In the bareness of the stage, in the unhampered movement of bodies, in the paramount importance of speech, the magic of theatre ultimately resides. Diluted with other skills, it may become a popular tour de force, an experience to marvel at, but not this. In the dressing up of the text this has been taken away. But what is this? I think it is the nub of the whole thing, the plain place of creation.

… We all have these empty rooms in our heads waiting to be filled with words.

‘The Empty Room’

Dorothy Hewett
This time the cells are not human—well, some of them are mine and Ben’s, but others were sliced and fused into our own embryo, our baby. There is not one chromosome in this little ball of cells. It's a whole genome edited and reprinted: a new work using old materials.
From the Editors

Tucked away behind the New Fortune’s stage, the *Westerly* desk is a vertical space—a deep drop into an intricate literary heritage—and also one that has over the years constantly revised itself and survived in a landscape not always so convivial to independent writing and publishing. Turning sixty, the magazine finds itself at an exciting crossroads.

This issue is a bridge between two distinct eras at *Westerly*. After the retirement of esteemed editors Delys Bird, Dennis Haskell and Tony Hughes-D’Aeth and before the commencement of Catherine Noske’s editorship, we have been given the honour of editing 60:1, one that we hope pays tribute to *Westerly*’s past while also suggesting the magazine’s future. It is a great privilege and pleasure to have this opportunity, which would not have been possible without the support of Philip Mead, the vision and example of previous editors, and the tireless help of Catherine Noske, before she properly takes the editor’s seat.

These are trying times for literary journals, publishers, and most artists and arts organisations throughout Australia. In the face of devastations to our sector, we at *Westerly* have simply decided to push on. There is too much at stake and we are still very hopeful for the magazine’s future. Without *Westerly* there would not be a literary journal this side of Melbourne with a history commensurate with publications such as *Meanjin*, *Overland* and *Southerly*. We believe that with careful planning and community support *Westerly* will not only survive these times, but will emerge renewed once again, and Catherine Noske’s energy and leadership are already proving there is much to be hoped for. As John Berger reminds us: ‘Hope is a long affair’.

The volume and quality of submissions that we receive is testament to the fundamental necessity of our continued existence. We receive work from across the globe, but it is usually work from writers within Australia, and particularly from Western Australia, that we are most pleased to receive. It was an editor’s dream to have unpublished work by Dorothy Hewett arrive on our desk, and it was only through local ties in the writing community that this was able to come about. This is also true for the photographs by Randolph Stow that are published here with an accompanying essay by Kate Rendell (and are a reminder that it is not only the arts community that is suffering from mercenary budget cuts.) We are indebted to the estates of Hewett and Stow for this material. As *Westerly* bridges between its heritage and new beginnings it is so fitting to be able to include the work of two of the state’s literary icons, individuals who were also intimately involved with the genesis of the magazine.

We are also indebted to our skilled and hard-working external editors: our thanks to poetry editor Cassandra Atherton, whose first issue with *Westerly* is so intelligently selected; and our staunch fiction editor Amanda Curtin, who has once again made fine choices.

We would also like to acknowledge our new graphic designer, Becky Chilcott at Chil3. In collaboration with Keith Feltham at Lasertype, our loyal typesetter, she has designed a beautiful new look for the magazine, one that we hope reflects this exciting new era of *Westerly*—as it looks to its history and its future.

Editing can feel very like a backstage activity. As we sign off, behind the New Fortune Theatre, we cannot but be aware of Hewett’s paean to the beauty of the bare stage—its suggestiveness, its limitless and exciting quality. We hope you will enjoy some of the chalk lines that radiate between the many fine pieces in this issue. From that 'empty room'—to the marvellous stagey ‘Os’ of Nausheen Eusuf’s poem—to the ‘secret room of life’ in Donna Mazza’s arresting story.

Long live ‘the plain place of creation!’ Long live *Westerly*!

*Lucy Dougan & Paul Clifford*, June 2015
Erratum:

Westerly would like to make a correction to the essay ‘The Golden Years: 1986–1995’ written by Delys Bird and published in issue 59.2 (2014). On p. 186, in a discussion of emerging writers published in Westerly, the essay states: “Others are like Sari Hosie, whose first Westerly story was published in 4:1988 and who continued to contribute over several years, then disappeared from the writing scene.” Westerly would like to acknowledge that this is incorrect. Sari Hosie has continued to publish as Sari Smith, as well as contributing in many facets to the Australian literary community.

Sari’s work has appeared in anthologies and journals including *Hecate*, *antiTHESIS* and *Pandora* as well as *Westerly*, where most recently we featured ‘The Disappearance of the Mother’ (55.1: 2010) and an extract from ‘The Concert Angels’ (50.2: 2005). Sari’s contribution to literature has been recognised by her inclusion on the course lists of university subjects across several institutions. She has served as a lecturer, tutor and mentor to many developing writers both within and outside the academy. She continues her involvement in the literary scene, marking theses at tertiary level as well as writing.

We apologise sincerely for this error.

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**PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the annual Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 2014, to

**DAVID WHISH-WILSON**

For his story, ‘The Cook’

Published in Westerly 59:2, 2014

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Previously unpublished and newly uncovered, ‘Prologue to *The Empty Room*’ is the prologue to a second volume of Hewett’s autobiography. This extract illustrates her characteristically lively and elegant prose.

Provisionally entitled ‘*The Empty Room*’ and unfinished before her death in 2002, the piece follows on from the writing of *Wild Card* (1990).

To celebrate *Westerly*’s publication of ‘Prologue to *The Empty Room*’, UWA Publishing are offering 25% off a copy of *Wild Card*. Simply use the code WESTERYLC in our web shop

www.uwap.com.au
www.westerlymag.com.au
Dorothy Hewett, iconic Australian feminist poet, novelist and playwright, was working on the second volume of her autobiography The Empty Room at the time of her death.

The Empty Room

Dorothy Hewett

Prologue

Last night I dreamed I was dancing with Les Flood in the old Elizabethan Trust rehearsal room in Forbes Street. Light streamed high up from a dirty bank of windows that held only the sky, the floor was slippery with white chalk. We danced in perfect harmony as we had once danced fifty years before at Jack Marks' wedding. Jack Marks, the charismatic young communist and trade union organiser who became the mayor of North Perth, died of cancer in 1998. Les Flood died of a heart attack in 1982, and the Elizabethan Trust building was demolished more than a decade ago. The last rehearsal I attended there was in 1985, but it is the image of that empty room that survives; the floor marked out in chalk lines to guide the movement of actors, and the places where the stage furniture will eventually stand.

There is nothing else, only this space to be filled with movement and voices, with dialogue and perhaps music. Yet it is the most important metaphor in the theatre. Here there is nothing to mediate between the performance and the text, no set, no lighting, no stage machinery and no costumes. Everything is bare, bright, exposed. Before we move into the theatre for the tech and full dress there will be a performance in this place never to be repeated. The actors will present it to us, the director and the playwright, as the culmination of a month's hard work, moving resistant bodies, wrestling with meaning, memorising, cutting and creating. It is a performance for ourselves, a closed circle dedicated to us. There will be other moments in front of the footlights, breathtaking moments, imaginative sets, brilliant lighting, stylish costumes, seductive music, the thrill of the audience reaction, but nothing like this ever again.

How is it possible that such a distillation of meaning can only take place in an empty room? Was it something that the Elizabethans knew and that we have forgotten or never properly understood? In the barreness of the stage, in the unhampered movement of bodies, in the paramount importance of speech, the magic of theatre ultimately resides. Diluted with other skills, it may become a popular tour de force, an experience to marvel at, but not this. In the dressing up of the text this has been taken away. But what is this? I think it is the nub of the whole thing, the plain place of creation. Tomorrow we will leave this space and move into the theatre. We will learn to manipulate costumes, furniture and lights. We will move into a glamourised realism.

This journey that the modern play takes is exactly the same as the journey of the writer. We all have these empty rooms in our heads waiting to be filled with words. As we finish one project and move it out into the public arena, the room empties again and we begin another dance. Moving in and out of different houses, sometimes into rooms of my own, I have discovered these empty spaces, still devoid of furniture waiting to become my writing places. At first I had no room of my own. I wrote on my knee in longhand on the little back verandah on the farm, amongst the shelves of stored apples, and kept my poems in an Old Gold chocolate box. As a teenager I wrote curled up on the window seat in the dining room or in the deserted women's common room in the university. There with a diffuse yellow light streaming through the diamond patterned windows and the Virginia creeper knocking against the glass, I wrote poems, a one-act play and a novel that was never published. Late at night in 1958 when everyone slept, I wrote on the end of the red laminex table in the kitchen at Railway Parade, Rockdale. All that cold Sydney winter when we'd run out of money for coal for the cosy fire I warmed my frozen fingers on the gas burners on the stove. Bobbin Up, my first published novel, was written on the end of that table, typed up on my old manual Olivetti Portable. I went upmarket in the sixties. The first separate writing room I ever possessed was a room in South Perth furnished with a red shag carpet, a big jarrah desk, a filing cabinet and an air conditioner, where the children were told not to interrupt me. When I became a tutor in the English department in the University of Western Australia, I sometimes wrote in my study looking out over the great space of the New Fortune theatre, that ultimate emblem of the empty room. What a luxury it was to have two writing spaces that were my own. I wrote my first full-length play, This Old Man Comes Rolling Home, in these rooms, followed by three more plays and a collection of poems, before we packed up our belongings and left Western Australia forever.

In our Sydney terrace in Jersey Road, Woollahra, in the seventies I had a dark downstairs back room with a chill over it, where I discovered
a mad sister had once been shut up to scream. There I wrote Rapunzel in Suburbia, a poetry collection banned by the High Court of Australia. In the blazing Sydney summer of ’78, I moved upstairs to a tiny room looking out over the front courtyard. Below the window grew a little tree thick with red berries and bulbuls in a feeding frenzy. There I reread all of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, saturating myself in the magical atmosphere of reconciliation. Only then was I able to write a play called The Man from Mukinupin.

‘What is this, a fucking writing factory?’ roared Johnny Goodall, surrealist painter, poet and dobro player, the handsomest man in New Zealand, staggering down Jersey Road after midnight.

In Bourke Street Darlinghurst in the eighties, my large room downstairs was lined with books. The barred windows looked straight out onto the busy street where the derros with their bruised and bloody faces paused on their way to the Matthew Talbot for a free bed for the night.

‘Got a spare fag love?’

‘How about a light, missus?’

Once when I was typing up one of my unproduced film scripts a younger swollen face with a strange greenish pallor was pressed up against the bars.

‘What're y’writin’?’ the slurred voice asked. It was as if a corpse had spoken from under loads of green sea water.

‘A film script.’

‘What's it about?’

Feeling superior, I said, ‘It's based on a Conrad story.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he said. Heart of Darkness, and went lurching and chuckling into his own heart of darkness down Bourke Street.

Eventually I moved upstairs into ‘my gentle prison’ and typed on the end of the dining room table. Once arthritis had crippled my knees I seldom moved up or down because of the dangerous climb on the steep terrace stairs, but I did complete two more poetry collections and several plays before I started on the first volume of my autobiography. I finished Wild Card in a rented house in Oxford, next door to Shotover Wood, where Shelley once walked with Hogg. Milton’s great-grandfather was warden of the wood, and the squirrels swung all winter through the leafless branches. The study where I wrote looked out through a bay window into a garden lined with beds of daffodils.

At Faulconbridge in the Blue Mountains in the nineties, I watched my room built in the back garden to my own specifications. It is the loveliest room I have ever owned. When the late afternoon light streams in, the walls turn gold. The Japanese maple by the verandah is like a gilded tapestry moving backwards and forwards in the wind. What will I write in this room? Already we have shifted out all the furniture to host a play reading by the Mountain actors. I have completed a new novel and started on the second volume of this autobiography. What a long way I have come to this last space not unlike an old-fashioned farmhouse with the precious books lined up on the shelves around me. Here the seasons alter, the currawongs scrobble on the tin roof and the freight trains brake at the end of the old orchard infested with snails and fruit fly. It’s not really Eden, only a rough approximation, and anyway I am too old for it. I can’t walk there gathering the plums when they ripen in the summer. I can only watch them fall.

When I was a little girl I dreamed of a Red Resting Room, an opulent room hung with velvet in a mansion called Fairhaven where I would write and entertain my lovers. Why did I call it a resting room? Did writing come so easily and unselfconsciously then, I never realised what a hard tussle it actually is? Perhaps even then I was trying to invent a withdrawal space, separate from ordinary living, a space that belonged to me, where the only visitors would be at my invitation. My tastes have changed over the years, become plainer and more utilitarian, I have no lovers anymore. Only the room waits as it has always waited, to be emptied and filled again.
Two joists—pine—are hammered together side by side, fifty years past, under clouds. The storm clout timbers and swelled their sinews before the sun planed in to claim the nails. The outsides dried, the western joist faster. The hidden faces held that swell for longer. The joists cup to somewhat mirrored ‘C’s, an imperfect mirroring you may see of red tail lights over wet bitumen.

Fifty years later the heel of my hand is resting in the small cup of your back. We start to dance. The floor was never flat. Our night’s turn was determined decades past, the origin lost to our pining steps.

Your reds slide into an early shower as steam rises from the grey tiles.

We are gathered in a room for violin and piano, convened by invitation.

I let my gaze descend the program—great names, their dates, the hyphen of a life between them.

Outside, through the picture window, a last sun hits the rhododendrons and, suddenly, in this hushed moment the room fills up with death: the cloudy circus of a sky around the heart attack, the slowness of a five year cancer. The options ramify like roots out into the room.

Conceivably, we’ll go together, a man quite suddenly among us, his coat too heavy for the weather.

The first piece starts; they’re blonde and gifted—and not without some joie de vivre. They tell us that our death’s deferred.

Struck or bowed, the strings sustain us even as they shout or whisper stories of an end.
Five Occasions of Water
Paul Hetherington

Paul Hetherington’s most recent book of poetry, Six Different Windows (UWAP), won the 2014 Western Australian Premier’s Book Award for Poetry.

1. Sea
It lies on pale sand like an animal asleep, breathing slowly in its long dreaming. Surely nothing will wake it. Three boys enter its soft, excessive fur, and two girls follow, bobbing awkwardly. They are unflustered; parents call them in. Sun caresses and glares at it, but it does not wake. Night glosses its coat with knots and writhings of stars.

2. Peat Bog
He fell into her and began to disappear—slowly, like a man preserved in peat. What was left was a face searching for itself in extremity; exaggerated gestures of arms and hands. His days became a pre-occupation with immersion; the sensation of being bathed. When he was released he disliked the feeling of air and freedom, permeated as he was by staining, tannic water. New words felt odd and dry in his mouth. Months later he still walked in his old damaged rags, living in a solitude of what he no longer knew.

3. Houseboat
The flat water’s surface gathers shadows as a houseboat creeps into a lock. Days, centuries stand under the brows of houses. For a moment there’s a crowd and cries of announcement; a man dangling arms in the stocks. It vanishes; slow silence is like a hovering dragonfly. The houseboat drops as water rushes out. The boat’s small garden shudders; a woman unwinds hair.

4. Ocean
At its deepest we don’t know it—what currents suck; what creatures may abide. Occasionally a fish like a species of night; a goggling surprise, straddles a plank of a trawler’s deck. There’s no way of naming what we have no noun for. Scientists would preserve it but fishermen often throw it back. That released, sudden shudder.

5. Water
They fell out of him like water—words; emotions; stretched, elasticised thought. Years of knowledge dissolved and dissipated. His body was a thousand replayed events, every one spreading in general liquefaction. The words were ordinary enough, despite hooks and wires, and their dissolution turned them to rust. He saw a figure in a mirror like a red-hued rainstorm.
Blue Poles and INXS shuffle into a bar. 'What'll you have?'
'A warm banana milk.' 'A plate of raw whiskey and a slice of carrot.' 'You can't mime a broken arm.'
'No, really.' 'How did you like my poems earlier?' 'Before? I thought them clever and elegant.' 'Clever poems must be elegant.' Blue Poles became engaged then in a discussion regarding Robert Frost with a regular. 'What time is it?' 'I put it at half past Eureka.' 'So late!'
Someone comes in with a loaf of bread. Blue Poles defeats everyone in the bar at darts. The moon threatens a window. Blue Poles sings 'The Rose' INXS gets stuck in the Mens. Poor design. 'Same again? They laugh. 'I'll have a digital prune juice'
'A vodka primrose and a video burger.' Vegemite threatens the window INXS acts out a scene from Careful He

*Into A Bar*

Michael Farrell's latest poetry book is *Cocky's Joy* (Giramondo). His first scholarly book, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, is out from Palgrave later this year.

*Might Hear You.* 'Is it a letter from Mary Gilmore to Che Guevara?' 'Is it *The Magic Roundabout*?' Blue Poles pulls out an unfinished manuscript and begins to read. Intrigued publishers hover around or leave. INXS smirks immoderately
It was light and white, every colour and none. It was river quiet, all sounds drinking. We didn’t look at the water; we carefully avoided watching as the other boats swept past, strong oars and one or two pensioned four-horse engines rattling against the light chop. Our boatman was older than some, with sandy hair and a moustache draped across his face, a science teacher with shorts and an old cotton jumper, sandals with straps flapping loose. A strange, akubra-style hat with a brim at the front, like a cap. I hadn’t seen anyone wearing one like it. We reached out for the shore, we wanted to be shading the shore in the early damp glimpses of light. The boatman rowed on, step by sculled step.

It had seemed a good deal—’Boat, you need a boat?’—better than following the map down to Waterman’s where they haggle over prices and privileges, the decisions tired and finally arbitrary, a settling for whatever. He had stopped us in Hampden Road, led us down through early streets to a squat pier round the corner of the point. There was parkland, a few wattlebirds coughing. A dense jerry-mist smoking out the sunrise we had been led to believe was our reason for rising in the dark, filling the gaps in our warmest clothes.

’Boat, you need a boat?’ We had offered a lower price and walked on, lost our steps in Battery Point’s mouldering gentrification. It was still dark and the streets were shaped by night. We turned, backtracked, and there he was, chatting at the same early cafe counter. He knew he had us. We had settled on his figure, but forgot to specify a time.

It would have felt shifty to be bargaining at the main jetty, while others in white shorts did the same, staring and evaluating.

’Half an hour,’ he had said, as we warmed the jetty with shuffling feet. ’After that, if we go longer, we’ll work it out.’ The cool humidity, the early morning water rising up and swelling the air. ’What’s the time?’ he asked. You checked your watch and told him it was ten to six.

We had stepped on to the shallow dinghy and were drifting out on the Derwent, but our boatman pulled in almost immediately to the riverbank. A small girl, pigtails and jeans, skipped aboard and offered us candles attached to waratah flowers.

’How much will this cost?’ we asked the boatman.

’You can give what you like, you don’t have to give her anything,’ he replied. We took the candles and lit them, settling them on the river where they rose and fell for a few seconds before drowning.

’It’s for the pine,’ she said awkwardly. ’You should be thinking about the pine.’ Then more certain, she held out her hand. ’That’s thirty dollars, now.’

’Thirty?’ I had turned towards the boatman. ’You said we didn’t have to give her anything. They’re worth a couple of bucks.’

’I said you can give her something. You can give her what you want, it’s not my business.’

I turned to the girl and her hand, her set, confident face. ’I’ll give you ten dollars. They’re not worth that.’

She spoke briefly with the boatman, accepted the money and jumped off a little downstream.

The wooden craft, of bark or of wood, oars gulping in the water. The fresh and rising perspective on the steps leading down into the water. The groups swimming and washing, the mud sedimented across the jetties. The mountain in the background, a grey shawl across the city’s shoulders. The beginning of the burning, the smoke waiting in the temperature inversion. The figures swimming in the filthy water, the heavy metals and diseases, the osmosis, the careless vents in the body.

We had travelled barely any distance down the river. ’Turn back now?’ he was asking us. Hardly any time at all. ’Turn back now and it will be your half hour.’ Just a little longer, we thought, this is an only river, this is a river on which we have to fill up our experience so its name spells what we have undergone. Just a little longer. There are some rocks we haven’t seen bursting from the old buildings and the shore, the sandstone church beaconing from the hill. The converted port warehouses. The bodies waiting for cremation in piles of celery top pine. A little longer.

The boat trickled. The boat did not blend with the water, the boat found a way to trickle alongside it, holding pace and nodding at suggestions from the oars. We looked at each other. Another warehouse, another set of cleansing stairs. The white on thick white. The river stretched down towards a framed horizon. Maybe this was now the time to head back, we murmured to each other quietly. We hesitated. You asked the boatman to
turn around. He nodded and struggled with different patterns of rowing. He began paddling against the flow of the current.

Perhaps we stood still, shuffling through the water. You glanced at the time. I watched the shoreline freeze, tried to pause the rush of worry, to remember where I was, the figures bathing. I needed to remember the people swimming in this freezing estuary. This was their river, dissolving and depositing their bodies. We had balanced on it and borrowed from it, but they knew moments we didn’t and couldn’t know, no matter what it was that told us. The rush streamed back into my mind.

I tried to look at your watch. You moved your wrist and I could see that the time was exhausted. We were only half way back to the pier. The boat was steady in the haze, or the fog, or the mist. The boat was aware of floating, more floating when the river is covered by white. Everyone talked about the sunrise.

The boatman leaned easily back and forth like he was stretching. He was watching the football, he was having an evening beer, he was swallowing spring rolls from the stalls downstream in the tourist districts. He was a lazy old bastard, he wasn’t even trying. You fiddled with your watch. I glared at the view as though somebody had locked my head, forced me to look at something I had no longing for. I noticed an opportunity on the riverbank.

‘Can you let us out here?’ I asked as he played with his oars in the water. An early pier. ‘We can get out here.’

His face strained, he adjusted the angles of the boat. ‘I’ll let you out here,’ he said. He eased the skiff into a few planks holding their chins above the water. ‘That’s forty-five minutes. You’ll have to pay for three quarters of an hour.’

The sunrise was an event that required programming. The crowds came down to the river and made a deal with a boatman.

‘No,’ you say, ‘look, it’s only 6:20 am. It’s half an hour.’ You held the watch out towards him. ‘It’s only half an hour.’ We crouched towards standing, and I reached for my canvas wallet.

‘We’ve only been going longer.’ The boatman shook his head and watched my hands. ‘From the green warehouse back to here, mate, it’s three-quarters of an hour.’ We had stopped alongside the pier, where the dinghy undulated on gentle river wavelets. The boatman was sitting in the bow. His hands rested against the oars.

‘It’s a fair price,’ I contributed, ‘twenty bucks is a good price.’

‘We’ve only been going half an hour,’ you urged, ‘look!’ You pointed your watch towards him again. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to read it.

‘All right,’ he said. He accepted what was happening, where we were all standing. ‘Twenty bucks. You say it’s half an hour, but I know.’

We paid the boatman, we hurried off the flat deck and jetty on to the shore. We heard his voice back at the jetty, speaking to someone. It was lighter on the way back, easier to find our way through the sick yellow steps, easy to turn left and then right, and right again, easy to step carefully to the breakfast bakery, for eggs, we will eat fresh eggs, easily on toast, with toast.
My title alludes to Anna Haebich’s fine study of post-war assimilation, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970*. Haebich’s title plays on the word ‘spin’ to invoke both the contemporary sense of the word as a euphemism for the work done by politicians and their ‘spin doctors’ to restate events in their most favourable light, and also, more radically, to suggest a certain inversion or turning about of accepted wisdom. The ‘Dream’ in her title points, of course, in part to the dream-time or the dreaming, in which Aboriginal worlds are made and re-made. But, more directly, the ‘dream’ Haebich is addressing in her book is the dream of assimilation, of a society in which cultural difference magically disappears and is replaced by a shining, harmonious, homogenous and undeniably white future. In other words, there is an implied dialectic between blackfella and whitefella dreaming; one an animist cosmogony of creation, the other an ideological engine of assimilation. Haebich reminds us, though, that at the time of its inception in the years after the war, assimilation represented the progressive alternative to the segregationist policies that had prevailed hitherto. By the end of the period, the late 1960s, the insidious aims of assimilation were increasingly difficult to defend, and a new language started to emerge, first of ‘integration’ and then, into the 1970s, one of ‘self-determination’ and ‘multiculturalism’.

It was during these two decades that Haebich specifies as the hey-day of the assimilation dream, 1950-1970, that the Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis (1917–2000) entered public life. He had joined the Brookton Aboriginal Church, founded by Mary Jones, the daughter of an evangelical Presbyterian minister, in 1949 (Chesson 123). Davis taught in the Sunday School at the Brookton Aboriginal Church and became a lay preacher, developing skills of advocacy and communication that would serve him in his later life as an activist and public intellectual. After two years with the Church, Davis left Brookton to work on the wheatbins further afield, but the general paucity of work in rural areas forced him to Perth by the early 1960s. There he got a job with Co-operative Bulk Handling weighing wheat, and was able to buy a house in the modest, then semi-rural, south-eastern suburb of Maddington (Chesson 136). In Perth, Davis became involved in the Nyoongah Church, and through them, the Aboriginal Advancement Council (AAC; formed in 1963, formerly the Western Australian Native Welfare Council). Thus Davis joined the emerging national advocacy for Aboriginal rights that was given focus by the formation in 1958 of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), an organisation which brought together the various State-based advancement councils and which would become instrumental in the campaign that led to the successful citizenship referendum in 1967. Davis became the Western Australian state secretary of FCAATSI in 1969 and also in that year, the director of the AAC.

A decade later Davis had largely retired from his career as an activist and public servant to concentrate on writing and was beginning a period of sustained creative success, particularly on the stage, but it is clear that the concerns that had occupied him in public life were continuing to shape his literary works. Davis had briefly experimented with theatre in the early 1970s, staging a one-act play ‘The Dreamers’ at an Arts festival in Bunbury in 1972 (Chesson 191). This play was a section of a longer play that Davis had written under the title, ‘The Steel and the Stone’. The original scripts for both this play and the Bunbury play drawn from it do not seem to have survived, but it appears that they became the basis for the trilogy of great plays that began with *Kullark* (*Home*) in 1979, and also included *The Dreamers* (1982) and *No Sugar* (1985). All three plays deal with the plight of the Noongar people as they met the full force of colonialism in the nineteenth century and then the segregation and assimilation policies of the twentieth century. *Kullark* (*Home*) appeared in 1979, Western Australia’s Sesquicentenary year, alongside Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin*—and the two plays share a similar subversive spirit. Both plays, Hewett’s and Davis’s, were produced by the National Theatre, though Davis’s play was in an off-shoot of the main theatre called Theatre-in-Education, which produced drama for school children and was run by Andrew Ross. Ross directed *Kullark* and staged it at the Titan Theatre in Perth. The collaboration of Davis and Ross was a key ingredient in the success of *Kullark* and of the later plays. It was the success of *Kullark* in 1979 that allowed Davis and Ross to re-work the one-act version of ‘The Dreamers’ that Davis had staged in Bunbury in
1972 into a two-act full-length play. The Dreamers debuted at the Dolphin Theatre at the University of Western Australia in February 1982, before touring nationally the following year.

It may sound obvious, but the key to understanding The Dreamers is ascertaining who is dreaming. In its basic substance, the play—like Kullark—is realist, and like the earlier play is set in the present-day household of a Noongar family, the Wallitch’s. Also like Kullark, the exact location is not given—just ‘South-Western Australia’—although we learn that the youngest son, Shane, plays for South Midland and it seems that they live in the outskirts of Perth, in what is optimistically known as the Swan Valley. The dynamics, though, are distinctly those of a country town, with a local hospital, a local policeman who knows them well, complete with a lock-up (also well known), and local shops, and a pub named The Exchange Hotel. Even if they live on the fringes of the metropolitan area, the wider circle is clearly that of the wheatbelt, particularly that axis of it that follows the Avon into the Great Southern, with relatives and events scattered through those towns—periodic visits from the ‘Northam mob’, fights at the ‘six acre reserve’ at Williams, footy games at Wagin, trips to Katanning Show, cousins in Gnowangerup and so on. Perth itself is hardly mentioned. The action of the play takes place in two Acts, the first in summer (‘Beeruk’ in the cycle of Noongar seasons) and the second in winter (‘Moorga’) later that same year. The main drama surrounds the slow death of Uncle Worru (played by Davis in both the 1972 and the 1982 versions). In Act One, Worru is picked up from the hospital and brought home to the Wallitch house, where he immediately starts drinking again with the layabout men—Roy (the father), Roy’s cousin Eli, and Roy’s eldest son, Peter—who live there. The house is managed by the family’s matriarch, Dolly, who keeps the fragile finances together and looks after the indolent men and the two high-school age children, Shane and Meena. In Act Two, Worru is seen to have gotten steadily worse, and more prone to the hallucinations that were sporadically occurring in the first Act. He is forced back to hospital against his wishes, and dies there. The play ends with a eulogy to Worru by Dolly.

Underneath this mortal arc, the various activities of Wallitch life are seen to transpire. The daughter Meena is trying hard at school, and battles her own family’s chronic disorderliness as best as she can. She has also started seeing a boyfriend and staying out later. Shane is less academically minded, but not yet a victim to the shiftless ways of his elder brother Peter, his father Roy and Uncle Eli. It is this roguish constellation of Aboriginal men that carry the main action of the play. Their first act is to take the money that Dolly has given them for the children’s lunch and buy a flagon of wine, and much of the rest of the play has them engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with Dolly in which she is trying to get them to help her run the house, and they are trying to scheme their way toward more alcohol. Though the situation seems dire, the overall mood is never especially bleak, and one instead finds, beneath the hopelessness, a certain knockabout resilience in the Wallitch family. The fact of imprisonment seems to be borne almost too lightly by the men, as if it was just in the nature of the world. They certainly hold the wetjala responsible for their plight, but equally point the finger at themselves.

**PETER** Look, Nyoongahs buy their grog from Wetjalas, they break the law and they get jugged by Wetjalas. The lawyer’s white, the cops are white, the magistrate’s white, the warden’s white, the whole box and dice is white. Put a Nyoongah against all them. I tell you we ain’t got a bloody chance.

...  

**ELI** Look at this – busted eye, broken nose, busted eardrum [pointing to his head] thirteen stitches. You know who done all that? Not Wetjalas, but Nyoongahs, me own fuckin’ people! (18)³ Their drunken debates about such matters provide, indeed, a refreshingly honest assessment of the social problems that mar their world. Despite the difficulties of their life, there is also a kind of spirit of adventure born out of the hand-to-mouth quality of their existence. Each day presents a new, even if familiar, challenge to their wits and resources and the family seems to be sticking together rather than falling apart.

The basic social realism of the play, however, is disrupted by the appearance at key points in the play of an entirely different time-scheme. So, before being cast into the bustle of the Wallitch family gathering chaotically for breakfast with the kids on the way to school, the audience is firstly treated to a vision of the past—a past which bears ambiguously on the present-day travails of the Wallitch family. The play begins as follows:

*Weste...*
As these directions make clear, it is Worru who is going to function as the bridging character between this silhouetted past and the vivid social realism of the main action. The play thus delivers a central dialectic that had featured in Davis's poetry of the 1970s, particularly his landmark volume, *The First-born* (1970). The poems in this volume oppose the nightmare of Aboriginal life ‘today’ with the image of Aboriginal life before colonisation. In this they follow in large measure the animating vision laid out in his good friend Kath Walker’s poetry, which Davis acknowledges as a key inspiration for his own work. It is, of course, an impossible comparison: there is something incommensurable between the universes of pre- and post-contact Aboriginality. No living person spans the two realities and even those who might—and Albert Namatjira was the archetype for this doubled figure in the post-war years—seem to also emblematise the impossibility of this reconciliation. The problem is exposed, in fact, by the act of writing and goes to the heart of what changes when a community constituted through oral knowledge enters a universe where lives are determined by documents. Davis was conscious of this antinomy; indeed he was perhaps more sharply aware of it, through the singular circumstances of his life, than anyone had previously been. Born to illiterate Aboriginal parents, Davis was the first in his family to write and the last in his family to not write. But knowledge inside his nuclear family was not primarily oral. Both his parents had been removed from a very early age from their tribal families on Pilbara stations and had grown up in white homes. At Moore River, at the age of 14, Davis came face-to-face with the kind of tribal people that his parents had been taken from, dragged into Mogumber’s net by some bureaucratic vicissitude or another. The memory of these aging tribal Aborigines is a crucial element in the poems and plays of Davis. After Moore River, Davis was immersed in the adapted life of Noongars on the Brookton Reserve in the 1930s. Under the tutelage of his stepfather Bert Bennell, he existed in the blended world of oral tradition and modern rural life. In his early twenties, he went to the Gascoyne, where he spent the next decade, experiencing life both as a fringe-dweller in Carnarvon and a stockman on the stations.

In all of these ways, Davis is a pivotal figure, exposed to Aboriginality in many of its key variants: from the assimilated life of his father’s timber town at Yarloop, to the annihilationist brutality of Moore River, to the reserves of Brookton and Carnarvon, to the segregated world of the cattle station, and finally to the political life of Aboriginal advocacy in metropolitan Perth. In the apparent simplicity of Davis’s poems and plays, we see in fact a concatenation of each of these systems of Aboriginal being. This is not always obvious in the gentle lyricism of the poems or the earthy realism of the plays, but it is impossible to understand them without also being exposed to the intersection of epochs which they dramatise. Uncle Worru in *The Dreamers* is the embodiment of the irreconcilability of Aboriginal history and it is significant that Davis cast himself in this part. As the silhouetted Aboriginal family disappears from the ridge in the opening image of the play, the spotlight falls on Worru who delivers an opening soliloquy. It is in the form of an elegiac poem, reminiscent of those in *The First-born*, which dwell on the bitter irony of Aboriginal survival:

I walked down the track
where the camp place used to be
and voices, laughing, singing
came surging back to me.

Now we who were there
who were young,
are now old and live in suburbia,
and my longing is an echo
a re-occuring dream,
coming back along the track
from where the campfires used to gleam. (8–9)

The ‘re-occuring dream’ in this poem initiates the inference that it is Worru, and others of his generation, who are the *dreamers*, condemned to dream of times that are now lost. There is thus a pathos attached to the concept of dreaming in the very first scene of the play. As the play unfolds, Worru is retrieved from his latest visit to the hospital, vowing never to return come what may, and brought into the house of his niece, Dolly Wallitch. There, as we have seen, he joins seamlessly into the drinking and banter of the men. In time-honoured fashion they gently rib their old uncle, calling him ‘Pop’ or ‘Popeye’, but also retain a certain reverence for his knowledge about the old ways and days. The younger men wind him up, and he tells them stories while they drink and play cards. The stories are as important for the way he tells them, particularly the Noongar words and expressions that pepper his speech, as for the incidents they relate:

**WORRU:** Well, they was gitten old fellas, them two, Cornell and Milbart, they was stayin' in Wagin an' they wanted to git to Katanning Show, see? And they was wararning [scared] of the train, real wararning. [Laughing.] Anyways, they
got in a railway carriage and that train was goin' keert kooliny, keert kooliny [quickly] rounds them bends and them corners. An' – an' – they was... they was ...

As the play progresses, Worru seems to fall increasingly back into Noongar speech, until several of his speeches in the second Act are entirely in Noongar. At the same time, and concomitantly, Worru begins to address less and less the people in the room than the figures in his memory. One can certainly see a resemblance here to the dramatic structure in Hewett's The Man From Mukinupin, where the traumatic history exists in uncanny fashion in the form of a doddering elderly figure speaking at cross-purposes to the main dialogue. Worru performs a function not unlike those of the 'night people' in Hewett's play—the Sisters Hummer, Zeek Perkins, Touch of the Tar, Harry Tuesday—by importing a history that is conditioning the overt drama but excluded from the consciousness of those caught in it. The key difference, however, is that in Hewett's play the white wheatbelt town occupies the foreground and the traumatic remnants of contact are in the creek-bed behind the town. But in Davis's play, the ramshackle Wallitch house is the locus of action.

What Davis brilliantly succeeds in dramatising is the fact that the Wallitch clan is actively repressing not just its history but the present reality of their lives. This is a central issue for the problem of assimilation. In this sense, Davis is a writer somewhat in the mould of Toni Morrison, whose novels depict black American families caught within America's traumatic history. White oppression exists in Morrison's novels as a background condition, rather than forming the substance of the overt action. The novels do not gloss over racial injustice, but nor are they occupied with dramatising it directly. Instead, Morrison's novels focus on the more insidious effects of the history of black America, the way that its extreme conditions have produced a certain terrifying morality of the defeated. Again, this is not to underplay, either, the resilience and heroism that certain characters in those novels display, but to suggest that Morrison's work is so powerful because it locates exactly the nature of the struggle. Davis does this too. Certainly, we see a family who has virtually nothing to show for themselves, they live hand-to-mouth, dependent on 'SS' (Social Security) payments, which they typically gamble or drink as soon as they collect them. The eldest Wallitch son, Peter, is clearly already going off the rails in the first Act, and has to be bailed out of the local lock-up after being caught riding in a stolen car. In the second Act, he is in gaol at Woorooloo, and Dolly has to visit him, though we the audience never see him after this. The fact that Peter is now in gaol does not preoccupy the family and the drama is not built around this young man's life being wasted, or of the system chewing up yet another young Noongar. The real tragedy in fact seems to be that no one treats the matter as a tragedy. It is here that the title of Davis's play begins to invert. It is not Worru who is beset by dreams of an earlier, better time, it is the modern-day Wallitch's who are dreaming away the disaster of their daily lives. Indeed, Worru's visions speak more clearly to the current predicament, than the angry disputations and petty recriminations of the Wallitch family. Not that the play condemns the family utterly. There seems a genuine warmth and rough-hewn affection that makes up for their many failings. But nevertheless, the presence of Worru frames their squabbles in a grander, more tragic confrontation.

The men represent the struggle of modern Aboriginal life and the different strategies that have been evolved to survive the challenges in it. Roy, the father and notional head of the family, is a pragmatist, wanting to do the right thing where possible, but not always succeeding and not often trying very hard. But he never abandons his family and though he wears his sense of duty lightly, tends to shirk rather than fully abdicate. Of course, his indefatigable wife Dolly manages to keep things going even when he is skiving off. But as the play folds into the second Act, Dolly loses the sheen of ideal matriarch, and more often than not is joining in the drinking too. The two younger children, Meena and Shane, while not 'going bad', are also gradually being caught up in the tribulations of teenage years. Eli, Roy's cousin, has survived through a mixture of appeasement and con-artistry, begging money in the local town with the assistance of a fake eye-patch. Dolly's nephew Robert appears in the second Act, with a car and education. He lives in the city and is resented by Eli for the implied slight on his life. Throughout all of this Worru wanders, neither neglected nor particularly noticed.

Jack Davis wrote later that the character of Worru from The Dreamers was a 'composite character' that drew on three men he met during his nine months at Moore River in 1932. The first was 'Skipper, blind with trachoma, hunched and alone in a world of his own':

In the early evening I would stoke his fire and perch quietly on the outskirts of its glow, and he would sit, sightless, staring at the warmth. It was as if he could see a vision of the past in that fire, yet he was oblivious to the sparks and flames that rose from the coals ... He was always aware of my presence, and when his disposition changed he would begin to recall the past, as if it dwelt there, alive in the flames.
There was a strength and dignity in Skipper’s account of Aboriginal life before the advent of European settlement, and through the passing years that impression has never left me. (Chesson 36)

Davis went on to describe how Skipper, sometimes with his wife Nora, would start to sing in their own language, tapping the rhythm on a tobacco tin. Neither Davis nor most of the others from Moore River could understand the pair’s Kimberley dialect, but the effect was entrancing nevertheless. In the gradual conversion of Worru from Aboriginal English to ‘pure’ Noongar, one sees an impulse in The Dreamers for him to occupy this state of direct, languaged being that Skipper had, even when he seemed to have precious little else. The two other sources for Worru were Winarn and Jack Henry, both also master raconteurs. From Winarn, Davis seems to have drawn the irascible dimension of Worru, that comes out in his more humorous tales. In The Dreamers, Worru tells the story of a man so drunk he rolled in his sleep onto the campfire and burnt his arm badly enough for it to require amputation—this was Winarn. From Jack Henry, Davis draws Worru’s enmeshment in the deep time of radical social alteration. Henry possessed the rare quality of seeing the event as history: ‘He could recall a time when Aborigines had not been affected by European intrusion, saw that period as a golden age, and regretted its passing’ (37).

An apparent fourth source for the figure of Worru was a man, also met at Moore River, named Warru. Davis writes about him in the poem ‘Warru’ from The First-born and discusses the man in the introduction that was adapted from an interview with Richard Beilby:

Warru fascinated me. Although I was only fourteen years of age and he was a man of at least forty-five, he came from the North-west, the same area where my dad came from and he was of the same tribe. I used to spend many hours talking to him: he used to sing aboriginal songs and I used to write down the aboriginal words, and of course, the first chance I got to go hunting with him I was happy. (xi)

It is possible that this Warru was not a fourth man, distinct from Skipper, Winarn and Jack Henry, but already and perhaps without any conscious realisation on Davis’s part, a composite figure. He seems, for instance, to unite the Aboriginal singing of Skipper with the life of a stockman lived by Winarn. At 45 he seems younger than the other men, and this too hints at the possibility of this being an idealised conflation of father-substitutes: ‘He was a remarkable man. He could track things which I couldn’t see.

He could also throw a spear forty or fifty feet, deadly accurate, and even a stone thrown at a bird, seven times out of ten he would bring the bird down. He had a beautiful voice …’ (The First-born, xi). But this idealisation is ultimately qualified by a later encounter:

Many years after, I met him in Perth. Of course I was twenty-eight years of age and he could only just remember me and half the time I think he just said he remembered me so that he could get a few bob off me. His eyesight had gone, he was dressed in hand-me-down clothing, he had taken to the drink—of course, he always chewed tobacco but now he smoked and I often saw him picking up butts in the street. He camped wherever he could, in parks, under bridges and that one day I heard that they found him dead in Wellington Square, curled around the butt of a tree. That was my friend Warru. (xii)

In all of these figures—Skipper, Winarn, Jack Henry, Warru and Worru—the significant element is a contrast between present decay and earlier vitality. Whether motivated by the shock of his own father’s loss—the next sentence in the account is, ‘We’d hardly been back a month from Moore River Native Settlement … when my father died’ (xii)—or by the need to emblematise cultural destruction, the recurrence of this figure is a pronounced feature of Davis’s work.

But in The Dreamers the matter does not rest there. Worru is not—unlike the Warru of the account above—just seen to drink himself into oblivion and die unmourned in a city park. The Worru of The Dreamers seems to act as a living window into the history that runs through the Wallitch family in ways they cannot comprehend. Worru’s connection is a double one because he contains both the direct link to Moore River—where he was incarcerated—and to the place before the catastrophe, ‘where the campfires used to gleam’. When Worru returns from hospital and gets drunk with Roy, Eli and Peter, the scene ends with him attempting to dance before falling over and then being replaced by another dancer who is young, vital and connected to his culture:

WORRU rises and begins a drunken stumbling version of a half-remembered tribal dance. PETER turns the volume up and continues his own disco dance. WORRU pushes him aside and dances to the amusement of ELI and ROY, until his feet tangle and he falls heavily.

The scene freezes, the light changes, and the radio cuts abruptly to heavy rhythmic didgeridoo and clap sticks. An
intricately painted DANCER appears on the escarpment against a dramatic red sky, dances down and across them, pounding his feet into the stage. Finally, he dances back up the ramp where he poses for a moment before the light snaps out on the last note of music. (21)

The same pattern occurs several scenes later when Worru, after reminiscing with Dolly about Moore River, lies down and drifts away, mumbling to himself, then calls out to his old friend Milbart, long dead:

WORRU Milbart, Milbart, Milbart! Gitji wah, Milbart. Make a spear, I wanna catch a kulanka. Make spear, Milbart! Gitji wah!

Didgeridoo crashes in, the lights change. The DANCER appears at front of stage in stylised rhythmic steps, searches for a straight stick, finds it, straightens it, pares and tips it before sprinting up the ramp onto the escarpment and striking the mirrolgah stance against a dramatic sunset as the music climaxes.

One can see how the dramaturgy of the play depends on the continued intrusion of this other scene, this determining prior moment. All the elements of stagecraft are used to bring about its existence, the challenge being to portray autonomous (pre-colonial) Aboriginal culture as a present absence, something which is there, but not there. This pre-existing culture is built into the play’s setting via a back-drop that encircles the rear of the stage and also features an elevated walkway. This back-drop works as a stylised escarpment, approximating the view one gets of the Darling Ranges from Perth and the coastal plain. In this sense it is the sign, from the metropolis, of the interior—and so also is the insignia of the world before colonisation. In the opening of the play, the Aboriginal tribal family marches quietly across this escarpment, silhouetted, like a shadow-play. At the end of the first Act they march in the other direction, again silently, but this time in chains. The lighting changes and so does the music. The DANCER functions as an emissary for these people, entering the foreground of the stage to embody the culture that is chained in the background.

In fact, the play constructs a lineage that runs from the social reality of the Wallitch family in present day south-western Australia, through the mediating figures of Worru and the DANCER, and finally to the lost tribes of the Noongar and the spiritual origins of the Dreaming. At the beginning of the second Act, the family appear once again, this time in bedraggled clothes indicative of the years after colonisation, spent on the fringes of white settlement. The key element in the dramatisation is the layering effect that Davis achieves, the existence of multiple moments, traumatic and excluded from present reality, but also constituting it:

A cold wet winter afternoon. The kitchen/living room is shabby and untidy, dirty dishes piled up on the sink, rubbish, bottles, cigarette packets on floor. Clean clothes are draped over a chair in front of a single bar radiator. WORRU’s bed has been turned around, his room is squalid.

An eerie traditional chant as the family of Scenes One and Nine of Act One trudge across the escarpment against a bleak, wintry sky. The women lead carrying an assortment of boxes and bundles. They are inadequately dressed in blankets and shabby period clothes.

As the sound fades and they disappear, a light builds on WORRU lying on his bed moaning and mumbling a mournful litany, half English, half Nyoongah. He coughs painfully, raises himself and staggers feebly into the kitchen. (47)

As the figures on the escarpment gradually come to meet—each in their ‘shabbiness’—one another, the effect is to invest the Wallitch’s tumble-down lives with historical dignity. At the same time, Worru’s gaze deepens, now looking past the colonised family in their ‘shabby period clothes’ towards the very thing that had vitalised them in their first serene, proud march across the scarp. In the second act, Worru begins to see and sing about the Featherfeet (Tjena guppi), mythical creatures that prey on the unsuspecting. He sings a song in Noongar:
Shafts of cold light fade in revealing the DANCER as featherfoot at the front stage. He is heavily decorated with leaves and carries two short sticks. He dances slowly across the stage and up on to the escarpment and off as the music and lights fade.

One should not underestimate the achievement of Davis in introducing Noongar language into European theatre. As Davis pointed out, the language was gravely imperilled by the second half of the twentieth century, and it remains so. By the late twentieth century few, if any, spoke the language as a primary medium of expression, although the language persisted in hybrid with English as a variegated Noongar pidgin used by Noongar families throughout the southwest. The featherfoot song sung by Worru contains only nine Noongar words but in its particular cadence, repetition, and sense of humour bespeaks a whole set of relations. It is like a tiny cell of living culture. Its presence in a contemporary Australian play is more or less a miracle.

Unlike The First-born, Davis’s first book, which included a lengthy word-list and an extended introduction of the poet, The Dreamers brokers Noongar culture and language without hesitation or apology. What becomes apparent as the play reaches its climax—the death of Worru—is that this language emerges as the true hero of the play. Noongar language, initially experienced as ethnic colouring, insists itself ever more strenuously into the action of the play. Its residue in the speech of the Wallitch family turns it into a kind of long, lost relation—joining them as they argue, reminisce, debate, joke, tease and insult each other. In Worru it gradually overtakes him as he dies. In other words, he literally dies into language. Worru thus becomes not, in a favoured phrase of the colonist, the last of his tribe, but a sacrificial carrier of culture’s continuance. Realising this helps us to understand the full range of meaning given by the play’s title, The Dreamers. On the one hand, the play can be seen as a working through of the dialectic that is implicit in Haebich’s historical critique of assimilation, the opposition of whitefella and blackfella dreaming. But the play brings this dialectic into the very heart of the modern Noongar family, into the intimate identifications and histories that compete for recognition in the symbolic universe of modern Indigenous Australia. In this acting out of the assimilation dilemma, the play moves us through several dimensions of this problem. First, we might well have thought that it was Worru, and those generations marked by incarceration at Moore River, who are the ‘dreamers’ of the play’s title. Worru’s increasing absences from the here-and-now of Wallitch family life depict him as increasingly lost in his own dreams of earlier times; difficult times, more painful but more real. Then it seemed that it was the present generation of Wallitch’s who were dreaming their reality away, sleepwalking through the wasteland of their cultural holocaust. Finally the play poses something much more hopeful, which is that Noongar culture continues to dream its subjects even though they have forgotten it. In this sense, it is Noongar culture which is dreaming its subjects into existence.

The status of the dream in The Dreamers remains open in the play’s concluding sequence. The final scene, at least the final scene from within the realist body of the play, takes place in the small hours of the morning. Worru has relapsed—‘got a fright and fell out of bed’ (76)—and been taken back to hospital by Dolly. The others wait in the house for news. Shane goes into Worru’s room to fetch a blanket but returns shaken by ‘something’ he has seen in the room:

| MEENA | What's up? |
| SHANE | Something in there. |
| MEENA | Where? |
| SHANE | In Popeye’s room. |
| ELI | Ah, you seein’ things. (77) |

Then Roy, Shane’s father, goes to the room and also clearly sees something in the room, but refuses to say what he has seen. We never know what Roy and Shane have seen, or whether this is what Worru had also seen and caused the ‘fright’ that had led to his most recent—and as it would prove—fatal, collapse. Circumstantially, and most prominent within the aural and visual memory of the audience, we might conjecture that the thing that all three have seen is the ‘Featherfoot’, whose song Worru had sung during the previous day. If we credit this interpretation, it becomes clear that the figure of the Featherfoot is indeed a strikingly apt avatar for the project of assimilation. Assimilation was so insidious because it did not attack with guns and chains, but by working quietly (with feather feet, as it were) on the parameters of what one believed was possible. Like all ideology, assimilation assumes its power by monopolising the vision of the future, by determining in advance what was inevitable, and by offering an apparent choice in such a way that there really was no choice at all.

The scene concludes by grimly naming the effect of the assimilation ideology. A spotlight shines on the DANCER, not dancing this time but singing ‘sorrowfully’, cross-legged on the escarpment:
Nitja Wetjula, warrah, warrah! [The White man is evil, evil!]
Gnullarah dumbart noychwa. My people are dead.
Noychowa, noychwa, noychwa. Dead, dead, dead.
Wetjala kie-e-ny gnullarah dumbart. The white man kill my people.
Kie-e-ny, kie-e-ny, kie-e-ny, Kill, kill, kill,
Kie-e-ny. Kill.] (77–78)

This simple threnody is then taken up by Dolly, who delivers the play's closing soliloquy, an eulogy to her dead uncle. This effectively gives the play two full-stops. The first in Noongar announcing 'the white man kill my people'. The second in the a-b-a-b scheme of European poetry:

Stark and white the hospital ward
In the morning sunlight gleaming,
But you are back in the moodgah now
Back on the path of your Dreaming.

I looked at him, then back through the years,
Then knew what I had to remember:
A young man, straight as wattle spears
And a kangaroo hunt in September. (78–79)

In this final sequence, then, we have combined the dance of the Featherfoot; the mysterious 'something' that had disturbed the vision of Worru, Shane and Roy; the DANCER's declaration in Noongar that 'the white man kill my people'; and finally, the restoration in Dolly's poem of Worru to the 'path of [his] Dreaming'. This constellation of effects represents the response the play has to the project of assimilation. In this sense, the play is moving beyond the period of the formal policy that Haebich traces between the years 1950 and 1970. It sees assimilation as reaching back into the earlier colonial period and forward to a time where the goal of assimilation has supposedly been abandoned. In this generalisation of assimilation into the broader historical crisis of Noongar culture, it becomes clear that in The Dreamers assimilation is not a policy but a limit point called into being by the forces of history. The animating ambiguity of the play subsists in the question of whether the dream is the resistance to those forces or their feathered emissary.

Notes
1 Jack Davis donated his personal papers to AIATSIS. These papers are under embargo due to competing claims over their ownership. I was given permission to review these papers for the purpose of this research, and was not able to find these early play-scripts. However, I would stress that mine was a cursory review and that the papers were only partially indexed. A full scholarly assessment of his papers remains to be done.
2 Indeed, Davis credits Ross with a number of the crucial technical elements in the stagecraft that helped to bring Kullark's sudden historical shifts into a viable dramatic form.
3 Page references are to the 2001 edition of The Dreamers.
4 The key study of the phenomenological consequences of life in primary oral cultures (cultures which have no writing and no awareness that writing exists) and life in cultures determined by writing is Walter J. Ong's Orality and Literacy (1982). Building partly on Ong's work, the intricacies of the Aboriginal encounter with writing are traced in Penny van Toorn's Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia (2006).
5 The contemporary Noongar writer Kim Scott has undertaken a profound meditation on the nature of Noongar language and the possibilities for its renewal in the modern era. This is visible in Scott's most recent novel, That Deadman Dance (2010), and also in Scott's work with the Wirrlomin Noongar Community: http://wirlomin.com.au/

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the tree is undressing
its slender skin
long strips of bark
hang loose and revealing,
twenty metres up
the first branch
shoulders a stylish tote
as if young, joyful
stepping out
and without any of these
the tree is undressing
its slender skin
not for me
not for any of us

for all the times I passed you in summer,
ignored you in winter
and kept my head down in spring,
I see you clearly now:

a line of london planes.
with autumn
comes an easing
so I see you in your shadows,
in cages, on a white brick wall
along aberdeen street

you remind me of those teenagers shaking
placards at busy intersections, advertising
stuff that nobody needs
doing your duty, dying
on the inside. it's hard to watch.

and now I understand,
why, like a convict, you stretch for the horizon
every afternoon—your sentence never
complete—and slip into the night
where your shape is lost in a forest of darkness.
State of Emergency
Ian C. Smith

Temperature in the forties, this state ablaze
despite naysayers’ scorn of climate change,
trees threshed by fierce wind below cloud
dark with smoke, plumes ten miles from my window,
a low pressure change heads my way
like the old-time proverbial cavalry, perhaps.

Branches falling, light a hellish yellow,
from my gate I see my neighbours on their hill
leaving, silhouetted by shifting smoke.
Driving past looking my way oddly, they wave.
I watch them disappear, sit under a melaleuca
where six charcoal and red galahs
roost silently just above me, feathers ruffling.

I feel almost as helpless as a crushed bird.
Brittle leaves, small branches, crunch underfoot.
My neighbours return, stop outside my gate.
By phone we have been advised to leave.
Although reluctant, I assure them I will,
aware of my deserved caste as an old recluse.

The wind change hits, favouring my position,
cooling me and galahs but imperilling others.
I play the fire warning message, dial loved ones.
My city son tells me to get going. Now.
The cats, all my books, my cherished journals.
This beloved place when soft rain falls.
I close windows, doors, take wallet and glasses.

Cartoon Snow
Aidan Coleman

When the freezer is cluttered
as a library returns chute
you realise the benefits of
cartoon snow. The sugar
cubes of igloo bricks,
well-storied in their
crisp divisions. The daybreak
of those dazzling acres,
you would dress for.
Go where a blue night
is snowing to itself, shushing
the owl-wide forest.

How gently it erases
fox-prints and sleigh-tracks,
the stamp of hoof
and hunter’s boot,
the vexatious sharp edges
of our pasts. Retire
once more to the puffing cottage,
its windows a blazing
marmalade. Inside, the huskies
have quit their howling
to settle for the uncluttered life:
the idea of North.
the rain settling in
a pile of dirty clothes on the bathroom floor
your glasses on the bench, your watch
*
It is winter, but it is Brisbane,
so we can sit outside in the sun.
You are cold still and take my jumper
and complain about the wind
but I like the cold, and a sun
that just touches, doesn't push.
I store this memory away for next summer,
and every summer to come.
*

I am giving up on the extraordinary
it is not the thing
that holds a life together
but these days—cereal, TV,
sighs. the lights go out
it is ten thirty pm

I keep dinner simple tonight—
pasta and a jar of sauce.
I won't turn on the TV—
I don't want to lay down my mind
just yet. There is music though,
on the radio.
I played the flute when I was young—
it never sounded like that.
Perhaps I will dig it up again,
play a few dusty notes.
The first girl I loved played the flute.
She was better than me.
I was twelve years-old.
I hang my clothes on my indoor line—
it might rain later.
The wine is starting to work
and the day is catching up with me.
I think of all the things I
wanted to achieve today.
A pianist owns the radio—
Beethoven and Brahms.
I learnt the piano once.
I didn't last a year.
Now the years have slipped by—
computer games and bad TV,
and the rain of course,
the rain has stolen some days,
but I won't pretend
I didn't give them willingly.

There are measures out there
beyond your door, you start counting
but lose birds past dawn,
too many in that thankful way of abundance.
And, yes, they dance on wires and bark,
bitumen and grass,
you'll never know them.
And drivers pushing roads and wheels
slow and turn, to arrive or pass.
You only catch part of their distance,
trails back at you.
You lose your grip
standing, if you forget the door,
if you forget what you forgot.
It's just a path.
Feel your step and again forget,
don't mock yourself, move along,
move through the atmosphere
with as much muscle and breath you need,
however it pleases you.
It's past counting out loud.
There is always loud,
a thus of movement and signals.
You know what trains do,
that way to the city, that way to the coast.
The sun beats down everywhere.
You lose count and fall into its pleasure
every time.
A hill road

and, either side, ravines,
no tree, but
a bare shoulder upon which our car stops, ticks, cools,
its body open, and us emerging, unfolding, into the dusk.
The breeze, all the way from Massis¹, snow-melt cold.
Sky presses.

Follow down the deep litter of stones,
down until, all above us loom boulders,
bruised air, a lid of cloud.
Still, heads down, we trace, bend, un
pick the earth’s seam.
What once was hidden has erupted here:
Obsidian mounds—glittering as knives, sharp and
black as Satan’s fingernails—slice our palms, pockets.

Night drops. Our feet clamber, slip.
Voices call. Names echo stone to
stone, wind their way up up and
back to the empty car.

We sit silent in its belly.
The road back to Yerevan² is long.
The black bag knocks and rattles in the boot.

The headlights point ahead, always ahead.
Who else sees our tongues lick the blood from our hands,
tastes the metal at its core,
feels our meaty hearts pump furious,
holding it all in?

¹ Armenian name for Mount Ararat, symbol of Armenia, now situated in Turkey
² Capital of Armenia
Poeptactics: walking and writing in the Anthropocene
Nandi Chinna

Nandi Chinna is an award winning poet, essayist and environmental advocate. Her latest poetry collection is Swamp: Walking the Wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain (Fremantle Press).

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding, But when I walk I see that consists of three or four hills and a cloud.

It’s a summer evening and after the heat of the day the moisture-laden wind known as the ‘Fremantle Doctor’ is pushing a cool breeze across the park. I pull on my shoes and step out across the mown grass of the oval and then crunch through the dry stubble of the road reserve. I head up onto the limestone ridge into my favourite patch of bush, land designated for future development but for the time being left to run into a wild tangle of acacia thickets, dryandra (banskia sessilis), Victorian ti-tree and fennel; habitat for numerous small bush birds, lizards and birds of prey. As I crest the ridge I can see the Indian Ocean reaching towards the western horizon, punctuated by container ships passing to the north of Rottnest Island, and small white sails tacking between here and the smaller Carnac and Garden Islands. To the east, orange and grey rooftops and tarred road grids stretch in an orderly fashion towards the pointed spires of Perth’s tall buildings. A flock of about twenty Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus latirostris) fly over. They are wee-look as they swoop above my head and disappear over the ridge. A poem arises:

At 6pm the black birds flew over / so low I could see into the dark shafts of their eyes / they were all coming in / the sky was filled with what I had always known / then everything began to recede / I was the last person left / the black bird bursting inside my chest/squalling and flapping against my ribs …

In this article I discuss the embodied act of walking as a research methodology for the writer, and contextualise walking and writing in the era of the Anthropocene, the current human-dominated period of earth’s history. I posit that walking, sauntering, rambling—placing one’s feet in contact with the ground and one’s body in the space of the walk—is one way of forging a connection with the earth as home, and with the regions or biospheres in which we live. I argue that the notion of the Anthropocene forces us to re-evaluate concepts of ‘the wild’, and that Poeptactics, the practice of walking and writing, offers a way of comprehending and working within the challenges of living in the Anthropocene. I invoke Albrecht’s notion of solastalgia, the grief people feel when the places they live in are irrevocably changed, often resulting in loss of habitat and biodiversity, and I conclude that poepatetics offers a kind of solvitur ambulando, a ‘walking solution’, to some of these challenges.

For many writers, the embodied experience of walking is an essential creative tool that enables not only an intimate sensual experience of the space of the walk but also, in its rhythm and ambience, facilitates creativity. Historian George Macaulay Trevelyan writes that,

There are times when my thoughts, having been duly concentrated on the right spot, refuse to fire, and I will think nothing except general misery... on these occasions my recipe is to go for a long walk. My thoughts start out with me like blood-stained mutineers debauching themselves on board the ship they have captured, but I bring them home at nightfall, larking and tumbling over each other...'. (qtd in Mitchell 58)

Rebecca Solnit describes walking itself as ‘the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart’ (Solnit 5). There is something inherent in the rhythm of walking, the four/four time of the body moving like a metronome, that seems to allow the organisational mechanics of the mind to fall away and the creative thought to arise. When writer Annie Proulx visited the Perth festival in 2011 she was asked why she chose to live in the difficult and isolated terrain of Wyoming. She answered, ‘because of its horizons’, and ‘because walking and looking at great distances sets the mind on fire, ideas come out like tsunamis. I can walk and look out and this solves writer’s block, the knotty problems of narrative and stanza’ (Proulx). Perth poet Kevin Gillam comments that when he is working on poems he invariably ‘takes the poem for a walk’, meaning that he goes out for a walk with the problem of the poem in his mind and after a period of half an hour or so of walking is able to resolve any difficult lines and stanzas (Gillam).

Following the tradition of Bashō, Thoreau, Gary Snyder, John Mateer and many others, the writer who walks, walks to encounter the world as well as the self (Solnit). In some ways to practice poepatetics—walking and writing—is to tread a path that is not there. Every walk is a new experience and there is no map for the journey. In poepatetics there is
the subjective body in the landscape, encountering and perceiving, and the mind interpreting and responding. I will return to a discussion of poepatetics in greater detail later in this article.

I grew up in the 1960s and 70s in the outer suburbs of Adelaide in a world in which people walked a great deal more than they do today. A survey undertaken in 2003 found the percentage of Australian children aged 5–9 that walked to school was 57.7 in 1971, compared to 29.5 in 2003. The percentage of children aged 5–9 that were driven to school by car was 22.8 in 1971, compared to 66.6 in 2003. The results for children aged 10–14 were similar: walking decreased from 44.2% to 21.1% and car use increased from 12.2% to 47.8% over the study period (Merom et al.).

For children of my generation, walking was a significant part of our lives. It was adult-free time. Time to roam and explore our neighbourhoods, and to engage with the small worlds within worlds; the mulberry trees, fennel meadows, urban bushlands and creeks that wound through land not yet developed. But more than this, walking was and is a way of reading the world through the senses, of getting to know the place in which you live in a more intimate manner than is possible when you pass through it in a car. Now as a writer I appreciate this skill learned through childhood necessity and use it, both consciously and unconsciously, as a research methodology for writing poetry. Solnit suggests that walking is a state in which the mind, body and the world are aligned, ‘as though they were three characters finally in a conversation together’ (Solnit 5). This three-way conversation affords us moments of ‘being’, of the self in place, and aptly describes the walker–writer’s embodied encounter with the world and the creative interpretation of that experience.

The walker–writer’s milieu today offers a considerably different set of challenges than those in the time of Bashō, and even Thoreau. The geography of the human-altered world has entered into what Eugene Stoermer, and later Paul J. Crutzen, have termed the ‘Anthropocene’ (Crutzen and Stoermer). From the Ancient Greek, anthropos meaning ‘human being’, and kainos meaning ‘new or current’, the Anthropocene is defined as the new human-dominated period of the Earth’s history. The International Commission on Stratigraphy may add this epoch to the geologic time scale in 2016 (Pharand-Deschénes et al.), but scientists and cultural geographers are already using the term to refer to this period in which human activity has altered the earth’s biology, chemistry and geology, changing the way carbon and nitrogen circulate between land, sea and atmosphere, resulting in most of the planet’s ecosystems being affected in some way (Crutzen and Schwägerl). Pharand-Deschénes et al. define the Anthropocene as:

A period marked by a regime change in the activity of industrial societies which began at the turn of the nineteenth century and which has caused global disruptions in the Earth System on a scale unprecedented in human history: climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution of the sea, land and air, resources depredation, land cover denudation, radical transformation of the ecumene, among others. (Pharand-Deschénes et al.)

Crutzen argues that ‘human dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth is already an undeniable reality’, and that the Anthropocene describes ‘a planet that is being anthroposized at high speed’ (Crutzen and Schwägerl 1). By changing the climate for millennia to come, by clear-felling rainforests, removing mountain tops to access coal deposits, and acidifying coral reefs, Crutzen says, we fundamentally alter the biology and the geology of the planet (Crutzen and Schwägerl 1).

Living in the Anthropocene presents challenges to the way we view and respond to nature and wilderness. Much of our earth is now characterised by human interventions, and relics and remnants of human usage. Lands not degraded by agriculture, industry and mining may still contain the residues of synthetic chemicals that are now persistently circulating in the earth’s metabolism. As Crutzen and Schwägerl point out, where wilderness remains, it’s often only because exploitation is still unprofitable (Crutzen and Schwägerl), and it is becoming increasingly common for lands that have been set aside as ‘Bush Forever sites’ and national parks to be encroached upon by mining companies and developers (see the Jandakot bushland, the Beeliar Wetlands, Kimberley Coast, Munday Swamp and Lake Richmond for Western Australian examples).

Nature and the wild are no longer those areas of pristine habitat that we can observe in Attenborough documentaries and feel relieved, from the comfort of our couches, that out there somewhere the wild lives on. The grand narrative of nature has been irrevocably altered by human activity and herein lies the ethic of responsibility needed to develop a healthful stewardship that includes the rights to life of species other than human. Thomas Berry suggests that for there to be any progress in caring for the earth, the whole life community, the non-human as well as the human, must be involved in that process, and that this will involve moving towards a transition in focus from anthropocentrism to biocentrism and what he calls ‘appropriate human-Earth relations’ (Berry 165). Poepatetics offers the practitioner an experiential methodology that enables personal, physical encounters with species other than human. It
is through the walker’s engagement with the world that the walker–writer forges a connection with a particular place or places, and is afforded the opportunity to develop a relationship of reciprocal responsibility.

In south-western Australia, Nyoongar Elder Dr Noel Nannup observes that,

whether a person is Aboriginal or non Aboriginal, if they are born in Nyoongar country the country knows them. If they have lived in Nyoongar country for more than six years the country knows them. And if they intend to stay in Nyoongar country they have a responsibility and that responsibility is to care. (Nannup)

Whilst many non-Aboriginal people may not have access to Aboriginal knowledge of their country, Dr Nannup stresses that all of us who now live here are responsible for the health and resilience of our home place. In the Anthropocene, caring for country entails an awareness that the wild is not necessarily something ‘out there’, disconnected from our experience, but that the wild is all around us in its altered and diminished form. In the Thoreauvian sense ‘Wildness’ (Thoreau, his capitalisation), is defined as a state of mind, whereas ‘wilderness’ is usually defined as a place and is often seen as a culturally constructed concept (see Phillips; Cronon; Callicott). Thoreau’s ‘Wildness’ is not only found in wilderness areas, but within the human condition. Artist Perdita Phillips discusses how the term ‘wild’ can be both definite, in that it is linked to a physical time and place, and yet also indefinite, in that its changeable and mutable nature ensures that the ‘wild’ resists definition. Phillips’ way of comprehending that which escapes definition is to discuss her work (walking and visual/sound art) as ‘working wild, an arts practice that is open, lived and enacted’ (Phillips 99–144). For the writer, poepatetics offers a methodology for ‘working wild’. Walking in our local ‘wilds’, those spaces of ‘dereliction and beauty’ (Armstrong), that exist in between developed and humanised spaces, affords us a way of connecting with the small wilds that inhabit our neighbourhoods. An encounter with wild birds, lizards, and plants is an encounter with the living earth. The walker–writer brings this experience back to the writing room where it is expressed onto the page.

To define my walking–writing practice I constructed the neologism poepatetics, or the poetry of walking—‘poe’ from poesis or making; patetics from peripatetics or walking, travelling: a person who walks and travels about (Brown). More simply put, poepatetics is ‘making from walking’. Although the word is new, poepatetics has a long history reflected in the poetry of Matsuo Bashō in the seventeenth century through to Wordsworth, Dickens, Whitman, Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Robert Walser, and more recently W. G. Sebald, John Shaw Neilson, Rebecca Solnit, Mary Oliver, John Mateer and Gary Snyder.

Poepatetics is a combination of three disciplines: the observed phenomena, the subjective bodily experience, and transcription of both the tangible and enigmatic into text. Matsuo Bashō, the seventeenth century Haiku master and walking poet, succinctly expressed (this layering of) poepatetics when he wrote: ‘learn about pines from the pines, and about bamboo from the bamboo’ (Bashō 33). The walker learns the world through the physical movement of the body and the temporal-spatial subjectivity of conscious intention. The walk is essential to the creative process, both as a lyrical metre, a bodily metronome, and as a way of perceiving the writer’s connection and relation to the world in which they live. As poepatetics practitioner Robert Walser exclaims in his short story ‘The Walk’:

Walk … I definitely must, to invigorate myself and to maintain contact with the living world, without perceiving which I could not write the half of one more single word, or produce the tiniest poem in verse or prose. Without walking, I would be dead, and my profession, which I love passionately, would be destroyed. (Walser 86)

John Mateer, a South African–born, Western Australian poet overtly names his walking: ‘walking down the path, dense bush on both sides / I’m disappointed the wildflowers have already wilted—’, and ‘walking out onto the saltlake / from the screen of paperbarks / and the intermittent groundcover / of samphire strands. Under my boots / the surface is like new cement / and each sloppy step resists its record’ (Mateer 1). Often, Mateer walks us into the place of the poem; we accompany him on foot as he records the effort of the walk and the impact of the walk upon both the walker and the landscape. Mateer’s walking–writing practice elucidates the physical experience of particular places, as well as the poet’s inner imaginative thinking: ‘in my dark mind the succession of blossoming / is like the flicking of the switch for metropolitan lights / black and forth, click and let there be …’ (Mateer 1).

Mateer comments that he walks and writes to; ‘find a way of internalizing the so-called lay of the land, finding points of correspondence between the inner and the outer experience of place’ (Mateer). His writing has been described by some critics as a kind of poetic guidebook. Barry Hill describes Mateer’s Asian poems as being the ‘best guide I know to the poetics of what we call Asia’ (Mateer 2); the poems
offer us the place of the poem, the physical terrain, as well as the inner experience of the walker. In the poem ‘The Monkey Sellers Stall’ the poet is confronted with monkeys in cages being sold on the street and the poem articulates the effect of this experience on the body and mind of the walker-writer:

Behind my skin there are clouds of smoke,/underground fires and this smothered city... I am watching one monkey in the seizure of screaming,/ his voice and emptying,/ In his agate-black eyes I am immediate and loss (Mateer 2).

Mateer writes that place influences his work in that ‘the poems emerge from the circumstance of my knowledge, experience and sense of the history—one could even say Being—of the place (Shook).

Whilst Martin Harrison comments that Mateer's work 'seems to speak from nowhere as a sort of supra-national poet' (Mateer 1), the walk allows him to be nowhere and somewhere simultaneously, pivoting upon the walker's sensory immersion in the place of the walk. In talking about his walking-writing practice Mateer suggests that;

writing like this allows the over-layering of temporalities—memories of various pasts, as well as imaginings of past and future, can be situated, placed, in relation to the unfolding of perceptual experience in situ. So place is deepened, memorized, memorialized, as well as articulated in the walker’s passing through. (Mateer)

This articulation of the ‘walker’s passing through’ is evident in the work of Australian poet John Shaw Neilson. Neilson was born in Penola in South Australia in 1872, and at 14 began working with his father as a surveyor and fencer in Victoria and South Australia. As he walked the country undertaking surveying and fencing work, Neilson composed poetry which he memorised and edited, sometimes taking years to resolve one poem. Paul Carter writes that ‘such was his attention to metre that he would often have to dismount from his horse in order to find the appropriate rhythm through his feet’ (Carter and Wolsely). Neilson is considered one of Australia's great poets and Paul Carter comments that his ‘emotional landscape encompassed the isolation, loss, loneliness, joy and contentment of bush life’ (Carter and Wolsely). At a time when drought and poverty resulted in the term ‘poor country’ to describe the eastern mallee country, Nielson expressed a deep love for, and connection to the flora and fauna of the landscape he walked through:

I waded out to the swan's nest—at night I heard them sing, / I stood amazed at the Pelican, and crowned him for a king; / I saw the black duck in the reeds, and the spoonbill on the sky, / And in that poor country no pauper was I. (cited in Gray)

Nineteenth-century Swiss philosopher Henri Frédéric Amiel wrote that 'any landscape is a condition of the spirit' (qtd in Taylor). When landscapes are subject to radical alteration, the human psyche and condition of spirit are also affected. Margaret Drabble expresses this cause and effect relation vividly when she writes that:

The past lives on in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throws its shadow backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and what we have become. This is one of the reasons why we feel such a profound and apparently disproportionate anguish when a loved landscape is altered out of recognition; we lose not only a place, but ourselves, a continuity between the shifting phases of our life. (Drabble 270)

Changes in landscapes and environments no longer happen slowly. Albrecht's solastalgia describes the grief associated with the loss of particular landscapes that have been destroyed or altered, resulting in an experience of homesickness without having left home (Albrecht). We can see the grief of solastalgia escalating due to an accelerated rate of global habitat loss, species extinctions and a warming climate (Reid et al.). As if to foreshadow the identification of the term solastalgia, in 1992 Doris Lessing wrote:

Every day there are more people everywhere in the world in mourning for trees, forest, bush, rivers, animals, lost landscapes ... an established part of the human mind, a layer of grief, always deepening, always darkening. (Lessing 318)

Since Lessing wrote, these kinds of losses have intensified, and the rate of known extinctions of species in the past century is roughly 50–500 times greater than the historical extinction rate of 0.1–1 extinctions per 1000 species per 1000 years (Reid et al. 52). How we live with (and strive to prevent) the losses of species that are a part of our physical reality and of our psyche, and whose existence helps us to define ourselves as human animals, is a major challenge of life in the Anthropocene.

Placing our human footprints into the earth, enduring the sheer physical effort of moving the body across terrain, breathing in the various
aspects of air, wind and stillness, having bodily encounters with life other than human, connects us with our being as just one of a multitude of beings inhabiting our region. Bashô, Thoreau, Neilson, Mateer and Snyder are all practitioners of poepatetics; all are writers who inhabit their home regions by walking in, around and through; leaving their physical footprints and extending the reach of their human footprints by writing down the walking and publishing their interpretations, enabling others to enter into the experience.

With a bit of madness in me,
Which is poetry,
I plod along like Chikusai
Among the wails of the wind. (Yuasa 31)

The desire for connection with the natural world and a sense of ontological ‘being at home’ leads the writers discussed here into an ambulatory practice that offers access to the world beyond the walls and roof of the dwelling; towards the development of a sense of home that encompasses the living earth and recognises our separateness from the same. Residing within the visionary circuit and poepatetics of the walker–writer is the idea of Solvitur ambulando, literally translated as ‘it is solved by walking’ (Brown). In the context of the Anthropocene, Solvitur ambulando suggests that an embodied immersion in natural environments affords us a way of developing an ethic of care for the natural world. Bennett, who co-wrote the NSW biodiversity strategy, argues that physical contact with the bush is necessary if a desire to preserve it is to be cultivated, and that the bush cannot be ‘known’ without the body entering it on foot. Thoreau and Snyder, meanwhile, declare that they wish to speak for nature—Snyder asserting that ‘the reason I am here is because I wish to bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency’ (Snyder 106). Bennett says that Thoreau wrote Walden to ‘wake people up’, and suggests that a poetics of space ‘requires an enlarged aesthetics, one fully respecting and alerting us once more to the natural’, and that ‘this kind of attention is not reverie, but involves alertness’ (Bennett 6).

In a time of great ecological and climatic change, in which the view of the earth as solid and immutable is no longer certain, Lessing’s ‘layer of grief’ and Albrecht’s solastalgia can be read as homesickness for the elements of the natural world that are disappearing from our earth home. The embodied act of walking invites an encounter with the physical and elemental world, and an opportunity to make connections with living environments outside the writing room. Walking takes on the limits of space in a certain time: Nielson—years, Mateer—moments. To walk is to encounter the temporal and spatial limits of the body and senses; in trying to convey this experience in words, the poet encounters the limits of language. In this sense, poepatetics encounters the limits of the world/self/language in relation to any discovery of what can be said about the same, and these limits represent a kind of existential incompleteness or loss, which is homesickness. What the poepatetic practitioner is striding (and striving) towards is a re-imagining and reframing of these physical and textual boundaries.

In the skies above my home, flocks of Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoos wheel and soar, calling out to each other, landing in the banksia and marri trees along the limestone ridge and cracking open seed pods with their tough beaks. When I see or hear the birds my chest expands a little, I breathe deeply, and am moved from my thoughts and activities into an encounter with the wild. Yet every visit from the birds is also filled with anguish. Cockatoo count survey results show that their population declined to 40 per cent from 12,954 roosting birds in 2010 to just 4,000 birds in April 2012 (Kabat). At 38 confirmed Swan Region roosts surveyed each year from 2010 to 2013, the total number of Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoos counted significantly decreased by 62 per cent. The Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoo Population Viability study of 2013 shows that with current rates of urban growth and land clearing, Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoo populations on the Swan Coastal Plain will be extinct within 20 years (Parsons Brinckerhoff Australia Pty Limited vii).

As the last remaining swamps and banksia woodlands are cleared to make room for more houses, roads and airport runways, the food sources for these birds become more scarce. The birds are literally starving to death. This mixture of gratitude and grief I experience when the birds fly over is a part of daily life in the Anthropocene. We watch extinctions happen and we grieve. We feel solastalgia, and we experience homesickness.

Poepatetics offers a twofold opportunity to engage with the responsibility of being human in the Anthropocene. The embodied act of walking is on one level conducive to thinking, dreaming and creativity, and on another level is a path towards an experience of the earth and a physical connection to soil, air, water and habitat. Walking in our earth home allows us the possibility of using our own bodies to encounter our home places and to create works that engage with the relationship between us and the non-human beings that share our home. Compelled by a philosophical sense of homesickness to wander through weedy voids in towns and cities, to stride out beyond the edges of culture into spaces...
of dereliction, scrubby parks and abandoned swamps, the poeptetic practitioner has no particular destination but is moving towards a bodily experience of being in the world. By walking through a place the walker experiences that place, and through this experience produces knowledge that is a priori to the Cartesian notion of the absolute. Poeptetic knowledge is the knowledge of inquiry, which is provocative and leaves spaces open and in question, rendering them sympathetic to artistic endeavour and human habitation.

Works Cited


Another evening
Marjorie Main

Marjorie Main studies at UWA. Her work was recently long-listed for the University of Canberra Vice Chancellor's International Poetry Prize.

It’s a quick decision.
I go for a walk
because the dog is sad.

Over a stile and into some gums
whose trunks are grey in the moonlight,
we walk and rain falls
so slightly, so softly,
on the ragged dried grass
that I recall Heaney.

*Had I not been awake I would have missed it*

Another evening I followed my brother
through dusk and the engine junk
that scatters our paddocks.
He told me to take off my shoes:
my feet were pale upon the ground,
and it was soft like dust,
so my steps fell silent
as we walked.

When the shot sounded
I was startled,
and a rabbit was killed, quick,
through its neck.
I took the creature up
and carried it
by soft, pale furred feet
as we walked towards the dam.
It was heavy, and warm in my hand.

Tonight I go
with my dog through the dark again.

Magpies carol in the bush
and again it all manages to move me.
I am home, here.
Catherine Noske's first issue as the editor of *Westerly* will be released in November this year. She completed her PhD in creative writing at Monash University in 2013.

_To Hold onto a Map_  
Jill Jones

Writing this, I am cruising at an altitude of 40,000 ft. Travelling from Melbourne to Perth, I am moving from land to sea and back again, slipping across altitudes and through time—four hours forwards and three back. I am crossing conceptual boundaries of state, flirting with borders of nation, as well as traversing physical demarcations—lines of coast and cloud. I exist in momentum.

This is a paper powered by movement, in multiple ways. It represents a moment of reflection within a continued creative process, a pause between drafts of a manuscript, a novel set in an imaginative space based loosely on my hometown of Portland, Victoria. I am considering, in multiple senses, where I have come from and how I might go forward. Movement and place. The lines from Jill Jones with which I have opened illustrate a similar coupling of concepts. Her writing reaches in these concerns towards an ongoing interest in Australian criticism, and in literary and cultural studies in particular, in constructions of place and landscape. Several scholars—like Stephen Muecke, in his recent articles as well as _No Road: bitumen all the way_ (1997), or Paul Carter in _The Lie of the Land_ (1996)—discuss approaches which are predicated on some sense of movement. John Kinsella in his blog relates the writing of place through movement to ecological life, ephemerality as key in his ‘concretions’, poetry installations within a natural space (see: ‘Further Jam Tree Gully Concretions’, 7/3/2015, see also _Disclosed Poetics_ (2007)).

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He wants to take her where birds grew legs long as rodeos, and a re-imagined giant wombat tends to disappoint.

He wants to drive her to a desert where they ghosted her in ochre, buried her, standing upright by a milky singing lake.

He wants to walk with her along a curve of shattered moon, where human memory unmade her long ago.

He wants to wake where sand blows yesterday from her face—where there is nothing but the terror of his faith.

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Lake Mungo
Susan Fealy

Susan Fealy is a widely published poet and a clinical psychologist. Her first full-length manuscript is under development.
To focus on one example, Ross Gibson has on various occasions suggested the importance of movement in the conceptualisation of Australian spaces—perhaps most overtly in the essay ‘Changescapes’ (2010). Here, he argues for an understanding of landscapes as highly mutable systems, ‘dynamic, tendency-governed, ever reactive’ (2010: 24), a fluid point of balance incorporating temporal as well as spatial elements. He describes the need ‘to be able to zoom back and forth instantaneously connecting the past with the present, connecting received momentum with whatever is immanent so that one can perceive historical continuities operating in concert with chance and change.’ (2010: 32) The changescape is thus a system in ‘slippery balance with mutability’ (2010: 26), and the space becomes one which is ‘not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but also by the intricate relationships between those components.’ (2010: 29) Understanding a landscape through this concept is to reject the notion of stasis in place. It is to allow movement to become the defining principle in engaging with a landscape. But why? The limitation of Gibson's conceptualisation is the difficulty of applying it in practice. What relevance can this have to my own domain of creative writing, where landscape exists most normally in description—that act of capturing, holding, preserving?

More recently, Gibson has discussed movement in the act of mapping a space. Most importantly for my purposes, he considers the possibilities of GIS mapping and the trundling ‘stumble-cam’ (2014: 257) of the mobile camera which creates Google Street View. In this act of viewing, he suggests, ‘the story that is meant to be ascribed to the journey is no longer obvious, no longer presumed and credited, as it was when an avid sense of manifest destiny sustained the colonial venturers.’ (2014: 261) The ‘stumble-cam’ offers a new way of mapping, one which incorporates some of the sensation of the system he upholds in ‘Changescapes’. Instead of the colonial narrative drive... we encounter diffused or ‘ambient’ perspectives and divergent through lines [sic]’ (2014: 261). What Gibson is arguing for here is not—or not only—the GIS maps themselves but the manner in which these maps have the potential to involve the people who engage with them, and the relationship with space and place this creates:

When users are continuously implicated as stimuli that activate updates within a map, then it is no longer the old Cartesian thing we thought we knew, no longer an abstract and rigidly coordinated arrangement purporting to offer disinterested orientation by addressing every surveyor equally and objectively. Once you have become a participant...

This kind of mapping, for Gibson, insinuates the nature of land and landscape as a network, one which involves a multitude of elements—'animal, vegetable, mineral and commercial' (2014: 251). It undoes the direct opposition of subject and object in representing the land—if it is not simply an object, no more is the viewer an all-powerful subject in designating the narrative which can take (or perhaps make) place at that site.

I have myself been experimenting with the documentation of 'movement footage'. This is a dialogue of viewing which can be taken to inform creative praxis, if not practice. Using a low-grade, hand-held video camera to produce footage of my interactions with the space—Mt. Clay State Forest, near Portland in southwest Victoria—I have been writing in response. This process does not offer the empty viewing of the Google ‘stumble-cam’ Gibson upholds. But the footage collected nonetheless provides an account of the space in which my experience can be seen as part of a wider whole. I am shown my movement. As excerpts of the footage demonstrate, the low quality of the video blurs and softens the viewing and auditory experience, challenges the viewer's focus, limiting the authority of the viewing subject and denying a fixed perspectival centre. The clip shows me riding through the forest in the company of my dog. It privileges the experience of my horse, Sarry, centring on her movement and her reactions to the space, the curious, eager or anxious pricking of ears, the flick of one back every now and again as she focuses on me. Her response to the space was richer by far than my own. Her reactions seemed more minute, more detailed. The camera, in documenting this, opens up a participation in the space of which I had only been superficially aware.

The network found in my filming informed my writing of the place in allowing some sense of fluidity to seep in. A similar creative manoeuvre adopted was the use of several sites in imaginatively constructing my setting, shifting across research from each to write a place beyond them all. It was, as Jill Jones so eloquently describes, to be 'out of place and to know that other place/is still there on a coast...' (2010: 18) Two sites in particular came to offer a focus in my reading: my hometown Portland in Victoria, and Albany in Western Australia. The towns are similar in many respects—both sites were colonised around the same time, Albany in 1826 and Portland in 1834; both are situated in the southwest of their respective states; both were the first permanent colonial settlements...
in their states; both were founded on the trade of whaling; both are
natural deep-water harbours sheltered by a curling, western cape; both
are approximately 400 km from the nearest capital city; both now list
agriculture, wood-chips, fishing and tourism as their primary industries;
both look out to islands in their bay, (a detail crucial for the fictional
setting I was constructing). The similarity between the two places
allowed me to draw from my childhood experiences of Portland, and yet
move above them, reimagine them freely. My research crossed time, as
well. Reading colonial diaries represented an effort to understand the
evolution of these places through history, a means of decentralising my
own experience by privileging the past as ‘that other place’, one which
was in many ways still there. Partly this was driven by the recognition
that in riding through Mt. Clay as a space, I was participating in a tradition
initiated by much earlier explorers on horseback. I was conscious of the
danger of taking up the perspective of colonial explorers and settlers in
my exploratory rides, their movement through that space dictated by the
acquisition of land.

The colonial voices in sources from both Portland and Albany, like the
places themselves, hold many similarities. The perspective assumes an
inherent dominion over space. Regularly, the diaries describe the land
in constant reference to England, classifying and thus controlling the
space at hand. There are active narratives at play in these writings. In
several accounts of the Portland area, for example, it is easy to feel a
religious tone, a representation of the land as God-given, a land of milk
and honey. John G. Robertson writes: ‘I cannot express the joy I felt at
seeing such a country before me... all was eatable; nothing had trodden
the grass before them [the sheep]. I could neither think nor sleep for
admiring this new world...’ (Letters 167) Robertson here illustrates
moreover the dual myths of terra nullius and newness, writing out the
presence of the Aboriginal people. In setting up the expectation of the
religious narrative, these accounts illustrate also the disillusionment
experienced in it failing. George Grey’s expedition journals, describing
his exploration of the western and southern coasts of Western Australia,
play out this narrative disappointment: ‘At the first streak of dawn, I leant
over the vessel's side, to gaze upon those shores I so longed to see... I was
not altogether prepared to behold so arid and barren a surface, as that
which now met my view.’ (67) What is interesting in Grey’s account is
the manner in which his disgust with the landscape is framed: ‘...indeed,
I could not more accurately describe the hills, than by saying that they
appeared to be the ruins of hills...’ (69) The myth of a ‘new’ land comes
here into direct confrontation with the recognition of its age. A touch of
anxiety rises in result. In describing the ‘loose disorder’ (69) of the hills,
Grey cannot reconcile the viewed object with the preconceived narrative
framing its viewing, the instability of the experience ultimately serving to
challenge his subjective control.

The colonial voice in these accounts focuses directly on possession.
Rev. John D. Wollaston’s account of his arrival to Albany in 1848 contrasts
a description of the coastline as 'dreary and desolate' (37) to his first
sight of ‘the white houses’ (38). The tone between these two passages
shifts dramatically—the harbour, with its settlement ‘like an English
village’ (40), is allowed ‘natural advantages... this place must some day be
of consequence to England.’ (38) The Henty brothers’ journal from Portland,
with its continual, calculating assessment of land, sea and weather
conditions offers a slightly different example, as does the collection
Letters from Victorian Pioneers, a compilation of accounts of settlement
provided at the request of Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe in 1853. These
letters, including a contribution from Stephen Henty, serve to document
occupation constructed as a history to justify ownership. Henty’s goes as
far as to include attached ‘a copy of a statement, prepared by my brother
William, when laying our claims for compensation before the Home
Government... [which] bears out my account of the early settlement of this
part of the Colony.’ (Letters 121) Similarly, several accounts give detailed
narrations of the areas taken up by settlers—almost three pages of Thomas
Manifold’s account are primarily taken up with a list:

...Mr. Joseph Sutherland... settled on the creek now bearing
his name; Mr. G. Russell, on account of the Clyde Company,
on the Moorabool and Leigh; Mr. David Fisher, on account
of the Derwent Company, occupying where Geelong now is,
Indented Head, and the country about the junction of the
Barwon and Leigh. A Captain Pollock went on to the Barwon
where the upper vineyard is; a Mr. Sharpe, on account
of Colonel Kelsall, taking the upper part of Sutherland's Creek...
(Letters 137–138)

Manifold is not only inscribing his own possession of the land but invoking
a communal ownership in suggesting the connection of boundaries and
the contact between settlers. A financial community is implied in the
relationship between settlers and the Companies to which they belong.
The land is simultaneously made an object of commerce and made
comprehensible to the European mindset. And stylistically, the list is
reminiscent of the biblical language in the opening of Genesis (Books 5, 11)
wherein lineage arguably denotes a sense of belonging, a rootedness in

68 | Westerly 60.1

69 | Catherine Noske
time and space. Here, the lineage is not vertical but horizontal, spreading across the land and insinuating the power of possession.

Such movement as does exist in these accounts comes in the form of a 'traversal account' (Gibson 2014: 259), travel across country with the aim of possessing it, either figuratively or literally. As Gibson underlines, this was movement of '[s]elf-assertion and continuous acquisition' (2014: 259), recounted and distributed in letters of this sort as 'colonial prospectuses, tabulations of assets and entrepreneurial opportunities.' (2014: 259) This form of movement can be found in Stephen Henty's account as he details the family's process in acquisition of land, delineating the boundaries of their holdings. He describes his own journey from the Swan River colony to take up the land around Portland with his brothers; several journeys inland and along the coast sourcing grazing land for their stock; Major Mitchell's arrival in the area during his exploration, and the information Mitchell brought of grazing land 'about 50 miles north' (Letters 124); and his brother Francis' journey with Batman's party to camp 'for the first time on the present town-site of Melbourne' (Letters 123). Configuring a landscape through movement thus problematically has the potential to take up the perspective of these traversal accounts, the '"prospectus mode" of mobility' (2014: 259). It sets an expectation of stasis in place through the emphasis of subjective activity.

Suggestively, the only representation of a landscape itself in movement which does exist in the letters comes from John G. Robertson in 1853, describing the change the sheep had made to the country. But even here, the subject-object relation is maintained, as illustrated in the possessive language. The only difference is the anxiety that rises in his description that the passive object should show this capacity to shift:

Many of our herbaceous plants began to disappear from the pasture land; the silk-grass began to show itself [...] and herbaceous plants and grasses give way [...] The ground is now exposed to the sun, and it has cracked in all directions, and the clay hills are slipping in all directions; also the sides of precipitous creeks—long slips, taking trees and all with them. When I first came here, I knew but of two landslips ...now there are hundreds… (Letters 168)

The repetition of 'in all directions', the specificity of 'two landslips' in rhetorical comparison with the open-ended 'hundreds', the qualification of the landslips 'taking trees and all'—all these elements suggest the heightened unease of the viewing subject at this point. A comparison to contemporary anxiety about climate change might be made. But the description culminates in the concern that 'the lands here are getting of less value every day' (Letters 169), returning to and reinforcing his subjective position as active possessor and the land as a passive, static object.

These are not new observations in addressing colonial writings, and yet these voices formed a history to write against. Collecting and responding to the 'movement footage' was an attempt to reject descriptions of the land that function through stasis, a response to the capacity of the space to move me—to see entry into the space as an entry into a network of ongoing existences, powers and movements. As much ecopoetic writing makes clear, (I'm thinking here particularly of Forrest Gander and John Kinsella's Redstart (2012)), movement is an appropriate context for understanding the natural world. In any natural space, there are complex biological processes constantly in motion, both faunal and floral. The very shape of the land is the product of gradual geological shifts, above and below ground level. Nothing in nature is still, our bodies, our eyes included. Describing a landscape in stasis is a direct contradiction of this natural force. Gibson, in considering movement through the shifting vision of the Google car and the participatory nature of the maps it creates, argues that: 'we have a chance to undercut, enrich and overlay the new acquisitive actions of Google... with fresh accounting, fresh narrating and fresh place-making...Curiously, unintentionally, we have been given a machine ...that might help us care for country in some new way, instead of just continuing to grab land in the old colonial way.' (2014: 263–264) This is the power of movement that I am reaching for—movement as a weapon to undermine the subject-object relation of colonial landscapes. This is, too, the reason Jill Jones' writing is appealing to me. Introducing her work on her website, Jones declares that 'the way I work has evolved from a continuing interest in texture, pattern and transience, of jumping in the midst of the flow' (web, np). The continued emphasis on fluidity through her work, both in her writing style and, as she describes it, in her practice, is the ultimate rejection of stasis in writing place.

Jones' 'To Hold onto a Map' offers a vision of place shifting across the influence of a multitude of experiences and objects—exemplar of her interest in 'shifting borders, the openings in closures, pleasures of exploration' (web, np). This very beautiful poem speaks to both the anxieties of interacting with place and the sense of empowerment which can emerge. It opens from a position of unease, the speaking subject is 'out of place' (18) and memory as a narrative is failing—an experience the reader is drawn into by the open perspective. Here it is the movement in the space which is alarming, the 'other place' (18) of memory 'in
disagreement’ (18) with the experience in the present. The subjective experience is marked by this unease, you ‘flinch while witnessing the bruise’ (18), ‘wake without meaning’ (18), are ‘disturbed’ (18). But this unease reaches a climax by line 22 as the subject is led ‘to adduce this is a way/ of describing this place, and to realise the world/ moves a little east of itself when elsewhere, and to move/ with it, to be/ unbecoming…’ (18) The subject is subsumed in acknowledging movement in place, dissolves into the experience of the present, and relinquishes narratives of memory in knowing it. The poem begins to unfurl backwards through the anxiety which built up in the opening, in a palindromic repetition of imagery. The experience of the space is altered, takes on a sense of the moment: ‘encounter sun like a glassy star/ on a balcony, to appreciate the aqua/ dip of stairwells’ (19). The final lines of the poem recast the subsumed subject as ontologically involved in the place, the line ‘to know how this place/ is’ (19) emphasises with the enjambment the agency of the place in movement—it is not knowing the place, but knowing how it exists. This awareness, this relationship with place is what allows the ‘finding’ of a place which ‘is the end/ to everything.’ (19) The title of Jones’ poem—‘To Hold onto a Map’—offers this experience of place as a living map, moving beyond the rigid Cartesian description of place that Gibson likewise rejects. As with Gibson’s GIS maps, everyone who makes contact with the poetic space ‘gets folded into [it]’ (2014: 251). Writing place like this holds the possibility of not only representing movement in the space but in ourselves as we come to be implicated in the existence of the place, its processes and cycles, conceding its power over us...

Now, with the plane coming in to land, it is the ground below which is dictating the shape of our flight. We are waiting, waiting to make contact, to become involved in the life and specificity of this place unfolding itself as we descend.

Notes
1 Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHrpklKlchc

Works Cited
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Grey, George Esq. Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-Western and Western Australia, During the Years 1837, 38 and 39. London: T. and W. Boone, 1841.
In Coimbatore once I thought
I heard behind my shoulder
Pitjantjatjara like pebbles in the
mouth, turned & saw a blind beggar
singing with hand held out, the same
in-turn of jaundiced eye in grey soughs
of Dravidian skin.

I didn’t belong there just
passing through as I do by Antipodean
detour, a distant son of empire. Not by
chance that there and in Tamil Nadu
the plea for a blindman’s tiffin-fare.

The song caught on long since
crossing the sea-bridge of DNA
unseen, and open-eyed I saw less
than the singer in the market-square. A
boy with him held his twig hand &
took the rupees I held out
from mine.

So goes the dull exchange
begs for another medium where
appealer & appealant cross lines
in dirt and claim a common
wealth in poverty  a work of
mutual translation  defying
the green (‘n gold) standard  a
barter of polysemes  the surprise
of dingoes  new-old words like
small sharp tools.

It’s passed now  four thousand years
in crossing a bare patch of trade-ground  dry of paper notes
(another soughing bridge) still in
the memory of the hand.

(In early 2013 researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology
published the discovery, in some aboriginal Australian men, of Y chromosomes that
indicated migration from Southern India 141 generations ago, bringing also the early
dingo and microlithic technology.)
When I was little I would float around like helium, amongst the dust, hardly noticed. Belting down a steep stretch of grass, I propelled my arms toward the sky. I'd fly over the local pony club and survey the helmets and braids bobbing in dressage. I flew along the local river when I wanted to lower. I always had to land inside my house, gradually fading from the ceiling. Rousseau was right, I skimmed the earth like a young starling, but soon, emboldened with experience, I would spring into the air with the impetuousness of an eagle. I had shrunk the earth itself to a minor planet, a minor star.

Fig. 1 (’Djadjameri’)

’Everyone around here seems to be mad on colour photography – all of the white staff on the Mission... Can’t blame them, it’s magnificent country. Can’t describe how wild and grand the scenery is coming up the river... Great red cliffs and gorges.’

(Stow, ’Letter to Mother’, 2 April 1957)
Encountering Randolph Stow’s slide collection for the first time in the brightly lit and unnervingly quiet ‘Pictures and Manuscripts Reading Room’ at the National Library of Australia, I am immediately struck by the quality and beauty of the images: the saturated hues of the soaring landscapes and the crisp definition of figures suddenly come to life. Recognising the unmistakable Kimberley landscape of Heriot’s journey in the novel To the Islands, I stoop over the light-box to better see the visual account of this place that so influenced Randolph Stow as a young man. The slides are in good condition and the scenes that emerge out of those small cardboard frames are vibrant and sharp. I am transfixed.

It is surprising to register in that moment that 35mm film format, when well preserved, can retain an image quality superior to many digital formats. Positioned on the cusp of the so-called X and Y generations, my perception of the photographic past is somewhat clouded by the rapid technological advances that parallel my years—not to mention my contemporary political vantage point, which regards visual representations of Mission history with some suspicion. Biased definitely, even foolish perhaps; part of me did not expect to find the ‘dark Mission days’ of the late 1950s represented with such magnificence of colour or light.

This journey to the archive in Canberra was undertaken in a somewhat vain attempt to know more about a notoriously reticent writer who once claimed in an interview: ‘ideally, perhaps, a writer should be totally anonymous—a voice and nothing more’ (cited in Kinross Smith, 23). Yet, Stow’s archive led me further than I expected and it was the photographs that took me there. Not only offering tangible accounts of the incredible settings within Stow’s novel To the Islands, the slides of Forrest River Mission also changed my perception of the ‘Mission’ as place and experience. Stow’s photography allowed Mission ‘history’ to be perceived as locally and intimately constituted, played out on ‘magnificent country’ under wide skies with great rays of Kimberley light. For me this was no longer fictional. Here, slides in hand, I began to explicitly register the existence of Forrest River Mission from 1913–1968 and Stow’s presence there in 1957.

My encounter with the slides in the archive also triggered a second kind of temporal reckoning, a jolt of recognition that this historical moment threads into the present. Faced with such imagery I could not help but wonder about this country, about the people in the photographs, and the impacts of this Mission’s history on Aboriginal residents and their future generations. To encounter the past through Stow’s photography was also, therefore, a registering of the present. Out of the archive came an emerging awareness of the recent government actions at Forrest River, now known as Oombulgurri, and the devastating effects of these acts on Oombulgurri peoples and community.

The slides that form the basis of this photo essay are held in the manuscript collection Randolph Stow Papers 1935–2010 in the National Library of Australia, Canberra. While some of Stow’s early manuscripts had been acquired directly from Stow in 1975, the bulk of this collection was archived after Stow’s death in 2010. It is a fascinating and miscellaneous archive, made all the more intimate for its seemingly hasty assemblage. Given the suddenness of Stow’s death it was left to his sister Helen McArthur to make the acquisition arrangements, which no doubt influenced the somewhat haphazard feel of the collection. Entire contents of desk drawers are crammed into archival boxes, generously bequeathed for the perusal and pleasure of future Stow scholars. Among the messy assortment of manuscripts, letters, diaries, personal memorabilia and documents there are approximately 60 slides from Stow’s time at Forrest River Mission. According to Stow’s sister Helen, these slides had been kept by their mother in Perth in a camphor wooden chest, and upon her move into a nursing home were returned to Stow in Harwich (Helen McArthur, personal correspondence). Stored away out of sight, the slides preserved the bright light of the Kimberley. As far as I know, these images have never been published and have only been viewed by a few researchers in recent years. For this reason I am deeply grateful to Helen McArthur for permission to publish them here, and for kindly sharing with me the provenance of the collection. To be able to reveal the images through publication is to give the photographs a life beyond the archive, beyond the personal and temporal.

Stow’s slides within the archive are predominantly landscape images. Clearly it was the land that made the strongest impression on the young poet. At Forrest River, Stow explored the dramatic country that surrounded the Mission site as often as possible and went to great lengths to capture the affects:

We went to Nangi yesterday, a beautiful sight – steps and steps of black rock, perfectly flat and squared off at the edges, with white water streaming down into a pool of grey-green water... I lay for a long time under the waterfall – it was like being pelted with something enormously heavy and soft, very pleasant sensation. There is a cave at the back of the last step where you can get in and keep perfectly dry, just watching the water...
run down across the front like a bead curtain. (‘Letter to Hen’, 16 June 1957)

Stow took photographs as he made these journeys, it seems, to bear witness to and share the ‘magnificent country’ that he encountered:

I’ll send down two boxes of slides in about a fortnight, when I’ve got the film I finished yesterday back from the lab. The other ones came out very nicely, but it was nearly all of the cliff country and didn’t show much of the less startling, more “pretty” pools. (‘Letter to Mother’, no date 1957)

Yet, the quality of Stow’s images also suggests a more sensitive and considered approach than simple record. It was not surprising therefore to learn that Stow had developed his skills as a photographer from a young age, experimenting with trick photography and even learning to process his own black and white film as a boy (Helen McArthur, personal correspondence).

Alongside the landscape images there are also a number of photos of Aboriginal people in the Mission. Rather than passing snaps or documentary accounts, these images are posed photographs of adult subjects directly engaged with the camera: with participatory body language and smiling faces. There are also a number of active images of a cattle muster, horses being ‘broken in’ and the ‘work parade’. These otherwise mundane functional moments are imbued with beauty through Stow’s aesthetic sensibility and the highly saturated colour of slide film. Interestingly, within the slide collection there are no images of Mission staff. And there are only two photos in which Stow himself appears: the first an image of Stow posing alone in his hut, a classic figure of a poised young writer; the second a jovial image of him with six young Aboriginal men, posing together for a group photo, streaked in long shadows from the afternoon light.

Encountering this body of photographs, stored among the collection of personal memorabilia, it’s possible to see the images as simply an account of Stow’s experience, records of a kind of working holiday, shared with family upon Stow’s return, legible only in relation to private memory. Yet these images, like many others coming out of Missions, have value beyond their immediate relation to Stow:

A steady parade of Europeans to Aboriginal settlements have clicked their cameras and moved on. These photographs now exist in the photo albums of aging missionaries and teachers, sometimes just as esoteric memories. Occasionally the significance of such photos is recognised by those clearing out the estate of a deceased family member and a few photos find their way into archives across Australia. (Green, 1988, 9)

These photographs capture a site for which there are multiple and diverse bearers of memory. They record Oombulgurri history. They capture country that is deeply significant to Oombulgurri peoples and Balanggarra Traditional Owners. And now, as images that so beautifully photograph a place that is no longer habitable, they reverberate with even greater meaning. First in relation to Stow’s experience at Forrest River Mission, and then in relation to Oombulgurri’s past and present, I seek to affirm the significance of these images as carriers of history and markers of place.

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Fig. 2
‘I am living in the funniest little one roomed cottage I ever did see. Low overhanging thatched room, mud-brick walls with rows of loopholes to keep it cool, prop-open shutters over the windows (no glass up here) and a cement floor.’ (Stow, ‘Letter to Mother’, 2 April 1957)
In March 1957 Randolph Stow made the journey to the remote community of Oombulgurri, then run as the Anglican ‘Forrest River Mission’. Crossing almost the entire length of Western Australia, Stow travelled from Perth to Wyndham, finally arriving at the Mission via the river launch—a journey which alone ‘takes 24hrs...because you have to wait for the tide to come up before you can get out of the river’ (‘Letter to Mother’, 2 April 1957). At this time Forrest River Mission, as Stow reflected in 1984, was ‘still one of the most inaccessible places on the continent, in the wild and grand tropical North of Western Australia’ (‘Transplantable Roots’). Such ‘wild’ isolation seems to have been the appeal for Stow, who had sought out Forrest River Mission not with any intent to enact Christian service or with any Missionary aspirations, but through his own desire to find a setting in which to locate his new novel, which already existed as a ‘general plan...conceived during a seminar on King Lear in my last student year’ (‘Transplantable Roots’). That novel, of course, is Stow’s Miles Franklin Award winning *To the Islands* first published in 1958.

Conducting observational research for his planned novel, Stow’s presence in the Mission seems to have been a relatively unobtrusive and autonomous one. Positioning himself as ‘neutral’ within Mission staff factions (‘Letter to Mother’, 1957), Stow quietly carried out his novel’s research without the knowledge of the Mission staff and residents. As one staff member recalls, ‘I did not know that Mick was there to get inspiration for a book’ (Herzfeld, ‘Mick Stow at FRM’). Instead Sally Herzfeld (nee Gare), who was a teacher at Forrest River Mission during Stow’s time there and who struck up a strong friendship with him, was surprised to find the Mission experience so accurately transcribed in the novel: Stow was ‘very shy and would sit at the staff meal table with head bowed and twiddle his eye brows. It wasn’t until I read *To the Islands* that I realised how much of everything he was taking in’ (‘Mick Stow at FRM’).

In a letter to his sister, Stow noted ‘the Mission is like the wild terrain of some of my characters’ (‘Letter to Hen’, 2 June 1957). It was here that he had more regular contact with the Aboriginal Mission residents. Through this contact Stow was able to learn a significant amount of local language and develop strong friendships—relationships Stow acknowledges in the ‘Authors Note’ of *To the Islands*: ‘For details of mythology and language I am deeply indebted to my aboriginal friend Daniel Evans, as to many others of his people’.

Thus it seems that a certain neutrality within Mission politics, his position in the ration store, as well as a genuine interest in Anthropology, linguistics and land had allowed Stow to establish real connections with Aboriginal people at Forrest River Mission:

> You do get to know all the people pretty well [in the store], probably better than anyone on the Mission. I have all the old camp people coming in on Mondays for rations and many riproaring arguments we are having, half in English and half in their language. One old duck, Udibane, whom I adore, has adopted me as her brother, insists I call her lala (sister) and says we are both *guranggula* (brolga) people, i.e. we have the same moiety totem. It is all very involved as my abula (brother) Ronnie Williams, who helps me in the store, is Udibane’s daughter, according to Udibane, which means he should be my niece. (‘Letter to Hen’, 2 June 1957)

Stow’s admission into kinship relations, and his engagement with their complexities, relayed here in a letter home to his sister, may be read as the kind of acceptance of an implicated network of Indigenous rights and obligations that Stephen Muecke writes of in *No Road*:

> Something new begins when Australians, strangers, begin to accept their implication in a network of indigenous rights and obligations... Since the Aboriginal person accepts every stranger as part of his world, the stranger must accept that his world too must be forever changed, in consequence and according to this local philosophy. (184, 185)
As Muecke suggests the stranger’s world can be forever changed if the stranger is willing to make a real investment and to accept their personal implication in Indigenous cultural obligations and relations.

Stow certainly seems to have been changed by his encounter with Aboriginal people at the Mission. Reflecting on his time at Forrest River Mission in 1985 he writes:

It seemed that I had been privileged to feel for a while, vicariously, rooted in my native land as no white man can be, in fact. Afterwards the life of White Australia, and especially the life of its cities, of which I had not previously had much experience, seemed aimless. (‘Transplantable Roots’)

In some ways, therefore, Forrest River Mission is a ‘beginning’ that enables Stow to consider more deeply the complexity of his presence as a Settler Australian, a consideration that seems to have profoundly influenced his writing over the next forty years. ‘Forever changed’, in Muecke’s terms? Perhaps. Stow does seem to emerge from Forrest River Mission with a greater sense of his own unbelonging as Settler Australian and a desire to reconnect with his own ancestral roots: what Kinsella calls the crisis of presence, belonging and identity that comes to permeate his literature (p26).

Yet, a beginning is not an arrival and perhaps does not bear over-sentimentalisation. Despite Stow’s sensitivity he is not immune to the influence of his era, one defined by segregationist, paternalistic and assimilationist policies. For example, racialised language and prejudice seep through his letters, while his novel *To the Islands* ultimately preferences an aesthetic depiction of a sublime encounter with the landscape over any real engagement with the intercultural complexities within the Mission site, relegating Aboriginal characters to little more than shadow puppets within the novel. Moreover, it cannot be overlooked that Stow’s encounter with Aboriginal people and culture occurs within a site of profoundly unequal power relations. Despite his interest in Aboriginal culture, in his novel *To the Islands* Stow ultimately sought to defend the Mission site from ‘Australian writers’ who ‘had generally given missions and missionaries a bad press’ (‘Preface to the Revised Edition’ *To the Islands*, 1981). It is a defense that Stow’s photographs of Forrest River Mission seem to support rather than undermine.

Forrest River was established as an Anglican Mission in 1913, the first attempt to establish a Mission in 1897 having failed after a consistent and concerted resistance campaign was waged by the local Aboriginal population. From this time until its closure in 1968 Forrest River Mission existed as a complex site of oppressive regulation and control. Framed by the passive language of Christian benevolence, the Mission was a systematised settlement populated with approximately 150 local Aboriginal people, as well as children forcibly removed from their families in pastoral stations and Wyndham fringe camps. It functioned as a ‘total institution’ which conditioned ‘inmates’ to respond to regulation and routine daily life (Green, 2011, 12–13).

Within Stow’s collection of slides there are a number of images of the Mission settlement. Yet Stow’s imagery provides little insight into the complex dynamics operating within the site. Taken from an elevated vantage point, presenting an almost aerial perspective, the photographs show small smatterings of huts and buildings nestling in the flat valley. The lush green, village-like settlement is framed by purple hills and deep blue sky (Fig. 3).
Of course, from my contemporary vantage point and with a certain knowledge of this Mission's history, I read beyond this surface layer. When I look closely I make out the large open-air Church, the tin shed of the Girls Dormitory and the worn path of the 'Boab Boulevard.' To recognise the Church in this photograph is to observe the centrality of Christianity within the site and the regimented proselytization that took place. To identify the dormitory is to bear witness to the Mission's practice of separating and segregating children from their families and to register the daily confinement of girls in this large tin shed, strung with barbed wire and fitted with heavy padlocks (Green, 1988, 67). To observe the tall Boabs lining the Mission's paths is to potentially discern the location of the Mission's Bell, donated from the Wyndham jail and strung to a large Boab, and to realise the role this tolling bell played in the regulation and routine of the Mission: ringing out up to 10 times a day to call people to church, to the 'work parade' and to bed, and even commanding 'silence' at 8 pm (Green, 1988, 71). (As well as his work in the Ration Store, ringing the Mission bell was also a duty Stow fulfilled during his time at the Mission ['Letter to Mother', 20 May 1957]).

Yet unless one specifically seeks out these politicised possibilities, Stow's photographs from Forrest River Mission don't give much of this context away. They are not political in any overt sense and certainly do not offer exposé or denunciation. They are not anthropological in style, despite Stow's clear interest in Aboriginal language and cultural practices. Instead, Stow's photographs are primarily aesthetic depictions. They are images like the mesmerizing photograph of the lily pool (Fig. 4), which makes use of Stow's profound skill as photographer to compose an image perfectly divided between the vast sky and the deep reflective pool; the mirrored halves split by the line of yellowing grass and punctuated by bright white lily flowers, the dark shining coats of the wild horses, and the bulbous grandeur of the old boab.

In this way, as sensitive artistic constructions, Stow's photographs differ from the majority of photos snapped by missionaries, anthropologists and government staff over the life of the Mission. This is particularly obvious in comparison to the collection of images compiled by Neville Green in The Oombulgurri Story, a work he produced in 1988 with and for the Oombulgurri community. Green's pictorial history, which draws on a range of public and private photographic collections, presents documentary and social-realist imagery. The photographs for the most part mark occasions: weddings, sports days, the purchase of a new launch boat, a new crop of peanuts, work parades, school groups and daily Mission life. (One thing does become clear through Green's pages - this is a community very familiar with the camera!) There are also many older anthropological records of ceremony, tools and traditional hunting. There are some evocative and beautiful images; yet, for the most part they are devoid of artistic flourish.

Alongside these images Stow's soaring landscapes are imbued with even greater artistic intensity. Seen together as a collection they are deeply beautiful and project an almost idyllic sense of place. Yet aestheticism is not necessarily neutral, nor does it negate politics. Even Stow's striking image of the cross with the wild bushfire in the background (Fig. 5)—which from a contemporary vantage point could be read as deeply suggestive of the encounters that occurred in these sites—seems to have been composed more with an aesthetic than political consciousness. Juxtaposing the dark rising smoke and blackened earth with the sharp white cross, he constructs a beautifully atmospheric image. As to the suggestive implications of Christian presence, Stow seems ambivalent.

Fig. 4
‘In the rays of the low sun the petals of lilies shone almost translucent against the shadowed hill... In that light the lily pads and the reeds glowed green as malachite, the water glistened.’ (Stow, To the Islands, 64)
The danger that Stow seemingly feared as inherent in the act of research is significantly heightened when dealing with material relating to Aboriginal people. Narrunga poet and academic Natalie Harkin writes that for Aboriginal people ‘these records are our memories and lives; material, visceral, flesh and blood. The State wounds and our records bleed’ (p. 4). Therefore, returning to that moment in the archive in Canberra, a site heavily invested with structural authority and colonial power, I remember being palpably aware that in uncovering Stow’s slides I was also accessing images of Aboriginal people whose identities and histories I did not know. Furthermore, these images of Aboriginal people were not being knowingly shared with me, so that my viewing enacted a voyeurism with potential to violate Aboriginal cultural protocol.

In making this context explicit here, I seek to enact what my colleague Lilly Brown calls an ‘attending to’; that is, an attending to the ethics, the context and self-positioning relevant to any research work. I acknowledge, therefore, that my position in the archive is a privileged and unequal one, made possible by my implicit cultural capital and status as ‘researcher’. I am not of Kimberley country. I have never travelled there. Nor am I Aboriginal. My interest in these images lies, via my research on Stow, in the inter-cultural encounters that may or may not have been enacted between Stow and Mission residents.

That is why I have made a conscious decision in curating this photo essay to exclude images of Aboriginal people. There are two images which slightly deviate from this practice (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). These images I’ve selected to acknowledge, or at least suggest, Aboriginal presence. Both are anonymous, partial representations of Aboriginal people: figures walking far in the distance, the rear angle of a back turned, their identities obscured from the camera. Such partial representation becomes an imperfect way to register the site as inhabited—with impacts on real individuals and real bodies. I acknowledge that absence and opacity have their own dangerous potentialities: to exclude photos of Aboriginal people is possibly, in turn, to exclude individualised bodies, presences and subjectivities from the remembering of this historical moment and thus to depopulate the Mission and depersonalise the past. But without full knowledge of individual identities and without the community’s full access to and engagement with the images, I cannot respectfully release identifiable photographs of Aboriginal people from the archive.

• • •

Fig 5

“Will you listen,” Heriot demanded. “They had my ideas, they made my mistakes, they used the whip sometimes, they were Bible-bashers and humourless clods, they were forgotten while they were alive and attacked when they were dead. You don’t like the work we did – very well, we’ll take it back.” (Stow, To the Islands, 77)
In the process of grappling with the questions of exclusion and inclusion relevant to this essay, I made brief contact with the chairperson of the Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation, Cissy Gore-Birch Gault, who generously gave her ok to publish this selection of images. Cissy indicated she did not know that Stow’s photographs of Forrest River Mission existed, but thought there would be many people interested in seeing them. In this context, Cissy requested copies of Stow’s images to share with the community.

Significantly, fifty-eight years before this interaction, a related request was made. In September 1957, after Stow had left the Mission and taken up a tutoring position at the University of Adelaide, an Aboriginal Mission resident Ronnie Williamson wrote to Stow:

> Thank you very much for the letter… pleas [sic] send my photo back please because you promis [sic] me that you will send them to me I think there’s 3 if I am not mistaken. (22 Sept 1957)

I do not know if Stow ever did send the photos to Ronnie. Or exactly which photos the letter refers to. There does seem to have been some level of exchange, at least in the form of slide shows, between Aboriginal residents and the Mission staff: ‘would you also send me my slides. The people love them here and Bill wants all he can get to show them’ (‘Letter to Mother’, no date 1957). And there certainly are slides throughout Stow’s collection in the archive with the tag ‘Ronnie’. I would like to think that Stow did in fact process and share these images with Ronnie, in a kind of reciprocal exchange for the material gathered for his novel. And if Stow did send the pictures to Ronnie, I wonder now about their whereabouts. Did the images weave their way into Williamson family history, and if so what stories might the family tell now of the Mission and Ronnie’s encounter with Randolph Stow?

I also wonder what Stow’s wider collection of images may come to represent for the contemporary Oombulgurri community, a people who have been so decisively and ruthlessly denied the possibility of residing in their ‘magnificent country’.

• • •

While Stow’s time at Forrest River Mission in 1957 had a complex effect on his life and literature which is worthy of further interrogation, ultimately what emerges as central from the photographic collection within Stow’s archive is the way in which these truly beautiful images thread the past into the present and give weight to the contemporary reality of Oombulgurri. West Australian historian Neville Green wrote passionately in his prelude to the Oombulgurri pictorial history in 1988 that:

> The Oombulgurri Story shows how such photographs may be brought together to form a basis of an Aboriginal community history… to ensure that a generation of Aboriginal youth can better understand both the Dreaming and the historical past. (1988, 9)

But what of the present? The most recently published photographs of Oombulgurri were taken by Marieke Ceranna on project for Amnesty International Australia and appeared in media outlets The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald and Al Jazeera (Guardian 27 Nov 2014, SMH
29 Nov 2014, *Al Jazeera* 7 Dec 2014). The images depict a deserted and derelict settlement and represent Amnesty International’s attempt to document and bear witness to the community’s demise at the hands of the West Australian Government. What Aboriginal community history do these images tell?

Having declared the community ‘unviable’, the West Australian Government commenced the closure of Ooombulgurri in 2011. This was the second time the Oombulgurri community has been forcibly relocated: at the closure of Mission in 1968 the population were removed to the ‘Wyndham Three Mile Reserve’, where very few people got the houses or jobs they were promised and the conditions were described as some of the worst slum conditions in the world (Green, 1988, 110). Re-established in 1973 the Oombulgurri community was home to a fluctuating population of 60–150 residents until its closure. In 2011 the government first closed services, including the store, the clinic, the school and the police station, in effect forcing the majority of Oombulgurri residents to relocate to Wyndham or Kununurra in order to meet their most basic subsistence needs. The final remaining 10 residents were forcibly evicted to Wyndham in August 2011 (*Guardian*, 27 November 2014).

In a letter home to his mother in May 1957, Stow poignantly reflects on the permanence of his ‘beautiful’, though shabby, little store:

I’m sitting in my beautiful store at the moment, typing by the light of a hurricane lantern with the mysterious rustle of cockroaches, crickets, frogs, beetles, rats and bats all around me, and the rich fragrances of flour, phenyle, dripping, tea and just plain dirt. The place is getting to look better since Ronnie and I built new shelves for it and cleaned up some of the filthy corners that hadn’t been touched for years. But it’s still just a tin shed and *always will be*.

(‘Letter to Mother’, 20 May 1957, my emphasis)
Stow’s letter is poignant not in its recognition that a tin shed is simply a tin shed—but in the reverberations in the following report made by ABC News on 8 August 2011: ‘Oombulgurri’s only store was dismantled and removed by boat this week. Most of the community’s remaining residents also left on the boat.’

More recently in 2014, the Balanggara Aboriginal Corporation submitted a request to the Government on behalf of 150 former residents that Oombulgurri people be allowed to return to their community. However, in spite of or perhaps because of this request, West Australian Government contractors entered Oombulgurri in October 2014 with bulldozers, demolishing remaining buildings and infrastructure and depositing the rubble, including cars and personal belongings, into a large hole in the ground (Guardian, 27 November 2014).

Given this reality for Oombulgurri people, whose community settlement was obliterated against the explicit wishes of the Balanggara Traditional Owners, Stow’s images of ‘magnificent’ Oombulgurri country are now imbued with even greater significance, especially perhaps for the Oombulgurri community themselves.

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Notes
1 The terms ‘boab’ and ‘baobab’ are used interchangeably throughout Stow’s correspondence and literature. ‘Boab’ is the commonly used name in Australia for the species of ‘baobab’ endemic to the Kimberley region. Following Neville Green’s lead, I have opted to use the localised spelling ‘boab’.

Works Cited
Night Fishing
Anna Ryan-Punch is a widely published Melbourne poet and critic.

By turn of evening I tested the river mud with my toes. Brought back the ghosts of my father and brother each frosted with anniversary of their fantastic swim. When My brother hit the water first, his fishing rod reversed and he swung through the water first bright as a lure, next cold and pretty porcelain. Fly-tied in a filigree of weeds. My father always boxed without gloves, bare-knuckled fists swinging reminders. Muscled river flew around him like punches and he took on the fight. No wager licked money from his pockets as he leapt toward my brother's sculpture. Water drums in his ears beat victory until the ground fell out so fast he didn't hear my voice, swarm of sand up his nose fierce like terror. My fears were towers on the bank, head to foot in shirt singlet underpants pants socks shoes. Heavier than the river from source to mouth I watched the whole show catch and form: for the first time none of us could swim. Flotsam gathered for weeks after like a school of rotting tuna. A boy paraded my father's shoe and I showed him the value of relics through the red flood of his nose. When evening turned cold I brought my feet to edge of river mud where the cold peeled something a bit far back like when I pick a fingernail too much then look down and see blood.
Harry’s up ahead ducking and weaving between the seaweed and bluebottles washed up at the high tide mark. He keeps his eyes on the dirty horizon, huffing through his nose when he throws his jab. *Hfff, hfff.* He’s slower than he used to be, arms as stiff as a 4x4 but you can see he still has it in the way he shifts his feet, bobs his head. He circles the debris left at the shoreline, his t-shirt billowing in the northerly like a raised flag. *Hfff, hfff, hfff.*

It’s September 22nd, the same date Jack Dempsey lost the heavyweight championship of the world to Gene Tunney. He was Harry’s favourite boxer after Grandpa played an old black and white tape of his most famous fight, dubbed the Long Count. Even asked Mum to cut his hair with a side part. We never heard the end of it. I’d catch him in front of the mirror in Mum’s room with his mitts up, toilet paper around his knuckles and he’d say, ‘Tall men come down to my height when I hit ’em in the body,’ and he’d see me in the reflection and wink like he was three gins deep.

When his cheekbones glisten and his shoulders brew with lactic acid, he stops, and ambles back towards me with his arms swinging like oars. He bursts bluebottles with the callused part of his heel and sometimes little pieces of tentacle hit me in the leg and sting like nettles in a cow paddock. As we drift towards the edge of the dunes where the softer sand is, the bluebottles thin out and he has to run down to the tideline to find more.

We pass sandbars and deep gullies perfect for bream and flathead but we keep walking and don’t mention it. I don’t really want to fish. Couldn’t be stuffed. But I have to try, at least for Harry’s sake.

‘Where do you want to go?’ I ask him.

He shrugs his shoulders and toes crab holes in the sand. His finger traces a line down the front of his shirt like he’s pulling down an invisible zipper. When he sees me watching, he rips his hand back to his side.

His scars have always been tender. The first week home after the operation he woke the whole house trying to tear his chest open because it felt like ants were trying to get between the stitches. When I walked into his room, Mum had a paper bag to his mouth while Dad trimmed his fingernails on the bed. The paper bag was brown like the ones we use to hold our school lunches. It expanded and crumpled with every breath and if you shut your eyes it sounded like waves lapping the shore. When he finally gave in and fell asleep, I looked at his limp hands resting on his chest, the nubs of his fingers tender and bloody.

Dad was waiting for me beneath the skylight in the hall. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him so I stared at a crack in the tile next to my big toe. He grabbed me by my chin and brought my eyes to his face.

‘Give me your hand,’ he said.

He took my fingers in his fist and ripped down the collar of his shirt.

‘Watch.’

He squeezed my fingers, pulled them to his bare chest and dragged my nails down right through his skin.

He gripped my chin again.

‘You see?’

Beneath the strange glow of the skylight, even through the tears, my father’s blood looked blue under my fingernails.

I keep an eye out for rips and currents. I search for floating debris and darker water like Dad taught us. I remember him walking us up to the river mouth where the waters boil like blood and dredge out past the waves. He dangled me over the sweeping current until my feet were skimming across the highway of water, just so we could see how fast it was, how dangerous the sea could be. Then Mum slapped him in the face and walked ahead, sobbing into her sarong. Dad stood behind us with his broad hands on each of our shoulders and he talked about what’s best for me, what’s best for all of us.

We continue heading down the beach, the northerly wind at our backs. Harry looks back at the asbestos shacks bunched at the end of the bay.

‘No one can see us,’ I say.

I drop the tackle bag in the sand and check my line and trace. Nothing is tangled.

‘Dad’s been better,’ I tell him. ‘Now that he’s working again.’

Harry doesn’t listen. I begin to rig Dad’s beach rod. I put the line in my mouth and moisten the knot, just how he showed us.

‘He’s different now, ever since—’
Harry brings his eyes from the sand. I can’t help but stare at the scar line poking above his shirt collar like a pink beach worm. He runs a finger across it, shiny and smooth like weathered glass.

When the rod is ready, I wade into the shallows and leave him at the shore with the tackle bag full of discarded tobacco packets and beer cans; mementos of our father and the long nights he’d spend casting his line below the lighthouse. I swing the heavy rod over my shoulder and leave it there for a moment, the lure dangling close to Harry’s face. He inspects it closely, counts the tiny painted gills before I haul it above the shore break.

He stands close. I can almost feel him there, feel his awkward lope; that stance that would put you off for the first two rounds before you worked out it was unintentional. He has the same look on his face he had in his first fight. He was scared then, but he shouldn’t have been. It was his right hook you had to look out for. It left a constant dent in the side of the heavy bag. I’d see it swinging silently from the corner of my eye when I went into the garage. It reminded me of what he could do if he ever decided to really let ‘em fly.

I survey his lips and they flinch like he’s going to say something but the mosquito buzz of my reel and the waves rushing around my legs are the only sounds between us. When my lure takes a hit I act like I don’t give a shit. I just wind in slowly and throw him a glance when the time is right, but I know that deep down in his bones he knows I’m shaking like a kicked mutt.

‘Not much happening,’ I say after a while.

Harry trudges back in to our stuff. I try to stay out there but my calves burn like I’ve just done six rounds on the rope. I finally give in and slump next to Harry in defeat and watch the green waves rearing up at the shore.

‘It’s not ya fault, Harry,’ I say. ‘You know, with Dad and everything.’

He toys with the sand and regards the sea.

‘Harry?’

Just the sight of his hands trembling in the afternoon light is enough to keep us both quiet. He eventually pulls his eyes from the horizon and I follow the sun etching itself into the lines of his white face. It makes him look old, too damn old for his age. The lagoon tinge beneath his eyes makes him seem weaker than he is. I’m tempted to drag him out of the light. He’s tougher than that. The flowers at his bedside always seemed so out of place. I’ve seen him on the cliff edge of giving in and even then he could send you packing with a single glance.

I start to shape a ball of wet sand with the rough parts of my hands. I bury it like a turtle egg and wait until it’s cooked, hard and ready.

‘Mum reckons it’s complicated.’

I don’t know why but I reach out to graze his now fragile fingers, just to stop them from sifting the earth between his legs. Dad said Harry had all the potential in the world when he was younger; long arms, lean. Said they’d never see him coming if he stuck at it. Said he could see he was a southpaw from the way Harry threw his jab. That was before they found out his heart wall was too thick on one side. Dad would always ruffle his hair and say it was just a bung ticker. Harry never laughed though. He’d say he was tired and the nurse would usher us into the hall. Then Mum would clip Dad across the ear with a rolled up magazine and tell him to go make her a coffee. Black and mean, she’d say, like Sonny Liston.

I brace myself for the now unfamiliar touch of his skin, the fridge door feel of his nails. I remember his knuckles wrapped in tea towels from the kitchen bottom drawer. He was only a kid but he opened me up, big time, and wanted to stop when he saw the claret. I made him keep going until the tea towels were flecked with busted brows and I held out until he was so exhausted I won by default.

They’re big knuckles for a kid, bony, gravel shaped. I wonder how many teeth they would have dislodged if he stuck at it like Dad said. They’d never see it comin’.

He must feel my gaze, see my creeping mitts because suddenly he’s up, bounding for the fence with the dune walls. I scramble after him, the sand ball bouncing in the sagging belly of my shirt. He stops on the ridge between the land and the sea and looks down at a flock of seagulls huddled against the wind. I climb the dune and stand beside him. He eyes the birds with devout concentration, a closeness that would perk a teacher’s ears up. He brings his hand towards his chest, an unknowing reflex since the first operation, and presses his sternum with his fingers. The gulls shiver the sand from their wings and his brother’s fingers dig into his shirt fabric until the cotton leaks blood. I tell him to stop. I tell him what he wants to hear, that Dad’s an old bastard, too old fashioned. I tell him I should have tried harder, we all should have. His eyes burn like a fever and the birds watch us perched on the dune like we’re something more than bickering kids.

I take the sand ball out from the bottom of my shirt. Harry keeps prodding his chest like it’s made of canvas. Before I throw it, I see his grin; the same one he had when he was drawn to fight another out-of-towner in his first bout. I remember it being so sharp it could cut your soul in two.

Sugar Robinson, the old man said. We held onto the ropes and got ready for an early ride home with the radio as loud as it could go. We were drunk with confidence, you’d almost call it cockiness but you had to be there.
Harry examines the blood between his fingertips. He never really had the guts for the ring. Couldn’t go for the throat when he needed to. He could run a mile in six minutes but it’s not a substitute for the nerves.

I take one last look at him; his shaking hands, that same smile that got him knocked cold, got him tasting the dirty canvas with his lips, and I lob the ball over my head. The dune grass whips at our ankles as we watch it falling through the sky like a giant sinker. We hold our breaths, tense our guts as the gulls lift in a cloud of scurrying wings until they’re just a mad white blur. Harry begins to laugh. I’m laughing too, cackling like a toddler and I don’t really know why.

Then we notice one left squabbling, its weight dragging in circles through the sand. My mouth feels like it’s full of shattered glass. I taste the fighter’s blood behind my teeth, the glove sweat stink coming from our skin. I leave Harry and sprint down to the harder sand where the bird shakes and squawks on its buckled wing. I pick it up and hold it under my shirt, hold it against my skin. I feel its silky feathers and the soft flurry and rhythm of heart and blood.

On the way home after the fight, we stopped by the local butcher and bought a hunk of wet meat for Harry’s eye. Dad talked in proverbs from the driver’s seat, about having heart, saving face. When I looked back at Harry, I knew that was it, I knew his gloves would be hung on the hook by the back door and never laced up again.

The swell is up, breaking unevenly and sending cold spray shoreward. I wade through the waves with the limp bird in the pit of my shirt. I stop at the edge of the sandbank where the water is dark and the land falls away. Where the world ends. I take it out from under my shirt. I want to say something, to scream at god for everything, to tell him I’m sorry, we all are, but the words are stuck like shells between my toes. My hands tremble and the bird just stares. Dad never believed in god, because of Harry and the war and all that stuff, so I hold the bird and wait.

The tide starts to come in. The current drags around my knees. The waves begin to hit me in the belly and chest but I don’t move. The bird hovers above the rising water, quivering in my hand. The sea starts to creep up and around my neck like one of Grandma’s knitted sweaters. She always knitted us jumpers while Harry was in the hospital. Just a bung ticker, my Dad would always say. It’s funny; the bird in my fist would be the same weight as a human heart. A heart drained of life and blood. A heart clogged with seawater. And now I’m under, my feet kicking free from the world below and it’s like he could still be here, Harry, dancing across the dunes, bobbing and weaving behind his household famous jab.
Daughters
Rose Lucas

Rose Lucas’s most recent poetry collection, *Even in the Dark* (UWAP), won the Mary Gilmore Award 2012–2014.

These girls—
they spring up at our sides,
pushing,
lanky into the air,
sprouting and reaching,
their leggy uncertainty suddenly overshadowing—
while the mothers,
faithful companions,
solid anchor to the earth,
we only grow woodier with intensification of event and feeling,
the heavy swing of many times round,
its complex gifts, its weariness;
we are walking
with these girls who were pods,
knuckled close into a fecund dark;
we have watched the amazement of their unfurling as seasons tumble one after another,
leaf after leaf and hand over hand—

these girls;
their hair is as fine as corn silk flying in turbulent currents, the wild and surprising wind of their climbing.
Her parents leave her with Granny Sheehan, who is a right cow. She thinks we’re all bad seeds because at our age she was married. She makes wallflower jokes and blames the fact we wear jeans for why we have no suitors. The whole situation makes it easy for Christina to see Alfie though. Granny Sheehan lets her spend her days with him providing he combs his hair and uses his manners when picking her up. She tells us—me and Deanne—to go away and to ‘not play the gooseberries’, unsure if we’re a threat to her granddaughter’s prospects because we’re still kids or because, without boyfriends ourselves, we’re on the cusp of spinsterhood.

We watch the kids flicking about the park like reptiles. Six months ago we would’ve joined in some of the games, but after two minutes of throwing grass at one another earlier on, we grew bored and went and sat in the shade. The children seem to have boundless enthusiasm and play at war without signs of finishing. We peek at Alfie’s car from over the tops of our sunglasses and wait for Christina to wave us back. She usually puts her head and arms out the lowered window and hollers ‘All done, dog’s bums.’

All done doing what?

Deanne complains about the kids but is grateful we’re not at the space park today.

‘That place is nuts this time of year.’ She picks a bottle cap out of the dirt with a stick. ‘Christ, this place is boring.’

Boring seems an odd word for here, as I ride, following the river each weekend, just to reach this place. I think about the weekends of Deanne and me and Christina before Alfie and think Christina is just distracting herself with him so she doesn’t have to think about her parents being butchered by backpacker murderers. Otherwise we’d be down the street, like everyone else. It’s strange for a kid to worry more about their parents than their parents worry about them.

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We’ve pulled into a drive in a street I’ve never been to. The house has an angled roof and is rendered in a colour that reminds me of the bones of dead animals. There are succulents, in muted colours, planted along the fence line. They’re fleshy looking, though some have fine prickles curving out of them like thin little hooks.

The sun is turning my skin pink through the window of the car, so I pull myself away from the direct light. Deanne seems to want to soak it up. She circles the winder and dumps her hair out the window. Deanne has an abundance of curls, naturally darker at the roots and grading out into every type of blonde. Sometimes she packs lemons in her bag and tilts her
head backwards and squeezes, squinting upwards at the sun as if putting in eye drops. She then brushes the juice through with a metal comb and conditioning spray to sunbleach in more highlights. Her whole family has curls—mostly the same colours, though the younger boys seem a little fairer. And there are a few of them. Five younger brothers under her, and a sister, the littlest. You go to their house in the holidays and they line up toasters on the bench and jugs of milk in wait for the breakfast rush, like you’re on a camp or something.

‘Don’t you like Alfie?’ As soon as I ask the question I can see Deanne is looking for a quick answer. I’m looking for a tell.

‘I don’t know. He’s morose, I guess. And he smells. Really smells. I mean, somebody that sweaty should wear tank tops in the summer, not all over black. He’s never spoken to me either, just gave a grunt when Christina introduced us.’

‘At least he drives us around in his car. Not many guys his age would do that!’ I chip this comment in, in hopes that Christina can’t hear us from inside the house or something.

‘Lucky us!’ I laugh.

‘Another two years and we’ll be driving us around. Anyway, walking’s not so bad; it’s dirty in here.’

‘I know, but dirty isn’t always a bad thing.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘Well, untidy isn’t. Your house is untidy.’

‘Yeah, but that’s the kids. Alfie’s unemployed. There’s no excuse. I’d hate to think what his bedroom looks like.’

‘Do you think that’s where they are? In his bedroom?’

‘Don’t you? They didn’t want us to come in, did they?’

‘I guess.’

Deanne fumbles around trying to find a clip for her hair. After a few minutes she gives up, leans back, and sighs.

I try my hardest to hear the river from here before climbing from the backseat to the frontseat. Before us and behind us the drive is two tracks of cement divided by the thinnest strip of dirt.

• • •

It’s been another half an hour. Sweat, I can feel, is between the skin of my thighs and the fabric of my jeans. Deanne is kicking at the rubbish on the floor.

‘There are weird bugs everywhere in here.’

‘Do you want to go?’

‘No, it’s quiet without the loonies.’

‘They’re not that bad. I wish I had brothers. Besides, we could go anywhere, not just back to your house.’

‘What, your house?’

‘Why do you wait for her every week?’

‘Mum said we need to stay… in case things go wrong.’

‘What do you mean “go wrong”?’

‘Nothin’. I don’t know. Mum thinks we’re all going to get molested or something. She says we’re at that age.’

‘That’s a bit funny.’

‘All that stuff is coming up in our house lately. Because the boys are getting older and I got my period last week.’

‘Oh?’

‘Just “oh”?’

‘I thought you got it already. I’ve had mine since I was ten.’

‘You’ve had your period since you were ten! That’s six years! How come I never knew about this?’

‘It was before we’d even done Sex Ed. I was sworn to secrecy. Mum reckons the other mothers insisted I didn’t tell you all until later, and then I just forgot. The teachers knew, and your mum even. The hardest thing was having crushes on people when all you and Christine wanted to do was play with dolls.’

‘You liked people? You’ve never had boyfriends though.’

‘I was too young to begin with and only liked people off TV, then I got over it. The hormones settle down eventually. They all seem okay now, but not to-die-for or anything. I don’t think I ever want a partner.’

‘I think you’re just making excuses.’

‘Excuses? Excuses not to have a boyfriend. That’s why you don’t wear make-up. Because you’re scared.’

‘Scared of what?’

‘Sex.’

‘Christina’s not scared.’

‘Yes, she is.’ Deanne slips off her shoes and flexes and rotates her feet. ‘We all are.’

• • •

The screen door at the side of the house is open about thirty centimetres and a thin grey race dog is ushered out. The voice is too quiet to tell who it belongs to, but a bright orange sports shoe is visible through the mesh, propping the door ajar. A woman steps outside and leads the dog past us
and Alfie's car to a hatchback out on the street. The woman wears a purple tennis dress and visor and carries a drink bottle in her right hand. There's something about the way she moves that reminds me of Schapelle Corby, as if she's used to being observed—talked about.

'That's Alfie's sister. She's twenty, I think. I met her ages ago when I did work experience at the drycleaner's. She dropped in some stuff of her mum's and was talking to my boss for ages about how she wishes Alfie would grow up.'

How long have we been here? I reach for the ashtray and pull the neat black rectangle out, exposing dozens of compacted smoke butts. 'Ew.'

'I wouldn't touch that if I was you. He spits in there sometimes.'

I turn around and throw my arms over the seat. I pretend to look at Deanne while she speaks, but really I'm looking out the back window at Alfie's sister. She picks an oil can and rag out of the front of the car and opens the back end. She moves as if she's being filmed and pulls her dress down at the back every now and again.

Deanne is talking with her mouth full. She has a tin full of peppermint wafer tubes she nicked from the picnic. She holds one like a cigar, talking around it like a gangster. 'You know, she's a lesbian.'

Deanne is rummaging around in the back again. While Alfie's sister took the dog for a walk she applied face cream, blue nail polish, and slipped hoops in beside her sleepers. Her time management skills, as always, impressive. I spent the time thinking, unmoved on the edge of my seat.

'Do you really think she is—playing for our team?'

'Our team?' Deanne chokes back a laugh. 'What are you on about?'

I pretend I don't hear and fiddle with the car lighter.

Deanne goes on, 'I don't know. That's what they say. There was this whole story about her at school. I'm surprised you never heard. Plus, how else did she get to that age without having at least one kid in this town?'

'Maybe she can't.'

'She went to university, you know?'

'That's interesting.'

'Thought you might like that.' She sits up and brushes crumbs off onto the floor. 'Don't get your heart set on it, Megs—university. I heard Mum and Dad talking the other day, and your parents aren't going to let you go.'

'They might for a year. They said they'd consider a year.'

'Your dad was saying to my dad that you've already pushed it by insisting on going to the college. They need you to either get a job or move out after you finish.'

'You can be really nasty when you want to be, you know?'

'Don't shoot the messenger. It's just this place. No one can afford it. The university is too far away.'

'Jola can.'

'Jola's dad's a doctor.'

'She's not as smart as me.'

'No one is. No one I know anyway. Just get a job like the rest of us,' she grins wickedly, 'and marry Jola's brother.'

'Yeah.'

I'm getting increasingly uncomfortable and tell Deanne I'm getting out to stretch my legs. The air is humid but when I move away from the driveway and around the front of the house, it seems more shaded. I can't see Deanne anymore but I know she's craning her neck and listening, just in case I follow through with her parting words: Dare you to ask Alfie's sister if she really digs girls.

The grey dog is lying across the garden bed and its pale underside is exposed amongst the cacti. It doesn't take much. A look in her direction, a swing of my leg as I hop over the race dog's flaccid tail, and she has me hard against the front window, her hand up my top, my arse on the sill, and her teeth like crab pincers edging across my neck. Her hands feel like ice on the skin just above my hips and I'm not sure what to do with my own hands, so I raise and lower them as if ushering people to sit. We've barely kissed when she pulls away. 'Why do you have grass in your hair?'

'We were having a fight at the park.'

She backs up.

'My God, you're one of Alfie's girlfriend's friends. I... how old are you?'

I don't know what to say. I brush my hair back, straighten my shirt, and shrug. I can feel myself blushing as I turn to walk up the drive.

Deanne is waiting for me. Sitting up this time, with the door closest to the fence kicked open. I move around behind the car to get to her.

'Well, is she?'

I don't say anything, just look at her slyly with a duck of my head.

'Oh my God, she is, isn't she? I can't believe you asked her.' She starts laughing and anyone who knows Deanne will tell you, even at the most serious moments, her laugh is infectious. It repeats over and over and I feel light and joyous and can't help but join in.

Alfie's sister walks up beside the opposite side of the car. I can see she's trying to ignore us; her back is rigid, and she hesitates before reaching into the house through the screen and grabbing her racket. She lifts it
in her hand and shuffles it around, as if testing the weight of it. She then tilts her head and meets my eyes directly. There will be a time tonight when I’ll try in agonising detail to remember the whole thing, but for the moment it’s forgotten. I try not to think of her with Alfie later, looking over the dining table, enquiring about the immature schoolgirls in his car—enquiring about the one with the mousy hair and straight fringe, a thin green belt threaded through her skinny-leg jeans.

Deanne has stopped laughing and winks in my direction. I bomb back into the front seat and she stretches out again, her hair a gust outside the window. Crisp looking bugs, like dried beads of golden syrup, bumble over the rubbish at my feet. It's cooling off, the day, and Deanne’s feet push into the roof of the car every ten minutes or so when she shifts uncomfortably.

First one boy, then the whole herd of them stampeding like spooked stallions, faces grimaced by the g-force of pubescence, hurtling themselves against themselves, as if the body could outrun itself to someplace not even love can catch—then, one after the other, falling, falling into the green arms of the grass.

Richard Schiffman is a poet and environmental journalist. His forthcoming collection, ‘What the Dust Doesn’t Know’, will be published by Salmon Poetry.
the boys
Kevin Gillam

the boys, circled, in jeans, shirts untucked, beers and banter,
loosening, back slapping, real estate prices, golf tales, the boys, who’s round? unbuttoning, stubbies and schooners, un-finishing, Wednesday afternoon, the boys, in this pranged up moment of shared and shed untruths and bruises, the boys, beering, untangling, cruising, jaunty and blooming, the boys, in the ambered half light, the boys

Returning
Tim Edwards

I need that mad ploughing run
down a steep sand hill, legs all pistons,
arms like broken wings—to where moist shell grit will turn between my toes. I need to make a bowl of fingers and fill with water. I need to be reminded of a life so small, so porous.

Kevin Gillam is a West Australian writer with three poetry collections. He works as Director of Music at Christ Church Grammar School.

Tim Edwards has published in a variety of Australian journals. He is currently in the process of compiling a collection of his work.
Nursing-Home Memory
David McGuigan

David McGuigan taught literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students in the NT and remote SA for fifteen years. He has published poems and short stories in many Australian journals.

1.

The rush, the pound, the swirl of hidey in the street, tearing round the block, sprinting, panting, trapped on the twirling carousel of the city. We boys cut corners, spring across gutters, gravel flying, chips of flint striking, plunging over the fence into a hedge of roses. Under prickling thorns, in a bed of shed petals, we're temporarily inert, intent on silence, hearts exploding, lungs still clutching air, catching breath, catching breath. Acknowledge autumn, the clogging damp of rose-bed leaves, the buds and thorns and petals.

No-one following. Our hearts slowly calming, breath releasing.... We leap, lunge, feet flying, slapping cement, hurtling round blind corners from pursuers never seen. Accelerating, gasping, no goals in mind, just the frantic thrust and rush and beat of the moment. This moment. Then the next.

2.

Through the window, a clouded day, leaves fall. One, damp, clings then slithers down the glass. Within a humid room, tangled in tubes, frail body elevated in bed, sweat forms despite inactivity. His pursuers no longer seen or known, thoughts a hedge of roses, an impenetrable thicket, trapping him in. Somewhere dark, confusing, unfathomable. Except for a dim glint of light, a spark. So tiny. So tiny.
Kerrin O'Sullivan is a widely published and award-winning writer of short fiction and creative non-fiction from Victoria.

If I had to explain my actions to a jury, like how I came to be in an Athens hotel room staring at some guy's hairy back, I'd play the grief card. How my backpack was stolen. How I was mourning my lost journal. How I was in an ouzo fog.

But then I don't have to explain anything to anyone, neither prosecutor nor parent. No one. And I've survived another night in a stranger's bed. Woken with a sledge-hammer headache, sure, but I've not been strangled. Small mercies.

• • •

One minute I'm being crushed in a queue edging along the pier towards the booking agency, buying ferry tickets to—where? Crete, Corfu, Hydra? Wherever. Inside the office, I slide the backpack off my aching shoulders and drop it near the doorway. The line shuffles forward. Mykonos, 10 am departure; why not? Next minute, ticket in hand, I'm going nowhere. My backpack is missing.

I can hardly breathe for the thump in my chest. My eyes well. I run along the quay, this way, that way. Either way, the pack is gone. Stolen. I'm stranded.

• • •

I waste hours criss-crossing Athens, searching for the correct police station to report the theft. I'm catapulted from the Piraeus port police—no english—via the Docks' military police, to the city headquarters. I need the report to claim the insurance. I'm skint. The money matters.

Hours later, my statement filed and feeling sorry for myself, I find a taverna. Annoyed at not being adrift on the Aegean, and lamenting things lost, I re-read the report on the Hellenic Police letterhead. Sleeping bag, socks, Kashmiri pashmina. The list is long; everything I need. I order a

old age  can be making do  with leftovers
impaired cognition  memory  you're as deaf
as a post  you can only barely hear the decades
hurting past  too blind  to notice their
phosphorescent  comet's tail
coffee, strong and sweet. And that's when I remember my journal, zipped into the pack's outer pocket. I sip and cry, and cry some more. Twelve months on the road from the Himalayas through the Middle East to Europe. Scribblings. Memories. Pressed Czech wildflowers, Iranian teahouse receipts, Turkish wine labels. Names, too, addresses; people I'd now not see again.

‘What?’ A man approaches my waterfront table. ‘You could do with a drink.’

I don’t answer.

‘My name’s Hasan, I live over there.’

A friendly local? He hasn’t the look. I follow the line of his pointed figure to the watery horizon.

‘Where?’

‘There.’ He points out to sea.

‘Where?’ I repeat. Is the man a fish?

‘Larnaca.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Cyprus,’ he says. ‘Now, will it be ouzo, sad one, or retsina?’

A voice from the shadows of the awning: ‘So tomorrow then, Mustafa?’

The man Hasan had been smoking with is silhouetted against the whitewashed walls—black leather jacket, skintight jeans, wraparound shades. Hasan nods. There’s a chill in the steaming Greek swelter.

‘Thought your name was Hasan?’ I say.

He pours two shots of ouzo, and through petrol-blue exhaust fumes, looks out across the water, towards Larnaca.

There are more drinks, mezethakia. Plump green olives, cubes of feta, dolmades, anchovies in oil. But mostly there are drinks, many drinks, and I find a friend in ouzo.

‘Another.’ He plonks the bottle down hard on the laminate tabletop. ‘To cheer you up.’

My fault, I suppose. For crying in public.

Hasan’s arm is around my shoulders as we stagger through darkened streets to the two-star hotel I’d booked earlier, to save cash until the claim is paid.

‘Which one is it?’

‘That one.’

‘That’s a whore’s hotel.’

‘What?’

‘Where hookers take clients.’

‘How would I know?’ I say. ‘It was cheap.’

‘It’s not safe.’

‘Like I have anything left to steal?’

‘You’ll get raped,’ he murmurs, tickling my wrist. ‘Stay with me.’

Hasan is a blur, there are three eyes in his face. The streetscape seesaws.

The ouzo answers: yes.

I wake early but feign sleep until Hasan goes to the bathroom. Shards of yellow sun spear through a split in the curtain. I reach under his pillow for his wallet. Flick it open. Mustafa Spyrou. The wallet’s fat with euros; I pull out a wad. For services rendered, I decide.

For a backpack. Some ouzo. A journal to fill with new names, new worlds.

And a ferry ticket.

Going anywhere but Larnaca.
Two summers ago Paul went missing.

He had woken up one perfectly ordinary Saturday morning to find himself gripped by the firm belief, the unshakeable belief (no ambiguity, no doubts, no hesitations), that he, Paul Zerenov, aged thirty-two, height 185 centimetres, eyes brown, hair light brown, no distinguishing features, was missing.

This despite the fact that he had registered that absence while in the process of tumbling out of his own bed. This despite the fact that he had seen with his own eyes his own feet hitting the carpet of his own bedroom. Saw his toes splayed out in their customary fashion. Felt the accumulated carpetty grit beneath them. Tabulated, momentarily, such necessities as weekend vacuuming. Then (having ticked Sunday for the task, having sought to reorient himself in the general vicinity of the mundane) Paul fractured with panic: everyday life was everywhere present. Simultaneously, everyday life receded.

He straightened up. A groggy movement like a boxer who’d taken a hit too many. A boxer who’d seen better days. Straightening up he greeted (but with a tremor of surprise) his own face (clearly, unmistakably, his own face) framed in his own mirror.

Perhaps he was a boxer? Perhaps that was it? Perhaps he was punch drunk? Or just plain drunk? He fumbled the disordered bedclothes, jangled the keys and coins of yesterday’s pockets. He had an identity somewhere, a core of self, if only he could remember where he’d tossed it.

He looked at his double/his opponent in the dusty glass above the dresser in the hope of finding some mnemonic glint, but was met instead by a facsimile of own puzzlement.

He faked a punch. The puncher faked back.

Miming the force of the hit to his reflection, his gut somersaulted and, compelled by some impossible force, he stumbled sideways, tripped over...
Paul's mother recognised the photo of her infant son immediately. A pale child with a ball of golden hair that would mousen progressively into insignificance in adulthood. The hair was, perhaps, a metaphor, or so she might have thought had she been prone to such thinking. About life, about deceptive promises, about the balcony of expectation that momentarily juts out to stage a heady soliloquy of hope and then, suddenly, crashes to the ground, its foundations eaten through by corrosive irony. About little wonder-kids who grow up to become, well...? Nothing. Just nothing. Little wonder-kids who just grow up.

Yes. Although much time had passed there was a resemblance between child and man. Yes, she could definitely identify him. He was her son. And the grown man, still attractive but blunted in the sharp new photo beside the flecked black and white? He was her son too. They were both her sons. Her son. Paul's mother tried to stabilise her grammar before it exposed the incomprehensible. Her hands shook and she cried.

‘Paul Zerenov’. The police sergeant typed the name once more into a box. The file on P. Zerenov—initially presumed to be a routine missing person inquiry of the ‘filed and forgotten’ variety—was perversely expanding. Paul's girlfriend, Gina, sighed; his mother clicked shut her handbag with a look of resignation. Later that day the older woman would notice that their existence would be useful for the purposes of identification.

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‘Paul Zerenov’. The police sergeant typed the name once more into a box. The file on P. Zerenov—initially presumed to be a routine missing person inquiry of the ‘filed and forgotten’ variety—was perversely expanding. Paul's girlfriend, Gina, sighed; his mother clicked shut her handbag with a look of resignation. Later that day the older woman would finally pour out the full story of Paul's past to the younger one. At first it struck Gina as a vast tableau of impressions, the possibilities of which accumulated with a speed that could only end in fatal impact, a speed which blurred the concrete pillars of lived experience, which obscured destinations. The departing possibilities waved disordered quivers of hands through the gaps in boarded slats of her imagination. Gina tried to secure Paul amidst the stream of the mother's discourse, free floating as it was, generic rather than specific. Held out her hand. Tried to grasp his amidst the ghastly cycle of displacement that news broadcasts had made so endlessly familiar: post famine, post revolution, post war, post holocaust, post partition, post wall. To be followed by resettlement. To be followed by a new start. To be followed by the resurrection of boredom at the meeting of friends chosen by isolation.

In short, Paul was a migrant in perpetuity, brought to Australia at four, yet never really settled, the culmination of a Russian father (a minor clerk stationed in London, whom he could barely remember), of a working-class Irish mother. The sum total of a fast and furtive Cold War conception. Of a complicated birth. His father, head bowed, grilled interminably by bureaucrats while, streets away, his mother, gasping hard, sweated him into being as a pure mimicry of her respiration—a life.

But, to return to the actual moment of disappearance...

On Paul's bathroom floor lies a source of his difficulty. A copy of Chekhov. The Three Sisters. It is in Russian. He has been reading it for several months. Reading in the bath. Well, attempting to read. But Paul cannot read Russian. Paul cannot speak Russian. Cannot learn Russian.

So Paul's copy of Chekhov lies on the floor like an abandoned sponge, soaking up the overflow. The dirty water. The spray of shower and soap.

Ah well, at least he is clean.

Paul bought the Chekhov a little ambitiously. It was a small matter, or so he thought, of reclaiming his cultural inheritance. He was convinced that with a little instruction he would easily acquire Russian. He was not even sure that lessons were completely necessary. The teacher's competence was questionable and, in any case, the problem was not really one of learning. More one of resuscitating his memory. After all, his father (before his untimely death) had (or so he had been told) spoken incessantly to him. Jabbered away. For three years in a cramped London flat. Stuffed with books, manuscripts, newspapers. (For Paul had seen many movies about exiles. He knew the score. Something from Shostakovich or Rachmaninov, perhaps?) Yes, in such a setting, smoking (of course) an unfiltered cigarette, Paul's father had discoursed lengthily.
Had jabbered away. And Paul had jabbered back. A perfect communion. Father and son. Unshaven father mysteriously resembling a Slavic Albert Camus—or so his son, with what he assumed to be characteristic Russian sentiment, liked to imagine—and tow-haired tot, his eyes two wishing wells of innocence, mirroring back to Daddy his fractured self. Russian was his natural, his spontaneous language. It could flow through him, therefore, untutored. He was like these sisters of the Chekhov play, for he had seen, just last year—oh marvellous discovery—a BBC version (a translation), and hence knew the plot, which now stared back at him in an indecipherable scrawl. Yes, just like these Chekhovian sisters, he too longed for home, for Moscow.

Unfortunately, Paul had an inconvenient secret. He had failed the test of Russianness before. In the later stages of state primary school, in Australia, he had failed. His identity as ‘the Russian Boy’ suddenly tumbled like the Wall. His few cherished words of James Bond and John Le Carré Eastern-bloc, movie-memorised dialogue were cruelly kicked and pummelled to smithereens by the appearance of a real Russian boy. This wretched newcomer spoke little English, and thus the school authorities teamed him with Paul. Of course, when the boy began to speak to him the language was completely incomprehensible. Utterly foreign. Unutterably so. Unutterable.

The episode prompted, you must understand, a severe crisis for Paul because his whole identity up until that point had been predicated on his mysterious status as ‘Zerenov, the Russian’. Now there was a real Russian boy, and this real Russian boy, assembling a workable English vocabulary as quickly as he collected new friends, happily exposed Paul as a total fraud. In the wake of this humiliating revelation Paul found later hiding in a storage cupboard, curled like a snail, sobbing snotty gibberish and sucking his thumb.

And yet, hideous though its initial consequences were, Paul’s dethronement as ‘the Russian boy’ was not entirely a bad thing. His disintegration resulted in a move from the state system to a dirt-cheap Catholic College, courtesy of a whip-round from his mother’s brothers in Ireland. Here he squirmed at the attention paid to him as ‘a problem boy’, sought anonymity in silence by adopting a posture of prayerful spirituality, and attempted to effect his own redefinition. He eschewed subjects requiring communication skills and excelled at mathematics. He took up sports and, in particular, became a fine rower. He rowed day in and out, regardless of the weather. Day in, day out. He rowed with compulsion. He collected cup after cup to put on his mother’s mantelpiece. Each year, day in, day out, each season, without fail, a new cup.

Yes, Paul rowed. He was ‘a boy who rowed’. He rowed and he rowed. He rowed so far that one day he paused momentarily over his oars for a few necessary intakes of breath, and, looking up, realised that he was several years distant from his past as ‘the Russian boy’. And the next time he looked up that small pseudo-Russian boy was nowhere in sight. He rowed so far indeed that the next thing he knew he was an economics student at the university. He put his head down and rowed again until finally he found himself, suddenly, looking up to a flash of light, toothily grinning with his degree in hand and his tearful mother under his wing.

With the cradling of his oars, Paul’s memories (or, perhaps, his intense desire for these memories) were reanimated. He went to Russia immediately after he finished his studies. He believed that by stepping onto the soil of his father’s country, by hearing the voices of the people in natural dialogue, he could reclaim the abandoned self of his early childhood.

He looked at the incomprehensibly encoded writing and assumed it would open up to him, that its meaning would be transparent. It was not.

Nothing was familiar. Nothing. Worse still, his body did not react well to the cold. Other bodies did. This was the most embarrassing thing of all! Other Australian tourists he met, all without an ounce of Russian blood in their veins, were adapting better than he. He fled the country after two days, deserting his plans along with a battered map belonging to his father, the diary that he proposed to keep, one of his favourite pairs of shoes and three unstamped postcards. One of these was destined for his mother.
Another for his girlfriend of the moment. The third, perversely, although devoid of other information, he had addressed to himself. No message, just an address. A London address where he had lived as a small child.

... Paul is,’ or so his night school Russian teacher told the police, ‘the worst student I have ever taught. Not that he is inattentive, mind you. He is trying hard, perhaps a little too hard. He is, quite simply, a failure at languages. His English is bland too, for that matter. Perhaps he was caught between vocabularies at some crucial point in language acquisition and ended up somewhere, to borrow a phrase, lost in translation. Anyway he has no gift for expression. None.’

It was Gina who had involved the teacher in the inquiry. It was she, indeed, who gave the proceedings direction in the face of general indifference about a man, a perfectly respectable man, an accountant, indeed, who disappears after a night of average sex. Who goes to the bathroom, reappears, dresses himself in yesterday’s clothes and goes to the shop for a pack of cigarettes, never to return. Yet, surely, or so she had persisted, if over the last six months or so such a man and his girlfriend had discussed marriage? Surely if they had also discussed children, and persisted, if over the last six months or so such a man and his girlfriend had discussed marriage? Surely if they had also discussed children, and he had, at least in principle, agreed that a child might be a fine thing? The wry smiles, the polite glances away, the unspoken phrase ‘fear of commitment’, the cautionary tales of past cases, of men who had turned up months later working on the mines, surfing the Gold Coast with their mates, or shackled up in Thailand with an underage ladyboy under one arm and a syringe up the other—all these, for the most part kindly meant, were served up with varying degrees of subtlety by friends, workmates and authorities to temper her hopes. But Gina refused to play second fiddle in a clichéd urban parable; she persisted with her own inquiries by means of the internet and then a detective service, finally—and with a certain relish—alerting the police to her astonishing discovery: there was a Paul Zerenov searching via various London papers and internet sites for information about a child who had allegedly disappeared nearly thirty years ago. Yes, Paul, her lover, had advertised himself as missing since the age of four!

... What then of the Russian boy?

Paul’s suspicions about his own disappearance had finally been confirmed when he travelled to the outskirts of London and located a dismal tower of flats where his family had lived in their brief time together in the late sixties, before his father’s death. The dwarfing of self which Paul experienced when craning his neck backward in contemplation of this vast, ugly relic served dramatically to accelerate his already abject sense of abandonment. He stood beneath it, cut in half by the unforgiving edge of its shadow, and was convinced that here he had been lost. That here he had been stolen or had strayed. There was a Paul somewhere who was the real Paul. However (and this was the crucial reverse twist) the real Paul was also him. The adult Paul did not believe that, having solved the mystery, having located the missing Paul, he would then also be able to find the truth about himself—find his real identity—the identity of the boy substituted for Paul. No. He was still Paul. But he was lost. Thus he was also the child Paul who had disappeared and for whom he searched.

Once Paul’s general whereabouts had been established, his mother’s brother, Uncle Frank from Dublin, offered to go over and ‘sort the lad out’, a task which required him to pick through the seedier lodgings of outer London, only to find himself confronted with a befuddling conversation about a missing child who was, all the while, seated before him in adult form. Initially presuming that Paul’s talk of ‘finding himself’ was little more than the banal cant of a drug-fucked quest for inner meaning, Frank (who called a spade a bloody shovel, and who had always interpreted his nephew’s preference for Russianness as a slur on his Irish roots) launched into a forthright speech which began with a blistering: ‘You’re too old for this malarkey, son, wake up to yerself!,’ but which was ground down by stony indifference until it slowly tapered off into: ‘At least give your girl and your poor old Ma a ring’, and then finally fizzled out with: ‘Look, here’s a hundred quid, now for god’s sake let’s get you a meal and some half-way decent clothes.’

It was only a week later, after observing the intensity with which his nephew pursued his ceaseless inquiries into his own disappearance—the perpetual round of advertising, the methodical research into ‘leads’ which were inevitably fruitless—that Frank realised he was speaking quite literally of his own disappearance. Repeatedly, Frank confronted him with the absurdity of his proposition. There was, and Paul’s mother had sworn this ‘on a stack of Bibles’, no history of him being lost, even at the shops, even for a few minutes, ever. ‘If you really believe you’re missing, then who the hell are you? You can’t be missing and not missing at the same time! Maybe it would be best to see a priest, or even a counsellor?’

Panicked, presumably, by the fear that his uncle would become proactive in enforcing this advice, Paul went into deeper hiding, even finally wearing down the resolve of Gina’s heartbroken attempts to uncover him, and thus becoming, in time, just one more puzzle amidst
the vast, grey metropolis’s dismal underworld of squats, alleyways and cardboard boxes. And so, finally he brought about what might be termed a self-fulfilling prophecy: the transformation of a hypothetical missing person into a real one, itself a conundrum which (or so those who believe in such things might claim) exemplifies a peculiarly Russian brand of irony, well suited for a peculiarly Russian brand of boy.

most of the time we’re stuck in the chorus
a walk-on part (or limp- or wheel-on)
Tekki took me on when I was only twelve
that was a big deal I got to write and speak lines
what do they call it? a mixed-ability company (as if
that’s not everyone)
I know when you see me
whatever the part you see the character
and me at the same time I can’t disappear
I had a really rough time in elementary
(I’m sure you did too but…)
I was retarded if I was lucky
they’d ask me why I talk funny I have marfan
as well as cerebral palsy (but you can’t hear
the actual slide and jump of my voice can you?)
last year I went to fifteen schools to talk to kids who listen
(I think) ambassador from a place
within this place keep telling myself you’re much more
than what you look like or how you talk
or how you walk (writing is something other
though) oh and you?
you have to get among it no matter

Molly
From ‘Music our bodies can’t hold’
Andy Jackson

Andy Jackson’s most recent collection is Immune Systems (Transit Lounge). He writes about the poetry of bodies at amongtheregulars.wordpress.com
My girlfriend makes a pot of gumbo for supper.

I tell her about Taaka Vodka, how my dad drank a quart a day, twenty martinis.

And he died of it at fifty-two, veins burst by cirrhosis.

I tell about the time he threatened to kill me if I dodged the draft, fled to Canada.

And if he didn’t kill me, if I got away at first, he’d track me down.

I slept in my car that night and the next …

I guess I should shut up about my dad, as even my girlfriend doesn’t seem to listen.

But so much reminds of him, his drinking:

the bottles they sell in the deli on the corner, in the drug and grocery stores.

There’s even a giant Taaka sign above Canal Street; my father is everywhere.
The first time, I see him in the car park.

I’ve been flat-sitting for three days when I need to take the first of Lauren’s lavender-scented double-tied bags down to the bin room, a caged-off area near her parking spot in the basement. This building is in a lovely location, on a West Perth hill with views of Kings Park, but its bins smell like everyone else’s: shit and rot. Holding my breath, I open the nearest one, shove the bag inside and leap back through the wire door, letting it slam and rattle behind me. The sound reverberates through the concrete structure and as it dies off I hear an accusatory voice:

‘Hey!’

The man is tall and focused on me as he hurries over from the lifts. This is what I was afraid of when I was asked to look after the apartment: the suspicion of wealthy neighbours. Lauren and I have been friends since primary school, best friends for half that time, but I’d barely been here at all before she said I could stay while she went overseas. Most of the friends Lauren went to high school with have already moved into their own places, but I’m still with my parents, biding my time. I asked if she should tell anyone else in the building that a stranger would be here for three months, feeding the cat and opening windows. Lauren just laughed. Now some guy thinks I’m stealing the rubbish.

‘Wait,’ he calls, though I haven’t moved. Despite an appearance of speed, he’s taking a while to get to me because of his weight, which is as abnormal as his height. ‘Is that your car?’

I assumed he was going to say something about me rifling through the bins, so I’m confused. ‘What?’

The man’s lips and neck are splotched purple and white like a radish. He points to my Datsun, Dolly, parked in Lauren’s designated bay. She’s lent her Audi to a different friend, and even though it’s so generous of her to let me stay at all, I wish she’d left the car as well. Entering and exiting the building would feel much less conspicuous in a vehicle worth more than a fridge.

I nod and the man’s face pinches. ‘These spots are for residents. Visitors have to use the paid parking on the street.’

‘No, I am a resident,’ I say, fumbling in my pocket for my driver’s licence, which will only prove that I live elsewhere. ‘I mean, I’m house-sitting for a resident.’

‘Who?’

‘Lauren Walford.’

His back straightens like a wild animal smelling food. ‘Where’s she gone?’

‘France.’

We stare at one another for a few seconds. The discolouration in the man’s neck slowly spreads upwards and I smell the bin room in my hair. He sticks out his hand.

‘I’m Rory,’ he says loudly, nodding in the direction of my car. ‘We’re neighbours.’

My hand’s been in his warm sea-creature palm for a while before I realise he’s referring specifically to the Holden Commodore in the spot beside Lauren’s. Most of the residents’ vehicles are parked in rows of four separated by thick pillars, but mine and the neighbour’s are in a separate little nook, bordered by load-bearing walls in front and to the right of Dolly and the bin room on the passenger side of the Commodore.

‘How long you here for?’ Rory asks, letting go of my hand.

I don’t want to be specific. ‘A few weeks.’

Nodding, he pats the boot of his car, leaving a moist print on the paintwork. ‘These spaces are pretty small,’ he tells me. ‘Careful your car doesn’t get scratched.’

I snort. Dolly is thirty years old and looks it. ‘I don’t think anyone will notice.’

Rory pulls a large set of keys from his shorts pocket and smiles. ‘Have a nice day.’

7.

The cat I’m looking after is an old, slow tortoiseshell, a gift to Lauren on her tenth birthday. Mr Bubbles is a humourless animal, but I respect his age and scepticism. Lauren treats him like a difficult roommate. ‘When he dies I’m getting a Persian,’ she’s said, ever since he was six or seven. Now he’s thirteen and seems to be living just to annoy her.
I have a part-time job on the checkout of a swanky deli and bottle shop in Subiaco, not far from Lauren’s. When I got the job I thought I might end up seeing her more often, though that didn’t really happen. Now, a week after my first encounter with Rory, I’m running late for work. I was all right until I saw Mr Bubbles in the kitchen on my way out, his expression disdainful. ‘Shit,’ I said, letting the door close. I forgot to feed him last night.

The cat food Lauren buys is expensive and inconvenient, packaged in small tins without ring-pulls, and her can opener doesn’t work well. My hands are cramping by the time I get the lid off and slide the jellied pink meat into the bowl. Mr Bubbles watches but doesn’t move. He won’t be seen eating.

Rory is at his car as I come out of the lift, his expression again bruised. I wonder if the Holden won’t start or he’s locked his keys inside. I don’t have time to help. ‘Hello,’ I say shortly, trying to convey busyness.

‘Can I talk to you about parking?’ he says.

Again, I’m so prepared for a different topic that the question stumps me. I stop. ‘I have to go to work.’

‘I had an agreement with Lauren,’ he says. ‘She was really good about parking.’

I look over at Dolly, who I’ve tucked courteously in the nook, nose right up against the wall. Her wheels are a little bent but definitely inside the line.

‘My spot is smaller than the others because of the bin room,’ Rory wipes his wet forehead. ‘Mine’s the only studio apartment in the block, so they figure the smallest apartment gets the smallest spot. But that doesn’t mean I have the smallest car.’

I’m looking at the white rectangle marked around the Commodore, trying to work out if this is true. It looks the same size as mine, though it’s hard to judge since his car is bigger.

‘What Lauren used to do was really nice. She always reversed her car into the spot so it was right up against the wall there,’ Rory nods at the wall to the right of Dolly. ‘It made it easier for both of us.’

‘Oh,’ I say, squinting. I’m not great with spatial awareness, which is why the Datsun is lined up crooked, but I think I can picture what he’s suggesting. ‘Well, if Lauren—’

‘Right,’ Rory interrupts. ‘When you come back, just reverse in.’

‘Okay, well, I have to go,’ I say, edging between Dolly and the cement wall to get in. Even though I’ve left room, it is hard to squeeze through the driver’s side door. Probably it’ll be better if I go in backwards. Lauren is really terrible at parking. If she can do it, I should too.

5.

The third time Rory comes to the door late at night, almost unacceptably late, but I’m still up. I’ve spent two hours trying to decide what to do about dinner, whether I have the money to buy pasta stuff at the convenience store on Hay Street or the courage to carry take-away McDonald’s into the lobby and risk people seeing. Eventually I found a box of old water crackers in the back of the pantry and sat in front of Lauren’s TV, eating them plain. The whole situation has skewed my sense of time and appropriateness, so when the neighbour knocks, I open the door.

Rory wears a soft, thin T-shirt that strains against the heft of his stomach and breasts, and his face is concerned and damp. ‘I had to park my car on the street,’ is what he says this time. ‘It wouldn’t fit in the spot.’

‘But I reversed in,’ I say, my voice cracking. It’s the first time I’ve spoken all day.

I’d parked downstairs the day before, after work. The Commodore wasn’t there. I was pretty hopeless at getting in backwards; it took about five goes to line up properly. I had other things on my mind. When I’d gone to my locker at the end of my shift there were two missed calls from Lauren on my phone, but even though I rang back four times she never answered.

‘I really need your car closer to the wall,’ Rory says. Away from the bin room I can smell him; dirt after rain. ‘They gave me the smallest spot in the building.’

‘Okay,’ I say, going to shut the door.

Rory’s eyebrows shoot up in alarm. ‘My car’s on the street,’ he reminds me. ‘I had an agreement with Lauren.’

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minor obstacles of the driver’s side mirrors: Rory’s on the top left facing out, mine on the bottom right looking in. They remind me of hands in a barn dance, reaching for one another.

As I head back I check my phone, but I haven’t missed anything.

4

Lauren never returns my call, but I chat to her online a few days later. It’s one a.m. and I’m working the morning shift, but Lauren is hard to pin down. She doesn’t tell me why she rang the other day.

Paris is wonderful and she’s having a fabulous time. She’s there to take a fashion course and improve her French, which she studied in high school but hasn’t needed for ages. Her dad thinks all of this will be useful. Perceptions of usefulness correlate with levels of wealth: my own father telling me to ‘make myself useful’ means I should get him a beer from the fridge or pick up the vacuum. As we’ve got older and grown apart, my dad has called Lauren the Rich Bitch, though he’s still nice to her face. I wonder what Mr Walford calls me.

So what’s going on with you? her message bubble finally asks.

Of course nothing’s going on with me. Nothing is ever going on with me. My biggest news is that I’m living in my childhood friend’s swanky apartment for three months. I tell her about Rory. This guy has a serious obsession with his parking spot.

It takes Lauren a while to reply. The tall fat guy? she eventually sends.

Is that his name?

He thinks his spot’s smaller than everyone else’s, I respond, aware that I’m becoming the weirdo who’s obsessed with parking spots. Did you have an arrangement with him or something?

She sends through a confused emoticon, a bright yellow face with a twisted mouth and purple beret. A confused French emoticon, of course.

I don’t think I ever spoke to him, she adds.

He thinks you have. When there isn’t a response, I type, He’s weird.

You know he killed his kid? Lauren types. Then her status switches to ‘away’.

Is that a joke? ‘Away’ has greyed Lauren out so I can’t respond. I’m left staring at the screen for six cold minutes, cracking my knuckles over and over again.

Lauren does this; I remember from school. She likes secrets and leaving people hanging; saying enticing stuff and letting it sit, waiting for someone to pick it up. When we were little kids she was a consummate liar. She told me she overheard our teacher tell the principal he didn’t like me, and pretended her family pool was haunted, letting out a distorted scream any time I put my head underwater. She doesn’t lie any more, not as far as I know, but she likes to have ‘news’; that is, gossip. Whatever she says, I remind myself, you have to doubt a little bit.

Finally the ‘away’ disappears and I send, What?

Someone told me. He moved here after he got out of jail.

Maybe it’s the detachment of this kind of communication coupled with being on the other side of the world, eight hours in the past, but Lauren seems like she barely cares. I try to be as cool. How did an ex-con get an apartment in such a nice block?

It’s his aunt’s or something?

I can’t help it. I type, Should I be scared?

Though her status remains available, Lauren doesn’t say anything for another three minutes. Meanwhile I’ve got up and dead-bolted the door. It’s half-past one and my shift starts at seven.

Like a firework, Lauren flashes back briefly: Ignore him. Gotta run, have fun, bye!

I go to bed and get three hours’ sleep. In the morning I inch Dolly out in millimetre increments, afraid of scratching a murderer’s car.

3.

On my lunch break I stay in the staffroom, Googling variations of ‘child’, ‘murder’, and ‘Rory’. Most of the results refer to a one-year-old with that name who died in Queensland a few months ago. I read a few of the articles about the trial and whether or not his mother was suffering from psychosis when she drowned him in the bath. From Queensland Rory I click through to a few of the linked stories but the sadness is too much—newborn twins killed in a car crash, the refusal of a terminally ill child abductor to tell parents where the bones of their children are, kids falling into dams, off play equipment, out of windows.

I want Lauren to call and explain more. She doesn’t.

Back at her place I idle in the driveway for ages, listening to the pops and rumbles of Dolly’s engine. It’s highly unlikely that Rory is a killer. Just because he’s an enormous, jittery, hyper-hydrotic man living in an apartment complex way outside of his apparent price range doesn’t mean anything. I can’t afford a place in this building, either.

Besides, I reason, pushing the clutch in further, Lauren only heard he’d been in jail. And she didn’t sound worried.

A car pulls up behind me and beeps lightly, rousing me from my trance. I aim an apologetic wave at the rear-view mirror and put the Datsun in gear. Anyway, I think grimly, descending into the basement, if Rory only kills kids, I’m safe.
I think I’ve found Rory online. A few years ago there were a batch of articles about a man in Geraldton who shook his girlfriend’s baby. The guy’s name is Rowan and in the one accompanying picture he has a jumper covering his face, but he’s very fat and tall compared to the policeman leading him into a van. The toddler, Scarlett, isn’t dead but brain-damaged; there’s a photograph of her as well, a glamour shot taken at a shopping centre, weeks before the injuries took place. She is blonde, with eyebrows so fine they disappear into her rose-gold skin. Apparently she had an ear infection and a piercing, constant scream. I wonder if Rory sweats because he keeps seeing that face, lovely girl, her future ahead of her. He might not be Rowan. I think he is.

I don’t mention him to Lauren again. Instead I send her emails about Mr Bubbles’ health, with no reply. On Facebook there are self-conscious pictures of her at French tourist attractions, eyes crossed, jabbing a thumb at the structure or painting behind her. Random European-looking people sometimes join her, looking sleek and unshaven, arms around her shoulders, her waist. They leave comments in French and she answers quickly, with lots of smiley faces. There’s an option to translate the messages, but I don’t.

I ring my parents to check in. Dad is sarcastic. ‘How’s the mansion?’ I’m enjoying the company of Mr Bubbles. The cat is the one constant in my uneasy life at Lauren’s, his presence stately and reliable. He likes to be in the same room as me, though at a distance of at least a metre, and I’m still not allowed to touch him. At night we sit on either end of Lauren’s leather couch, watching TV in companionable silence.

One night there’s a key in the door. For a moment I think it’s Lauren, that she’s made the improbable decision to fly back and hang out with me and Mr B, before I realise it’s her dad letting himself in. It’s nine o’clock and Mr Walford is still in his suit. ‘Oh,’ he says when he sees me. His surprise is mild enough that I don’t suspect him of trying to bring a secret girlfriend over, which is a relief. ‘I didn’t think anyone was here. There’s no car downstairs.’

‘No,’ I say, getting up awkwardly.

We shake hands because it seems necessary. It’s really bad. Mr Walford used to go in the pool with us, throwing us in and doing bombies. I don’t know how long it’s been since I’ve seen him. ‘I thought Lauren you had a car?’

‘My car isn’t here,’ is all I can say.

‘Right.’ Mr Walford takes a couple of steps further into the apartment. ‘Thought I should fulfil my landlordly duties.’ He looks around. ‘How’s everything?’

My heart pumps a shot of dread when I see the Commodore in its bay. I turn Dolly around jerkily and ease back into Lauren’s space, getting as close to the wall as possible. It only takes a couple of attempts this time and I’m sweaty but relieved as I open the door.

Rory is in his car.

My gasp of surprise turns into a coughing fit. By the time I stop Rory has got out and is moving freely between the two cars, the right side of his bulk brushing the Holden but not Dolly. So I’ve definitely left enough room.

‘Lauren used to fold in her side mirror.’

‘Jesus,’ I say.

Rory thinks I’ve said this because he startled me. ‘I only just got home from work,’ he explains. I try to remember how long I was stopped in the driveway.

‘I have talked to the strata company about this,’ Rory continues. There’s a seam of panic in his voice. ‘I suggested they give me the whole corner and put Lauren’s bay over there.’ He points at the parking spots closest to the entryway. ‘Some people get two, which isn’t fair.’

I think he means the occupants of the building’s twin penthouses, each of which has the space of three apartments and hundred-and-eighty-degree views. I’ve seen the owners’ cars lined up: a Mercedes, a BMW, a Peugeot, another Mercedes.

Rory doesn’t tell me the outcome of his appeal, but I can guess. He wipes a forearm across his beetroot-dipped face and I remember he might be a murderer. My heartbeat increases. ‘Do your side mirrors fold in?’ he asks.

The Datsun’s mirrors are dusty, the rubber dry. I swivel the one on the driver’s side tentatively, and though it squeaks, it does turn. When I step back Dolly looks like she is raising an eyebrow at me: Really?

Rory grins with relief. ‘That should work.’

He walks away, big stomach swinging from side to side like a girl’s ponytail. I can’t bear to share a lift with him so I go into the bin room, pretending to have junk. The cage is warm with decomposition. When I see the lift doors close I go over to Dolly, pull out her side mirror, and drive back onto the road.

2.

There’s free parking on a vacant block two streets away. It’s sandy and there’s broken glass from the pub next door, but there are no signs about private property and the office workers who use it don’t leave their cars overnight.
When I look at him Rory's eyes are shifting over my car with uncertainty. 'You haven't parked here for ages. I thought you must have left.' I shrug. 'Thought I'd give you some extra room.'

Rory looks embarrassed. There's a ridge of sweat on both his eyebrows. I feel sorry for him for the first time, knowing I won't have to see him again.

'So who's going to live in the flat?'

'They're renting it.'

'I think of the rich or irresponsible or both sort of person who will rent the apartment for the amount of money Lauren's father wants. Of course they'll have a car, and I don't think they'll negotiate with Rory about the space. I think they'll look straight through him and his sweaty nerves and banged-up Commodore. The first time I met Rory I found out his name. Lauren lived here for two years and only recognised a vague description. 'I don't know,' I say, and open Dolly's door.

I'm just about to duck my head through when he says, 'Thanks for the space.'

I take one last look at Rory's oversized car and regular-sized spot, trying to work out why he feels the need to have so much room. As I glance through the back window, for the first time I see a child's car seat fixed to the passenger side. A small blanket is folded across it, to warm the legs of a kid that isn't there.

I get in and start the engine, bringing Dolly to life. It's easy not to look at Rory as I reverse out of Lauren's spot and drive back home.

'Fine.'

His brow creases slightly and I wonder if I should have been more effusive. He spots the cat, arched around the armrest to see what the disruption is. 'Hello, Bubbles.'

Mr B withdraws.

'Right, well.' Lauren's father nods at me. 'So, no problems?'

Obviously he doesn't want me to have any. What would I say? Something like, 'I'm too scared to use the car park. I leave the car a kilometre away and I haven't spoken to Lauren for a month. Or, Did someone in this building kill a kid?'

I say, 'Thanks so much for letting me stay.'

1.

My last encounter with Rory won't happen for a couple of weeks. Not using Lauren's car bay means I don't bump into him, although whenever I come in and out of the building I try to widen my peripheral vision; to see him before he sees me. Lauren's father stays away. No one comes to the apartment. It's just me and Mr Bubbles, opening tins of food and looking out at the city lights.

Lauren has a French boyfriend. She's been invited to do a year-long fashion internship at a label I haven't heard of and is going to tour Europe before it starts, probably with the boyfriend. I learn this from the status updates she posts in English. Mr Walford phones to say he's going to let out the apartment, but as the current tenant I have first dibs. I ask what the rent will be. When he tells me I'm strangely flattered he thinks I can afford it. I say I'll be out before the weekend.

On my last day of house-sitting I park Dolly in the basement so I can bring stuff down. Along with the clothes and books I brought with me I fill a plastic bag with fancy food from the pantry and a couple of Lauren's things that I like. I know I won't see her again.

I'm making my last trip to the car when the door to the bin room opens. It's Rory. He looks smaller than the last time I saw him but his face is just as purple, just as pained. 'Hey!' he calls in the same reproving way as the first time I met him. 'You're still here.'

His hand holds the metal doorframe and I think of that hand around Scarlett's soft arm, squeezing with frustration. If that was him.

I use my knee to nudge open the Datsun's unlocked boot and drop in an armload of clothes. 'I'm moving out.'

'Is Lauren coming back?'

'No.' I close the boot.
Ointment
Wes Lee

You always thought crazy
was a defection of the will,
you'd been in that place holding on
for months, and you managed
(to stay on this side),
so you made up your mind
that people choose crazy,
but that was just one time
in your life
you thought was the worst,
didn't know
the worst comes like waves
and you are
Mickey Mouse
and you are the brimming bucket
the mop
the stone floor
the castle with its interior
arches, and the wizard.
And your sore arms
get sore
then relax
(by your sides)
and sore
then relax
and sore
then relax.

And sore
you are rubbed with Wintergreen
with eyes
with understanding
until
you aren't.
The medical student follows Nurse Bala along the void deck. It is an old estate of one-room flats. Nurse Bala has a bulbous, pockmarked nose and speaks with a slight lisp. He used to be a ward nurse in the mental institute. Now he works at the outpatient clinic, which bears the innocuous name ‘Well-Life Centre’. Nurse Bala has a list of patients, all former ward residents, who live in rented flats under government assistance. His job is to visit each of his charges once a month.

The medical student has been assigned to follow Nurse Bala on today’s visit. He finds it strange that the flat-dwellers are made to live two to an apartment, which he can only assume is to save resources and space. ‘Isn’t it difficult for two schizophrenics to live together?’ the student had asked his tutor, a psychiatrist. She had shrugged and replied, ‘Yes. But what to do? No one else wants to live with them.’

The lift lobby is small and dark. The adjacent wall is lined with shelves of tiny metal letterboxes, above which there is a red warning light and an electronic LED banner. Nurse Bala notices the medical student’s puzzled look and tells him, ‘Most of the people here are renters—elderly singles and families too. If anything happens upstairs, they can press a panic button and their flat number will be shown here. Hopefully someone will see it and come to their aid.’ They wait as the nurse presses the lift button.

‘We try to pair those on our list so they have the same race and religion. They split the rent and utilities. The rest, food and everything, they pay on their own,’ he explains. ‘These two are not too bad. At least they can get along with each other.’

The medical student nods earnestly. He’s never seen a one-room flat before. The lift arrives and they get in.

The tenth-floor corridor is also dark, with a low ceiling. Nurse Bala leads the way past a succession of metal grilles. Most of the occupants have left the doors behind the grilles open, to let more air and light into their flats. The salty smell of instant noodles permeates the corridor. The medical student is careful not to let his hands brush against the walls, from which the paint is peeling in big flakes.

They stop about midway along the corridor. The door here is also open, but the medical student doesn’t see anyone in the tiny strip of kitchen that directly faces the door. On the white tiled floor, just beyond the grille, is a faded cloth doormat that says ‘WELCOME—HOME SWEET HOME’. Nurse Bala tries to peer past the edge of the wall into the room. ‘Sulaiman!’ he calls, and reaches his hand in, past the grilles, to knock the door. ‘Sulaiman! We are here.’ The corridor ceiling is low and the medical student is sweating. Still knocking vigorously, Bala tells him, ‘Sometimes we have to come again because they don’t answer.’

‘Bala!’ A brown figure in shorts emerges and sheepishly steps onto the blue doormat. ‘Sorry, I forgot.’ Sulaiman opens the heavy steel lock on the grille.

‘Hi Sulaiman,’ Nurse Bala lisps. The two visitors take their shoes off and step inside.

Sulaiman is plump, with a lazy eye and curly hair. He eyes the medical student and grimaces as he scratches his back, which is a little sweaty. Sulaiman hangs the open lock on the grille. He returns to his corner and quickly positions himself on his rattan picnic mat, in front of the standing fan. Sulaiman’s corner also holds a crumpled cardboard box and a shelf made of transparent plastic. A plastic clothes cupboard, made to look like wood, stands two arms’ length away. At its foot lies a thin, rolled-up mattress. There is a stack of yellowing newspapers underneath the nearby window. The room is otherwise empty.

‘Hello, Bala.’ Another man appears from the toilet behind the kitchen. It is Sulaiman’s flatmate, Ali. He is a wizened ex-naval officer with a noble face and a bandage taped to the left side of his chest. Like Sulaiman, he is dressed only in shorts. He turns to the wall beside the kitchen, and brings out a worn plastic stool and a plastic foldable chair. The medical student murmurs his greetings and thanks. He and Bala take the chairs. Sulaiman watches them from his picnic mat, occasionally scratching himself and glancing at his fingernails. Ali stands in front of the nurse and new inspector with his hands behind his back, waiting at attention for his monthly appraisal.

‘Aiyoh, Ali, sit down. This is my medical student. He’s following me today.’ Sweat beads have formed on Nurse Bala’s tureenous nose. ‘How was your operation, Ali?’ He turns to the student. ‘He had a pacemaker implanted two weeks ago.’

‘Ok, Bala.’ Ali sits down as instructed. He has a soft voice.
‘What do you mean, ok? Your ex-wife and son got visit you or not?’

Ali’s face changes. ‘Don’t know.’

‘Don’t know?’

‘No.’

‘Why? You told them about it?’

Ali shakes his head. He can’t remember the last time he saw either of them.

‘Then your brother? Did he visit?’

‘Yah.’

Nurse Bala sighs. ‘Next time, ask your brother to tell your ex-wife and son to visit, ok? I don’t see why she doesn’t want anything to do with you. You die also she cannot get maintenance from your pension.’

‘Ok, Bala.’

‘Can I see your medications?’

Ali obediently stands up and fetches a Kleenex tissue box from the fridge beside the kitchen. The box has had its top cut off and is full of small white plastic bags. The medical student helps Bala sift through medication packets inside the plastic bags, some of which contain the same pills but bear the labels of different hospitals. The student remembers them from his pharmacology lectures: diuretics, antipsychotics, analgesics. Sitting on the peeling plastic stool in this strange environment, he is struck by a flood of recognition. At least he can be of marginal use here. He helps sort the repeat prescriptions into another plastic bag so Ali won’t take a double dose by mistake.

‘Did you take your other medicines in hospital?’

‘I take, Bala.’

The nurse continues, delicately, ‘In the hospital did you hear any voices or see anything?’

Ali smiles and shakes his head. In the years before, he has tried to kill himself twice.

‘Got this one also.’ Ali rummages through another tissue box and hands Nurse Bala an envelope, which has been neatly slit open. Also in the box are some flyers and other letters from the hospital and public utilities board. The medical student thinks of the postcards his sister sends him from overseas and realises, Ali must only get bills and advertisements. Nurse Bala scans the letter that Ali has just passed to her, and gives it to the student to read. It is the bill for Ali’s recent hospital stay. They have charged him several thousand dollars. Arms folded behind his back, the bandage like a white badge on his chest, Ali looks anxiously at the two seated figures and shifts his weight on to his other foot.

‘Don’t know why they sent this letter. He should be covered under his pension.’ Nurse Bala’s eyes squint behind his golden spectacles. To the medical student’s quizzical look, Bala says, ‘He’s lucky to have his hospital bill covered and he gets a generous pension, because he was in the navy. They give him $700 a month.’

Sulaiman, who has never held a permanent job, watches them with mild interest as he picks at his back. The medical student later finds out that his monthly support—for food, transport, electricity and water—amounts to a grand total of $300. Unlike Ali, however, Sulaiman can take a bus to his mosque where he is given the occasional odd job.

‘Never mind, Ali, you don’t worry about this one. They will check their system and see that you don’t need to pay. We help you sort out your medications first.’

‘Thanks, Bala.’ Ali smiles. As if to reassure himself that he really is a pensioner, he crosses the room to the faux wooden cupboard, opens his wallet, and takes his civil service card out. He spends a few moments looking at it.

‘Ali had enough money to buy a nice cupboard for his things,’ Nurse Bala tells the medical student. ‘Sulaiman, your shelf is a bit senget*. The plastic shelf has several mismatched hangers of worn polo shirts and work trousers hanging on it. ‘You can buy a new one from Fairprice. Got offer now, only $14.90.’

‘Anyway, how is your diabetes?’ Nurse Bala asks Sulaiman. ‘Still got enough medicine?’

‘Yah, still have. My next appointment is in November.’ Sulaiman gets up and flips through the wall calendar that hangs above his mat. The photograph of the month depicts a hyperrealistic temperate forest in autumn, underneath the logo of a petrol company. Apart from a few dates that have been marked, the pages are empty.

‘Are you taking them every day?’

‘Yah, taking.’

‘Your other medicines?’

‘All I take everyday.’

‘Good. You’re coming to the movie outing next week, right?’

Sulaiman nods eagerly and checks his calendar. The day has already been circled in pencil.

‘Sorry, we tried to get a comedy but school holidays are over. Never mind, this one is about Chinese kungfu.’

Sulaiman frowns.

* Senget: Malay word for crooked.
‘Don’t worry, quite funny one. Got subtitles in English, but they won’t talk so much anyway. I’ll come here next Thursday morning at 9 am after you are back from the mosque. We can take some breakfast before going for the movie. Ali, are you coming?’

Ali has returned to his sitting spot. ‘Don’t know, Bala.’

‘Ali, why you don’t want to come? Even Sulaiman is coming. I can pick you two up together. And the other nurses who are going know you.’

‘Don’t know.’ Ali looks a little lost.

‘It’s at Vivo City. Quite near here. I’ll be going with you.’

‘Yes, it’s very near.’ The medical student confirms eagerly. Finally something familiar he can talk about.

‘Don’t know, Bala.’

‘Cannot everything don’t know, don’t know.’ Nurse Bala tells him with custodial exasperation. ‘Ok, tell you what, I put your name down first, and you can decide later. Can?’

A pause. Ali smiles. ‘OK, Bala.’

‘Good. Sulaiman, did you manage to visit your sister?’

‘Yah, I went to see her for Hari Raya. But she not so happy.’

‘Never mind, she has a baby, right? Next time you go to see her, why don’t you bring something for her son. Then she won’t think you only look for her when you want money.’

Sulaiman looks down and nods. The swivelling fan ruffles his curly hair. He fidgets and pulls a face. The medical student thinks about the chapter that he had dutifully read the night before, and wonders if the grimacing is a side-effect of long-term antipsychotic medications.

‘Did you get her number?’

Sulaiman reaches over to a pair of work trousers on one of the worn-out hangers. From the pocket he produces a crumpled square of paper, which he unfolds and passes to Nurse Bala. The nurse painstakingly copies the numbers in his notebook. He tells the student, ‘He has bad hypertension and diabetes and we don’t have an emergency contact. Now at least I have his sister’s number.’ His voice drops. ‘I hope she will pick up if I have to call her. I don’t know if he will collapse one day. They say they do, but you can’t tell whether they are really taking their medications.’

The nurse refolds the paper and hands it back. ‘Thanks, Sulaiman. Why don’t you keep the paper in your wallet so you won’t lose it.’

The four of them sit without speaking for a while. The medical student looks to Nurse Bala for instruction. The nurse’s tasks as a monthly friend are done. He nods.

‘Ok, I’ll see you two next week. Take care, and remember to take your medications.’ Everyone stands up and the room feels suddenly crowded.

‘Thank you for letting me visit,’ the medical student mumbles. Somehow he feels guilty—but for what? For his family? For his own room, almost the size of this flat? Or for not having had the simple bad luck of illness? Whatever it is, his presence has been a voyeuristic intrusion into what little space the two have.

They bid each other goodbye. As Sulaiman replaces the lock on the grille, the medical student once again follows Nurse Bala as they retrace their steps out of the dark tunnel and take the lift down. On the ground floor it is cooler, and bright.

‘I will go back to the office to update the case files,’ Nurse Bala says. ‘Where do you put up? I’ll show you where to take the bus.’

‘Thank you.’

Nurse Bala points to where the bus stop is. Then the two strangers part.

Upstairs on the tenth floor, the other two strangers sit in their shared room in silence. For each of them, the voices have long stopped. All that remains is a dual solitude, the quiet punctuated every few seconds by the turning fan.
You, the ugliest baby tooth sticking around well past my eighteenth birthday. Babe, it's been too long. Drop from my gum's warm pillow and seek a bed in someone else's mouth: you would look pleasing in a set of dentures, screwed into bone and shackled, metal pins and rings. Ugly gum limpet, why do you haunt my hard palate? Why do you bruise my jaw with your infected root? Why can't I bear to yank you from my grown-up face? Tooth-baby, I tongue the hole that threatens to open up around you. There is room for you now to wiggle and I worry how to hold my mouth around your absence. I torture you with household implements, with toothpicks, forks, and floss. I need to clean my maw of your infection. I am anchored to the backwards years by you, you tiny off-white shackle, and I'm scared of losing who I was before. You make me little. Little baby, milk-tooth molar, don't make this so difficult. I'm sick of dragging round this dead-beat dentin, sick of swearing off hard substances. I miss the pressure of enamel, of how you used to grind away my stress. You don't fit me: this jaw, this face I've grown around a child's face needs something sturdy. But I'm scared of holes, untended openings, the tender nerve my tongue will wander drunken back to.
I wish I hadn't worn a dress. I feel so exposed here, an audience of fourteen around me with my dress hauled up to my armpits. A radiographer tucks the paper blanket into my knickers, pulling them down a smidgen, dark hairs coursing out to remind them where they all came from. She squirts a clear gel onto my hard stomach and moves the scanning device. The screen is turned so I only see a slice of the action. Clearly I am not the target audience.

When I took this on I really didn't think about being treated as a science experiment myself. It was all about the baby.

I have three already. All perfect specimens excelling at various things. Everyone tells us we are great parents and we should have more. Easily said, of course, but when you get closer to 40 than 30, pregnancy seems like a greater effort.

I close my eyes. I don't know what to look for, anyway.

'She's moving her fingers,' says the radiographer.

There are drawn breaths.

'It's a girl?' I whisper.

'Definitely a girl.'

In the shard of screen I see a baby. Fingers and spine and baby-shaped head.

'Looks good,' Dr Anderson pats me on the shoulder. 'Well done, dear.'

I want to cry. They all clap as if I'm in a circus. Maybe I am.

Maybe she will be one day.

There's nothing quite as hollow as that little mass of human cells we saw on the ultrasound screen over a year ago. That human-shaped-almost that waited, refusing to beat or flutter. It seemed so real, yet fragile as dew, it was gone before it really began. I wonder at our intrusion into the secret room of life. What did it do to us to see that sad little thing? My last baby, who will never be.

Yet I can hardly profess to be a purist, to disagree with medical intervention. Not with the choice I have made.

This time the cells are not human—well, some of them are mine and Ben's, but others were sliced and fused into our own embryo, our baby. There is not one chromosome in this little ball of cells. It's a whole genome edited and reprinted: a new work using old materials.

Imagine her one day, seven years old in a blue bikini, plunging into the pool, rolling over, skating through the water, shiny and laughing. Chlorinated water dripping from her hair. How much will she have of normal? To learn and talk with other children, not like her. I have watched the mothers with peculiar children and I know I will be among them and
Outside in the car I search ‘Lucy’ and eventually find an image of *Australopithecus afarensis*, a crouched and hair-covered beast of a creature. Nowhere near human and much older by millions of years than this baby’s amended DNA. Hers emerged from a melted glacier in the Alps, an ancestor dressed in animal skin. Not an ape. She will not be an ape.

WEEK 17
Email:

Dear Stacey

Researchers in our dept have been analysing the data on primate gestation across several species and have calculated an approximate gestation based on the size of the embryo at your 16 week ultrasound. Considering also the % human genome they estimate a 34 week pregnancy. We should get a clearer idea at your next scan. See you at our rooms then.

Kind regards
Mr Jeffrey van Tink
Honorary Professor in Obstetrics

The other mothers will have had this email, too. I wonder if he copied and pasted the words.

WEEK 20
Every time I come in here and wait in this room I’m faced with the same posters: the amputee man ‘Nothing sweet about diabetes’ and the hollow-eyed girl ‘Pregnant and injecting?’ Normally I am pragmatic and I can see the point, but they are like sand in my eyes. I am so tired and after the Lucy-jibe I didn’t want to come back here. What I did to my baby is worse than drugs or too much lemonade. I volunteered her to be broken and made into something not human. I want to run and hide with her. I don’t want to bring this child into being with all eyes turned to her. She is a freak already and she always will be. I play scenarios in my mind where I pack them all up and go hide in a little town somewhere dry and inhospitable where nobody will know us.

And they did a psychological profile before they started—so much for that! I came up so stable they couldn’t believe their luck. Now look! Now I’m a single mother pretending Daddy’s just gone on a holiday before the baby is born, taking my kids to school looking normal as a serial killer. ‘Stacey?’

I nod.
‘This way please. Have you drunk all the water this morning?’

‘Yes.’

‘Been to the toilet since last night?’

‘No.’

‘But I bet you want to, so let’s get in here and get started.’

‘I bet you say that to everyone.

No dress this time, a skirt and a rounder belly too so altogether I feel a little more dignified, on the outside at least.

‘Just a little cold gel and we’ll tuck you up a bit here.’

‘Where are all the doctors?’

‘They’ll be in here in a minute. They are just with another patient but they said to get started on the measurements and we’ll record all the images so they don’t miss anything.’

‘You mean there is someone more important than me in here today?’

‘I just wish they’d let me speak to the other mothers. They must be thinking the same things as I am. I wonder if their husbands have run away.

‘Every patient is important, Stacey. There are lots of unusual pregnancies and the Professor and his team try to make sure everyone is looked after.’

Treat me like a child. Nice one, Miss Radiographer. Deep breath. Lots of unusual pregnancies, they must have a whole army of hybrid humans on the way. It’s alright that they aren’t here, really. Maybe I will find out more.

‘There she is. That’s a hand…’ She clicks and measures, narrating the body parts but I don’t really listen. I’m just looking, as if that is the only way to know something. Looking at her, little thing.

‘She looks like a normal baby.’

‘She is a normal baby.’

But she won’t be. She might be hairy. She might have a jutting jaw, lumpy forehead. She might not be able to speak, ever. She might walk like a gorilla.

‘She’s only half-human, you know.’

‘Yes, she is half-human. But she is your baby.’

It strikes so deep, that little sentence, like a charge quavering in my chest. She is. But she isn’t.

‘Just think, some people adopt babies and they still call them ‘my baby’. Yours is your baby, even if she is not genetically all yours and your husband’s baby.’

Maybe Miss Radiographer is only half-human.

‘You haven’t really thought this through very much, have you?’

She looks sharply at me and the conversation is obviously over.

‘They’ll take her away from me eventually, you know. I won’t even be able to take her to the shop without people staring at her and wondering what the hell is wrong with her.’

Ben thought it through and that’s why he’s not here. And now there is nobody to talk through the possibilities with me.

She’s not saying a word.

‘She won’t be able to go to school. In fact she might not be able to talk or learn to talk. She might not learn to play with my other kids or learn to swim or ride a bike. None of us will ever have a normal day again.’

Not a word.

‘The whole world is going to change once these babies are born. Nobody will think of life the same way. We are going to be able to create our own slaves—an underclass of Neanderthals. And what do you think she is going to do when she grows up, if she actually does?’

Nothing. So I give full rein to the possibilities.

‘She’s going to be doing what I’m doing, having their babies. But her babies will be more Neanderthal, because that is the whole purpose of her being here. She isn’t even the real purpose of this experiment herself—she is a missing link that will take us to her children. She is of no real importance to anyone except me. Because I am her mother.’

And that last word is too much and I shake and quiver and cry until Miss Radiographer stands to leave.

She pulls a hard drive out of the computer and points towards the toilets.

A few minutes later I wipe the gel from my stomach and find the keys to my car. There really is nothing to do about it now. I am on the journey and there is no way out.

WEEK 21

Email:

Dear Stacey

All signs from your ultrasound are normal and the baby looks to be growing as expected.

I understand you are having some emotional stress about the child so I have referred you to our resident psychiatrist. Please call my offices and they will make an appointment for you at a suitable time.

I shall see you at your next scan at week 24.

Take care.

Mr Jeffrey van Tink

Honorary Professor in Obstetrics

That’s as warm as it gets.
WEEK 24
My bladder leaks a little but I’m hanging on to most of it.

‘Stacey?’

I nod. Not the same radiographer. This time it’s a young man, same blue uniform.

‘This way, please. How are you today? Have you drunk all the water? Been to the loo since last night?’

‘Yes, no. You know what I mean. I’ve done this before.’

‘Oh good. And how are you? That was a question too.’

‘I didn’t think you wanted an answer to that one really.’

‘Well, now I am hurt. Do you take me for one of those automaton types who has no bedside manner?’

He smiles at me. I try to return it, a little bent and lacklustre.

‘Is it just us today or shall I expect the Professor and his team?’

‘Just us,’ he smiles warmly. ‘I’ll just record the scan and they get it emailed to them. Have you seen your obstetrician? And the notes say you were also due to see a psych?’

‘Yes and no. Yes to the obstetrician and I don’t need to, I’m fine.’

‘Sure.’ He smiles and notes this down and now I am not so won over by his charm.

The scan begins. Gel, screen, sweeping across my skin… There she is. ‘Looks like she has her back to us. Not talking today huh, sweetie?’ He measures and clicks anyway.

I close my eyes. I just want this to be over.

WEEK 28
The posters in the waiting room irritate me but they draw my eyes. I can’t focus enough to read a magazine but I page through, trying to distract my thoughts from what I might see today, growing inside me.

‘Back again, Stacey.’

I nod at the charmer in the blue uniform.

‘Yes I do have a full bladder, yes I do need to go but I haven’t.’

‘Come on love, let’s go check on this bub then maybe you should take yourself out for a nice lunch. You sound like it’s getting to you.’

‘That’s a glorious understatement.’

He gives me a bedside-manner-smile. I sigh and follow him to the same room. He sets me up on the bed, gels my belly and looks me in the eye.

‘You know, I realise that this must be a very difficult experience. It is absolutely not normal to be having a de-extincted half-Neanderthal child, no matter how much they tell us to pretend like it is.’

He looks in my eyes and touches my hand.

‘Stacey, I’m speaking out of turn, you know. They record these sessions but I haven’t switched the webcam on yet.’

‘They record everything?’

‘Yeah. Shit, huh? That’s why you have me and not Miriam. They saw your big rant.’

‘If you want to talk about it you can call me. I’ll give you my number. Just tuck it in your bag. We’d better get started or they’ll start to wonder.’

‘Jason.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Before you start. Will they record the birth?’ He flicks on the webcam.

‘I reckon. Now, here we go. Oh, look, there she is! She’s turned over.’

Click. The shape of the nose—just like the other kids. Click. She is small. Complete. Click. Big, dark eyes, I imagine. A little well rises up. Baby. My baby. Click.

‘Looks like she’s moving down into the birth position, Stacey. They have an EDD down here of 34 weeks but it looks like she’s ready.’

A little charge inside—a thrill. Fear. He grabs my hand. Looks at me.

‘You have done this before. Not like this, I know. But you will be fine and she will be too. Look at her, she’s gorgeous.’

His phone rings.

‘Yes, yes. Yes, I’ll ask her.

‘They want to know if you’ve had any of the normal signs of labour. Just tell me, they can hear everything from the webcam.’

‘Um… cramps a bit. Yes, but I thought they were just expanding pains or Braxton-Hicks.’

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‘Um… cramps a bit. Yes, but I thought they were just expanding pains or Braxton-Hicks.’

‘I don’t think so. They want you to go down to the hospital and book in. They are sending down a taxi.’

‘But I need to go home, get my things. I have to pick up the kids from school. It might be the last time I can do it. I can’t take this baby to school with me. Everyone will know.’

‘Calm down Stacey, calm down. It’s all going to happen anyway. She’s on her way.’
shreds
Ashley Capes

Ashley Capes is a poet, novelist and teacher living in Victoria. His most recent poetry collection is *old stone: haiku, haibun & senryu*.

if you’re somewhere beyond
that keyhole
Alice-like maybe
or sleeping so soundly that
the thunder of
my chest collapsing
does not stir you
and if your pin-cushion veins
are the first things to
change
I want to see it
beyond the rustle of bed sheets
and quiet green bleeps
of equipment
so empty of love that they
must
have never been sad,
which isn’t to say you haven’t made me
happy—Christ no
it means only that their electricity
cannot grow lonely
and that it is never going to be a match for your lungs

and if you don’t wake
for many hours yet
I’ll be listening from the kitchen,
my hands like dull spiders
on the cutlery and pots and dials
and I’ll be listening

for the moment you stir
so I can smile as you wake
try to be strong
as you have been strong
for me
stronger than the pain
that
like a wretched ghost, wrings out
its song in the whisper
of your bones,
but that you will tear
into a million shreds and then release
each one thin enough
for the clouds to swallow
The Wild Grammar of Leeches
Kia Ora Creek – Overland Track Day 5
Rachael Mead

I shed my clothes like an awful first draft, splashing river on my face and into places used to their own company. In the sibilant rush, after so many days on the trail unwashed, my mouth makes loud vowels of shock and appreciation and my soles slip across the rocks’ skin like speed-reader’s fingers. I look down to find my body being edited, its pages harshly corrected with black punctuation. My hands slap at apostrophes and commas, these possessives and contractions claiming my blood. They engorge into dashes Emily Dickinson would covet and full of stolen content they race end for end across my skin, challenging my sensitive narrative with their bold third-person revisions, opening and closing quotes with wild abandon.

Ode to Apostrophe
Nausheen Eusuf

O Rose, O ye laurels
O wind, O wild West Wind
O body swayed to music
O O O O that Shakespeherian rag
O for a draught of vintage
O Night, O voluptuous
O unspeakable passionate love
O how that glittering taketh
O days and hours
O you who turn the wheel
O clamorous heart
O perpetual recurrence
O Dionysus, O Apollo
O suns, O stars of heaven
O moon with how sad steps
O wanderer, O despairer
O cruel, O destroyer
O falling fire and piercing cry
O sorrow, O piteous dream
O weep away the stain
O Answerer, O evermore
O for thy voice to soothe and bless
O thou terrible, O my god, my god
O hear, O there is none

Jonathan Culler, ‘Apostrophe’

Devoid of semantic reference, the O of apostrophe refers to other apostrophes...

Rachael Mead is a South Australian writer and poet with two collections of poetry. A chapbook is forthcoming with Garron Publishing.

Rachael Mead

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