for decades their story has not been fully told. There were some admirable beginnings. Douglas Lockwood, a journalist in Darwin at the time of the first raid, penned Darwin’s Pearl Harbour, interviewing the Air Group Commander, Mitsui Fuchida, for his book. Bob Alford, an excellent Australian aviation historian, wrote Darwin’s Air War, and in two editions analysed Japanese records to present a good overall picture.

The aircrew themselves however, remained mere ciphers and occasional names. They should be at least listed, and so research began. For these were not men behaving without honour. The least we can do is mark their graves with their stories.

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KATH MANZIE YOUTH AWARD

WINNER
Sierra Haigh
Power Prey

FINALISTS
Danica Jenner
Teddy

Monique Coffey
A Reflection of Anguish

Ella Spinks
The Real Victim
Power Prey
Sierra Haigh

I am powerful.

I am feared.

I am a Queen.

Any who feared me not, was a fool, a mere pawn in my game of strategy. My opponents quivered before me, moving cautiously across the arena. My arena. An arena crafted to the likes of myself. A battlefield of ebony and ivory. The eerie calm as soldiers fell victim to perfectly planned blows left a solemn silence across the field. I looked upon the ivory army with the disdain of a thousand lifetimes of triumph, the kind of disdain gained only through the arrogance of one’s success. The strategy of my game was simple. Slaughter my king, or allow me to slaughter you.

None had achieved the former.

All had suffered the latter.

Piece by piece. Square by square. I threw my enemies aside as though it was child’s play. Move by move. Blow by blow. I advanced towards my prey. Strike by strike. Foe by foe. The battlefield was strewn with ivory. My final opponent. The King. Considered glorious by the ignorant, yet known as the dunce by the strategists. Silently frozen, my final opponent stood before me on an empty playing field, awaiting my final impact. I considered the task before me with scrutiny, analysing my situation from every possible direction.

What piece, what player, what price shall I inflict?

Finally, when my decision was made, the darkness enveloped me, and when the light broke through the darkness, I found myself neatly perched before my target. I let the tension hang over my prey as a final, futile, frenzied attempt was made to sidestep me. Countering his defence, I positioned myself in a manner that made me invincible.

Check. Mate.

I felt the usual sense of victory wash over me as the King slowly rolled away. As I basked in my own glory, the darkness enclosed me, and suddenly I was repositioned amongst my ebony army once again. Before me stood a sea of ivory, a sea I awaited eagerly to dissipate.

It began as any other war began. Strategy. Warning. Policy. Our intention: protect the King.

As usual, the battle began as slowly and softly as an autumn breeze dusting the leaves of a great oak. When the first of my ivory nemeses fell, I rejoiced. When my right-hand knight fell prey to the hands of another, my sense of oncoming victory wavered. I’d never lost my knight to battle before, never felt the loss of an important soldier.

I watched our opponents as though through the eyes of another. I observed, with god-like perception, each attack and counter-attack that could be made against my army. I recognised each and every potential threat with the composure of a true Queen.

At least, I thought I had.

My judgement clouded with brash confidence, I had overlooked the simplest of players. An underdog in this war. A soldier I had never imagined would be my demise, was now the soldier I had allowed to creep mere inches from my King.

A wave of emotion that was not my own washed over me, yet I felt it echo through
my body as though the emotion itself had been infused into my very being.

Powerless.

Fearful.

The emotions my enemies once felt towards me now bore down on me like an unbearable weight across my crown. I no longer felt as though the game was mine to play. I felt my fate slipping into the hands of another as the darkness enveloped me once again, making me quiver ever so slightly as I inched across the board to the defence of my King.

A move I had never had to make.

A move I had never dreamed of making.

A move that forced me to sacrifice myself for my King.

A move that allowed me to be destroyed by a mere pawn.

A move that I would never have had to make if I hadn’t let my own victory overwhelm me with arrogance.

The carrier of my demise moved towards me with swift efficiency, yet I looked upon the once pathetic piece with pure panic. The pawn danced towards me almost teasingly, as if to say,

You’re mine.

If it were not for my perfectly carved glare of solemnity, I was sure my eyes would have allowed my despair to best me. Would have given away my fear. Would have betrayed my horror. Quivering before my King, I stood with as much defiance as I could muster, unwilling to betray my emotions to my enemies. With a look I hoped would carve through his ivory body, I stood tall as I allowed myself to be destroyed with a single strike. As my ebony bones hit the board, my jumbled thoughts slowed to a gradual halt.

I was powerful.

I was feared.

I was a Queen.
TEDDY
Danica Jenner

I remember the day we first met. How she picked me up out of the bushes, brushed the leaves off of me, and gave a big, gummy grin. I could tell she thought I was a fine looking teddy. I remember the gruff call of a man, before she shoved me hastily in her backpack and hurried up the path towards her house. Since that day, it was always us. Rebecca and I. She was never lonely, and neither was I. I gave her the comfort that the world took away. I remember when she first took me out of her bag. I didn’t expect to see what I saw. 

The last little girl I lived with had a bright, lively room. She had shelves upon shelves full of dolls and teddies. We had play dates with her friends too, where we all drank tea. Rebecca was different. Her room was small, dark and damp. It didn’t smell like lavender and love. Instead it smelt like mould and moth balls. It was a lonely room. No shelves of dolls, no other teddies. Just us. Rebecca and I. 

"I’m not allowed toys, Teddy, so stay hidden from dad!"

I’ve only seen him a few times, hiding from the safety of her backpack. He doesn’t seem like a dad. He’s a large, rough man, coated with ink marks. He has a permanent cloud of smoke surrounding him, with the lingering scent of alcohol and hatred. He scares me, and I know he scares Rebecca too.

Sometimes, Rebecca left me alone in her room. Those times were the scariest. There would be shouting and screams. Bangs and smashs. But sometimes there wouldn’t be. Sometimes there was silence. I think the times it didn’t happen were worse for her. Anticipating the pain that wouldn’t come. When she returned, there would be salty trails trickling down her face, and small, purple dots on her body that would slowly deepen. They never would get better, only worse. Worse and more. But I kept her company. I comforted her. I was the only warmth in her life full of sorrow and mildew. A life spent day after day hoping.

"Teddy, one day we’re going to have a nice family, and I’ll have dolls for us to play with!"

I know Rebecca better than anyone could know the alphabet. I noticed every new line, cut and bruise that appeared on her small, fragile body. I noticed the colour and life slowly draining from her once bubbly face. I noticed her big, gummy grin slowly start to hide away until it was as foreign to me as happiness was to her. And that’s when it all happened.

Rebecca stopped talking. Rebecca stopped crying. Rebecca stopped eating. She didn’t fight it, she accepted it. She gave in to the man who was coated in ink. She put out the small flame that once burnt inside of her, and in turn, it made her feel cold. When she hugged me, instead of the loving warmth that once filled me, a shot of pain and agony transferred from her veins to mine. It was crystal clear that it was just us. Just Rebecca and I. Just Rebecca and I with our lonely friendship. Maybe it was all a good thing though. A bad good thing. Bad in the sense that such a little girl seemed void of life, but good too. Good because someone finally noticed. It was Rebecca and I, and the two cloudy eyes that waited in the hall. The eyes started to notice the things only I saw about Rebecca. All the cuts and bruises that seemed hidden from the world were now on parade. They wanted to dive into the pool of secrets that were held in Rebecca eyes. But they didn’t. The eyes kept their distance. Everyday at school they would observe Rebecca, and as they did, I would observe them. They never spoke, they just watched. From the moment we arrived at school, to the moment we left, they were always within my sight. Everyday for Rebecca was the same. Go to school, go home, give in the man who smelt of alcohol and hatred. Day after day, it was Rebecca and I. And the eyes. Then the phone call.

*****

I remember the day we first met. How she picked me up off of the floor, brushed the dirt off of me, and handed me to Rebecca. I remember her hurrying up the path towards Rebecca’s house as we watched from the car. Since that day, it’s always been us. Rebecca and I. And love. We have that too. Rebecca and I and our new loving family.
A REFLECTION OF ANGUISH
Monique Coffey

I watch as the vermillion coloured smoke blows out from his mouth. The red whorls spiral upwards, framing his face, fine lines creasing his forehead.

The lights within the room are dim, the heavy bass of the song vibrating the floor until we are swaying gently.

Bright lights of blue and green caress the side of his face and he turns toward the opening door, allowing the lights to travel each ridge and dip of his face until they touch the titanium dangling from his earlobe.

I watch as the smile he had carefully painted across his face droops downward as he watches, the other man walks across the room, oblivious to him standing within the small space.

The lights re-trace their steps across his face until the door closes and he’s left illuminated by the dull red lights of the bathroom.

His face relaxes harshly without the presence of someone else in the room and I am faced with the desolate crease of a frown and tired eyes.

His eyes stare through me, pleading and looking for answers I know I am unable to give. I watch as he smiles, disheartened, the edges of his lips never meeting his eyes and an ocean of blue waves are reflected in his eyes, crashing and threatening to spill over, overwhelming me. I can’t bear to watch as he raises his hand to his mouth, smoke leaving again in illuminated wisps until he calms his breathing enough to force a smile once more. I wish for the ability to reach out and wipe his tears as the anguish threatens to consume me.

I watch as he turns and walks towards the door and when it shuts, the missing presence of a body turns the lights off within the room and I am left in darkness to try and forget another pair of sad and lonely eyes.

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The bang of the door against the wall alerts me to another presence in the room, rattling my form and within a moments notice I can see two people stumble through the doorway.

The lights from outside follow them in until the yellow and blue is overcome by the dark red of the bathroom lights.

The woman scans the room, catching my reflection as she ensures they are alone and in that small fleeting glance I can see the pain reflect in the green of her eyes.

The potent stench of desperation fills the room, assaulting my senses as I watch the couple move in a flurry of hands toward a stall when they find they are alone and I frantically try to grasp at the illusion of love and belonging before I am forced to watch them leave the room no more than the lonely strangers they were before this moment.

The passion within their movements doesn’t deter my desolate thoughts, the man moving until his back is against the wall and he is left to stare at me. We make eye contact and I see the downturned lines etched upon his face until the woman is moving suddenly, and the lines become smooth and unblemished by the warmth of frenzied affection.

I am forced to watch each moment between the strangers, unnoticed and unable to move. To witness every sad and self-deprecating thought pass across their face while the other remains unaware. I watch as two miserable people search desperately for just a moment of elation, a moment of excitement within each other.

The red of the woman’s dress is blinding as it droops from her body and as she turns I am faced with a similar droop of eyebrows. The guilt of succumbing to such an ordeal for a moments worth of happiness is written across her face and I feel a burst of pity consume me until I’m vibrating with emotion for this couple before me and the many before them.

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Workdays have come. The relief overwhelms me and I can no longer feel the suffocating desperation clawing at my throat. The breath is returned to my lungs.

I am caressed by the sweet hand of boredom as the cleaning people mill around the room and for once I do not feel the heavy pull of dread weigh me down as people go in and out of the room.

I look but do not feel as the ritualistic tasks of purifying my constricting confinement are performed around me. The remains of those few stolen moments of affection are cleaned from the bathroom stalls. The ghosting touch of lust washed away by the pure touch of bleach.

Each weekend I am saturated by the anguish of others, forced to watch the loneliness seep off them in waves, smiles created from broken glass. Their expressions dripping with self-loathing as they seek physical comfort with strangers like moths to flames.

I long for the quietness of the weekdays, when only boredom is reflected in those surrounding me. When I am exposed to the pure touch of white-gloved hands instead of the red and sticky fingers of a depressed man. Watching the soothing wipe of the disinfectant on the counter instead of the grimy hands of an old man against a woman’s dress.

I long for the days where I am consumed by the rumble of the cleaning equipment instead of the heavy bass of music that shakes me to the core.

I long for the smell of bleach that assaults my nose, familiar and comforting instead of the stench of short-lived passion.

I long for the hidden melancholy of those who hate their jobs, unwilling to share in fear of being ridiculed instead of the nights of reckless abandon in which nothing can be hidden and everything is felt.

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**THE REAL VICTIM**

Ella Spinks

The pounding of my head equalled the racing of my heart, involuntarily my eyes scanned the room looking for an escape route. I found nothing. The door was locked firmly behind me and I knew my biggest challenge was yet to come. The door handle rattled and my head swung around to face the judge. His features were soft and his eyes shone with sympathy as he took in my appearance. His badges and suit looked so professional next to my aged and ripped clothes. His grey hair and wrinkles flaunted his age without struggle. He strode past the rows of audience chairs, the prosecutor, and the defence before taking his rightful place at the head of the room. Our eyes were locked onto each other like targets. I silently realised my breath when he averted his eyes and glanced towards the many documents that now occupied the desk before him.

“Miss Smith,” his voice was soft and soothing. I flicked my eyes in his direction and relaxed when I noticed the sympathy subtly emanating from his eyes. “Are you ready to take the stand?”

“Yes,” I answered, my voice shaking, “I am”. I raised from my seat and faced the audience of police, lawyers and familiar faces. I moved towards the judge and took a seat on the chair beside him.

“Very well. Could you explain the relationship between yourself and Mr Parker?”

“We were together for a long time,” I explained briefly.

“Could you elaborate?”

“Well, we’d been together for nearly 18 months when he proposed, and I guess like every good love story it eventually came to an end.” I answered, a single tear rolling down my cheek as memories of him began to cloud my mind. “I thought he was truly
good in the beginning but maybe some people are better at pretending than we realise," I continued, whipping the tear off my face.

"Can you explain to me how you got the marks along your arm?" I glanced my eyes towards the photo he was presenting towards myself and the audience.

"He would tie me up" I answered briefly.

"Is it rope burn?" the questioning continued.

"Correct."

"Please elaborate on how you got these?"

"We had a chair, and whenever I did something he disapproved of, I was tied in the chair and left there until he thought it suitable to release me. The longest I was in the chair was 3 days straight" A shiver run down my spine at the haunting memory.

"What other difficulties were faced in your relationship, Miss Smith?" he asked. I couldn’t shake the feeling I was being watched, and a glance towards the judge and jury’s eye remaining firmly on me confirmed it.

"Lucas lost his job about a year into our relationship. I think a part of him always blamed me for that but when we began to struggle financially he turned to other methods of coping. Alcohol, smoking, cheating. He did everything, and I paid for it. He was a violent kind of drunk. I had bruises patterned across my body for months from saying the wrong thing in the wrong time…"

"Grace," his soft flowed up to the stand like gentle waves. I hadn’t realised that my checks were stained with tears until his voice spoke up. "Do you want to stop?"

"No," my voice cracked. I had to finish now that I’d started.

"I’m aware you were in hospital for a month at the end of last year. Can you explain what happened in regards to this accident?" The man sitting across gave me a small smile and patiently waited for me to continue.

"I tried to leave during the night when he was asleep. I had my bag packed and I had planned my escape, but Lucas was unusually sober that night. He was watching me, waiting. He came out of nowhere, like a ghost in the night and pushed me. I tumbled like a rag doll down 2 flights of stairs and when I gained consciousness at the bottom he was the first thing I saw. I reached for my phone, and thankfully managed to dial the ambulance before he ripped it from my hands and threw it across the room. He hit me several times before I blacked out again. The next time I woke up was in hospital. This was the first time he abused me when he was sober. I was scared. I was terrified to be anywhere near him, but I was even more scared of what he would do to me if I ever tried to leave again. So I stayed and things just got worse. The moment I did something wrong I was punished. I was like his punching bag and he had full control over me." I released a breath after I finished. The mans eyes watched me cautiously.

"What made you leave this time?" He kept his voice steady, I can see he’s trying to hide the fact that he’s shaken by my story.

"Lucas was choking me against the wall. I couldn’t breathe. A burst of adrenaline shot though me, determined to survive, so I pushed him back. He was drunk and stumbled, falling backwards down the stairs. Now is was him falling like a rag doll down the stairs. I called the ambulance immediately, but I couldn’t stay. I managed to pack a bag of my belongings and I left, heading straight for the police station before the ambulance even arrived."

"Is this all the truth?" I knew it was his final question, I was under an oath and it was necessary I knew it.

"Yes," I stated so calmly I surprised myself.

The judge found me innocent, and I was soon released. Walking out, the dark skies and stars never seemed more comforting. I breathed a sigh of relief and let a smirk grace my lips. The last 18 months played through my memory as I sifted through the organised mess of lies and truths. I continued walking, my steady footsteps echoing through the darkness. Pulling my phone out, I dialled a number I knew well. It was answered immediately and I released my final words into the night.

"It worked. They suspected nothing"

"Of course it did, how can you be the murderer when you’re you’re the victim? Then you killed the one person who could argue against it".
DEAR DIARY
Shona Ford

20th Oct, 2014
She is the most disgusting person I have ever met! I don’t know why she continually tries to befriend me, it’s as if she thinks that we are somehow going to become BFF’s, watch Twilight together and braid each other’s hair! News flash Mum, you are forty-five, not fifteen, so act like it! The other day she took me to school and I just about died. She used the word amazeballs in conversation! Please Earth, swallow me now! Yesterday she decided we were going to go on a mother/daughter shopping trip and she took me to Suzanne Grae, Jacqui E and Rockmans. As if I would be caught dead in clothes my grandmother would wear!
Then this morning...
Hi Mum,
Hope you have found my diary entertaining, since you appear to have been snooping regularly. It was marked PRIVATE for a reason. Yes, this last entry was a fabrication, but I really feel, in the interest of equality, that now you know my secrets, I am entitled to some of yours. So, tell me, who is the man in the photographs under your bed???
Sara,
I will apologise for invading your privacy if you apologise for getting drunk at Renee’s house last Saturday when you told me you were going to study Chemistry. And that photo? It’s your Dad. Don’t tell him you didn’t recognise him with hair.
So, if you would like me to cease ferreting out your diary, either don’t keep one, or start telling the truth.
Love Mum.
Sara,
I have just joined Weight Watchers and signed up to Advance Hair, just like my idol Shane Warne. Hopefully I will be able to attract a celebrity mistress as beautiful as Elizabeth Hurley. Don’t worry Angela, you will still be my number one girl.
Dad.

Eric,
Make sure you organise liposuction and botox for your face as well. Oh, and a fake tan that makes you look more orange than sun-kissed. These appear to be the key ingredients to feeling young at fifty. You are looking a bit weathered darling.
Love,
Angela.

MUM and DAD,
GET OUT OF MY DIARY! I GET IT, OK? Now leave me alone and do some of that stuff that parents do, like watch a documentary on the life of aquatic mammals, or something equally as boring so I can go back to filling these pages with teenage angst.
Sara.

OK.
Love Mum and Dad.
PS. Tonight’s documentary is about the mating rituals of the walrus. Care to join us?

FACEBOOK
STATUS UPDATE
Sara Johnson
Have convinced Mum and Dad I have a diary, write in it regularly and am a little scared to do anything naughty. Game, Set, Match.
Party this weekend, anyone? :)

WHALE DREAMING
Betty Lum

It was the most magnificent animal I had ever seen. It had swum into a nearby salty lagoon and had become trapped. All eighty ton of the whale looked huge but helpless as it now lay stranded by the water’s edge.

There had been talk amongst the villagers of a hump back spotted in the sea around the northern island of Hokkaido. A few of the fishermen had also seen a whaling vessel trailing and harassing the beautiful sea creature. It looked like it was ravaged by an infection resulting from it’s massive wounds.

I was so angry and ashamed, how could they do this? That night I lay restless and sleepless and had this dream:

I was looking out across the ocean. I was searching for any sign of the whale. I wanted to be with it, to comfort it. The water was dark and deep. I was afraid but I jumped in. Like a twig that had fallen into a river, I was floating helplessly along then slowly sucked into a whirlpool that sent me spinning. The weight of the sea pressed up against me.

Then in the inky darkness of the ocean a shadow of black and white was moving slowly towards me. Surprisingly, we didn’t collide, and before I knew it, I was swept up in the giant’s slow momentum. I found myself grabbing a huge fold of its leathery skin. I clung on and then realised that in fact, I was not drowning; I was breathing but how could it be? It was as if I was caught up in some sort of current or air pocket from the whale with the saltwater rushing past my face, my body.

Hanging on by my arms my whole body dangling, I was then whisked up, as if in a lift, and driven up several floors high. My stomach dropped and my heart was pounding. I
was escalating faster than I could breath, I was hurled along, still clinging on with all my
might.

I was dragged along in that underworld basin when suddenly just like a bird diving
down for a feed, we plummeted to the sea bed. I held on, my body and face now close
and brushed up against his tough hide. I caught my breath. The water slowly returned to
stillness and we glided along.

Then, at that very moment, I suddenly saw the whale’s eyeball turn and look down at
me. And in that deep and dark domain of the sea, narrow rays of sunlight streamed
down. There was a calmness, a stillness as we both glided gracefully together as one.

I awoke the next morning thinking of the whale. So I returned to the sandbank where it
remained still and lifeless. As I stood beside the giant I placed my hand on its body, its
open eye once again staring back at me. I said my last goodbye.

GETTING AN EDUCATION
Miranda Tetlow

I learned about sex from the Stone Age. Jean M. Auel was my mentor. Her doorstoppers
on prehistoric man were the most popular books in our school library. You sometimes
had to skip through long bison hunting scenes and the spiritual ponderings of someone
named Creb, but eventually you’d get to a good couple of pages of stiff manhoods, wet
folds, and mounds of pleasure.

I didn’t really need the school library, though. My dad’s bookshelves were full of Harold
Robbins and Jackie Collins, women called Gloria and Lucky who could get juiced up at a
moment’s notice. They did it in lifts, swimming pools, and train carriages; with strangers,
cabana boys, and their stepfathers. It didn’t seem to matter if it was prohibition in
America or the swinging ’60s in London, there was always some woman with waist-
length curly, black hair who enjoyed taking her lover by the mouth.

It was a confusing world to be exploring at the age of fifteen with one hand down
your pants and the other turning pages. To be aroused by a surprise encounter in the
business class toilets or strangely titillated as Virginia Andrews related every incest
scenario imaginable. The yes, no, push, pull, oh god, and dear god no of forbidden love
and lust.

I think it was Gloria who spent a very pleasant week in the Caribbean, and she
introduced me to the sexual possibilities of a spa. On page 138 she wretched away for
hours in a luxury villa Jacuzzi with an Italian boyfriend who owned a private island. It
all seemed very satisfactory, so I decided to try her technique out on a family holiday in
Bateman’s Bay when we unexpectedly got upgraded to the spa suite.
Gloria was onto something – mounting those jets was light years away from clumsy fingers and vague explorations for something scary like a G-spot. The climax was sudden, exhilarating, and made me yelp like our cat when it copped a foot on the tail.

And that’s when Dad walked in, with the twins’ bucket and spade. “Jess, we’re just going to the...Oh dear God.” He clamped his eyes shut, and backed out hurriedly. The door slammed behind him.

“Lily and Sebastian. Outside! Let’s go!” Dad made them evacuate like it was a fire drill, though he had to return awkwardly for towels and sunscreen.

I almost felt sorry for him. Parenting books back then didn’t have a Frequently Asked Questions section for dealing with your masturbating teenage daughter. I’d been given free reign over an extensive erotic fiction collection, just not expected to use it. Dad tried to give me a hug later, but I shrugged it off in the surly way that only a 15-year-old with braces and oversized breasts can.

On our next family holiday, the bathroom was decidedly spa-free. I stayed for a week and then said I should probably go home early, before school went back. I had some reading to do.

**SKIN**

Kate Leah Rendell

It is woodchips that I associative so viscerally, so textually with that defining moment – the rough edges and sharp splinters of bark that stuck hard against my cheek and left brief imprints in my skin.

It surprises me still that woodchips were ever considered a soft protective measure in children’s playgrounds – a rough groundcover presenting an illusion of safety.

Stuart Barkler was an unpopular kid. His sneering jibes and pestering whine had a particular way of getting under your skin. A scrawny freckled boy, he would hover wherever the action was, keen to stir and mock. It seems so obvious now that he was someone uncomfortable in his own skin.

‘Ya short-haired rat-rooter!’ he’d taunt as I’d run past in the quadrangle. As if my short spikey haircut was a personal affront to his burgeoning masculinity.

I had a stubborn streak as a child. I had learnt to stand up for myself, to know my own value – such is the privilege of being raised in a safe home. Yet not having a brother who could teach me the physical terms of this world, I did not know the limits of my own defence.

Stuart Barkler taught me that, in one brief moment in the playground.

It was a lesson that has never left me and one which all women no doubt register at some point in their lives:

Men are simply stronger.
**THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS**

Miranda Tetlow

While I am dying, Errol Symes from 5B tries to feel up my granddaughter on his way to the bathroom. Errol is at least 93, and he doesn’t have dementia. I’m not sure that he even needed to go to the bathroom. You take what you can get around here, but I’ve never liked Errol Symes. The least he could do is keep his hands to himself.

I don’t need my eyes open while I am dying to see the false-cheer photo collages that decorate my room. I don’t need my eyes at all. Elsie and Barbara are downstairs eating supper, keeping my seat for me. I won’t need that either.

I know that yesterday was June 13. It would have been my 67th wedding anniversary.

I’ve heard that three million people have just downloaded something on The YouTube. I’m not sure what that is exactly, but my grandchildren seem to like it. They stare into the phone, and all the while, I am dying.

One plus three is four. The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. I’m not silly, you know.

My daughter Marie slides the rings off my fingers while I am dying. She is worried the nursing home staff will pinch them. Probably they should, Lord knows they don’t get paid enough to wipe my bottom. The rings catch on my joints, arthritic now, but what do you expect?

Eventually she reaches for a jar of Vaseline, rubs it onto my skin, and the rings pop off into her hand. I can hear Marie’s voice catch in her throat, nervous and sad, just like it did when she was a little girl.

While I am dying, I hold out hope for a bright light, a tunnel, and a handsome film star like Cary Grant to take my hand. Someone told me that he turned out to be a gay in the end, but I don’t believe it. I’ll twirl around the dance floor. I’ll sing. I’ll drink champagne. I’ll have trifle for breakfast and ice-cream for dinner.

And my sisters. Martha, Betty, and Ida. I never thought I would see Ida again.

Granny Tremaine will be sitting in her favourite horse-hair chair. My mother and father, smoking cigarettes on the verandah. And Arthur, hovering nearby as always. I’ll finally tell him that I hated the way he washed up (the plates! Always greasy!) and that Trixie is staying with the dog-walker.

And, I’ll tell him that I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Instead, while I am dying, none of these things happen. Nothing happens at all. I am held firmly in the palm of the present, with gropey Errol Symes down the corridor, the thrummmmmm of the nursing home air conditioner, and excited voices bellowing out of the television. I think they call that channel Aspire. My next door neighbour won’t turn it off.

While I am dying, I say to myself. *Not with a bang but a whimper.*
LAMB CHOPS

James Murray

Truck drivers like country music. This is the popular conception, and I know it to be true because, as a hitchhiker travelling the Brisbane-Darwin return more times than you would believe in the 1980s and '90s, I got lifts in lots of trucks and listened to lots of country music, lots of songs about Mom and Pop and the little woman, about the home town and the farm and the road. So I knew I was in for something different when, after standing for hours on the outskirts of Winton, I opened the cab door and hopped up into a mosh pit of death metal.

It was a long lift, several hours to the Roma saleyards, through the late-in-the-year heat. Each of the road train’s three trailers had eight hundred sheep, in four levels of two hundred, and the driver would stop every couple of hours to check on them. It was best if they stayed standing, he explained. If they passed out and fell they’d get trampled. So he’d walk along with a long stick, jabbing the ribs of any that were lying down, to try and get them up again. I’d be out and stretching my legs, watching him. There were limbs sticking out through the trailer’s paling walls, and he’d grab them and twist them violently, trying to bring the sheep out of its coma and often failing, and he’d curse them angrily. ‘Fuckin cunt!’ he’d garble through his frustration. ‘Fuckin get fuckin up, you cunt fuckin cunt!’ and he’d twist the leg to horrible angles, or jab the stick with all his might.

Later, from the driver’s side, above the screaming of Anthrax and Armageddon, he explained the economics. Of the twenty-four hundred sheep, one hundred and twenty would be dead on arrival. If he carried more than twenty-four hundred there’d be more than one hundred and twenty fatalities, if he carried less the road toll would less, but they’d worked it out – twenty-four hundred minus one hundred and twenty made the most money.

Outside the roadhouse at Mitchell, teary-eyed, clamping down on the sobs busting up my throat, I turned my back on his jabbing and twisting and fucking-cunting, and I made the solemn vow: I will never eat meat again.

The next night I was at my girlfriend’s house in Brisbane. She still lived with her parents, and I accepted their invitation to stay for dinner. And there before me was a plate of mashed potato, peas, and three lovely big lamb chops.

They were delicious.
FORMING THE COMMON INTENTION
Matthew McKinlay

Not far away, in a treehouse in suburbia, a group of teenage boys meet to talk about ways to avoid boredom through group, team building activities...

“Gerry, Ian, Tony and Token, let me start by welcoming you all to the first meeting of “Young People against Community Expectations”, Ryan began. “As you know, our efforts have been somewhat haphazard at the moment. A bit of anti-social behaviour, some graffiti, scaring old people and what-not and I think it’s time we all came together to formalise our common intention to cause trouble in the community. To that end, today we will further our discussions regarding the proposed break in at the town pool that Gerry put forward at our last meeting. Gerry?”

“Thanks Ryan”, said Gerry, “If I can draw everyone’s attention to the mud model I prepared earlier.”

Gerry then pulled out a ruler and gestured towards the detailed three dimensional rendering of the pool and surrounding areas.

“As you can see”, Gerry continued, “the pool is at the end of a cul-de-sac. There is only one road entry, however on foot, we will be able to affect our escape via these alternate routes here, here and here.”

Gerry proceeded to point out a large rock (the pool), the road (marked in chalk) and surrounding footpaths, laneways and parks, expertly rendered in colourful LEGO bricks.

“Very good Gerry”, congratulated Ryan, “Planning has been carried out by Ian. How is that looking?”

“The planning phase has been completed”, Ian stated with authority, “Black ops outfits, including balaclavas and gloves, have been purchased utilising petty cash, backpacks have been sourced along with bolt cutters and screw drivers. There is also a length of rope and a gaff hook should scaling and rappelling be required.”

“Well done”, said Ryan enthusiastically, ”Now, to confirm, we will meet at “the meeting place” just after dark. From there we will all proceed to the pool complex where Gerry, Ian and I will affect entry. Tony and Token will remain outside as lookouts. Once we have all the ice creams and soft drinks secured, we will all make our way to the rendezvous point here.”, Ryan pointed to a park on the mud map, “Where there will be a distribution of items liberated from the oppressive Community Pool. From there, we split up and meet back at school tomorrow. Any Questions?”

“Just one”, piped up Tony, ”Why are we bringing along Token? He’s only eleven and he just gets in the way”.

“Good question, ”replied Ryan, ”Token is our failsafe in case of cop interference. Should we be captured, we shall all agree that this meeting never took place, it was Token’s idea, he planned everything and forced us to go along with it. Furthermore, we all only acted as lookout while Token broke in and forced us to carry everything. All agreed?”

“Yes!”, replied Ian, Tony and Gerry.

“What’s everyone talking about?”, asked Token, suddenly realising there was a conversation.
BROWN’S MART THEATRE AWARD

WINNER
Lee Frank
*Lured*

FINALISTS
Levin Diatschenko
*The Undying Swan*

Mary Anne Butler
*The Sound of Waiting*

Kate Leah Rendell
*Skin*
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