Voice in Australian creative non-fiction: The project of my belonging

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Synopsis

The Notebook of Belonging engages with and contributes distinct values in relation to connection, belonging and narrative. Its ‘Voice’ situates an ontological approach originating from familial and cultural traditions. Multifaceted, it speaks to Western intellectual values, Aboriginality and the transformative nature of silence.

Primarily a practise-based creative nonfiction project, the Notebook of Belonging has an embedded exegetical commentary. The exegetical cannot be sliced away at either end without weakening the centre; the centre is not as strong without the exegetical. In this way, there are tensions and there are alignments in how book learnt interacts with oral story. The authority of book knowledge in relation to oral traditions is contested here.

The Notebook of Belonging presents knowledge imparted in oral story-telling whereby belonging and connection exist through a shared understanding of the interconnected nature of life and being. Oral story uses silence, repetition and reflection. The use of silence, repetition and reflection imparts knowledge in a non-linear and circular process. Replicating this non-linear, circular approach, the Notebook of Belonging is composed of a fragmented, discontinuous narrative, moving back and forth through time, recounting events in a non-linear order, where the multidimensional nature of time and story are always in dialogue, as they are in life.

The intention is to show a constellation of belonging both conceptual and tangible; situated between European and Kamilaroi understandings. The idea of creating a constellation using a discontinuous narrative is also informed by Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street (2016). Benjamin showed how a fragmented text creates subliminal connections between textual passages, complimented by explicit themes, formal echoes and rhymes; all of these may be structured in such a way to convey a constellation of meaning to the reader (Benjamin, 2016, p. 7). Individual fragments work as philosophical miniatures rather than snap shots. Moments from life recounted in the Notebook of Belonging focus on connection not rupture, informed and in response to Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida (2010) which presents the concept of the studium and the punctum in relation to the photographic image. The
studium is the public broad range of meaning associated with the image. The punctum, on the other hand, is the private association the viewer has with the image. It is conjured by the spectator’s own experience. It is unexpected and consequently remembered (Barthes, 2010, p. 26).

Other writers encountered in this research include: Nicholas Rothwell, Ngarta Jinny Bent et al, Kim Scott, Jeanette Winterson, and Helene Cixous. Their works investigate oral story as well as the power of narrative and literature.
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I am also especially thankful of Dr Marcus Waters’ research, cultural guidance, support and encouragement to learn Kamilaroi language.
Statement of Originality

This work has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the exegesis and artefact contain no material previously published or written by any other person except where reference is made in the dissertation itself.

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Michelle Vlatkovic
Notebook of Belonging
Preface

Before the beginning…

‘A Contained Self’ was published seventeen years ago (Vlatkovic 2001). This short story spoke about the projection and construction of ethnic identity. It was also about longing: me, able only to imagine the land as an outsider, locked out. Three elements were brought together to build the story.

I used metaphors: the box and the colour red. The boxes arrived, having travelled sea post, from my father’s country of origin. Inside them were house silver, crystal, fountain pens, linen and red cross-stitched needlepoint samplers. Hidden in the hems of cross-stitched tablecloths, my grandmother carefully sewed family heirlooms: lockets, gold chains, rings and watches. These treasures had tiny paper labels, written in her fine cursive hand, naming what belonged to whom. I described the cherub-like folkloric dancers in red and white costumes on the postcards she sent. I spoke of my father insisting he had forgotten Croatian. The story melded the contents of the boxes and the colour red alongside my father reading me the fairy-tale of ‘The Little Match Girl’.

My voice in ‘A Contained Self’ was unconsciously but emotionally driven to describe the longing for my emotional, intellectual, sexual and loving self to be contained and co-exist harmoniously. The drivers of that voice were veiled as something entirely different – an exploration of ethnic identity.

‘A Contained Self’ was melancholic and clever. Clever was awarded third place on a platform shared with Cate Kennedy and Craig Cormick in The Age newspaper’s short story competition in 2000. Clever, publication and one thousand dollars in prize money, however, didn’t contain my feelings of shame or inadequacy. But I remind myself, the title was not ‘My Contained Self’.

In the story, I found no solace with the writers I’d admired since my late teens. What I’d thought was poetic I found to be merely the description of a void, an abyss: Camus and

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1 The full script of the story is included in Appendix One.
his boulder, blind Borges, Sartre without God, Barthes and meaning. Even the feisty French feminists offered no place of consolation, with their lips flapping. Derrida seemed to talk in circles about the core and periphery. None of them addressed my concerns. None of them spoke to the shame I felt.

At that point I understood that my intimate history with its fractured relationships, its sexual assaults and emotional violence, was something I had to take responsibility for creating. Or at least understand the part I was responsible for continuing.

In the face of this realisation, my existing intellectual repertoire – feminism, post modernism and western philosophy about meaning – was an empty box. Those theorists had occupied my mind for some time, shaping my writerly voice and outlook. This thinking had been destructive, lacking insight into my personal trajectory. At that time, I believed if I were to write what was considered to be literary and intellectually rigorous, I would have to engage and locate myself along a continuum with the harsh thinkers and this would mean mentally drowning in that swamp. Sensibly, the more pressing question was – where would I find the self-belief to stop my crying and help me survive the psychological trauma I experienced?

There is still the reverence for those who navigate the abyss whether it be a Nobel laureate like Kasuo Ishiguro or a Rick and Morty cartoon. Eurocentric culture has an overwhelming ache to read and describe being trapped in a French existentialist moment. In broad societal terms, I think this is because its audience is endlessly trying to reconcile itself with living in the power paradigm of the individual, not for the good of the mob. People know seeking power is always a matter of dominating others and it causes unhappiness and misery.

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2 Making the announcement of the award to Kasuo Ishiguro, the Swedish Academy’s press release stated: ‘in novels of great emotional force [Ishiguro] has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world’ (‘The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017 - Press Release’, 2017).

3 Episodes of the adult cartoon Rick and Morty are saturated with existentialist references. Morty’s speech to Summer in the Rixty Minutes episode – ‘Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody’s gonna die. Come watch TV’ – mirrors French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre: ‘Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance’ (Olivieri, 2016).

4 This preference to understand and describe life as a matter of having been trapped in existentialist moment I call ‘empty thinking.’
Threads and yarn…

Since receiving the public recognition of ‘A Contained Self’ that left me feeling so empty, I have been learning ways to experience belonging that is full, not empty nor illusory. It has taken seventeen years to develop a voice that has the range necessary to engage within one world and present another. This is not merely the act of representation. It is also about positioning my reality. To story-tell for me is to truth-tell in a way that brings about change and connection without hurting people who are close to me or people who are vulnerable. Because stories lay out our experience, there will always be consequences for the story teller.

Yarning is story threaded deeply with connections: it attaches people, it connects us, and in this it is alive to consequences.

My writing seeks to intellectually engage with ‘empty thinking’ in a way that positions cultural and familial protocols and philosophical understandings embedded over generations in nature and story.\(^5\) My purpose is to reveal the power of yarning, an oral tradition versus the hollowness of words in a book or on a screen. The stories told to me by my grandfather and others handed down through the generations on both sides of my family have a different dynamic quality to anything book learnt, a fullness and depth. As an Aboriginal woman, I believe yarning is part of being.

Epigenetic scientists are now finding we have more than DNA in our genes; they suggest that our genes can carry the experiences of our ancestors. These can influence how we react (Beras, 2017). Experiences of our parents and their parents are handed down in the personality and emotional tics we inherit. Another way of speaking of this phenomenon in all of us is to talk of our Dreaming.

Like other black fellas in my family and community, I believe the story of me, my Dreaming, is locked in my DNA. I think all people carry story in this way. Sadly, many people have forgotten those yarns. These threads exist on both sides of my family. In the past seventeen years, their presence and purpose have revealed themselves.

In 2000, the Existentialists and the other post War European thinking I’d highly regarded for twenty years lost my allegiance when I confronted my reality of cumulative

\(^5\) Empty thinking is predicated on the idea of a world without ancestral beings shaping us or our experience in the world. This runs contrary to a Kamilaroi ontological understanding which believes our ancestors shape us and our life experience. They walk alongside us. They are present in nature and through story handed down to us by our Elders. They are intrinsic to our consciousness.
sexual trauma. I packed up those books and let go of any notion that ego-serving ambition or being clever had a place in my life.

It’s been seven years since I first went on Country, since my Uncle, sitting with me at a kitchen table said, ‘You were black woman before you knew you were.’

‘I know nothing,’ I said.

Uncle said, ‘We are all on a walk to knowing. We are always learning. Anyone who says different is a stupid Cunt.’

His language shocked me the first time I heard it. Now I might tell Uncle – it is time we opened the Contemporary University of New Thought.

For years, I have written, always not for profit, letters, resumes, funding submissions, policy and in my journal. I will always write not for profit. I write this with pride.

I didn’t write for publication for thirteen years. This project of my belonging, then, in many ways, is about my silence, in this context. The silence between then and now when I was learning, and my journey to home. It’s about how sitting in silence, I found other harmonies in myself and connection with those around me, that has changed my voice from one of longing to one of belonging. It is my discovery and understanding of how culture and family shape my voice as a writer. As a notebook of belonging, it will be accessed again when this material is reshaped and woven into my ongoing practice as a writer, broadcaster and researcher, conscious of my connection to my family and community.

This project is my reflections about belonging and voice. It is not time bound in a linear way of telling a chronology. I’m interested in showing you a constellation, presenting my belonging. It asks the exegetical question: “How can a writer manifest personal and familial cultural context and history in her voice in the genre of creative nonfiction?”

I have chosen to write in the creative nonfiction form to work out and through what has shaped my voice here and now speaking from this place, the values that underpin all I produce as a writer. The creative nonfiction is the form best suited to this investigation. It is a form where writing can be discursive, subjective and non-linear. It is well suited to my focus on the personal – family and community relationships, on values and on self. This form, focussed on the dynamic ‘I’, accommodates material which deals with emotional content in ways not achieved by texts which aim to be totally objective (Brien, 2000). It is focussed on creating a dynamic ‘I’.

My writing voice is shaped by being both a Kamilaroi woman as well as the daughter of a Croatian refugee. My voice comprehends the complexity and dynamics of cultural intersection in relation to ways of being and aesthetic approaches. My voice expresses
personal values and knowledge grounded in Kamilaroi ontology in relation to connection, belonging and oral storytelling. My voice is concerned with where and how connection, belonging and narrative are experienced. I seek to share the transformative space where these factors come together, to resolve shame, anger and helplessness. I wish to express Kamilaroi perspectives, in relation to living and being, which I have found to be healing and empowering. Simply, nature and people are connected, and interdependent as well as in communication.\(^6\) We are not designed to be competitive or individualistic, we are designed to co-operate and to be low impact.\(^7\)

Oral story and family history has given me this knowledge outside of traditional western pedagogical approaches. In this way, people and the natural world hold the energy and presence of my ancestors. My ancestors are always with me. This is not myth. This is my reality.

My belonging and connection engages with notions about what it is to be a ‘real Aboriginal’. Being a ‘real Aboriginal’ is so often falsely constructed by non-Indigenous people as existing in isolation, in the bush, away from urban centres. Being a ‘real Aboriginal’ is often falsely represented and misunderstood as necessarily having dark skin, brown eyes and other physical attributes (Grieves, 2014). This is not the truth for Aboriginal people living in the city or the bush. For us, it is to share an ontological approach about being, belonging and connection related to an oral tradition that hands down values, responsibilities and accountabilities that map out how to live your life, in truth and peace – even though our knowledge of language and experience of ceremony varies along a spectrum within our tribes.

Uncle Richard Bell, original member of ProppaNOW Indigenous arts collective Brisbane observed:

We are still telling dreamtime stories albeit contemporary ones. The Dreamings actually pass deep into Urban territories. (cited in Waters, 2012, p. 149)

Our culture is in interaction with non-Indigenous ways of knowing, having to negotiate both cultural spaces. Aboriginal people interact with non-Indigenous people with institutions in

\(^6\) Science confirms this interdependence in our eco systems as well as communication between the natural world and us. The movements and sounds animals make communicate certain things. If we look as well as listen in the bush, it reveals where water is found and other food sources are available.

\(^7\) These principals have informed generations of my family how to be resilient and survive civil conflicts, removal and dispossession.
our cities and beyond. In many instances, we also have family that do not identify as Aboriginal. We comprehend where our values are shared, as well as where different for non-Indigenous people. Being Aboriginal is also to feel and know the sadness and trouble colonisation has brought and continues to perpetrate within our communities. This shapes our actions, priorities and speech.

My voice, belonging and connection presents an Aboriginal ontological life view shaped by mother and maternal grandfather. This is tempered by a European aesthetic I learnt in books and from my father. My understanding is grounded in knowledge that has sustained people for tens of thousands of years with low impact horticulture, cohesive communities and without major conflicts. In the very recent past, this thinking has been interrupted and dismissed by the people who have come to live in Australia. Our values and beliefs have been subjugated and our communities decimated by armed force, dispossession, policy and misrepresentation. This experience has not changed our reflective approach to life. We teach our young to observe the unspoken. We see violence and trauma exist as a result of an imposed way of being, that favours things we know do not create peaceful or connected lives.

My voice is interested in moving beyond conceptions of who is a ‘real Aboriginal’ and the undervaluing of the gift my cultural understanding has to offer. Instead I present how nature and oral stories handed down to me experientially reveal a life philosophy addressing being, connection and belonging. My Kamilaroi value system comprehends the performance of storytelling through stories my grandfather told me in childhood. Over time, these stories were repeated – their associations, their significance informing me in different ways, depending on my needs. Rediscovering these stories, sharing them with cousins, Aunties and Uncles as well as Aboriginal people within my community the responses to these yarns have been something like this:

‘Deadly! That one of all the ones was kept and handed to you.’
‘Yes.’
‘Ancestors, our old people are always with us.’
Or
‘We’ve got a story like that. Have you heard of…’

8 Aunty Cathy Jackson explains, ‘We only took what we needed, we cultivated plants but it was low impact way. Some of our knowledge was shared in relation to bush foods and water sources. Our communities had a structured way of life, founded on sharing resources and following Lore. The stories of war, on this continent exist after colonisation (Jackson, 2018). At the time of settlement, there were 250 distinct language groups in Australia (Walsh, 1991). The vast number of separate language groups confirms the capacity of different people to co-exist harmoniously.'
Family members and new friends have been generous as well as proud about sharing something important that has travelled through time, reaffirming our connection and responsibilities.

Kamilaroi pedagogy is reflective rather than being analytic. Knowledge is imparted via inter-generational story telling where meaning and significance, rather than being immediately revealed, is unveiled over time. Stories are repeated and they are re-considered alongside other life experience. Paul Spearim explains this learning process of yarns being told and retold:

It’s a circular thing, in gaining knowledge. Each story take (sic) on new meaning, interpretation as you get older. (cited in Waters, 2012, p. 124)

Reflection and understanding is linked with place and its realities. Stories may be associated with originating in a geographical place, however their significance and knowledge is often imparted in the context of the hearer’s place and situation reflecting on those yarns. The context of Now imparts meaning and significance. Now is a concept, it is underpinned by a belief in the multidimensional nature of time. Life is perceived as circular not linear.9

A distinct voice relies on the writer’s own sense of identity. I present my sense of belonging as a writer as it is shaped by simultaneously existing in the following life roles: descendent, daughter, aunt, sister, community member, writer and broadcaster. My project addresses the intersection as well as juxtaposition of European perceptions and Indigenous understandings around narrative, identity, time and belonging.

My work is informed by a European aesthetic. This notebook of belonging is composed of a fragmented, discontinuous narrative. For me, each fragment is a feather, situated in the dark bits between the stars of a black emu in the sky. Readers may perceive individual fragments as representations of the thinking process.10 This is a constellation of

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9 Marcus Waters explains it like this: ‘Traditional Aboriginal pedagogy incorporates epistemology based in a circular and non-linear notion of life and experience (world view or ontology). It is based in the inter-relatedness of all things and brings together “ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing.” That is what at present retains our separation and uniqueness from non-Indigenous approaches’ (Waters 2012, p. 124).

10 This idea comes from Michael W. Jennings’ introduction to Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street (2016). According to Jennings, Benjamin showed how a fragmented text creates subliminal connections between textual passages, complimented by explicit themes, formal echoes and rhymes; all of these may be structured to represent the free-flight of the mind daydreaming (Benjamin, 2016, p. 7).
belonging both conceptual and tangible. It is situated between European and Aboriginal understandings.

This project about voice presents Aboriginal knowledge imparted to me in oral storytelling, silence, repetition and reflection. It explores how this knowledge has been useful and practical to my life and well-being. It describes what it is for me to be a Kamilaroi woman, my connection and belonging.

This artefact with commentary depicts an inter-cultural understanding. Multifaceted, it speaks to Western intellectual values, the de-colonialization project and remedies for feelings of shame resulting from trauma. In the night sky the emu moves through a cycle of fertility: laying and hatching for evermore. When to travel, when to seek eggs, when to do ceremony all require knowledge of the transitions from one point to another in this cycle. My Kamilaroi understanding provides protocols about how to engage. I have learned to trust and read the emu in the sky: my silence showed me the moments of choosing one response over another, what details people need to know. Cultural protocols and familial accountability also inform what is not disclosed. I do not have permission to share certain things.

My innovation is how gaps are used. Most writers write to fill in gaps with their words. Whereas in this discontinuous narrative I have considered where to create gaps. I choose silence: not only to avoid describing lived trauma. I choose purposefully to allow my reader to experience silence and also to position my Aboriginal understanding on equal footing to those European modernist thinkers referenced above.

I share my understanding of connection and belonging as experienced in family and community in four separate parts, with a Postface and appendix:

Part One: Country
Part Two: Pirates
Part Three: Thigarraa Winaaga-li
Part Four: Un-Surreal Increment

There are fragments that read like exegetical commentary within the artefact. They serve as examples of an objective, detached voice, contrasting the fragments that read more like excerpts from a short story, a poem, or the retelling of an oral story. This is an example of the range of my voice to speak to and from different cultural spaces. Altogether, the fragments

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11 In a discontinuous narrative, the story is told moving back and forth through time, recounting events in a non-linear order.
express complexity, transformation, hidden truths and knowledge shaped by my Kamilaroi and Croatian lineage.

Part One and Part Two investigate intergenerational experiences of colonization and civil conflict. Part One, Country, touches on the contested understanding – Country versus Country – the sense of violation felt, the sense of helplessness experienced when sovereignty is denied at a personal or community level. Using the word cunt exposes the offence taken, the offence perpetuated in how shared language is misunderstood and used to mean different things for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. It presents how my voice uses this word expressing a range of feelings from disgust to solidarity, for the purposes of resistance as well as empowerment. The land is our mother. She is not empty. She is not something to be pillaged or treated with disrespect. Colonially infused language like ‘literary territory’ is used to describe parameters of form that make shared understanding difficult and challenging. Meanjin is the Murri word for Brisbane, as well as the name of a Melbourne-based literary journal. Sadly, most people don’t know the names of the places where they live in Australia. Using cunt, such a provocative word is really a call to Listen differently, suspend reacting, and be OPEN to seeing things another way.

Part Two: Pirates includes commentary that deconstructs ‘A Contained Self’ through the lens of hindsight and of having spent time in Croatia not long after the civil war and directly after ‘A Contained Self’ was published. In this section of my artefact I introduce the significance of silence to this discursive meditation on voice. In 2000, I realised the limited usefulness to me of narratives that present disempowerment to humanity. To describe my traumas would mean continuing to feel shell-shocked, angry, annihilated. I chose silence, not discourse, to recalibrate. I chose transformative experiences that grounded me in a breath-taking present over learning to wield a pen as a knife. This choice I made after seeing the aftermath of a bloody civil war. Essential to understanding how voices veil and reveal is understanding the use of silence: its comfort, despair, power, capacity for understatement, cultural associations and its relationship with time.

Part Three: Thigarraa Winaaga-li (bird knowledge) presents an Indigenous understanding of time, silence, action and story.

Part Four: Un-Surreal Increment is the conclusion, describing my emotional journey of reconciliation and connection with family and the intergenerational consequences of removal. It speaks to what silence may give birth to over time and what my voice seeks to articulate now.
Lastly, the Postface presents my research methods and further analysis of my writing method.

**Origins…**

The significance of this project lies in how it engages with broader debates in relation to what it means to be an Indigenous Australian. It achieves this through presenting my Kamilaroi ontological perspective, how I apply this to the world I inhabit alongside the other ways of knowing I have encountered.

Distinctively, Kamilaroi values underpin my connection and belonging in my family and community. Contrary to feeling marginalized, these values have enabled me to develop strong, supportive and loving relationships. My connection and belonging does come with responsibilities and accountabilities. These I accept, for they are always grounded in sharing and compassionate action.

This project’s innovation is revealing silence as a space of transformation rather than disempowerment – a space often characterised as disempowering, debilitating and out of step with the present. Too often, Aboriginal knowledge and values are trivialised as mythology and irrelevant to living an engaged and productive life. In my reality, the marginal has become liberating rather than imprisoning.

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12 In 2009, well known journalist Andrew Bolt wrote two articles implying Aboriginal people were not real Aboriginals because of their light skin and mixed heritage. These articles identified nine specific people who then sued Bolt for defamation (Callanan, 2011). While Bolt was found guilty of defamation for these articles, it remains an issue that many non-Indigenous people have misconceptions around what it is to be an Aboriginal (Seed, 2016). Views about Aboriginality are diverse within our own communities. Aboriginal thinkers and scholars have discussed the defining of Aboriginality for the past twenty-five years. Marcus Waters’ thesis ‘Contemporary Urban Indigenous ‘Dreamings’: Interaction, Engagement and Creative Practice,’ cites the following examples. In 1994 Patrick Dodson gave The Wentworth Lecture, ‘The End In the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality’, stating ‘Aboriginality must be generated by Indigenous peoples ourselves’ (Dodson, 1994, p. 7). Jackie Huggins rejected definitions of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginals in her essay, ‘Always was, always will be’ (Huggins, 1993, p. 459). In 2006, Yin Paradies conducted an extensive study to establish how Australian Aboriginality has been defined. He found 67 different definitions of the term ‘Indigenous’, referencing 700 pieces of legislation (Paradies, 2006, p. 355). Vernon Ah Kee has stated that the traditional Aboriginal is a white construct while it is the urban Aboriginal people who are the authentic Aboriginal people (Ah Kee, 2006, p. 3). Marcus Waters identifies that our pre-history to colonisation as a people has been and continues to be the foundation to survive beyond the binary, ‘and it remains at the core in understanding our Aboriginal identity’ (Waters, 2012, pp. 126-128).
My voice works to redefine what it means to be Aboriginal, beyond binary stereotypes that falsely suggest culture and people exist only in opposition to one another, ignoring how they are also responsive to one another. I reflect on the complexity and layering of these shared understandings by fusing European aesthetic concerns with Indigenous values and understanding based on an oral tradition.

Each part of this project is a separate star cluster in the night sky for the reader to consider. Each cluster offers the gift Kamilaroi perspectives offer humanity. Our culture has remained strong for thousands of years because it is relevant and instructive. Our knowledge is about living a fulfilling and peaceful life.
**Part 1: Country**

*Country versus Cuntry*

Country:
I have a complicated relationship to country. Being a spiritual place, it is as much conceptual as it is tangible. My body is a country. The dirt I stand on is Turrbal and Jagera Country at the place known in Turrbal language as Meanjin. The domain of Australian letters is a country with its own currency. They pronounce it Me-An-Gin.

We say it softly, mingin.

Thinking about country, terms like colonisation, occupation, shame, trauma, seeing the understanding of these still marginalising voices, the word has another intonation: Cuntry.

Cuntry,

Truth be told, never was terra nullias. Not nobody’s land.

You not seeing right. Same here as always, homelands invisible to some, denied by others. The colonizer has never been a lover. They see vacancy where there is fullness.

You need to think of cuntry in a way that is different.

With belonging,

Country

P.S.

On Country – lying with a woman, a man becomes part of her Dreaming. No Gammin!

Look, listen and learn.

***
We sat at the kitchen table drinking harsh instant coffee, listening to mournful cowboy songs on the radio. A wooden goanna was in the centre of the table, another hung on the wall.

Uncle wanted me to go to the land council meeting.

‘I don’t know about that,’ I said when he asked me about going down there in getting my proof of Aboriginality.

Uncle said, ‘You can speak and write.’

I thought about the privilege and opportunity I had and the bitter way school, work and wealth wasn’t available to uncle and my cousins. Kids had taken over the house. Uncle and Aunty had two caravans they took refuge in away from the laughter, teasing and carry-on of teenage boys and eight- to twelve-year-old cousins who overran the small three-bedroom home where they lived. He was blood, my relative, and he and Aunty were kind.

But to say I was Aboriginal was to claim to be something I didn’t know. He was astute as well.

‘You were a black woman before you knew it. You’ve been estranged from us through no fault of your own.’ He told me.

I lived in Brisbane, he lived in Gunnedah.

He lit his smoke and took a long drag. I had a mouthful of coffee, looking at the goanna. He opened the newspaper. ‘Look at this.’ He pointed at a photo of a fence and gate, preventing access to land being used by a mining company. ‘Cunts, look at what they’ve done. That’s our country. There are grinding grooves, rock paintings, places we’ve been taking care of for thousands of years.’

Then, I didn’t feel comfortable talking as a Kamilaroi woman but I agreed to attend the meeting.

Uncle is gone now. He spent the last two years of his life fighting the government to have access to Country after a Chinese mining company bought the land. Uncle was reading the newspaper when he died.

* * *

Life and being is a river, the stars above, the fish beneath. You can cast out into the river
and catch food that way. Or there’s another way you can use as well. Other people, my mob, they can reach out into the sky and pull down stuff, open their hand and show it to you, nourish you. And that’s what we do belonging.

This is my surreal increment. I don’t need city lights when I’ve got night sky above and the land beneath me.

* * *

I’m a custodian of this body, comprehending the responsibility that comes with the sovereignty of being. I’m a custodian of this Country knowing it owns me, I will never own it.

Literary, literal and spiritual country still decides how long I am here in this form or another.

Country determines your priorities, what feeds you, your life and your death. It does this conceptually, spiritually, tangibly and physically in what you eat, where you go, who you know, what you seek and what you find.

* * *

There is country and there is connection – the kindness of blood ties and shared experience.

* * *

There is country and there is a concept called real estate. My real estate is ideas, a surreal increment. The real associated with estate is always surreal, it’s based on a perceived value.

* * *

...Write ...Right ...Rite

I used to feel I belonged only when I wrote. I got heady on being a subject in process.

* * *
Why we write creative non-fiction is the same reason we write fiction, to scratch circles, unpacking our understandings. We use it to veil and reveal ourselves, knowingly and unknowingly at times. It’s always a sort of disclosure of who we believe ourselves to be.

Writers tend to want to be liked by readers to the extent they wish to be read and their work purchased by readers.

Writing is often to be longing. I’ve met historians, journalists and memoir as well as fiction writers and read their work. Without exception, there is an alignment with their emotional blind spots and the way they choose chapter titles, express their reverence for a subject and how they choose subjects. Form and voice are often used to hide this truth.

Writing is representation of lived experience and recollection. Writing about something having read about a subject, talked with experts, listened to opposing views, inevitably involves re-shaping understanding and situating self.

When I write, it can feel like I am a subject in process. I do not feel fixed. I feel fluid, mercurial, jotting down thoughts. Stepping back considering the scaffolding, thinking about other voices and views, what they would think. I try to look at the work objectively. I want a perspective that is aerial and sees where the ideas sit on a landscape of understanding.

While I’m doing all that wanting to bring cohesion to my view as it appears in marks on the page in my journal and later on the screen, my longing for understanding, praise, forgiveness, self-acceptance or whatever is suspended because my belonging is established as I am longing. In those moments, I belong, outside of doubt, soaring above the shit of existence. Flying. It still happens for me, but what’s different from before ‘A Contained Self’, is I know now I belong on the ground as well.

Years ago, it felt as though it was only at the point of creating I felt that belonging. It seemed so hollow that it should only be when expressing my views that I should feel I belonged and was whole. It was unacceptable to me that writing should serve my ego in this way. I needed to ground myself. I chose not to use my voice in a literary way. Instead I used my voice to advocate for others working in community media and employment services.
Where the margins lie...

I’ve come to see what is perceived as marginal is everywhere. Addiction, dis-function, disconnection exist in workplaces, families and the community at large. I’ve experienced this, we all have. Too often and too much, clever and individualistic is something to strive for at the expense of belonging and connection. The latter is possible only with listening, empathy and respectful compassionate action, not in what glitters or necessarily offers public esteem.

Craft

Thinking about voice, I think about actors, how they project themselves. Fiction is obviously like acting, a writer takes on various personas with the enactment of different characters.

Interviewed by Dick Cavett in the seventies, Marlon Brando claimed, we all act (American Broadcasting Company, 1973). He meant we all shape ourselves to suit who we’re seeking to connect with. We act in life when our voice and our body language come together for a specific audience in our interactions talking to that shop assistant demanding a refund, asking a boss for leave, annoyed with our pet, whispering to a lover.

Behind our projections are our intentions. Intention is motivated by a need of some sort that will be met with connection.

Writers do this by choosing a voice. There are certain inflections they choose to hype up and draw attention to; and those that work against the writer putting forward any proposition whether it be theoretical or creative writing.

It’s form that provides the costume.

My writing is like a home-made dress. I want it to become a tailored suit.
Blue Dress

The phone call with her nephew hadn’t ended well. She had expected this would happen. It was going to be disruptive, her backing out of the arrangement. But things change. That’s life. Nothing more to say about the matter.

She finished her breakfast and had a shower. Standing in front of her open wardrobe, Michelle thought about wearing the seventies halter neck pant-suit. Its tailoring was precise, invested with time and consideration. Bold wide lapels with statement white stitching said: women’s liberation and power. She purchased it from an opportunity shop, expensive at $35.

But it was going to be a hot day. The sundress was a garage sale find one weekend. She found it rummaging through a bag of two dollar items. It was the fabric that attracted her attention, blue background with pink tulips. Bright and cheerful. Home-made with crooked seams, it had darts sucking in the excess fabric around the mid-riff.

Removing it from the hanger, she noticed the split under the cap sleeve. It wasn’t that big. No one would notice.

* * *

The traffic was congested on Main Street where the Mater Hospital was on her left approaching the bridge. She merged into the right lane and saw on the bridge footpath a wiry man with a baseball cap pulled down hiding his forehead. His tanned arms were leathered and covered in aged tattoos. His jeans were tatty and he wore a superman t-shirt, electric blue with the S logo. He swayed clumsily, as though he was drunk. The traffic moved a little faster. Closer, she saw the crutches. He had hobbled all the way from the Valley to Kangaroo Point, at least one and a half kilometres.

The steel Bridge arched above her. She smiled at its name, the Story Bridge, and looked back at the man. He saw her smile in the split second the car passed him. She saw the recognition at that moment.
When I walk through the car park entrance to the radio station on Saturday afternoons, I hope she will be there again, sitting on the bench.

That first time, she sat at the bottom of the stairs, a half-smoked rollie between her fingers as we were arriving for our show. I smiled, then pressed the buzzer for the on-air announcer to let us in. Our sistar on the stairs asked for a light. Tab held out hers and the young tidda lit her cigarette. The door opened and we went in the building.

Later, when we went out for a smoke after our shift, she was gone.

* * * 

4ZZZ is situated on an island of tar between Barry Parade and St Pauls Terrace in Fortitude Valley. The three-storey community radio station is protected by a loud multi-coloured third eye mural on the front of the building. Once the Communist Party headquarters, the Z sits on a prime bit of inner-city real estate, dwarfed by three garish skyscrapers on Barry Parade. On hot afternoons, the car park at the back of the building is often packed with young people at small but loud underage gigs. The station gives a voice to those at the margins, those not heard elsewhere. For forty plus years, the Z call to action has been *Educate, Agitate, Organise*.

Sometimes, in the early hours of the morning, people walking past the car park entrance hear the speaker rigged up on the side of the storage shed and wander in.

Beside the staircase that leads to the office space, there’s a door on ground level leading to the studios and music library. It has always been a safe space for homeless people to sleep until the breakfast shift.

Now, each time I go to the station, I look for the tidda. I hope that she will be sitting on the bench next to the big ashtray with her rollies. Our exchange was unspoken, but I will recognise her lopsided grin and petite frame, there or someplace else.

* * *
Tabatha, my Bidjara Sistar, has wisdom curls, though she is the younger of us two. Tab is in her mid-forties, a single mum with three kids. She sings and is studying Aboriginal health. We share similar interests: music, culture and politics. There is repetition in our family stories: love and care, state intervention, dislocation and all the things they talk about on the news, repeated over and over again in government reports and never comprehensively addressed.

There are big differences as well: the time we’ve shared on our country with elders, with extended family. What our families told us of our history, and what they knew, is very different. I was raised not knowing I was Aboriginal.

To find out that the life you have experienced happened because of lies and deception, to know that your relatives never had that kind of opportunity, makes you question the way you see the world. It shifts the way you accept history, who you are, where you belong and what responsibilities you have – to truth-tell, to call out shame, to name fear.

It has changed what I see, what I hear, and how I describe it. It has changed the emphasis I place on the specifics of my life and my experiences. Privilege costs those less fortunate. But you can actively choose to lift others up in action and speech.

Every Saturday at 1pm, we are fiercer, braver, stronger. We fade down the Go-Betweens track the show before us, *Brisbane-line*, uses as their outro. We play soundbites of our SoulJah Sistars: Nina Simone, Betty Davis, Marlena Shaw, Koko Taylor, Rosetta Tharpe, Aunty Ruby, Aunty Wilma Redding, Aunty Lila Watson, Aunty Mary Graham, Rita Marley, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and Rosa Parks. Women who shape the world as we see it.

Downstairs Kiesha answers calls, sells merchandise, updates the membership database and does our social media. She’s our younger Sistar.

This day, I pick up the studio phone as soon as Tab fades up the first track following the program intro.

‘Kiesha, is it busy?’
‘Not right now.’
‘You want to order us some Chinese?’
‘Sure.’
‘Me and Tab will go get it after the show.’
As the track fades out, Tab moves the sliders on panel for the microphones.

‘That was Camille Yarbrough, singing All Hid.’ I always back-announce to give listeners context. ‘We’re the SoulJah Sistars on the Zeds. We’re talking about Rosa Parks this week.’

‘Rosa Parks was the African American tidda who refused to move down the back of the bus and the incident galvanised the civil rights movement,’ Tab says.

‘What does Rosa’s story say to you?’ I ask her.

‘She took a stand with no expectation things would change. She was no mild-mannered Sistar, like people thought. She was an activist. Before that day she had been kicked off the bus by the same driver. She knew she would be arrested.’

‘I so agree. What is exceptional is she was so courageous, not expecting a good outcome.’ I glance up at the studio clock and back at Tab. The program is an hour long so there is not a lot of time to talk.

Tab presses play on the computer, then fades up the track. ‘Now this is a Sistar closer to home.’

It’s important to give people the sweet with the bitter. We offer them voices grounded in this place, local and honest: Christine Anu singing with Paul Kelly on Last Train, Casey Donovon singing True Colours, Wildflower singing Galiwin’ku.

* * *

Researching the program, I’d read about the photos of Rosa on the bus and of her fingerprinting, which were staged by law enforcement and the media after the event. Rosa was deliberately made to look something she wasn’t – meek.

I’ve been thinking about how we present experience for the purposes of truth-telling.

Truth-telling is needed for healing. It’s empowering, too – to know that Rosa was a political woman driven to change the world for the better. That she lived the slogan that we and the rest of the 4ZZZ community strive to live by: Educate, Agitate, Organise.

* * *
After the music, we talk about segregation here before the referendum in 1967: the Care and Protection Acts that dictated where Aboriginal people could live and work, who we could marry.

In some instances, to move and work where they wanted, our people applied and were granted an Exemption Certificate – and it came with conditions. It was self-imposed assimilation where people gave up connection to kin and country. They could not go back to the mission, or return to see family. They had to pretend to be white. Invisible regulations, the Exemption Certificates, severed people from family, their language and culture.

Many children were taken, like my great grandfather. Their Aboriginal identities were silenced and denied. The pain was so great. Sometimes they met rejection when they returned.

The forced labour of our women, trained to be domestic help while in state care, the Stolen Wages, these all happened in very recent history – in our mothers’, aunties’, grandmothers’ lifetimes. In some places, they are still happening, like with the intervention and Work for the Dole programs.

Now segregation exists in ‘the gap’ seen in incarceration, life expectancy, educational outcomes, suicide, addiction and housing; these are things experienced far more and far differently by Indigenous Australians.

Before colonisation, people had the knowledge and understandings to have a quality of life that has since been taken from them wherever possible. For many thousands of years, we were able to live off the land well.

* * *

‘One hurts all hurt,’ Tab says. ‘Lives circle one another in routines for days, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia, weaving a basket that might hold us in truth or deception.’

‘Our last track is Auntie Ruby Hunter singing *Down City Streets.*’

The program outro is a short grab from an interview with Nina Simone. A male journalist asks, ‘What does it mean to be free for you?’

Nina answers, ‘It means the same to me as it means to you. To be free is to feel no fear.’
Tab and I are smiling, laughing at the dog lifting its leg on the side of the building. We’re striding in time with one another, past a busker in front of the rail station. Around the corner we turn right onto Wickham Terrace to grab lunch. We head back up Brunswick Street with our take-away.

Waiting for the walk signal at the traffic lights at the five-way intersection, across the road on the tar island, we see trouble.

There’s a parked paddy wagon. Six cops are standing around.

We cross over. We can see a Sistar on the ground.

‘Maybe we should go in the building via Barry Parade,’ Tab says, just above a whisper.

‘No. Let’s go in via the car park.’ The cops should know there are witnesses. But because of years of this shit, Tab knows that it’s best to keep out of harm’s way.

It’s a difference in our life experience. Black tea and white tea. But tea is tea, Tab says later.

As we walk past, we both see it’s the tidda who was in the car park a few weeks before. The sky inverts as if it were a boulder pressing down from above, as recognition flows between the three of us. The air is thick with silent humiliation. Tidda, Tab and I are covered in it. We don’t make eye contact. We don’t stop.

A female copper is pulling on a purple latex glove. Another cop opens the back of the paddy wagon.

I do not want to make this young woman feel any worse, but worry I already have. I need to listen harder to hear the wisdom of experience.

We walk into the Z’s car park, the high from doing a program gone. Six police officers; it was unsafe to intervene, to ask questions.

Every Saturday now, I park my car and walk down St Pauls Terrace and I look for the tidda before crossing the road. I hope to see her, sitting or sleeping in the sheltered area, out the front of an office, hidden by bushes from the gaze of motorists, from the hands of the
police. When I walk through the car park entrance to the Z, I hope she will be sitting on the bench.
Part Two: Pirates

Embedded

In silence, in time, I am always here. Outside of the narrative and embedded within my constellation of belonging.

What has taken so long has been the knowing. Knowing what is mine and what is not mine. I did not want to hide from my own narrative. The narrative I wanted was not to be taken under false pretences and used as my own. It had to be of me, from the places I occupy.

* * *

This scene is not my narrative, but it is my voice, my re-telling, imagining:

He hears them, crawls out of bed and pads down the hall. They are sitting around the table. The big man is holding something on his knee. It is dark. It looks like one of his toy guns. His mother sees him standing at the door. She stares in a way that says go back to bed. He looks at what the man is holding. Her eyes communicate the danger. He retreats back to his room.

The big man is drinking coffee at the table the next morning. The gun is not in sight. His wife and child arrive with their belongings. The boy goes out with his mother to visit his aunt. Walking to the tram stop she tells him. Don’t talk in front of the strangers who have moved in. They are spies who report to the authorities.

Commentary and Story

The playful mocking of *ethnic identity* slides off my tongue, spurts from the pen easily, because it is a veneer, that conceals a place with layers of broken histories.
Draped on the back of the spare chair is her navy Moschino Jacket with dollar symbols on the brass buttons. 

Louise is a successful literary agent. It seems unbelievable she wants to represent me. 

We order lunch. 

Louise dissects her bruschetta, and her tone becomes serious. 

‘You’re not a twenty-five-year old Cambridge honours graduate. We need to play on your ethnicity.’ 

‘My what?’ 

‘Your ethnic heritage.’ 

She swishes the red wine around the glass before taking a sip. Her nails match the deep plum colour of her lipstick. 

‘But everyone has an ethnic background,’ I say. 

‘Yes, but some are more ethnic than others. Where is the name Vlatkovic from?’ 

‘My father was born in Croatia.’ 

‘Slavic. Fantastic. Since the trouble there, people have an awareness of the region. They’re interested in its complicated history.’ 

‘I don’t speak a word.’ 

‘No one need know that. I can see the cover. Selling books is firstly about packaging. Secondly, reader expectation. And lastly, the merits of the prose. We’ll use a traditional needlework motif behind your name and the title. I want you to go home and write about being ethnic.’

Commentary: 

The voice in ‘A Contained Self’ is full of affectation. A clumsy, immature voice that knows about listener expectation, cultural currency in a literary marketplace, seemingly sharp in its refusal to lay its personal truths bare.

Excerpt:

I requested the same story every night: ‘The Little Match Girl’. I’d never seen real snow; it looked like vanilla icing in the picture. A kindly old woman sat in front of the hearth and the little match girl lit matches outside in the cold. 

Lulled into imaginings by my father’s thick vowels, heavy consonants and weary delivery, I went to a place far away. A place where golden domed buildings
surrounded the town square and the people skated on glass surfaced ponds. Horse
drawn carriages travelled along cobbled streets; princesses lived in castles on talcum
covered mountains.
‘The little match girl reached out to her grandma by the flicker of the last sparked
match. In the morning, the town’s people found her body. Her spirit had gone.’

Commentary:
It is the little match girl who presents the greatest clue about me, then, the sense of
being an outsider, longing for something I did not know. Not unlike someone only knowing
the sea by the sound of a shell. They don’t know the sea, just like I did not understand
belonging.

I mentioned the times I wanted to be more Croatian.

Excerpt:
‘Dad will you teach me Croatian?’
‘You haven’t learnt German, yet.’
‘I want to learn Croatian.’
‘I don’t remember Croatian.’
‘How come you remember German?’
‘I didn’t feel the need to forget it.’

Commentary:
My father’s narrative, his past in parts have been kept from me. The not knowing
made it impossible to claim this narrative as my own.

Excerpt:
My father is proud of his grevillea. He tells me, “They’re hybrids, like you, a
combination of things.”

Commentary:
I think these are the two sentences I dislike most in ‘A Contained Self’, my easy but
shallow association with the discourses of the moment, that talked of hybridity.

Excerpt:
‘Where are you from? he asked.
‘I lived in Brisbane before moving to Melbourne.’
‘No. I didn’t mean that.’
‘I grew up in Sydney.’
Commentary:

Then, I found the question Where are you from? Annoying. It’s expectation I was from elsewhere. I have always felt I was from here.

***

I am no longer constrained. I speak of the silences in me and those that exist on both sides of my family history. These silences I value as much as words; for omission may reveal as much as inclusion veils.

Smrti, promjena i dobiti (Death, change and profit)

After the collapse of Yugoslavia, Destrovic, my father’s advocate, pressed palms with my father’s cash. He pursued the return of sixteen apartments, three shops and a work shop that were confiscated by the Socialists from our family. He made himself a rich man brokering this outcome. Tenants over a number of years vacated premises my father then sold to customers Destrovic found. The family apartment, at 57 Pantovkak Ulica, was one of the last properties to be returned.

***

It is a leafy neighbourhood with embassies, mansions and apartments. There are as many officials and diplomats as there are mafia. Their residences line the road up to the presidential palace.

***

The cellar at 57 Pantovkak Ulica is on the deeds and the floor plan. However, the cellar on the left side of the building disappeared. The downstairs tenant, once an official in the Department of Housing, stole the space and refashioned a studio apartment for his son.
My father paid a lawyer to bribe the judge. The judge stamped and signed. The original plans were validated and the state agreed that theft had taken place.

* * *

We heaved suitcases from the boot and lugged them up the stairs to the apartment where my grandparents had died and my father had been born. This was the first time my father had been inside since leaving in 1950. He opened the door. We put down our suitcases in the hall and entered the lounge-room. The parquetry floor was covered in dust, power sockets had been removed from the wall. In the vestibule behind us, the telephone was ringing. It was Destrovic. My father talked in Croatian and I walked through the empty rooms.

* * *

When I visited as a child, it was winter. There had been ornate hand carved furniture, tall bookcases lined with novels in the five languages my grandmother spoke, paintings and ornaments, rugs, hand-painted wall paper and tiled furnaces warming the living spaces.

* * *

This visit with my father, the apartment was bare, but for two camp beds Destrovic had delivered. Someone had renovated sometime after my grandmother died. There was a new bathroom, but recent tenants had removed taps, smashed the bidet and taken the toilet seat. There was no stove or kitchen sink. There was central heating and every wall had been painted the same dull grey.

Nikic lived next door. He was an economist with government connections. He had his sights on our apartment before Destrovic had become involved. Nikic had arranged for a foreign journalist to move in who lived there for three years until Destrovic paid the right people to ensure the lease was not renewed.

* * *
Early the following morning, jackhammers downstairs in the cellar woke us. Fittings were being removed: stove, sink, toilet, basin and tiles. I stood at the dining-room window, watching the tenant and his son pack it all up into a truck. No cellar, no studio apartment.

* * *

Inside my head was a dusty space full of rubble, not unlike the mess we would soon clean up downstairs. The false self I’d lived with for thirty-five years had abandoned me, all that was left was rubble.

* * *

My father is not the sort of person to pry. What had happened in my personal life before leaving we never discussed. He understood silence, its usefulness post trauma, its capacity to recalibrate. This trip was when I began to think about silence.

Old Town New

I first went to Croatia when I was thirteen. I remember walking around Republike Square on an icy morning. Everything in black and white not colour, the grey sky, glum buildings that were dirty and unpainted. Everywhere were young men in uniform, like a scene from an old American war movie. They spoke in gruff voices, using words I did not understand. No one smiled as they teemed on and off trams, coming and going from the heart of the city.

* * *

Since the civil war in the nineties, there has been an attempt to reinstate the old town pre-socialism. Republike Square has disappeared and Jelačić Square returned. The statue of Jelačić on his horse originally faced north but now faces south. The buildings are re-painted, white and clean. Townspeople sit underneath red umbrellas in the sun, laughing and
drinking, watching and being watched in their best clothes as the trams stop, drop and pick-up passengers. Registered buskers, Gypsies playing accordion, entertain the crowd. There are bunches of flowers being sold at small stalls.

**Hrelić**

On the tram ride we saw the brutal cement apartment towers with their satellite dishes beaming in false promises. On clotheslines hung mini-skirts next to military socks; blue jeans next to army shirts and combat pants.

* * *

Not long after the Socialists took power, my father pushed a wheelbarrow carrying the family dinner service and silver ten kilometres from Pantovkak, past the rail station, across Mladost Bridge. He and his brother headed south further along the River Sava’s embankment to an outdoor flea market, spread across a gravelly lot.

Now, like then, war loot is laid out on tables at the Sava Market. Tools, machine parts, pictures, crockery, cutlery, saucepans, jugs household linen and children’s toys are sold by those who pillaged. There’s a man with hand-made birch brooms and copper cauldrons next to a stall-holder blaring Euro Techno.

The smell of garlic, roasting meat, fried sausages and stew seeps out of the old army mess tents where they sell alcohol and food.

Red-faced men stand in the morning sun, drinking and smoking, laughing and leering at the Gypsy girls sitting on plastic tarpaulins, selling old clothes.


Menacing masculinity, my father is so not this. We are looking for furniture for the apartment and quicken our walk.

At a stall, I spot an old rug, needing a professional clean and mend. Hand-made from pure wool, its pattern is the same as a rug bought from Bosnian refugees and given to me as
a gift. The stall has all sorts of bric-a-brac, landscape paintings, vases, broken clocks. My father sees my interest.

He looks at the stall holder, a burly bloke with a sweaty forehead.

Dad says, very quietly, ‘Not hard to imagine how and where Steptoe got this lot.’

We keep walking. The answer of what happened to the people who once owned the belongings laid out on the trestle tables is present everywhere; in the glimpses of army green, in the broken objects, in people’s eyes, in my own memory.

I comprehend for the first time, my father’s need to forget this place for fifty years.

Wars take people backwards, it is only bankers, gun and drug runners that move forward.

Men are everywhere, waiting not doing. Their rotting teeth tell you something about state health care.

* * *

Nothing had changed but names. No longer comrade, instead catholic; no longer Yugoslavian, now Croatian.

* * *

Looking at furniture for the apartment in the shops there is either cheap chipboard or valuable antiques. It becomes obvious there are two types of shoppers: the very rich or the poor, most are very poor.

**Mirogoj**

In Zagreb, they say people are housed better in death than life. They are speaking of the visual beauty of Mirogoj. Hermann Bollé designed the main building, the arcades, the cupolas, and the church on a piece of land purchased by the city in 1872. The grounds include sculptures, ornate tombs, tree lined avenues and park benches to sit with the dead.
We walked down the steps beside the chapel, past Tudjman’s massive crypt of black granite. Along the main avenue were rows of family vaults, well maintained, with flowers and candles, photographs of loved ones on headstones and clear gold lettering. Vlatkovic looked not unlike the other names etched into stone. It was in the next avenue, lined with laurel, I noticed the vacancies, newer headstones that were blank without text.

I asked my grandmother, as a child, about a casket with dying flowers, that stood under an archway in the arcade. She told me, if the rent was unpaid on a grave, bones were removed and the spot was sold on. Back then, they were waiting for a vacancy.

My father says, ‘You are gone and your body is irrelevant. Bones don’t grow in this orchard.’ He laughs.

Destrovic will move our family’s bones. He will have the lettering removed on the crypt and have his name inscribed. He and his wife will eventually move in, staying only as long as their family can afford it.

We go to the past, to history, to cemeteries to gain perspective on the present, to make choices, take action that creates our future.

Paul Vlatkovic, my grandfather, ran away from his step-mother in Otočac at eight years old. His father had disappeared and was never found. He travelled fifty kilometres on foot to Gospić where the family who owned the brewery and general store offered him a home. He went to school and worked in their business. His wages from eight to eighteen set him up in his first business, a haberdashery shop. A self-made man, at thirty he owned a
thriving cosmetics and perfume business in Zagreb. He built and rented two blocks of units on a substantial amount of land in the heart of the city as well as two shops.

Well before my resourceful grandfather, was Ivo of Senj.

**Blood State**

We left Zagreb to drive to the coast in a hire car. I saw the beds for the young that had died in recent conflict, fields of plaques and crosses. In the country-side unoccupied bombed out houses were collapsing next to houses with tended gardens, cows and grand old oak trees. Storks nested on barn roofs. Properties with thriving rows of cabbages and tilled fields ready for the next potato crop sat next to drive-ways with yellow plastic tape warnings on gates and fences. *Actung Hazard Land Mines*, the signs read. Families who had worked together and celebrated together as a community had turned against their neighbours and killed one another.

Seemingly sensible and educated people said crazy things like, ‘You don’t understand, one Serb in a village and they think it’s part of greater Serbia.’ Locations were associated forever afterward with dark meaning and cultural significance. Had anyone learnt anything from all the pain and loss?

Minds had always been manipulated and fear used to co-opt the inhabitants. It wasn’t a country so much as an ossuary for fallen false martyrs. Natural beauty made it easier for the visitor to forget the fault lines and focus on the wine, food, lakes, alps and sea.

* * *

I was looking at history to find something essential to myself and my future. But what – the shut-down feeling? My desire to disassociate from the death and violence around me? Write and remind myself I’d failed to take care of myself or exhibit self-control in a crisis before leaving Australia?

I may have had a victory in placing in a national writing competition. This didn’t seem like a victory, because something I thought was more important I felt I’d lost. I’d lost faith in my judgement, my capacity to read situations and people.
I wasn’t so sure it was victors who wrote history always. What do they write over, or write out?

* * *

The lorry driver was metres away from the bumper bar, honking his horn, pulling his nose out on a blind bend. Adriatic on our left hundreds of metres below, a wall of escarpment on our right, the Balkan motorist bullied to overtake us. I was in the passenger seat with my brake foot pressed hard to the floor.

* * *

We zoomed past vineyards, fields with lavender and red poppies. Along the way, at stalls beside the road, men sat in the shade and sold goat and sheep cheeses, olive oil and wine.

At the coast, the air was heavy with the scent of laurel and rosemary. Old not ancient, stone walls, terraced olive groves and small villages marked the rocky hills.

Below, the coastal towns, sandstone, marble and terracotta edged up against azure. Nin, Rajna, Karlobag and Sveti Juraj teemed with package-deal tourists. In three short months, locals made the money they lived off for the rest of the year.

* * *

In Senj there was a street called Vlatkovic. A local told us where we could find out more about our family history.

On a foreboding, wind-ravaged hill sat the Nehaj Fortress, a grey block of weathered stone with five towers. The fortress is the symbol for Senj.

We gathered with a tour group in the courtyard. The guide took us to the cellars and showed us the barracks, officer rooms and armoury.

The fortress was built by the Uskoks in 1558 using materials from destroyed houses and churches outside the fortress. The Uskoks became pirates and protectors as former refugees from Bosnia Herzegovina. Once farmers, they became fierce seamen. Unpredictable winds, known as the Bora, challenged large galleons travelling to and from
the east via the Adriatic. In small sail boats the Uskoks harnessed these winds for their own purposes. They could easily out-manoeuvre galleons to take gold and supplies from the Turks and Venetians. They communicated about the approaching ships using smoke signals along the coast. They promised to seek revenge on their enemies – the Ottoman Turks. But, stealing from the Venetians, the Uskoks found themselves on wrong side of the Pope.

According to our guide, the Uskoks named the hill and fortress Nehaj. This word is derived from the term Ne hajati, which means, Never care. Using this expression was a message to the citizens of Senj, and those that lived nearby. People need not concern themselves because the Uskoks would defend the fortress as well as seek revenge on those who attacked.

Mannequins wearing red caps and breeches with white shirts guarded the refectory where the guide led us. This room was now an exhibit dedicated to telling the history of the Uskok families of Senj. The display cases held engraved swords and daggers. Each wall was centred on a family coat of arms surrounded by information boards in Italian, French, German, English and Croatian telling the history of each family’s brave.

We stood before the Vlatkovic coat of arms.

Our seal is an ostrich with a horse-shoe in its beak above a medieval helmet and shield of red and gold. On the red area of the shield is an eagle. The gold area has a star and moon. Below is the family motto written in Latin: Silentium audire non desperandum.

It means Silence. Listen. Do not despair.

The group gathered around and the guide told us about my ancestor.

Ivo Vlatkovic was born in 1571. Often referred to as Ivo Senjanin (Ivo of Senj) he is the subject of many Croatian poems and songs as the undisputed master of the Adriatic. At the end of the 16th century Ivo fought against the Ottomans in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, Morea, and in the Long Turkish War, from which he emerged as an archduke. Then, due to changes in political relations, the Venetians sought Ivo’s head.

When peace between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire was concluded in November 1606, it was forbidden to invade and plunder Turkish lands. An investigation was conducted against Ivo which found that he had taken grain. He was sentenced to death but he appealed against the conviction.
In the appeal, Ivo Vlatkovic claimed he was a poor Croatian who had been ‘superhuman’ from his youth on various occasions. With pride and just bitterness he said, ‘It is a miserable thing for me I pay my loyalty to losing my life’.

He was executed on 20 July 1612 in Karlovac, and pardoned afterward.

Our family, like the other Uskoks in Senj, were eventually moved away from the coast to a region called Lika – alpine country, surrounded by mountain chains: Velebit, Mala Kapela, Velika Kapela and Plješevica. Lika is known as the ‘The spine of Croatia’ because through Lika passes the highway, the state road and the railway from Zagreb to the coast. The towns of Gospic and Otocac are in Lika. A few hundred years later, my grandfather left Lika for Zagreb.

* * *

There followed over successive generations the same narrative cycle: refuge, violence and dispossession. They danced together over and over, stamping the same circle like the Kolo dancers wearing red cross-stitched costumes on the postcards my grandma had sent.

I could see a nation carrying trauma, psychologically wounded in the way it saw itself and its place in Europe. Nationalism insisted it wanted peace and prosperity; for its citizens to never be humiliated again. But Nationalism expressed fear, hysteria, and aggression. Its manic and uncontrolled nature was not unlike what my consciousness had experienced. Symptoms and responses that would be defined in psychological terms as post traumatic despair had blown apart my cellar.

* * *

We followed the same coastal road Dad’s family had taken on a road trip, before the Second World War. My grandfather imported the car, a 1933 Pontiac, from America. They drove north from Zadar to Opatija.

Opatija’s grand villas, painted gelato pastel colours with their piped icing exteriors had been the destination of choice for Mahler, the Russian Tsars, James Joyce and Isadora Duncan. They are now enjoyed by wealthy northern Europeans.
We had two portions of quivering custard slice at the pale pink Villa Angiolina, its interior richly decorated with zoomorphic and vegetal illusionist paintings, neo-Corinthian columns, curtains and mirrors – and I was suspended in a postcard moment.

Afterward, we strolled around the gardens. Budding red tulips surrounded a massive blooming magnolia in the formal garden. Blushing camellia bushes bordered the out-of-season roses and winding paths led into private garden rooms with benches to sit and contemplate the sea.

* * *

We followed the path south along the headland and there he was, a great towering old man, his fat grey trunk and dappled canopy of medicine. I could smell it. A branch that had come away in the wind, a hand outstretched, lay on the ground, seemingly held out to me.

It was a Eucalypt and I took a fan of leaves from the outstretched branch and put gumnuts in my pockets. A bit of home, a place with a stronger sun and a more certain sky.

We sat down on a bench and looked out at the blue.

‘Now we’ve got the apartment back – are you interested in spending time here to write your book?’ Dad asked.

Me, rolling a gumnut between my fingers, I thought: with so much violence and destruction, change is necessary for survival. Perhaps, to let go of the desire for revenge and feelings of fear, finding forgiveness necessitates sometimes sitting in contemplative silence. They didn’t seem to have mastered that in Croatia.

‘I’d like to come back,’ I answered, avoiding a commitment.

Trieste

Risiera San Sabba was the displaced persons camp where my father stayed before immigrating to Australia.

We stood in the walled courtyard, designed as an open-air, non-denominational basilica by architect Romano Boico in the seventies. I read aloud from the brochure, quoting Boico:
The Risiera, half destroyed by the fleeing Nazis, was squalid, like its surroundings. I thought that this total squalor could rise as a symbol and itself become a monument. I decided to remove and restore rather than add. After removing the ruined buildings, I demarcated the context with 11-metre high concrete walls arranged so as to form a disquieting entrance on the same spot as the existing entrance. The building where prisoners were kept was completely emptied and the load-bearing wooden structures pared down as much as seemed necessary. The seventeen cells and the death cell are unchanged. In the central building, level with the courtyard, is the Museum of the Resistance, minimal but alive. Above the Museum, the rooms of the Deportees’ Association. In the courtyard is a terrible path of steel, slightly sunken – the trace of the oven, the smoke channel and the base of the chimney.

My father mentioned that while he was in the camp they were never told during the war that the building had been used by the Germans to interrogate and execute prisoners, many of whom were transported on to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

He pointed out where the workshops had been, where refugees took lessons in carpentry, electronics and mechanics. He showed me his sleeping quarters, I saw the straw filled rice bags that they used for mattresses. There were rooms they made classrooms for the learning of languages.

He described being approached by someone in the camp, one of the workers, who suggested he not leave Trieste but stay and be paid to pass on information about the displaced persons moving through the city.

‘I wanted to get as far away from there as possible. People brought the politics with them, Serbia, Croatia, Albania. I kept to myself, went to the sea, snorkelled and listened to the BBC.’

My father loves the sea. The sea was a calm place where he could get away from the cramped confined space at the camp and the other people carrying their own traumas and troubles.

‘I started learning Spanish, thinking South America was an option. I would have to stay here for longer, years more, if I applied to immigrate to Canada or America. Then I was told by another internee, it would only take six months to be screened and approved to go
to Australia. The man told me not to mention I’d been to university. They were looking for labourers. Labouring had to be better than the Yugoslav army and labouring had to be better than this. I filled out the forms and waited.’

‘And when they said yes?’

‘I did not want to be disappointed. I decided to have no expectations.’

* * *

I think having no expectations was the key to my father’s immigration and successful integration into a new culture. Unlike his brother who found the lack of acknowledgement for his former education and the loss of inheritance bitter and disappointing.

I saw my father had kept his past to himself to protect me from his trauma.

My dad is contemplative, patient and calm. He knows himself and is open but unexpectant, a reflection of the family motto, *Silence. Listen. Do not despair.*

Silence may be the space where the self turns around and around in a dance of learning, being and knowing, like a rebellious Kolo dancer going anti-clockwise, ultimately finding peace and balance in its own space. Silence, may be a contained and contented self, without despair.

I left Europe with feelings, not the words. Words on a page seemed counterintuitive to my needs.
Recurring dream

There was a time when I had a recurring dream. In the dream I needed to wake up before I was thirty-six. I watched a clock next to my bed, slipped off to sleep to dream of being on a train with all my belongings. In the carriage is my silky-oak wardrobe and dining table, the mahogany table my grandpa restored, old desk and mirror from Aunty Pearl, three bookcases, velvet covered arm chairs; there is a dressing table and art deco kitchen dresser, my camphor wood chest and old lamps with leadlight shades.

The train comes to a stop and passengers and a guard help me unload my belongings onto the platform. I wait sitting with my belongings for the next train to my final destination. It arrives and all over again I must get the furniture into a carriage.

This time I am distracted and only some of the furniture can be loaded before the train leaves. I ask someone to sit with a few things and let the station master know I will return for what I’ve had to leave behind.

The train leaves the station, clickty-clack clickty-clack, and I’m aware I have no idea how I’m going to get my things all in the one place. Clickty-clack clickty-clack, the repeated sound and speed of the train makes me anxious.

I remember I’m in a dream and I need to wake up. I must wake up before I’m thirty-six. It may be too late. I try to wake up, but can’t and the train is approaching a tunnel. Clickty-clack clickty-clack. It’s pitch black in the tunnel. And I wake up, bolt upright in bed, breathing fast as if in shock. I look around the room, I’ve been dreaming, there is no clock beside my bed. I am not thirty-six.

I left behind nothing I needed.

Light Rail Griffith

Experience crosses time continuums – incidents are re-experienced by us, in memory as well as in interaction with others and circumstances. Re-experiencing the moment can
transform it, diminish or invest in its significance and its impact to our lives whether it is
documented or not. All experience has the capacity to do this.

It’s a very European notion perceiving experience in finite terms rather than cyclical,
even spherical, ways like non-western traditions do.

One way or another...

My sister is going out and Linc is staying over.

He doesn’t like the dark or to go to sleep while other people are still up in the house.

When I close my eyes, I can hear my grandmother’s pendulum box clock gently
ticking. It chimes on the hour and half. Its sound, the muted constant breath of an old friend
sitting beside you in mutual and comfortable silence, reassuring to me. It’s the same clock I
wound in the hall in my grandparents’ house in Umina as a child when I visited for
weekends, when Pop and I would go fishing and crabbing at Patonga.

‘Aunty, how come old clocks tick?’ Linc asks. ‘They’re so noisy.’

‘Old watches and clocks are mechanical. They tick to let you know they don’t need
winding up, they’re mechanical.’

‘What’s mechanical?’

‘They have moving bits inside.’

‘Old clocks have silly numbers and hands.’

‘All clocks have silly numbers, mate, one way or another.’

Time, I lie there thinking about Linc’s questions, his absent father, absent mother
and me being present, with his uncle, grandma and grandpop.

Sometimes silence is your best defence, gathering yourself to yourself. In silence,
another noise, vibration, understanding comes into play, that serves a purpose.

Everywhen

Everywhen means time is itself dimensional with the forces of the past, present and future
all contained and implicit now.
Yesterday co-exists with today and tomorrow right now.

Inside of me and outside of me. Everywhen insists on accountability and responsibility now in relation to yesterday and tomorrow.

Everywhen is knowing, living and being. Not rupture.

Everywhen does not exist in a history of refuge, violence and dispossession.

Everywhen exists on land as much as lore.

Everywhen is founded on need not want, in now not why.

Everywhen is here now and Belonging.

Angophora Place

At thirty-six, I shared a house with my brother and lived next door to my sister and nephew.

Our parent’s home was in the same suburb.

My nieces came to stay every second weekend.

Children exploring, learning, laughing and creating are an antidote to disconnection.

* * *

The chook was in the oven and the girls had come inside. Mia was painting a cardboard poster. Jane put on some music and sat up at the bench where I was prepping vegetables.

‘Dad said you might remember.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The story about the emu and the brolga. He only remembers the bit about the emu leaving the chicks in long grass.’

I put down the knife and looked at Jane.

She was around the same age I was when Pop and I used to go crabbing at Patonga, when we’d suck up pippies from wet sand in a home-made pump. The pippies boiled in a billy full of water. Pop and I, we’d wind and weave fishing line over, under and around the chicken wire and metal frames for Pop’s homemade crab traps and Pop would yarn. He would slice up chunks of sheep heart and hook them onto the frame.
The Brolga and the Emu

By the river were a brolga and an emu digging up roots and bulbs both with their many chicks. They were there from early light, past when the sun was highest in the sky, to when it started setting over the other side of the grasslands. The brolga and emu dug to find enough tasty food. Walking back to camp the emu came up with an idea.

Next morning, she was up earlier than the brolga. Her chicks followed her onto the grasslands, she led them away from where she had been digging the day before. She hid her chicks in the grass but for two that followed her to where the brolga and her had been digging the day before beside the river.

The brolga came over to where the emu was digging. Seeing only two chicks she asked, ‘Where are your children?’

The emu was very matter of fact. It was important for the brolga to believe what she told her and her reasoning.

‘I killed them.’

‘Why?’

‘I was unable to feed them.’

The brolga said, ‘How sad, poor things – Why?’

‘All day and all night I could dig for roots and still this would not be enough.’

The brolga’s brood of chicks were at her feet as she dug for roots alongside the emu and her two chicks in the sun.

The brolga dug up roots to put in a pile next to her, but each time she went to drop another root on the pile, her hungry chicks were beneath her feet.

‘Stop it. I keep tripping over you. I want to make a pile.’ She turned to the emu. ‘They eat so much.’

The emu shrugged her shoulders.

The brolga chicks squawked for their mother’s attention. She sighed. They had spotted a lizard that would make a good dinner.

The brolga moved quickly. This would be enough, she thought, as her beak broke the lizard’s back.
Still afterward, the chicks squawked for more. Small, still growing, their voices did not yet have the same call of the adult brolgas when they trumpeted.

‘They eat too much,’ said the emu.

The next day the emu asked the brolga how things were going.

‘I killed them. I have only two to bring along.’

‘You did it,’ said the emu. She strode away from the brolga to the long grass to herd her chicks. The brolga saw the emu return from the long grass. There were all her chicks following one after the other excited to be going down to the river bank.

The brolga went away. She stayed away, so sad and ashamed she’d been tricked into killing her chicks.

When she returned, she went to the river bank. She saw the emu collecting food as she was before.

‘You’ve been away for a long time,’ remarked the emu.

There were two small chicks with the brolga. They must be her chicks for this season.

‘I went away from here to stop thinking about them.’ She fed with her mouth, her wings were easily hidden behind her back. She kept digging and eating only with her beak. She dropped food from her mouth into her chicks’ open mouths. All the time her arms were out of sight.

‘Why are you eating like that?’

‘I cut off my wings,’ the brolga answered.

‘What for? Why would you do such a thing?’

‘They get in the way. It’s better to eat like this. My neck can reach down and stretch this way and that way without my arms getting in the way. Especially good when I’ve a rodent trying to escape my beak. They can thrash this way and that and my neck can swivel.’

To be able to move her neck a bit more would be useful thought the emu. Her short beak struggled with small lizards all the time.

The brolga turned her long neck. ‘My back used to get sore with two arms to support, but no more.’

A few days later the brolga was on the grasslands eating seeds. Her two chicks were at her feet when the emu arrived.

‘How’s things?’ asked the brolga.
'Yes, I cut off my arms,' answered the emu. 'I’m feeling lighter.' The brolga and emu ate seed under a hot sun. They were thirsty after their feed.

'We need to go to the river,' said the brolga.

'All right, I’ll fly,' said the emu.

The brolga trumpeted. 'You will go on the ground.'

The emu turned its head this way and that, then started to run, but no matter how fast she ran, she had no wings to extend.

The brolga sung out, her ungainly wings flapping as she lifted off the ground.

'You have lost your wings. I tricked you.'

She laughed above the emu, her extended black wing tips were visible. She glided to the boulder in the centre of the river. On an island, the brolga danced and trumpeted with happiness, having got her revenge.\(^{13}\)

**Want versus Need**

'It’s not a very nice story.'

'Useful stories don’t need to be nice.'

'Why did they dislike each other so much?'

'It is the story of why the brolga only has two chicks and why the emu can’t fly.'

'They tricked each other, they were so mean to one another.'

'Competing, wanting to feel important, as good as someone else, we can make ugly choices that hurt us and others. There’s another emu. He lives in the night sky.'

**Time-zones**

Our lifespan includes infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, the *Biological Time* that exists between birth and death, locked in.

\(^{13}\) My grandfather told me this story. In the course of my research, I found the story had been recorded by Norman B. Tindale in 1938 and was described as a Kamilaroi myth (Austin, P. 1985).
Days of not eating, living only off his body fat while watching over emu eggs, cause a male emu to lose up to a third of his body weight. *Cause and Effect Time* describes when a cause subjected to linear time has an effect.

We need to sleep to have the energy for the periodic time of wakefulness we live each day. *Periodic Time* is observable in action and inaction. The latter energising the former, *ad infinitum*. The seasons, day and night, the land wakes and sleeps with the movement of the sun in periodic time. Cyclical.

*Time as an Agent* creates and destroys memories like the bush blazes orange, turns black, then bursts green later. Un-predictable.

Colonization of this country has insisted on a particular chronological view of time. *Historical time* describes one facet of time that is equal to and co-exists with other facets of time in life.

The story telling about nation building called history, displaced but did not dismiss Everywhen on country. However, it has supported us experiencing *Time in the Fourth Dimension*. 
Time in the Fourth Dimension describes when a group of elements together exercise almost total control, dominating how other elements utilise other time dimensions. The dominating forces may be political, ecological, social, even psychological. This kind of time describes the kind of oppression experienced where beings are directed in how they use, value and perceive time. Time may be experienced like this after a traumatic event that has caused an internal rupture, obsession or distraction that can dictate how we use time.

It’s also this time-zone I’m in when closing out on work for a deadline.

* * *

Personal Time: think the perceptual growth of the individual. To grow ten years in a few minutes when we perceive a facet of understanding previously denied us.

* * *

The Dreaming defines a sequential period when Time, as a finite commodity, a historical time, the chronological linear conception of Time, came into being for us. Before the Dreaming was a chaos of particles, existing in disordered un-enlightenment.

* * *

Astronomy and astrophysics exist in Cosmic Time. This type of time is controlled by distance, the slowest time, expressed in stories and aeons.14

Emu in the sky is everywhere

The emu in the sky is observed in the coal sack across the milky way. The changing visibility of dust clouds tell us about what is happening below on country. He enacts the multidimensional nature of time.

14 These concepts of time can be found in Patterns of Aboriginal culture: Then and Now (King-Boyes, 1977, no page numbers)
In autumn, April and May, the emu appears to be running, stretching from the South to the southeast. This is the biological time of mating when the female bird chases the male below the night sky on country. Emus on country are laying eggs. It is the beginning of the period of time when emu eggs are available for us to collect.

At the beginning of winter the legs disappear in the sky, the emu is sitting down. Below, on country male emus sit on nests. Eggs are still available for countrymen.

In late winter, from August to September, the emu in the sky reconfigures itself to represent an emu egg. Below on country, chicks are hatching. The egg resource no longer available, it is time to travel. People travel to ceremonial sites.

In the spring, the emu in the sky changes once more. By November, the dark bits transform the egg to a body. Neck and head are barely visible as the emu sits low in the sky. The emu is now sitting in a waterhole, telling us this is the time when waterholes are fullest following winter rains on country.

Over summer the emu becomes almost invisible in the night sky. The emu has left the waterhole in the sky indicating the waterholes on country are at their driest. The longest period of sustained heat affects water availability.

As long as black fellas remember, the emu in the sky disappears until its head peeks above the horizon in February, followed by the body in March as summer leaves.¹⁵

This is Thigarraa Winaaga-li.¹⁶

Before colonization we had no need for months.

White Galahs

There were always birds here. The father asked the mother to send him two birds. She sent two white cockatoos. He made one the morning star and the other the evening star. These stars are so bright because of the whiteness of the cockatoos. There’s another bird story. It’s about what’s below the surface in silence.

¹⁵ This Kamilaroi knowledge shared with me by my grandfather has also been documented (Fuller et al, 2014, pp. 10 -11).
¹⁶ Bird knowledge.
**Black Gala with a Red crest**

A voice that has intonation and body language, tone and timbre that tells a yarn. The importance of yarn – yarning weaves in and out, over and under. There is only yarning, and different people’s threads offer different qualities. To hear a story told over and over, a bit added each time, to be imparted the knowledge of the story, not even knowing what it is necessarily until it is needed.

**There is no place for Why here**

This is where the schism is around reconciliation, around sorry being sorry and accepted. The entire value system of the coloniser’s power is based on ‘smart’, ‘cleverest’, and most important Whys being answered. Why is at the top of the tree of knowledge.

But Now is more pressing and essential. Now being harmonious is what determines why things unfold any given way.

Now shapes who is important and who is not, in terms of response. Now shapes connection.

We’re on the way to an environmental catastrophe, the colonisers’ scientists say. And this might be the portal to address Why and Now, how we give power to them in society as Why always taking precedence over Now.

The whole thing needs to flip whereby Now is recognized as equal to if not greater than Why as a question.

If Now takes precedence, maybe the coloniser will then go to Indigenous knowledge, our know-how, to continue to exist on the planet with harsher weather, unstable geology and the other effects that are part of climate change.

I try and let an Indigenous Now supersede my Whys when something doesn’t immediately and easily come to me. I remind myself to observe Now in silence and hear what it says, to hear Thigarraa Winaaga-li.
This can be a struggle at times because I’ve been trained to engage my critical mind, to endlessly question the world around me. However, I am aware that certain understanding and knowledge is simply not acquired with out-loud questioning. Rather, it is gained with listening and observing.

There’s a devastating level of intergenerational trauma across our communities, the result of terrible policy and racism. It’s expressed passively, in disengagement, in self harm. Anger is turned inward.

I’ve come to understand with these conversations it’s traditional language being learnt, spending time on country, being in time with nature, time with mob learning lore and law that offers the recovery model needed.

People also need affordable running water, secure housing and power, health care and education. These are needs not wants.

What I needed to recover from trauma was time on the land where I grew up, sharing that with children and silence to reflect and find the language to express a changed consciousness.

* * *

Violence, disconnection, ego and fear are things to leave behind at a train station. Longing about absence is an existentialist crater you can sit beside or you can fill.

The phrasing needs to change. Silence makes this possible with Winanga-li Gurruu.17

**Winanga-li Gurruu**

Kamilaroi mob connects family, country and culture inside and outside by Winanga-li Gurruu.

We value how silence speaks in narrative, the potency of in-between spaces to be redemptive and healing. This is behind what we talk about and what we don’t in my family.

17 Winanga-li Gurruu translated from Kamilaroi means to listen deep.
This was the healing space I was offered at home. This is the space I try to occupy at my desk. This moral action asserts connection not rupture.

Practising Winanga-li Gurruu is an act of being open and respectful, without questioning.

The value of this Indigenous concept to my constellation of belonging is it names my silence for 13 years as a writer, when I chose Winanga-li Gurruu to develop a revitalized sense of self, grounded in family, place and community. As a result of choosing silence rather than using my voice, I understand my purpose as a writer to recalibrate others to focus on now not why, to hear, and comprehend, how silence communicates and nurtures a different way of looking at ourselves and the country where we live.

Presenting my Kamilaroi values, this work reveals the need for non-verbal, un-seen communication by what is not spoken and written. Winanga-li Gurruu demands a different kind of accountability and ultimately a different way of being. Here, it underpins what I disclose, repeat, leave abstract and make vivid.

Winanga-li Gurruu is a missing link that non-Indigenous Australians are not educated in, often ignorant of and often misread. It leads to fraught conversations when there is demand that all the why's are explained. Direct questioning as a communication style does not give space for Aboriginal understanding or communication protocols to impart answers to questions. True understanding of mob requires shifting the way people learn. We do not spoon feed answers, understanding comes from reflection, on being silent and Winanga-li Gurruu.

Learning to fly

We ran down the grassed slope, a flock of school girls, navy tunics all ballooning box pleats and our sky-blue pinafores pushed back over our foreheads waving behind us.

My arms outstretched, my wingspan and aerodynamic body propelling me through the atmosphere being the wedge-tail eagle. Below me was the playground, school buildings, the road and houses. Nearby was bushland then more houses, the harbour and city.

* * *
Pop chose what to include and what to keep quiet about when he told me stories. I understand now the power of silence in stories.

* * *

She wears a chocolate brown tracksuit. She doesn’t go to a gym. As an adolescent, she was a natural runner and did brilliantly in the cross country and hurdles. She is lying on the lounge. The heater is on high, the curtains are drawn. On the telly, an emu runs across dry grassland in a nature documentary.

A little boy sits in front of the big screen, too close.

* * *

My childhood home backed onto a bush reserve. Sometimes Pop and I would walk down the ridge. At the bottom of the gully the track ran alongside the creek.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘There is more than one stream singing.’

No matter how many times I have walked that track, there are parts where I feel scared and uneasy. The bush always pushes back when it wishes. It decides who will traverse it, and how it will be traversed. This is its beauty, its mystery whether you listen to the songs of the bush or not.

* * *

She’s lying on the lounge texting until someone’s car pulls into the driveway.

‘Linc. We’re going now.’

He ignores her.

‘Linc.’

He isn’t listening.

‘Come on.’

She picks up her bag and keys, then turns off the heater.

She nudges him, ‘You ready?’
They walk out the front door. She pulls it shut.
‘Off you go. Your Auntie knows you’re coming.’
She gets in the waiting car.
He walks out the gate and into the front yard next door.

* * *

I have walked along the same track with my nephew more than once.
Always the thick lips of the banksia men buzz and the eucalypt scent is medicine on the breeze. We’ve talked together a lot along that track.
‘Auntie, how come you moved back to Sydney?’
‘Life opened up for me to be here with you.’
‘Auntie, how come emus don’t fly?’
‘There’s a black emu that flies. Next time we go camping I’ll point her out in the night sky.’
‘How is she in the sky?’
‘She is in darker bits of the milky way, between stars. She changes shape when she is laying eggs and when the eggs are hatching.’

* * *

My Pop loved the bush, there was everything you needed for shelter and tucker.
He taught me to make noise moving through the bush, so we wouldn’t cross the path of a brown snake. Down at the creek, we would get our feet wet in the shallows collecting tadpoles in old jam jars.
He told me stories when we sat on the bank to eat lunch. His stories were about travelling New South Wales, jumping onto freight trains, heading to where his father came from around Gunnedah. He worked on sheep properties and lived in the bush.
There was one story he told me over and over.

* * *
She picks up her mobile, bag and keys.

They walk out the front door. She pulls it shut.

‘Off you go. Your Auntie knows you’re coming.’

She gets in her car and backs out the drive.

He walks out the gate and heads next door.

* * *

‘How come you always tell me the same story Auntie?’

‘Some of it is the same.’

‘It’s the same story.’

‘You’d do well to listen. There’s always something different.’

‘How big is the wedge-tail’s wingspan, Auntie?’

‘Wider than I am tall.’

* * *

Pop started at daybreak and worked close to his campsite ring-barking trees. In the heat of the day he took a break, tended to his campfire and put on the billy for tea. He mixed flour and water, some salt and sugar, together making dough, pushing and pulling at the mixture until it was smooth and an elastic consistency. The dough was placed in a black cast iron pot with a lid, a camp oven. He dug up the coals with his shovel and buried the pot. Pop leant against a tree, drinking his cuppa, waiting for his damper to cook. The tree shading my grandfather was dead still, there was no wind.

Off in the distance he saw a tree with a big nest, woven like a basket from bare branches. A wedge-tail eagle flew out of the nest. Pop saw the eagle had something on its back.

She tilted her wings and body to one side. A white feathered eaglet fell from her back. The eaglet had no control and was falling fast towards the black earth. It did not know how to extend its wings. The larger bird flew down and caught the smaller bird. She soared higher this time. When the eaglet was tossed off, feathers and feet were upside down
falling straight towards the earth. The mother bird swooped once more. The eaglet safely on her back, the wedge-tail glided on the thermals in circles. Then she flew back to the nest.

Each day was the same as the last when Pop watched the wedge-tail teaching the eaglet to fly. She tilted her body, the eaglet fell off. She let it fall a little further to feel the eddies against its feathers. Still the young bird held its wings close to its body. After the lesson, the wedge-tail deposited the eaglet in the nest.

She flew off alone in search of food returning with a lizard, or a rabbit, sometimes a small roo.

* * *

‘Off you go.’

She drove off.

He came next door.

I packed us lunch and we headed off down the track.

He asked how to tell the female from the male wedge-tail.

‘She has orange plumage at the back of her neck, her feathers are dark brown.’

‘How does she hunt?’

‘She is territorial and patrols the same area. Her eyesight is keen. Her beak can pierce flesh and her talons are strong.’

I told Linc what Pop told me about watching the eaglet and wedge-tail.

* * *

‘The bird was dropped again. This time it lifted itself, stopping from falling. Wings flapped as if clapping for a moment before finding where they should be. Whoosh. All the while the mother eagle looked over to see the bird was alright. The eaglet finally could fly.’

* * *
Circling above Tamworth before landing, I can see the Great Dividing Range, the forgotten Warrumbungles. I’m flying in on a work trip. This boulder country holds a quiet confidence, whispering grasslands, secret business, hidden understandings.

A landscape exists beneath me, inside me and outside of me. I see life’s aerial perspective.

Now, Linc is a young man hoping to have his own family sometime soon. He will tell his kids about the eagle and the eaglet. He will explain the black emu in the sky, in the space between the stars.

My Pop never told me the wedge-tail was one of the principal totems of the Kamilaroi or that the emu in the sky was a dreaming story.

The songs of my Pop’s country, the wedge-tail eagle and the black emu, were given to me in childhood. In middle-age, a secret inside Pop’s yarn has slowly unravelled.

I think about what he taught me about the power of narrative, the quality it has to unfold over time into deeper meanings and reveal unspoken truths.

Songs from the bush push back. They provide for you always, now and later, in different ways.

* * *

_Chirp_

My voice and understanding values and asserts all narrative exists in the present, future and past at once. All narrative transmutes, reconfiguring itself and experience, moment to moment, when it is told or read or spoken, it is yarn. My voice belongs because of this awareness. It’s authentic and potent because it is of this place. It’s connected to familial and cultural identity. Self-knowledge and experience shapes its tone and inflection. It comprehends that with trauma comes shame.
Shame

Shame occupies a space where speech is difficult, for it is a prison where truth-telling is more difficult. If because of shame a person cannot describe the world as they see it to anyone else, they are disconnected at best; when this occurs over and over, they become marginalized.

Aboriginal people are ever conscious of shame. It is something that is used within our communities to force reflection. People will remove themselves if they feel someone is being humiliated unfairly to let the perpetrator know their behaviour is unacceptable. Bad behaviour is not fed by interest or an audience. When you are shamed it is excruciating because you feel ostracised and unaccepted in the context of explicit cultural protocols.

Shame is something you don't want anyone you care about to feel for long.

However, silence can transfigure a shameful space, whereby what could not be spoken at one time, is no longer dangerous to self or others. Silence can also reveal truth in ways speaking does not. Silence sometimes is used to contain anger associated with shame. Silence can’t sustain this long-term; anger and shame must give way or silence must be broken.

All of us have the need to truth-tell, to have a space where we feel safe to describe the world as we know it, without judgement, and for that to be accepted.

G30

I chose two women writers to balance the conceptual framework offered by Benjamin and Barthes to my constellation composed in fragments.

Cixous expresses her views on A nothing that changes everything by talking about wounds as well. Cixous writes,

The wound is a strange thing: either I die, or a kind of work takes place, mysterious, that will reassemble the edges of the wound. A marvellous thing also: that nonetheless will leave a trace, even if it hurts us. It is here that I sense things taking place. The wound is also an alteration... I like the scar, the story. (Cixous, 2005, p. 16)

Winterson is convinced the past is elsewhere. She says,
The more I read, the more I felt connected across time to other lives and deeper sympathies. I felt less isolated. I wasn’t floating on my little raft in the present; there were bridges that led over to solid ground. Yes, the past is another country, but one that we can visit, and once there we can bring back the things we need. (Winterson, 2012, p. 144)

And,

It is not only a wild nature that we need as human beings; it is the untamed open spaces of our imaginations. (p.144)

I maintain the open spaces of my imagination in the very actions and priorities I have in simultaneously living everywhen. I don’t wish to be bound up in whys or time on the page and off the page to blame and shame. My song is not merely the back history of a scar.

**Red Crest**

Before I was thirty-six I avoided the truth. I ran away from accepting I had experienced significant trauma that had shaped me and the way I was inclined to respond.

Afterwards, when I saw what I saw in Europe, I came home to Australia. Gradually learning to become comfortable, sitting with and finding the courage and strength to explore the triggers of trauma and shame, I confronted that shame, those things that rest uncomfortably in my certainties about the past that simultaneously exist alongside uncertainties about the future. I have learnt to trust everywhen to give me what I need to know. An authentic voice can encompass both certainty and uncertainty and is so much richer for it.
**Easter**

It was Easter Sunday. Stuffed full of chocolate, with sugar pulsing around their bodies, I figured the best thing to give the parents a break and the kids some fun was to get the kids out of the house and into the bush. Mia and Jane bounded single-file along the track with Snezjna, my West Highland terrier running ahead.

It was years, since I’d done this bush walk and I only had a vague idea of where the caves were. Bull Cave was on a hill. We walked some way into the bush and the track began to descend, we walked a way down the hill and then I stopped. I turned around, to look behind me. On our left, off the track, I saw the huge ridge of grey stone.

‘Hey kids, we got to go this way. Come back.’

We went into the scrub. It was steep, but fun clambering our way up the hill. Below the grey rock platform, where the stone had fallen away, a receding wave of gold and white revealed Bull Cave.

Jane was first to scramble the last bit of incline and stand at the cave’s entrance. Steel bars secured this cave.

Jane was frustrated holding the bars. ‘We can’t get in.’

‘How come they’ve put bars up?’ Mia asked.

Vandals had sprayed unseemly slogans – *Bong On*, and such. Hand prints in red spray paint were on the far wall, too close to precious Dharawal depictions of early settlement.

‘They want to preserve the paintings. People didn’t respect the place.’

Through the bars, we could see two white ships in the background and in the foreground a bull.

‘This is the first known record of the settlers.’

We took photos of each other holding the bars, locked out.

Sipping fruit juice from plastic bottles and nibbling on trail mix we looked out over bushland.
‘Down at the bottom of the hill is a creek. We can go down there to eat lunch. There’s another cave, near the creek I want to show you.’

* * *

The same age as Mia, I was an only child. I remembered me being just taller than my mother’s swelling belly. Her wearing a cotton sundress and hat, calling after me as I ran ahead along the track. A beating sun was above us.

‘Hold on, Shell. Come back.’ Her voice loud and booming over the quiet buzz of life around us in the bush. My mother has always called me Shell. I sign off to my nearest and dearest as Shell.

I could hear water. I wanted to get to it.

‘Shell. We’re not going to the creek just yet.’

The dog bounded past me.

‘I’ll go back to the car.’

I turned around. Mum walked toward two boulders, black and mauve, the size of two small cars.

We didn’t have a topographic map and the man from the local historical society described Bull Cave as large. My mother couldn’t see the sense in the cave being down here, when she spotted the sandstone covered ridge behind her. She rested leaning up against one of the boulders.

‘Shell, we need to head up there.’ She pointed.

Our white Alsatian, Teddy, was pushing his nose around some small branches and sticks near Mum.

The sticks and small dry leafy branches covered the entrance. A hole really. Teddy’s paws pushed down the leaf debris. The entrance was big enough for an adult, like a tent opening. On my hands and knees.

‘Michelle, get up. There could be a snake in there.’ Her tone was serious, addressing me by my full name.

Ignoring her, I crawled into the opening, following Teddy.
Inside was a domed chamber. This caramel enclave of sandstone had the remnants of a dead camp fire. The ceiling was low, but I could stand up. An adult would need to bend a bit. They would have to stoop.

‘It’s a fairy cave,’ I squealed.

Mum’s head came through the opening.

The honeycomb walls were covered with tiny ochre hand prints.

I was inside a birthing cave. It was cool and comfortable out of the heat. The white stand floor, soft to sit down on. Teddy rested his snout on my folded knee.

‘Out of there, you two. Come on. It’s not safe.’

Mum was always frustratingly over-cautious to my mind. The place seemed really wonderful to me. She had us walk up the incline to Bull Cave, but not before insisting we put all the twigs and branches back as we found them. Later, when we stood together in Bull Cave, sweaty and thirsty, the larger cave didn’t seem anywhere near as magical to my childhood mind.

When we walked back to the car, my mother walked slowly. She stopped a few times and rested her hands on her belly. She was in pain. This was the second time my Mum’s belly had a baby growing inside. The last time, I was told the baby brother Michael had been born very sick. He didn’t live. I’d so looked forward to a baby brother. When the child did not arrive, I was annoyed after nine months of swelling expectation for a sibling.

When we got to the parked car, Mum was crippled over in pain.

She told me, much later, when I was in my twenties: ‘You were so angry and I didn’t get it. People didn’t understand children grieve. You were frustrated and couldn’t understand being promised a sibling twice and them not arriving. You didn’t have the words for it. In arguments between us, you would draw why you were right, before you could read and write. There wasn’t a thing I could ask without you resisting.’

* * *

Mia is on her hands and knees, Jane is already inside with the dog, I follow. We sit down and look around us. The golden walls, the tiny hands, the markings of continuation. It’s a warm shared moment, something handed on, reshaped and handed down. It will resonate again
and again for us, thinking of this place, this experience and the women and girls and babies, before and after us.

* * *

Long after Mum and me had come to terms with our grief about the babies that did not live, this day, taking the girls somewhere so special, was a fitting reconciliation with the past.

Now in the present, I reflect for a moment about that and about the deeper cultural understanding I have now. We were in a sacred place. We hadn’t asked permission, but the place was revealed to us. The old people led us there.

*Red Chief Country*

Some ten years after ‘A Contained Self’ was published I found myself in Gunnedah hearing the stories of my mother’s family.

When we’re lost, do we only notice the things that echo from somewhere else that we’re most engaged with now? Or is there some divine coo-ee that draws us to the things we most need to notice?

The first time I visited Gunnedah, I travelled from Sydney with my mother, from Darrawol land that I was raised on, rather than going direct from where I live now – Meanjin.

There’s an ordering to this journey to meet my family. My mother took me, having gone out there some months before and having met our extended family. Everyone came from as far away as Tamworth to meet her and they did it again when I visited.

It is the only time I can recall my mother and me doing something together without pressure, talking together, listening and being also in easy silence with one another as companions of choice on this journey. Difficulties did not consume the space between us.
Fingerprints on country, marks of The Dreaming, remain as lakes for long periods after the heavy rains in the warmer months. The black earth country, known as the Liverpool Plains, is fed by a large reservoir of underground water as well as the life force of the Namoi River and its tributaries, the Mooki River and the Peel River. The plains are bounded by The Great Dividing Range, the Liverpool Range and the Warrumbungle Range.

The settlers cleared this woodland for agriculture and sheep-grazing from the 1820s. My great-great-great-grandmother Jane Maloney was born on the Aboriginal mission at Walhalow and my great-great-great-grandmother Mary Anne Healy, born in Murrurundi, was also Aboriginal. My great-great-grandmother Charlotte Curry identified as Aboriginal; so did her husband Henry Matthews. After Charlotte’s death, her son, my great-grandfather James Joseph Matthews was taken from his family. His father Henry Matthews and brother lived in at Piallaway and Breeza. There were huts down by the Mooki Creek at Breeza and our cousin Grant still lives in the village.

Close to dusk, the sky has a pearly mauve sheen as the sun goes down. By the side of the road what look like snow balls are scattered everywhere, they are really balls of cotton that have escaped from bails being freighted in trucks along the highway heading to the Sydney wharves for export.

‘Gunnedah is only a couple k’s up the road,’ Mum says, slowing down and putting on the indicator. ‘Let’s stop and enjoy the last light. I want you to see the cemetery.’

When we get out of the car a flock of white cockatoo squawk before sweeping above, flying toward the top of the hill at Breeza. There’s long wild grass in the paddock beside the old graveyard.

Walking around the graves we see there are Matthews’s and then I see the name Bowden. My Grandfather had gone to work for the Bowdens in the Depression at Coonabarabran. My brother was friends with the owner’s grandson, some eighty years after my grandfather had travelled west looking for his father’s family.

I say, ‘Generation after generation we’ve come back since your grandfather was taken, not even knowing he was taken, in the way we understand now.’

‘You wait,’ she says. ‘The rellies are like us. Big talkers, kind, friendly and pleased to hear what happened to the missing siblings. We’ll come out here again.’
Lives circle one another. Lives circle one another in routines for days, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia, weaving a basket that holds our connection.

* * *

Later that week we returned. It was mid-morning at Breeza. We saw a bloke in his garden and asked where Grant Matthews lived. He walked out of his yard and stood beside us. ‘Down there on the flat. It’s the third house with a fence and gate.’ He pointed. ‘You’ll see the cars in his yard.’

A man in his mid-forties walked out of a shed. He was wearing dark overalls, there were black patches at the knees where he must have been kneeling on a workshop floor. A dog was at his feet, barking at us the other side of the fence. His forehead had the gleam of sweat and oil. He looked like Pop. His thinning grey hair stood up the same way, the same broad forehead and smiling eyes.

‘What can I do for you?’

We introduced ourselves, told him we’d been visiting with Uncle Lloyd and Aunty Betty earlier in the day.

Grant opened the gate warmly.

‘I’ll sing out to the missus to put us on a cuppa. You’re gonna stay with us for a drink, aren’t you?’ Looking down at his hands holding the gate, I saw he had thick fingers that looked like they had been bludgeoned with a hammer, the same as Pop.

The yard had browned dry grass and not much shade. The trees were small, a lemon, an apricot and a stand of paperbarks near the back fence. There were three big sheds.

‘We tend to plant cars rather than trees, I tell people,’ he said, walking us down the side of the house past two rusting car chassis.

At the backdoor Grant took off his boots.

‘Deb, put on the kettle, we’ve got company.’

Sitting down in the lounge, I looked around the room. There were photographs, footy trophies, ribbons above the television. Photos of kids together, two young girls and a
boy. On another wall were framed photos of GT fords from the Bathurst car races with Alan Moffatt holding the silver trophy.

Mum couldn’t contain the Holden crank in herself. ‘I always loved Brocky myself.’

My mum was told by the owner of Sydney’s largest Holden dealership in the seventies, she was the only woman he knew who insisted on looking under a car before she would drive it.

‘When the kids were little I used to buy old Holdens and scavenged parts from the wreckers to get them back on the road.’

‘We drove Kingswoods, FJs, EHS, Toranas and Monaros. Then Nino decided he wanted a Ford.’

‘I’ve got a garden of Fords out there. We’ll go down to the shed directly.’

‘Grant, you’re the only Matthews living out here at Breeza.’

‘It’s home. Deb and I lived in Muswellbrook but her asthma was terrible from the particles in the air there. I don’t want to go nowhere. The air is going to go to shit here too, when Shenwaua starts extracting coal. But this is country. Mum was born by the creek, lived there in a hut, then a house. She kept welfare away from kids whenever she could. We grew up here and learnt how to live off the land. We ate sweet yams, fish from the creek, prickly pear. Come on out and let me show you around the place, Ruth.’

Deb and I had a second cuppa. She talked about her daughters living in Newcastle. I asked about the young boy in the photos.

‘Sorry about that. It upsets Grant if I talk about Scott. It hurt so much.’ Deb’s voice trailed off as she thought about it. ‘It’s been ten years, but when you lose a child because of their terrible choices, it can make you angry. It is such a difficult thing for Grant to accept, so he doesn’t like for Scott to be talked about.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss, I understand. We’ve experienced this too.’

I looked at the side cupboard with glass cabinet. It was full of old blue and clear glass bottles. There was also a collection of hurricane lamps.

‘What do you do, Michelle?’

‘I write and work for not-for-profits.’

***
Mum held up her mobile to take a selfie beside the green Model T with black running boards and black hard top roof.

‘You’ve got to see this, Ruth.’

Grant just outside the shed, next to a shiny beer keg soldered on a frame with four legs. A chimney had been soldered to the top of the keg and small door cut out, fixed with hinges and latch. This feat of home engineering worked as a beer keg fire drum to sit around on cold winter nights at Bathurst once each year.

There was not only car love in common between my seventy-four-year-old mother and this cousin in his forties. They both valued sharing.

‘When are you going to come and see Deb and me at Bathurst? I mean it. We’ve got camping space, this fire, sleeping gear.’

Grant pointed out the house a couple of doors down. ‘That’s where we lived. My mum used to hide kids under the house if welfare were on their way. They took kids and sent them back a few years later.’

He pointed to the hill behind the graveyard. ‘Up there we would dig for yams. It’s also where we would get prickly pear. That block of land that’s vacant and you can see something was once built there. That was where Lloyd had the house that burnt down. Before him and the kids moved to town.’

* * *

‘What about that stand of trees?’ I was pointing to tall gums and bush that was on the flat.

‘That’s just above the bank of the Mooki Creek. You’ll see when you drive back from the homestead and turning onto the main road.’

‘Water in the creek, was low when we drove over the bridge.’

‘Yeah. Here, water is stored in the ground. The black soil holds water. Cotton needs a lot of water. Our water table has dropped something to twenty-five metres with cotton. My dad could reach water at ten metres.’
Meeting Mob

Endless cups of tea, white bread sandwiches, country music playing on the radio, hugs and kisses of cousins, uncles and aunties. It is overwhelming exchanging what was known of the children that had been taken away. The one that disappeared.

They say a child removed affects a family for five generations. Names loom forth from the records, the Birth, Death and Marriage certificates Mum has in manilla folders. Plastic sleeves bundle up related paper Mum has downloaded from the internet and paid to have the government release. I have to flick back and forth over and over again. The names and the places all start to sound the same. It is difficult to hold them in my mind and order them. I look at the concertinaed paper stuck together with sticky tape that has names written next to one another and lines drawn together and apart with people who married one another and offspring listed.

My mother has a deep booming voice that can be heard some distance. Playing in the bush down the back, or two doors up at a neighbour’s, it’s audible. She has had thick white curls since her forties and before that it was dark blond. Her nose is flat and large and she was picked on at school about its size; her cheeks are fleshy and big, her brow wide. The silence about her family history, together with her blond hair and blue eyes, veiled the underpinning ancestral architecture of her face as I now see it.

Uncle Lloyd and Aunty Betty laugh looking at the photos, they see the likeness in our smiles and foreheads.

It is the same when I look at photos of me and Pop together. The wide forehead and broad cheeks, his knees and disposition. His love of nature, yarning and tucker. His firm belief in the importance of kindness, sharing, respect, your word, your family, what you could do to help others.

Along the way

We drove north along the Pacific Highway and then at Newcastle exited to head west toward Cessnock and follow the New England Highway through the Hunter Valley.
We passed the vineyards, the horse studs, the land of bed and breakfast tourism. As we drove, my mother told me about Pop asking her to drive him out this way, years before. We were listening to the radio and she turned it down.

‘It would have been the seventies. He had a letter from a Mrs Doolan. It’s the letter in the blue folder.’

Dear Mr Matthews,

I am Elizabeth May Doolin. I am the daughter of Mary Ann Watson, daughter of John and Elizabeth Watson.

It was John and Elizabeth Watson who reared your father. I met your father Jim Matthews who came to visit my mother Mary Ann Watson. It was either 1941 or 1942 that Jim called and stayed. He used to write letters to my mother, he called her Midge.

John Watson was a railway worker and also Jim Matthews’ father. Jim’s father had a son older than Jim and a baby girl. Mrs Matthews died in child birth when the baby girl was born. Mrs Matthews told Elizabeth Watson to take the children and if she didn’t get the baby girl christened by a Priest she would haunt her.

I read this claim and I wondered about Elizabeth Watson telling this story to her daughter, it being passed down to the granddaughter. Was this really Mrs Matthews’ wish? Why was it so important? I continued to read:

The father kept the oldest boy, my grandmother kept Jim. When she got the baby girl christened, she let the baby girl go to a childless couple who had a farm. (I think at Quirindi). I don’t remember their name.

The baby girl was baby Charlotte.

You can visit me if you care to.

The people that adopted your father’s sister used to give Elizabeth Watson milk, butter and eggs, when they lived in Quirindi and you may be able to get information from there.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth May Doolan.
P.S.
It was Nell Watson in Armidale who told me of you, she asked Nonnie’s daughter about Jim Matthews, but they could not remember him.

I am 80 years old and will be 81 in May. I have just had a cataract removed from my right eye seven weeks ago and am only now starting to get my sight back. Someone else has had to write this letter for me.

Jim Matthews was a night officer on the Railway station in Uralla. The brick home he lived in is still standing and a good looking home. His wife’s name was Harriot. All of the Watson family that your father was reared with are deceased.

‘My father and I drove out here looking to find out about my grandfather’s family. We tried to find out more but Mrs Doolan died.’

* * *

As we approached Murrurundi, Mum mentioned this was where Mary Anne Healy and Charlotte Curry were born. It takes a while for the names to come into focus in your family history. They were blur then.

Below the Liverpool Range, what I took in was my mother talking about her grandfather, holding a flask of coffee in a picnic area on the roadside.

‘Now I know my grandfather was eight when he was taken from his siblings and father. His sister Elizabeth was five and taken into care. His brother Thomas, two years old, stayed with their father Henry Matthews. His little sister Charlotte, one month old, was severed from her family forever. My great grandfather, Henry Matthews, was dark skinned, Lloyd told me. He died in 1941. This was around the time my grandfather Jim Matthews visited Mrs Watson. My grandfather was such an angry man. Now I know why. His family was taken from him. He was hard on my father and Dad was strict with my brothers and me. Dad wanted to know about his father’s family.’

I offered Mum a sandwich from the hamper and took one for myself. We ate silently for a bit.
Then she said, ‘No one called him Jim in our family. He was called James or Black Jack. I thought the nick name was because of his dark moods. He always had a tan, funny, never thought of him as dark skinned.’

‘It all seems pretty clear now. Who did you say came from here?’

‘Mary Ann Healy, an Aboriginal woman who was Charlotte Curry’s mother.’

‘So they’re your great- and great-great-grandmothers?’

‘Yes, and on the other side as well my great-great-grandmother was Jane Maloney from Walhalow, another Aboriginal woman and Henry Matthews’ mother.’

It was all still confusing to me. There was baby Charlotte and her mother was also Charlotte and that was just the start of me becoming lost in it. What was really unusual was Mum and me being on a road trip and doing something together without other family members with us, or dealing with a matter that was urgent. We may have argued when I was younger, but things had mellowed since my twenties.

This journey was the first time we had spent significant alone time as adults together. We were both interested in my grandfather’s family. He was such an exceptional man, without malice and so kind and loving.

After eating, we walked across the suspension bridge to stretch our legs before getting back into the car.

As she drove, Mum filled me in on her last visit.

‘From his dad Clint, Uncle Lloyd heard the story that when he was a boy, his great-Uncle Jim, returned to Breeza.’

‘And?’

‘Clint heard his Aunt Elizabeth saying to a well-dressed man at the door one day, “You didn’t care about us then, why are you here now? Go away. I don’t want to see you.” Aunt Elizabeth was shaken but refused to say who the man had been at the door.’

‘How awful, that rejection.’

‘Mrs Doolan’s letter never mentioned Elizabeth Matthews return to her family.’
If she wants something, my mother has this extraordinary skill to track it down. She is a born researcher, whether it be a car, a fridge, a wayward grandchild or a family history. My mother has a persistence and determination to find resolutions, solve problems, rescue and protect. She’s zealously compassionate as well as independent, often blunt. Our family life could have done without the annihilation we’ve experienced. But Mum’s strong personality has maintained a fierce love. Nurturing together time has been difficult because of a kaleidoscope of pressing priorities. This was different, unhurried for us on this trip.

According to Mum, James Matthews tried to shelter his children and was hard on them to give them opportunity. His ten children went to school until they were twelve, only Daphne did her leaving certificate at Fort Street High. The one he wasn’t hard on was Cathy. She was his favourite. He tried to give them opportunity he did not have. He travelled to South Africa where he worked as a manager on the railway. He had seen the worst of whites here and in South Africa. He did not like to be around people, never had friends and seemed bitter with a quick temper.

Driving towards Gunnedah Mum told me his story.

‘When he came back from South Africa, he leased land from 1912 until he died in 1946 in Ryde where he built glasshouses and grew the tropical fruit he loved in South Africa – bananas and paw-paws. He trellised blackberries. He sold his produce at the city markets and put in an orchard on his seven acres. And during the war he was not evicted when the army camp moved in around his farm. He lived in a three-bedroom wattle and daub home lined with weatherboards and a covered walk-way to the kitchen. He drove a horse and sulky. He did not live as a black man.’

‘Did the family know?’

‘It was never discussed. But thinking about it, my uncle Herbie and Auntie Cathy were dark. So was Uncle Jack who changed his surname to Burke. They all left home as soon as they could. Pop Matthews was a hard man.’

Mum remembered the books he had on the shelves.

‘There was The World Book of People and The World Book of Animals. A set of encyclopaedias and Webster’s Dictionary, signed by Webster. He also had The Complete Works of Shakespeare. He named your grandfather William Shakespeare Matthews, another son Henry Lawson Matthews. He loved words. He was a man precise in his use of language, a gruff and direct communicator. But he had a saying that never made much
sense to us – ‘I’m so lucky I have an un-surreal increment when so many others have nothing.’

This word puzzle – a clue – his legacy – the present. I spoke the phrase out loud thinking what it was at the same time.

‘Un-surreal increment, a double negative. You didn’t get that?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Never understood what he meant.’

An ice blue day, the expanse above us, canola green fields for as far as you could see, wisps of grass lifting their seed bags spilling. Overhead birds circled in the endless sky.

The meaning there as clear as the day.

‘Increment is a measurement of something. Aboriginal people have a seemingly surreal relationship to land, a spiritual connection, custodianship not ownership. Pop Matthews had an un-surreal relationship leasing and farming the land he worked.’

* * *

On this trip, we made our way to the Catholic church in Armidale where Pop Matthews married Harriet Dwyer. In a leather-bound book, we saw their signatures dated the 8th of August 1899.

The strange thing was, Mum remembered that as a child she wasn’t to bring up the church when in her grandfather’s company.

‘He hated the Catholics. A priest got bogged in the creek at Ryde and he charged him to pull him out of the mud. He thought the Catholic church had it wrong. The teachings were false. He wrote to the Pope and told him so in a letter where he resigned from the church.’

‘Was there a reason he resigned?’

Mum didn’t recall the specifics.

‘He liked nature, to walk in the bush, go camping, and he was happiest in his garden and greenhouse. He fed the kookaburras meat chopped with the axe on the wood block in the yard.’

‘Pop did that too,’ I remembered.

* * *
My great grandfather had an un-surreal increment. He felt he was more fortunate than others. But he carried a bitterness, the result of being removed from his family and country of origin. My grandfather and brother established connection to the same black soil, the country my great-grandfather was from. Maybe my grandfather knew; it seems likely. My brother didn’t know, but he was drawn to that land.

My grandfather rode the rails during the depression and found work there, fruit picking and ringbarking. He worked on a farm in the vicinity and befriended the property owner. My brother’s best friend is this man’s grandson. My grandfather went back in the nineteen-seventies with my mother, trying to find his father’s extended family, following a dead paper trail. In 2011 I travel to the same country with my mother to meet our extended family.

Lives circle one another. Lives circle one another in routines for days, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia, weaving a basket that holds our connection.

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**Black and White Cockatoo**

The black cockatoo was made the keeper of the fire and held it in his red crest. He lit the fire at night. During the day he often perched in a tree above the billabong where the other birds gathered.

One day, the white cockatoo flew to the branch where the black cockatoo sat.

The white cockatoo remarked, ‘I don’t carry the sun in my crest. Would you let me carry the fire during the day?’

The black cockatoo did not respond.

‘Did you hear me?’

The black cockatoo looked toward the billabong. ‘It’s so hot,’ he replied, leaving the branch. He flew to the water, where he splashed, flapping his wings.

The white cockatoo squawked, ‘What about the fire?’

The black cockatoo stopped slapping the water. He answered the white cockatoo:

‘I don’t have permission.’
When I think about the black cockatoo I think about being part of a group, unwilling to expose anyone to make them embarrassed or vulnerable. I think of my great-grandfather, protective of his cultural understanding because at every opportunity where someone could assimilate him, they did.

I see that where they can, people continue to marginalize Aboriginal understanding, values and knowledge. The political entity of ‘the country’ runs on the western notion of individualism rather than a philosophy that places community and sharing at the centre of being and belonging.

White Galah Expectation

Hyper vigilant for the punctum, critical thinkers only hear trigger words.

There’s a lust for disclosure fed by a cult-like elevation of identity that cries, ‘Whore for us your exclusion, we want to hear about your pain and trauma.’

Write it, I don’t get what you mean if you don’t show me what led to all of this. Don’t be shy, we want to see your tits.

They occupy Panic Territory with expectation, for gruesome disclosure. They want things explained grounded and framed with whys. They ignore the realities and needs of now, forcing people to go to a space of disempowerment, to describe traumatic experience. Instead of allowing people to express in their own time and their own grounded concepts what and how they have learnt about living effectively with traumatic experience.

They’ve forgotten how to openly listen.

Home truths
I possess a surreal increment – it’s an understanding that produces tangible work and particular outcomes. I understand that in my speech silence may be used to create safe spaces for transformation and healing. I know to be fierce and strong is to be engaged and connected by helping others. Without a career, property, assets, husband or children of my own, connection takes place in broader familial and community contexts.

Listening to the noise and buzzing static of silence can ground and renew you to keep moving forward. I am unwilling to be marginalised by an essentially oppressive demand to unravel private traumas. I am a writer shaped by familial and cultural dispositions more than books when it has come to my private understanding of self and what I share.

To me, it’s cohesive not curious, the shared values in the Vlatkovic family motto, *Silence. Listen. Do not despair*, Winanga-li Gurruu and the stories my great-grandfather seeded that have unfolded the shared surreal increment I have inherited. My parents share the same value system that they held dearest: honesty, respect and kindness.

Long ago, I got off a train in a recurring dream, never to have that dream again. I left possessions I treasured. In waking life, I travelled across Croatia on what felt like a runaway train called the Surreal Express. This trip with my father unravelled part of the narrative wired in my DNA embedded in the family motto. *Silence. Listen. Do not despair*. When I returned home understanding something of the importance of silence, I felt easier being silent than I had before in life when I had been distressed. I wanted to be silent and see what it taught me. I learnt Winanga-li Gurruu.

My mother’s blood brings the other threads of DNA that draw together the yarn, that is the story, that is embedded in me.

My great-grandfather was a paradox. He knew who he was; he was resentful and angry about his childhood and being removed. But he found the only way forward was to use the white man’s way and live undercover. He left clues for us to unravel the truth, understand our surreal increment, understand about a mother hiding her chicks and how silence creates a space for speech and truth-telling. My voice has ample capacity to accommodate the silence, the paradox and the emerging and mutable truth.
Postface

Research Approach

An Aboriginal woman and the daughter of a Croatian refugee, I have sought to answer the exegetical question – ‘How can a writer manifest personal and familial cultural context and history in her voice in the genre of creative nonfiction?’

This exploration of how ‘voice’ engages with and contributes distinct values in relation to connection, belonging and narrative situates its ontological approach in an oral tradition. Reflecting this tradition, my research has included conversations with Elders and Aboriginal mentors within my community who have been generous, encouraging and inspiring when sharing their knowledge and insights. Earlier conversations and travel with my father, Ninoslav Vlatkovic, have also been formative to this project.

In the past six years, there has also been the informal yarning circle of peers to whom I have spoken about my re-discovery of the stories told to me in childhood as I actively pursued greater cultural understanding. These conversations have engaged with both my writing and thoughts, provoking me to create an artefact that is accessible without oversimplifying the complexity of cross-cultural interaction.

Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt articulate well the suitability of a practice-based research approach to my project:

The innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for the critical interventions and application of knowledge outcomes. (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, pp. 2-3)

18 These people have shown me what it is to be a proud Kamilaroi woman and the gift of culture: Aunty Cathy Jackson, Aunty Peggy Tidyman, Dr Marcus Woloombi Waters, Gwen Troutman Weir, Barbara Bent, Annette Lamb, Leon Petreu, Tabatha Saunders and Jacob Maguire, my grandfather William Matthews, my mother Ruth Vlatkovic, as well as my extended family, especially – Aunty Betty Matthews, Uncle Lloyd Matthews and Uncle Stan.

19 I am grateful for the questions posed and views expressed by Dr Pam Greet, Dr Joanne Taylor, Dr Jessica White, Sally Macmahon, Caro Rentel, Kat Steele and Beverly Campbell and Jem Hawkes.
This research approach utilises insights gained from Elders and family members within my community as well as published writers and researchers. I have sought to situate the cultural knowledge, understanding and approaches on an equal footing with knowledge and understanding that is book learnt.

Linda Candy, in her Creative and Cognition Studies Report titled Practice Based Research: A Guide writes: ‘If a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based’ (Candy, 2006). Candy differentiates practice-based from practice-led research identifying that practice-led research instead focuses on advancing knowledge about practice or within a practice (Candy, 2006). This includes analysis and theoretical writing about writing. But I believe I am doing both practice-based and practice-led research in this project. While there is an expectation to include exegetical commentary on the writing of the project for the purposes of examination, I also wish to position Indigenous knowledge and understanding in relation to Western existentialist thinking. This work addresses the belief that existence is finite and we create meaning in various ways.

Using a Kamilaroi ontological understanding, I wish to present how Ancestral understanding is present and relevant in our Urban communities infusing the way we get to know one another, interact and understand the world. This understanding is not created by us, it existed before us, before our individual beginning.

My introduction, ‘Before the beginning...’ and following sections, discusses ‘A Contained Self’, a previous piece of writing which is key to the exegetical examination of my development as writer examined here. This thread is followed up in subsequent Parts One to Four by further exegetical analysis, but mainly by practice of a fragmented method of writing suitable to investigating literary and spoken source materials and to the process of remembering itself. I have patterned this research project embedding the exegetical commentary into the artefact, as well as seeding a Kamilaroi pedagogy into my approach with the Emu in the Sky narrative. The exegetical cannot be sliced away at either end without weakening the centre; the centre is not as strong without the exegetical. In this way, there are tensions and there are alignments in the way book learnt interacts with oral story. I wanted to make this work as practise-based as possible, while at the same time acknowledging that one’s practice necessarily changes in the process of discovering new understanding.
Form

This project about voice presents Aboriginal knowledge imparted to me in oral story-telling, silence, repetition and reflection. Belonging and connection exist through a shared understanding of the interconnected nature of life and being. The yarning tradition – especially its key element, the parable, and its promotion of analysis and deduction – informs the stories I choose to tell using creative nonfiction here and now. The brolga takes care of her grief silently. Elsewhere, there’s the pirate hero’s advice in facing fear – Silence. Listen. Do not despair. Country and Country are spoken and understood along a continuum of power. I want to peel back the veneer that hides the fake to reveal the surreal in the concept of ‘real estate’. Life is responsive to our choices – the brolga does not breed more than two chicks per season, the emu cannot fly. The eaglet learns to fly. These understandings handed down in oral story are the surreal increment my great grandfather possessed. This knowledge has transformed with experience and action into something un-surreal for me. It is the Notebook of Belonging.

Creative nonfiction emerged as an obvious choice when I considered an appropriate form for my research, positioning a philosophical perspective, presenting a voice relevant to here and Now. As Donna Lee Brien asserts, creative non-fiction is particularly suited to a focus on the personal, on human values and ethical issues, on a sense of the self in action, and on material which deals with emotional content in a way that texts which aim to be totally objective may not be able to. (Brien, 2000)

Brien identifies that in creative nonfiction writers diverge from traditional non-fiction using fictional techniques and subjective points-of-view.

Creative nonfiction writes a more discursive, more subjective, more organic less straightforwardly linear nonfiction. (Brien, 2000)

Creative nonfiction’s discursive and nonlinear possibilities have been an appropriate form within which to replicate the criss-cross way yarning works. It supports a pedagogical approach drawing on the use of repetition, reflection and the circular way knowledge has been imparted to me in familial and cultural contexts.

Thinking about how I might use the creative nonfiction form, I also found useful Robin Freeman and Karen Le Rossignol’s research across a wide range of writers working in this form. Freeman and Le Rossignol consider writer positioning and the use of the intimate voice when discussing Mark Tredinnick on the personal essay. Tredinnick’s views on voice
in the personal essay are instructive. According to Tredinnick, voice is integral because it establishes a personal perspective on truth: “This is my voice… This is what I make of things, and this is what they make of me” (Tredinnick 2014). I considered the qualities identified by Tredinnick in the crafting of SoulJah Sistars, a stand-alone personal essay, included in the Notebook of Belonging.

Mark Tredinnick suggests that personal essays have six qualities: they are personal and voiced, they wander and wonder, and they demonstrate humility. They are also true. They are, he writes, “a kind of story about real things, real thoughts, real people, the palpable and actual world; you can make up the essay, but you don’t make up its subject matter”. (Freeman & Le Rossignol, 2015).

Tredinnick described the personal essay at its best is a musical arrangement of passionate facts, a literary conversation where the narrator is halfway toward singing to you something they’ve learnt by heart. He suggested, it’s art not merely discourse. It advocates with a particular voice and powerful style (Freeman & Le Rossignol, 2015).

It appealed to me that creative nonfiction accommodates literary and poetic ambitions in regard to style. The voice that advocates through this text is a voice that has emerged through lived experience with particular concerns and priorities, as well as an understanding about belonging and connection that draws on the power of sharing stories, yarning. It was important to express an awareness of the affluent upbringing and privilege I have experienced compared to other family members and friends. It was important to follow cultural protocols in acknowledging my elders and mentors. I have checked with others that they are comfortable with what I have expressed in a way that I wouldn’t if it weren’t Indigenous knowledge I shared. I feel an accountability here to the Aboriginal people who have contributed to this research, sharing their insights and understanding. And considering the need for a powerful style, I adopted a fragmented structure to use various types of writing to create a text that may be entered at different points to represent a multi-layered perspective of writing and being. The Notebook of Belonging includes fragments that read like prose poems, stand-alone essays, short stories, journal entries and exegetical commentary.

Canada’s Creative Nonfiction Collective believe that what distinguishes this form from nonfiction is a ‘personal’ identifiable voice; the writer is present in text (Freeman & Rossignol, 2015). In the Notebook of Belonging my voice varies. It is direct sometimes. At other times, it is understated. I switch from first to third person narration. I choose to shift the volume of my voice from quiet to loud in my artefact. I do this partly to enable the reader to engage imaginatively with the text, colouring in gaps and coming to understanding of how
culturally I use silence and repetition to encourage reflection, to attempt to simulate the Aboriginal dialectic of Look, Listen and Learn. Look, Listen and Learn are the pedagogical signposts that have been repeated and imparted to me in childhood and then again this year.  

In a chapter titled ‘Why Creative Nonfiction?’, Perl and Schwartz claim the voice that works best with the material can emerge as the writing progresses. While not a conscious choice, it is apparent when the writer finds it. Often it has a surprising quality (Perl & Schwartz, 2014, p. 67). This advice attuned me to look out and take notice where a particular set of words speak with a cadence in alignment with the point of view, themes and breadth of ideas I wish to honour and share.

I have excavated stories handed down to me, reflecting on how familial and cultural values shape my interests, responsibilities and accountabilities. Along the way, this process has revealed my voice as that of an Aboriginal woman and the daughter of a refugee whose family background is one of people forced to experience violence, civil conflict and trauma, who have handed down the knowledge they possessed in regard to overcoming these adversities. These stories are roadmaps in the sky to live here and now, wholeheartedly without bitterness or shame.

A highly nuanced voice comes into being with editing. Voice may not be conscious at its inception; however, narration can be shaped by the writer. Vivianne Gornick in The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative (2001) asserts the voice which narrates acts as a guide through a designed terrain for the reader in order to present a particular point of view (Gornick, 2001, p. 24).

The one we can trust will take us on a journey, make the piece arrive, bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before (Gornick, 2001, p. 24).

The ‘landscape’ in this project is a matter of presenting how familial and cultural understanding shape my voice. I have sought to accommodate the interplay between European and Indigenous understanding as it exists in relation to my sense of connection and belonging. To create this ‘landscape’ I have used fragments that present a voice able to use different inflections for different contexts. Western book learnt and Kamilaroi ontological perspectives exist alongside, as well as in, interaction with one another in this artefact with exegetical commentary. Both perspectives offer possible voices for me to express particular

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20 This expression I heard first from my grandfather growing up and then in 2017 by Aunty Cathy Jackson and Aunty Peggy Tidyman. (Jackson & Tidyman, 2017)
ideas. However, this is an act of choice and as such has responsibilities and accountabilities involved.

In ‘Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers’ Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University’, Mark Kramer and Wendy Call write of the interconnection between voice and structure.

Every text has a voice – a personage who accompanies the reader. From the reader’s perspective, that personage is the writer’s personality. From the writer’s perspective, it is a personality, carefully crafted through the writing. An effective writing voice does much more than provide good company. It offers authority, savvy and order; it guides the reader on a journey, navigating the most engaging route toward a thematic destination. (Kramer & Call, 2007, p. 126)

I believe creative nonfiction is a form ideal to show that what is misunderstood, and dismissed, as ‘mythology’, is in fact relevant and instructive. This form uses story-telling techniques and has an emphasis on voice. At its best it offers strong sensory detail, memory, facts and research to shape a point of view with an emphasis on lively prose (Perl & Schwartz, 2006, p. 7). I’ve tried to present how I experience the world and where I’ve found family stories as well as silence to be a powerful and potent space for transformation.

The creative nonfiction form has provided a way for me to build on my existing practise, using techniques I was familiar with as a fiction writer. These included: description, character, dialogue and the use of a discontinuous narrative in sections, whereby storytelling shifts between the past and the present. In using this form, I am able to allow the subjective and objective to work together to describe the world as I see it (Perl & Schwartz, 2006, p. 4).

Structure

My Aboriginal sense of belonging, connection and ontological approach does not exist in isolation. It is seen in interaction with non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Sometimes this is a point of conflict when I see others suffering. At other times my Aboriginality sits alongside European understanding, as it did when I sat looking at the Adriatic seventeen year ago. It was the gumnut in my pocket, rolled by my thumb and forefinger in quiet meditation.

Reading Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street suggested to me that a fragmented text offered an appropriate container to be suitably un-contained and to present a constellation.
One-Way Street, while not having a linear structure, is a highly structured body of work that presents a cohesive world view without an apparent organizing logic and with a diversity of writing styles used in the pieces included in the narrative. Jennings, in his introduction to the 2016 edition, describes Benjamin’s work as a highly theorized ‘constellation of fragments’ (Jennings, 2016, pp. 4-5). The fragments come together to make a prose montage which relies on other signposts for the reader including subliminal connections between different pieces of text, complimented by the overall theme and rhymes, to create meaning. According to Jennings, the body of work was structured to follow the free-flight of the mind daydreaming (Jennings, 2016, p. 7).

Written in 1928, Benjamin’s fragmented text operates with the imposed constraint of being comprised of short pieces that constitute a non-linear narrative. Jennings suggests that Benjamin’s bite-size bits of prose are experiments with the characteristic presentation of the aphorism, known as Denkbild – a philosophical miniature that in the 1930s became Benjamin’s characteristic mode of expression (Jennings, 2016, p. 3). In my Notebook of Belonging, my research has involved collecting, then documenting fragments of myself, found and uncovered through a process of guided recovery in conversation yarning with others and in reflection of my life experience, considering these things from a particular ontological perspective, the concept of a philosophical miniature was a helpful way to conceive sections of this work being made up of pieces that might stand as Denkbild of my own experiences.

My voice expresses a consciousness shaped by a tradition that values the performative quality of oral stories to impart knowledge and understanding in relation to living connected and peaceful lives in the face of adversity and trauma. This also involves the spaces where silence exists. A fragmented text offers the possibility to impart another way of conceiving connection, belonging and voice. It wishes to speak to the non-Indigenous valuing of individualism and binary representations of being.

Benjamin wished to develop a new style of prose to speak to his concerns regarding modernity. This new form of prose engaged with the avant-garde movements of the mid 1920s headed by the Dadaists and Surrealists (Jennings, 2016, p. 3). Benjamin wanted to develop a prose form that could approximate the Dadaist photomontage pieces. These put together seemingly unrelated images in the one art work to reflect the complexity of the world – alongside the Surrealists’ sharp and shocking depictions of dream states that sought to wake human consciousness to the good and evil within all humans (Jennings, 2016, pp. 6-7).
Fragmented texts offer the structure to express human consciousness in a multi-layered way that is non-linear and typically conceptual. This seemed to me an appropriate form to relate an alternative consciousness and voice nuanced by my cultural and familial background. I looked at fragmented texts written by both European and Indigenous writers. The Notebook of Belonging appropriates this fragmented European form to reveal another philosophical perspective which presents a different consciousness of time and silence.

Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida (1980) is a fragmented essay made of forty-eight parts. It presents a phenomenological meditation on the photograph. Barthes posits that the emotional and subjective response the spectator has to photographic images is defined in relation to two discontinuous elements (Barthes, 2010, p. 23). These elements are the studium and the punctum. The studium is the public broad range of meaning associated with the image.

To recognize the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the studium derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. (Barthes, 2010, p. 28)

The punctum, on the other hand, is the private association the viewer has with the image. It is unexpected. It is recognized and consequently remembered. The punctum is a detail or partial object that attracts the viewer’s gaze; it pricks and wounds the observer ‘This second element will break (or punctuate) the studium’ (Barthes, 2010, p. 26).

The punctum is something that is in the photograph although its meaning is conjured by the spectator’s own history. This concept of the punctum invited me to think about what writers seek to express. I recognised writers so often are drawn to what causes uneasiness when excavating lived experience; this point of reference conceptually is like the punctum. It may be the point of rupture where the picture of life and existing understanding is questioned, that we feel passionate and compelled to assert our voice and our belonging. However, writing about Croatia, it occurred to me my experiences might be presented by using the concept of punctum not to depict wounding, but instead to choose to represent the transformational moments of lived experience, not only the excavation of an abyss. My voice is concerned with where and how connection, belonging and narrative are experienced. This clarity about purpose was provoked by my initially negative reaction to Barthes’ concept of

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21 I discuss Kim Scott’s essay ‘Both hands full’ later in this Postface.
the punctum. I reacted strongly to this inherently phallocentric language of pricks and
rupture.

Using a fragmented text of moments and thoughts, my intention is to present how and
when my private experience engages with widely held beliefs about Aboriginality and ways
of being, to present the in between time where, to confront significant trauma, I did not write
for publication but instead invested in family and community connection. Creating a
fragmented text has been a way of gathering both silences and the understanding arising from
reflection and experiences. This form enables me to express a voice encompassing both my
desire for silence around certain matters pertaining to personal trauma and my desire to speak
in relation to other experiences that best represent my understanding, values and priorities.

Instead of researching Croatian writers, I went to family stories, my own dreams and
Dreaming.\(^\text{22}\) Rather than abstract thinking, I present an engaged and responsive Kamilaroi
perspective, invisible to many and understood by few. A fragmented text enabled me to show
how my Kamilaroi values exist in interaction with non-Indigenous ways of knowing,
empowering me to negotiate both cultural spaces and have meaningful conversation.
Hopefully my use of silence as well as voice in this notebook ruptures false notions that
Indigenous cultural reference points are redundant and from a bygone era.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{22}\) When I use the expression *Dreaming* – I am referring to a way of seeing the world – the
relationship between the yarns handed down to me in my family and my life experience.

\(^{23}\) Here is one of many examples that might be cited of this being a widely-held view of Aboriginal
understanding and culture. Aimed at a mainstream reader, this excerpt is from an entertainment
review in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2016, captioned: ‘First Contact review: David Oldfield’s
verdict on “Stone Age” culture’:

\[\text{Thank God for David Oldfield. He is dogmatic, inflexible, arrogant and abrasive, but he’s the beating heart of First Contact (SBS, November 29 to December 21 at 8.30pm), a show that would otherwise have only bleeding hearts at its disposal.} \]

\[\text{The co-founder of One Nation arguably represents the views of an awful lot of white Australians … in the second season of this constructed reality show from Blackfella Films (Redfern Now, First Australians, DNA Nation).} \]

\[\text{Before starting out on their 28-day immersion in Aboriginal Australia, each of the six “well-known” (SBS doesn’t do celebrity) participants records an interview in which they lay out their preconceptions of the Aboriginal people and culture they have had little or no direct experience of. As you might expect, Oldfield pulls no punches.} \]

\[\text{“It’s not actually good for Aborigines to remain Aborigines. They should be Australians.” Of Indigenous culture, he says: “You just naturally let it die out. I mean frankly, it should have died out, like the Stone Age died out” (Quinn, 2016).} \]
I’ve also observed the digital environment is changing the way people read. Readers are interest in shorter forms such as blog posts and essays. My interest in creating a fragmented text is a response to this circumstance. A fragmented text may be broken apart easily, and separate segments may be published in smaller stand-alone pieces. [SoulJah Sistars was published by Overland in October 2017.]

**Point of view**

In the course of my research, I read a number of texts where writers investigated oral story as well as the power of narrative and literature. This groundwork reading included: Quicksilver, Two Sisters, ‘Both Hands Full’, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? and Helene Cixous, Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing. These works presented points of view I wanted to speak to in the Notebook of Belonging. To write is to present a point of view and creative nonfiction offers dynamic possibilities. The Creative Nonfiction Foundation notes:

truth is not a fixed adage but a concept that shifts under our gaze, multifaceted, determined by whatever self or persona happens to be in charge at the moment. In fact, when we think of the term point of view in all its implications, we can see that it’s really an essential aspect of creative nonfiction’s groundwork. “Try to see it from MY point of view,”… or “It’s MY point of view” … these phrases often make it seem as though a point of view is a fixed thing, immutable, easily ascertained. The joy of writing and reading creative nonfiction can be precisely that we come to have a multidimensional apprehension of the “truth” of experiences. (Creative Nonfiction Foundation, 2006, p. 66)

In October 2016, I was invited to read at the Brisbane launch of Nicholas Rothwell’s Quicksilver. I had not read Nicholas Rothwell’s work when I accepted the invitation. In order to decide what would be appropriate for me to read, I went to his website to find out more about the writer. I read Rothwell’s 2011 Madwick Lecture, ‘Quicksilver Reflections.’ It was lyrical, intelligent, and ambitiously literary.

I hope the parallels between my stories, drawn as they are from such different realms, may hint at some regularities in human affairs: and lastly, I have the dream that my examples may encourage you to turn your thoughts inwards – to gaze at the strange stillness we bear inside ourselves. What is that silence? How do we meet it, and how do we answer it? It was a set of experiences of silence that brought me to these stories, and to the ideas that they have set in train for me: ideas that hint at a picture of
where we stand, and how vast and irreducible the world is through which we make our gradual, uncertain way. They are ideas that begin from the heavens, and return there, and that seem confirmed in their intensity for me whenever I lift up my eyes to the night sky, and see the shimmering light-fields of the southern stars. (Rothwell, 2011)

Rothwell’s silence I comprehended. His voice was a piercing and rousing call to action, for me to express my understanding – Silence. Listen. Do not Despair.

Rothwell’s *Quicksilver* (2016) is a collection of six essays looking at how non-Indigenous Australian thinkers ‘conceive of our place in the landscape of the continent we have claimed as our own’ (Rothwell, 2016, p. 133). His voice is shaped by wide reading of European literature and lived experience in the bush and remote Australia. Most importantly, it articulates where the existentialist quest meets with Aboriginal understanding.

I listen as their voices filled the dark around me, and it came to me how little I grasped of their world and its structure. Nothing. I had never heard them say a single word about the stars, the sky, and how they might be sacred – though they are sacred in every culture where men look up at the great silence of the overarching night. (Rothwell, 2016, pp. 54-55)

This passage describes the well, the emptiness I’d felt after recognition about being ‘smart’, a tricky nothing to me. A moment when I saw being book clever as meaningless. Back then, I pushed forwards with my life searching for meaning in the tangible. I observed the post-war psychosis of a nation and considered my past in silence. I was determined to come to grips with living with bouts of depression triggered by post-traumatic stress disorder.

I returned to live in close proximity to family, nurturing nieces and nephews as well as working with others more disadvantaged than me in not-for-profit contexts. I grounded myself in a present of family connection and community. Working with words, listening to others, observing, I’ve managed to manoeuvre myself to surface from self-imposed silence, as a literary writer, to present the sea inside this Shell.

In *Quicksilver*, Rothwell searches for an authentic language to describe place, landscape and belonging. He shares his experiences, an analysis of writing by explorers, ecologists, poets and historians about Australia; as well as anecdotes about European intellectuals to present how place and landscape may reflect a metaphorical experience of being an outsider. While landscape and the bush in the Australian imagination have changed over time, his project is not completed as yet.
But I have the sense that there is still further to travel down this road, and that forms of writing attuned to the landscape, in rhythm with country and with the realm of nature hold out the promise for us of a strange, late-dawning redemption, of rescue from the disquiet and near despair that fence in and threaten the enterprise of literature today. (Rothwell, 2016, p. 137)

As a Kamilaroi woman, I am a local not an outsider. I am from here and able to articulate my belonging and connection to place and landscape. It exists wherever I am. It is something not constructed by me, but something greater than me. It has not changed over time. It has been passed down through time. The knowledge and understanding handed down to me via story is part of my DNA. Our family’s motto is Silence. Listen. Do not despair. My great-grandfather was a Kamilaroi man stolen from his family of origin. He talked of having an un-surreal increment and others being in different circumstances. My great-grandfather’s own un-surreal increment revealed itself, told by him to his children and then by my grandfather to me. The same yarns are documented as Dreaming stories by anthropologists and other Kamilaroi people.

In Kamilaroi culture – our Genesis story has a time before the beginning.

The time which gave birth to the Dreaming, we call gamilu yilaambiyal, which put simply means “before the beginning...” and it is in this time before the beginning that we have the introduction of a number of Ancestral Beings, called the Maran Dhinabarra, responsible for all creation. (Waters, 2012, p. 157)

We came from something. The universe is not premised on nothing and being empty, it is predicated on ancestral beings, then and now. My ancestral inheritance shapes my responses to lived trauma, where and how I speak and why I believe I was wired genetically to choose silence for a period of time. Now, with the necessary maturity and knowledge, I have the words to describe the transformative space silence created. I am now able to share how and what shapes my voice and perspectives in life and in writing: it is facing Now, not being preoccupied with Why.

Jeanette Winterson’s memoir Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? (2011) explores how her traumatic childhood continued to haunt her later in life.

All of us, when in deep trauma, find we hesitate, we stammer; there are long pauses in our speech. The thing is stuck. We get our language back through the language of others. (Winterson, 2012, p. 9)

Winterson sees the emptiness need not be an abyss but rather an opening for her imagination. She states she writes into the gaps (Winterson, 2012, p.6). I do not subscribe to this always
being necessary. In my experience, gaps don’t always need to be filled. Silence can sometimes create a space for something else to enter, both in life and in a text.

Listening deeply without speaking is not only part of Kamilaroi culture. Miriam Ungunmerr-Baumann is an Elder from Nauiyu (Daly River). She describes Winanga-li Gurruu in Ngungi Kurunggurr language as Dadirri. She explains:

It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call “contemplation”. When I experience Dadirri, I am made whole again. (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002)

In this project, I note how silence speaks in narrative, the potency of in-between spaces to be redemptive and healing. In my family, this notion informs what we talk about and what we don’t. The silence, the space, was the healing I was offered at home. Asserting connection rather than rupture, this is something that builds resilience through open and respectful listening. In my project of belonging, this Indigenous concept names how silence speaks in life and in quiet contemplation as well as working at my desk. In the gaps that exist in texts, Winanga-li Gurruu may be enacted, by the reader. There, the reader may create and imply meaning.

In the collaborative memoir Two Sisters (2016), Ngarta and Junkuna describe the experience of leaving Walmajarri country in the 1960s for the first time. While Ngarta and Junkuna’s lives were far removed from my own, we share a philosophical approach. Each sister’s story uses time and age markers outside of European traditions of months and years; instead timeframes are aligned with traditional knowledge and experience of the land.

Meanwhile, Ngarta was growing up. When Jukuna left with her new husband, Ngarta was still only hunting small game, such as dragon and blue-tongue lizards. (Bent, Chuguna et al, 2016, p. 32)

Journeying in Two Sisters differs from non-Indigenous travelogues. To travel across country is not an exercise to gain insight, experience or knowledge of a place, rather travelling across country distinctly shows connection to place and belonging that already exists.

There was nothing random or haphazard about these journeys. Ngarta’s mother might choose the more roundabout route, not because she liked to walk further, but because she knew a good place to find jurnta bulbs at that season of the year, or where a particular fruit would be ripening. (2016, p. 26)
Two Sisters presents how season, land and nature dominate a sense of belonging. The points of view and gaze of these Indigenous women also sit outside Western academic notions around memory and recollection that stress the inherent subjectivity of these activities. Two Sisters shows how an Indigenous sense of belonging makes no such delineation between objective and subjective discourses. Instead, reflection and understanding is linked with a knowledge of place and its realities, a hierarchy of knowledge based on Now, not Why.

My life is presented, in the Notebook of Belonging, using techniques I’ve experience in Indigenous yarn-telling with family, friends and mentors where the multidimensional nature to time and story are always in dialogue. My life is presented in a series of fragments that show how cultural knowledge and familial connection inform being. Discovering the truth about my great-grandfather unfolded my understanding of something much bigger about the world and my place in it. It was like a blurry family photograph was brought into clear focus. It explained certain values and attitudes my grandfather thought were important to impart to me. It made perfect sense of my mother to myself and others. Her resourcefulness, family focus and own attachment to the bush. I now belong in a way I did not when my terms of reference excluded my Aboriginality. I came home. I understood my earlier resistance to write for publication and my love and respect of narrative in an entirely revitalised way.

I show here that my connection and belonging exists before my beginning as well as with me via shared intergenerational experience. This is how I have written an Indigenous point of view into the Notebook of Belonging using fragmentation. This contrasts the issues around belonging presented in Australia’s migration stories, where Australia is typically considered in relation to hierarchies of desire concerned with the quality of a new life in an unfamiliar land.24

Kim Scott’s essay ‘Both hands full’ is about language and storytelling. He stresses the significance of an oral tradition.

In Aboriginal languages, it is hearing, not vision, which is extended to denote know, think, or remember, while see is more likely to be used for specific forms of social interaction (flirt with, love, supervise/oversee). (Scott, 2016, p. 324)

Scott uses a fragmented style to show the significance of language and stories.

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24 For my father, like others who left southern Europe in the fifties, Australia was a new country where he might have a safe, comfortable and happy life. On arrival, he knew nothing of this place except what he had seen in a book by two German marine biologists about the Great Barrier Reef.
Language, like story and song, withers away if not connected to the world and shared between people. (Scott, 2016, p. 323)

He describes personal experiences alongside fragments that read more like traditional literary criticism. ‘Both hands full’ offered an insight into the potential of using a fragmented form to convey a multilayered point of view.25 I saw in Kim Scott’s essay the importance of how to use this space in a moral way:

Change is most likely if the writing helps and enables a new or even neglected narrative. (Scott, 2016, p. 319)

The Notebook of Belonging is an attempt to show how oral storytelling has exposed where the ancestral informs my contemporary reality. This is my time to speak, my season as a mature woman to share what I have learnt so far. I do this each week on the radio program SoulJah Sistars, supporting others within my community, in dialogue with my migaloo friends, in conversation with my family. All of these relationships are present in how I use my voice in this writing project.

Alongside Rothwell’s need to plumb, measure and understand what is in the abyss, in the dark, in the gaps, I looked for work that expressed the desire for a just world being part of finding where we belong. I found a collaborative text written by Helen Cixous and Mireille Calle-Grouber. Helen Cixous, Rootprints: Memory and life writing (1997) presents how Cixous’s theoretical approach informs her fiction. The first section of the book, ‘Inter view’, is a discourse between Cixous and Calle-Grouber discussing Cixous’s creative as well as intellectual processes. For Cixous writing theory or fiction is about de-hierachizing by being geocentric, i.e.

“Being geocentric” in the sense of points of view, competing for space and positioning one’s self because of a drive for re-establishing the truth, justice as our subjective self understands what that means. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, pp. 10-11)

In ‘Albums and Legends’, a photographic essay included at the end of the book, Cixous explains what it means for a writer to be geocentric.

What constitutes the originary earth, the native country of my writing is a vast expanse of time and lands where my long, my double childhood unfolds. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 2005, p. 181)

25 As well as this, Kim Scott’s work in language acquisition and Dr Marcus Waters’ encouragement have made me keen to learn and use Kamilaroi language.
At the conclusion of the essay, Cixous declares:

I adopted an imaginary nationality which is a literary nationality. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 2005, p. 204)

I do not believe the country of my writing is imaginary, it is here and now. It exists for me where I am a relative and community member – this is the landscape of the *Notebook of Belonging*. I would not reduce this to having ‘literary nationality’.

Cixous finds it liberating to reject the nationality ascribed to her in the ‘real world’ for a freer imaginary one which transcends political and national borders; whereas I have liberated myself from containment by proactively claiming my Aboriginality. Interestingly, what we both proclaim is a connection that transcends time and is focussed on humanity. Cixous’s concerns as a writer align to some extent with my own in a drive to de-hierarchize and seek justice. Also, Cixous is a fiction writer and a theorist, but most importantly she insists she is a poetic writer who wants to articulate the naked world as she sees it (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 2005, p. 3). Like Cixous using a distinctly literary form, I’ve attempted to create a poetic piece of work expressing my own values, knowledge and life experience underpinning my practice.

This work is the initial research for a creative nonfiction novel. I see this enquiry opens certain doors I am yet to walk through. I am yet to pursue the power of humour as well as the intimate moments we realise are ours to speak personal truths.

I anticipate, as my proficiency in Kamilaroi language evolves, more cultural understanding will inform this work. I am looking forward to expanding this research in my Doctor of Philosophy degree.
Bibliography


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Website: 


http://nicolasrothwell.com/quicksilver-reflections/


Appendix 1

A Contained Self

“**Young lady, if you come home with holes in your ears, you won’t get any of your jewellery. Only wogs have their ears pierced,**” Mum said.

She gave me my grandmother’s gold studs on my twenty-fifth birthday. They sit in a compartment of my writing desk, which once would have held ink bottles. I don’t wear them. I’ve never got around to getting my ears done.

It’s a windy day. Cranes and scaffolding create moving shadows on the office blocks overhead. I walk up Collins Street looking for the place Louise described. This must be it. Behind the glass shop front is a white minimalist interior, a vase of strelitzias sit on the counter. Louise is waiting. I’m late.

Draped on the back of the spare chair is her navy Moschino jacket with dollar symbols on the brass buttons.

Louise is a successful literary agent. It seems unbelievable she wants to represent me.

We order lunch.

Louise dissects her bruschetta, and her tone becomes serious.

“You’re not a twenty-five-year-old Cambridge Honours graduate. We need to play on your ethnicity.”

“My what?”

“Your ethnic heritage

She swishes the red wine around the glass before taking a sip. Her nails match the deep plum colour of her lipstick.

“But everyone has an ethnic background,” I say.

“Yes, but some are more ethnic than others. Where is the name Vlatkovic from?”

“My father was born in Croatia.”

“Slavic. Fantastic. Since the trouble there, people have an awareness of the region. They’re interested in its complicated history.”

“I don’t speak a word.”

“No one need know that. I can see the cover. Selling books is firstly about
packaging. Secondly, reader expectation. And lastly, the merits of the prose. We'll use a traditional needlework motif behind your name and the title. I want you to go home and write about being ethnic.”

Are the gold earrings the sort of thing Louise wants me to write about? Or does she wish to hear some sort of rumbling along my Balkan song lines? A tearful violin begins to play a solo. Another fiddle changes the music. It becomes louder, a Gypsy tune. A cherub like figure wearing an embroidered cross stitched costume dances in my head, moving in a circle, faster and faster.

Dizzy and exhausted, I try to transcribe everything past and present that's 'ethnic' about my life.

I write about childhood, when a foam bubble kept me afloat in the backyard swimming pool, my favourite dress had a strawberry appliqued on the bodice. And a cool change punctured the heat at the end of every hot day.

I requested the same story every night: 'The Little Match Girl. I'd never seen real snow; it looked like vanilla icing in the picture. A kindly old woman sat in front of the hearth and the little match girl lit matches outside in the cold.

Lulled into imaginings by my father's thick vowels, heavy consonants and weary delivery, I went to a place far away. A place where golden onion domed buildings surrounded the town square, and the people skated on glass surfaced ponds. Horse drawn carriages travelled along winding cobbled streets, and princesses lived in castles on talcum powdered mountains.

"... The little match girl reached out to her Grandma by the flicker of the last sparked match. In the morning, the town's people found her body. Her spirit had gone. The little match girl was now with her Grandma. The End."

He placed the book on the bedside table, then went to kiss me goodnight.

"Dad is it snowing where Grandma is?"

"Maybe.

"Would Grandma be in front of the fire?"

"Possibly."

"What would she be doing?"

"Perhaps she is asleep."

"She could be packing us a box."

"Already? A box came last week."
I describe the contents of the cardboard boxes, tied up with string. They came from the same place as Dad's accent.

*Monogram serviettes and pillowcases with mother-of-pearl buttons made the sea voyage to Australia. Crystal brandy balloons and a silver ladle found their places in the kitchen dresser. From the depths of the box surfaced two folkloric dolls. They sat in front of miniature spinning wheels. The quick-un-pick moved along the seams of their dresses, guided by my mother's hand.*

“You're ruining Grandma's presents,” I wailed.

“No darling, here are the real presents.”

She held up heirlooms and small bits of paper. As scrupulously sewn as the bracelets, rings, fob watches, lockets, cufflinks and earrings: the bits of paper, labelled what belonged to whom.

*Sealed yellow envelopes filled with these treasures were stored in the safety deposit box, at the local bank. From cardboard box to steel vault, seemingly, forever out of my reach.*

I recall the school bus climbing the formidable incline where Angophora Avenue met Cobbadah Drive, when we squished three to a seat.

*Nigel Bellamy made farting noises, egged on by Craig Watson. My lunch box on my lap, I took a bite of a gherkin and tried to ignore them.*

“Look at her weird food. Yuk!” Watson stirred.

“Looks like it's made from dead frogs,” said Bellamy.

“Flickcaflaks eating frog sausage,” Watson laughed.

Natalie Tate reached for her school bag in the overhead rack. She knocked my hand. The gherkin fell to the floor.

*Craig Watson laughed. Nigel Bellamy stood on it.*

*Splat!*

“There's a wog frog on the floor. There's a wog frog on the floor,” they chanted.

*I looked out the window knowing Watson's and Bellamy's ancestors were criminals and mine were aristocrats. My humiliation was no less with this historical perspective, but it seemed more important to hide my tears.*

I jot down scenes, unsure whether they come from dreams or incomplete childhood memories.

*The photo. An old man with a waxed moustache lies still in his coffin. The*
Madonna watches over him. Surrounded by mourners, none of the grey faces holding burning candles are familiar.

I mention the times when I wanted to be more Croatian.

“Dad will you teach me Croatian?”

“You haven't learnt German, yet.”

“I want to learn Croatian.”

“I don't remember Croatian.”

“How come you remember German? You didn't grow up there”

“I never felt the need to forget it.”

And the times when I felt the opposite, resisting the notion that a place I've never been to defined me.

A framed 'Living in Harmony' poster hung behind the organisation's Director.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“I lived in Brisbane before moving to Melbourne.”

“No, I didn’t mean that.”

“I grew up in Sydney.”

I document moments at my family home.

Our house backs onto a bush reserve. In the rockery pigface, kangaroo paw, boronia and Sturt's desert peas bloom. Eucalypts shade the swimming pool; not a fir tree in sight. The grevillea holds our attention. My father is proud of his grevillea. He says to me, “They're hybrids, like you, a combination of things.”

I write about my father's negotiations with his past.

My Dad recently revisited his birthplace. He has embarked on reclaiming all that was confiscated. It's been difficult. He has needed an intermediary. The intermediary a distant cousin, insists on certain concessions.

“His family will maintain the crypt after our death provided he and his wife are buried there. Your great-aunt her sister and husband, as well as your grandparents are already in there.”

“Is there enough room?” I ask.

“Two urns will fit,” he replies. “For him, it's the prestige of being buried less than
one hundred steps from the chapel. Your great-grandparents are buried under the chapel. At least they can't dig them up, if no one pays the cemetery fees. We had a photograph of your great-grandfather in his coffin; that made you have bad dreams as a kid.”

He says nothing more.

There are gaps, and things I don't know about. Absence leaves a space for imagination and meaning in my writing.

It leaves the space for the colour red

Slavic red. It radiates from the Bosnian rug, a gift from my parents. In my blood-red lounge-room, under the window, is a carved glory box that belonged to my great-aunt Elise. A gilt framed mirror that once hung in her apartment is above my fireplace. Standing in front of the mirror, I can see the tapestry made by Elise. It covers the wall behind me.

The faded threads are deceptive. In the background a castle vanishes and reappears depending on the light. A Gypsy in the foreground whispers in a young maiden's ear.

There is a family story about Elise. She fell in love with an officer who gambled. He killed himself in a game of Russian roulette. Elise refused to marry anyone else. Long lonely nights she spent with only her needle and thread.

I look up at the tapestry, translating the archetypal symbols in my tarot deck. Perhaps my single life is sealed. I’ve jinxed myself with these artefacts.

Four weeks have passed since Louise and I shared lunch. Do I really only possess empty matchboxes? Which of these boxes holds my ethnic identity? Where does it hide? In my glory box, or the family crypt, in my school lunch box or the cardboard boxes Grandma sent. Each match I’ve struck flickered momentarily. They didn't seem to light the space between myself and Louise's expectation.

I'm all out of matches and boxes now. I consider what could possibly be their lasting illumination. And then, I realise these are not empty matchboxes, but parts of my little match girl psyche. My hopes, fears, humiliations and ruminations warm themselves in front of the oil heater in my study.

I gather up my notes. There is one thing for me to do.

Louise is waiting. I'm late.

“Are you always unpunctual?” she asks.

“Sorry, I went to Quirky on the way here.”

“The tattoo parlour?” Her magenta lips curl, ever so slightly.

“They do piercings as well,” I say, with a hint of the perverse.

“And what did you get done?”
My earlobes throb. I never imagined it would hurt so much.

“It's personal.”

“If you feel that way, fair enough.”

Passing her a flat sealed yellow envelope I smile and hope Louise will be pleased. Though I know there's nothing more I am willing to do to meet her expectations.

“Here it is, what you asked for, a contained self.”