

Let Me Tell You About a Place: Tending Hidden Narratives in the Continuous Present

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Abstract

Annemaree Dalziel and Lizzie Buckmaster Dove collaborate to perform a walking essay where “essay” is both noun and verb. A literary composition built from words (noun) emerges from the verb “essay”: ‘to make an often tentative or experimental effort to perform: to try’. The artists perform walks in adjacent places, with Gundungurra Country in Mittagong and Dharawal Country in Coledale.

As they walk, each step takes them into Country, activating memories from this and other places. Attention turning to deep listening, they take grief, place and time into an embodied sensorium. Gathering imprints and field notes the artists identify and respond to crevices... in the pleats of mountain and coast that mirror the enfolded sensoria of our bodies; that reflect secret places of survival in the rapid unfolding of what bell hooks calls dominator culture. They walk sustained by Rebecca Solnit’s definition of radical hope.

At the day’s end they write to one another about the quiet, overlooked and marginal sensed in each place using bell hooks’ method of narrative mapping; the artists build maps with words, feet and more-than-human collaborators. Subsequent guided walks in each place draw the two walkers and texts together; feet and words strengthen and make visible concurrent narratives witnessed in the crevice communities encountered. The artists re-assemble walks and words in a process of call and response: interweaving, expanding and amplifying the unseen, unheard, the forgotten, the brushed aside and the ineffable: the murmurations of place, acknowledging John Berger and Anne Michael’s conversational *Railtracks* text.

The First Loop Place

waiting for my shadow,¹ I lean on a power pole. Before first
sunlight the sky is already bright, Venus caught between a waning
gibbous moon and the east, where you too are walking, mapping,
greeting the day

*the almost-quarter moon is luminous against the dawn; Venus
glistens, a singular star punctuating the sky. I linger on the
verandah, the first place² of my day, a place I spend much time, and
the place I am with you when we speak on the phone the evening
before*

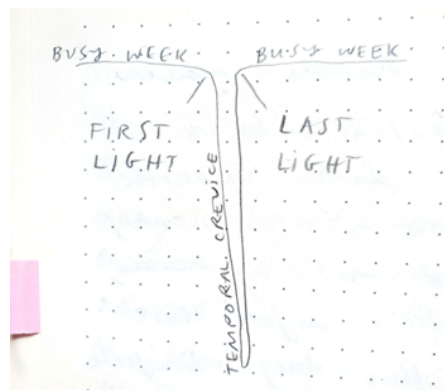
let me tell you about the mountain, my home
the watershed I am, mapping today ...

*this window for walking is difficult to align. The people in our lives
need our care and as you do, and I am learning, we prioritise
family and community before work and other worldly demands. The
costs for this we absorb, as women do, for centuries. Today I leave
my raincoat behind³*

every time I step out from this first veranda-place, I begin

thirty-one years ago, I first walked here, each footfall seeking
a place for my soul to be

this day of walking is our temporal crevice



¹ In his 2005 performance and 2007 essay entitled *I Saw the Sun*, Bandjalung writer, curator and artist Djon Mundine describes how the rising sun brings the shadow of the living into being, encapsulated in these lines from his poem: “I saw the sun, I sang my song I danced my dance, I see my shadow, I see my soul” (Mundine, D 2005 & 2007).

² Geographer Tim Cresswell describes place, as space made meaningful (Cresswell, T 2008). We walk in two places, yet because place is so much more than merely geographic, it is also true that we walk in a multitude of places.

³ Ada Limon’s poem, *The Raincoat* explores a mother’s unseen physical, emotional and spiritual labour carried on behalf of her child; understood at last by the child-now-adult. This theme – of what we carry, by and on behalf of whom – threads gently throughout this essay (Limon, A 2012, p. 11).

here the shout of birds calls me to ancient dawn
to the feel of the great volcanic upthrust beneath my feet, carpeted
by grasses and other flora of this reserve. It is strewn with
yesterday's windswept sticks, still moist from rain, and the memory
of millennia of winds and water stripping sandstone from the
trachyte core.⁴ Trachyte is hard but riven with fault lines that wind
and water sculpt. Crevices form

*this day of walking is a crevice to lean into; let me tell you about
this ravine, this temporal crevice*

this is where it begins
a red disc of sun balances on the escarpment horizon and my shadow
leaps westward over the rock. It crosses the myriad dishes of water in
its pocked skin, where grey green lichens and bright moss fringe
watershed pools that feed capillaries of Chinaman's Creek,⁵ in its
holy⁶ flow to the Nattai River

*the seas' horizon is sluiced by an egg-yolk dawn,
waves topped with spilled light
the sun sneaks up as I watch the moon*

*I walk while the sun rises, along the main road to the north. I am
wrapped in the gift my family gives me – this day, in which they
make no demands and for which I am unavailable to them. I find
my way to a crevice of silence: unexpected, muscular and total;
sacred even*

I walk camouflaged in a Fair Isle jumper, its wool nature-dyed,
spun and knitted by my mother 50 years ago. My hope to walk
without roads, succumbs to my wish to greet the day from the
summit, encircled by the lookout loop road. The predawn sees me
walk up my street and cross the looping road. Even so early, two
vehicles accelerate past

*dawn is already booming, the surf crashing, birds calling and a
while later, traffic up and down the old coast road. Wind is forecast*

⁴ "Once buried beneath the earth's crust, The Gib's hard old bones of plutonic rock have been exposed as the ancient land eroded away. The 180 million year-old mountain is composed of igneous rock called microsyenite, a kind of trachyte" (Lemann J, Simons J, Smith E, Wright C, Moffat J R, Elphick M (eds) 2007, p. 21).

⁵ Chinaman's Creek has an earlier name I believe to be lost. The river flat above its confluence with the Nattai used to be a market garden tended by a "chinaman". I believe he was murdered. Today this fertile ground lies under a shopping mall. This is a fact.

⁶ Djon Mundine writes: "Water sources, springs and waterholes themselves were considered of extreme importance by Indigenous people as sacred places where the souls of unborn and dead people reside" (Mundine, J 2007, p. 1). I use 'holy' in respect for this Indigenous sacred, my Catholic baptism, and my Celtic forebears' understanding that all of nature, including its waters, is sacred, "The life within all life is holy" (Newell JP, 2021, p. 149).

*to reach 40 kilometres per hour from the south in the afternoon.
This day is writ large with wind*

I walk a watershed; I interpret the verb 'walk' loosely, including
climb, scrabble, slide, cut thistles, wander ...

... sleep

*our walking is a form of deep listening, a "quiet still awareness".⁷
Walking therefore is also pausing and being still. We walk for
thirteen and a half hours, yet I walk only thirteen kilometres or so.
Often, I am still.
A still point in a swirling windy day*

the Gundungurra people named this place "Bow-rell" for its
height,⁸ or Mittagong for its rocky hill.⁹ It is part of their
"Mirriigaang Mountains (the Dingo Mtns)"¹⁰, watershed of the
Nattai River¹¹ below me. These people are not so visible on the
surfaces of their mountain, or the suburbanised society below.
Perhaps the first crevice of safety, their anonymity, enfolds these
people. Their lovely rolling-syllable language persists in the names
of mountains, rivers, ranges, names that somehow echo in my
pre-dawn sensorium. It sets my skin trembling, permeable.

Like its Gundungurra people, the dingo too is not so visible. Living
safe in remoter creases of Gundungurra Country than Bow-rell,
dingo remains important to this place: some say "Dingo makes us
human"¹²

Knowing that my world is built on their loss of language, genocidal
dispossession and displacement ... this is uneasy

⁷ Ngan'giwumirri woman and Elder Miriam Ungunmerr Baumann (from Nauiyu in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory) explains the concept and spiritual practice of *Dadirri* (da-did-ee) as an inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. (Ungunmerr, M 1988.) This concept is foundational to both our research. The Yuin concept of 'look, listen and see' is a practice of deep listening where the combination of senses and attention attuned with Country can bring insight (Harrison, MD & McConchie, 2009).

⁸ Lemann et al 2009, p 19.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Barrett J, 2015, p. 89.

¹¹ According to historian Jim Barrett, in 1818 the Nattai was known as the "Gandanguura" and flowed through "Gandanguura country" (Barrett, J, 2015, p. 97).

¹² In 1992 anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose gave this title to her account of two years living with the Yarralin people of the Victoria River region of the NT. She writes, "Ancestors and contemporaries, dingoes are thought still to be very close to humans: they are what we would be if we were not what we are" (Rose DB, 2000, p. 47). In 2022 Bandjalung curator Djon Mundine used the same title for his catalogue essay for *The Dingo Project* exhibition at Ngungungula in Bowral, on Gundungurra country (Mundine, D 2022, p. 13). Both writers explore and document the interconnectedness that binds all people and their consciousness, to all that is more-than-human. An echo of this interconnectedness flickers alight in our walking essay.

erasing language and knowledge is a founding act of colonisation

*the Wadi Wadi people name the escarpment Merrigong.¹³
I live on a narrowing of land defined by Merrigong and the coastal
edge. This is the northern part of the Illawarra, Wadi Wadi Country.¹⁴
Further south Geera¹⁵ and Djembla¹⁶ form part of the Five Islands
dreaming story, but this far north I don't know the Wadi Wadi names
for the local places I walk*

*Ursula Le Guin and David Mitchell talk about the primordial power of true names¹⁷
we walk in echoes of true names we cannot hear or repeat
we feel through the soles of our feet*

Mirriigaang/Merrigong

*the Wadi Wadi people are not so visible to me on the surfaces of this
suburbanised coastline. I walk to evoke crevices and sensibilities the
Wadi Wadi elaborate, living this coastline for tens of thousands of
years. I walk, to loosen a shimmer of older stories and imaginings, to
fold and enfold¹⁸ deeper relation with Country. Everywhere I trip over
European names only recently imposed. A kilometre in the west, water
brims escarpment edge, or pulls by gravity from ground. Water
emerges almost imperceptibly. Partway down the slope other watery
imaginings meet, trickling and transforming. By the time this
confluence is named Stockyard Creek across the road from my house,
it carves a deep line with sheer vertical sides. A culvert takes it under
the main road, to the beach. This is where my walk begins*

I carry my father's lovely Gaelic name *Dalziel*: the place where
sunbeams touch the grass, a precious sight in rainy windswept
places like Scotland. I descend from poor people of the soil, share
their loss of independence and ancestral belonging, their
displacement to industrial cities and empire. The grief for these

¹³ Knowledge arising from in place common usage today (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation 2016, p. 1.)

¹⁴ I refer to the Country on which I walk as Wadi Wadi, as specified by Wadi Wadi elder Dr Aunty Barbara Nicholson. In the instances where Dharawal Country is referenced in this paper, it is geographically sited adjacent but further north to where I walk.

¹⁵ Geera/Mt Keira is a prominent mountain within Merrigong (Illawarra escarpment) folds, sacred to the Wadi Wadi people; an important women's site, and part of Wadi Wadi dreaming. As in footnote 13, my knowledge of these names arises from usage, accumulated over time from oral sources, and shared by generous teachers: specifically, Wadi Wadi elder Dr Aunty Barbara Nicholson and Yuin women Dr Jodi Edwards and Linda Kennedy. Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation share dreaming stories through their work and publications.

¹⁶ Djembla/Mt Kembla is sacred to the Wadi Wadi people, an important mountain for men's business and part of Wadi Wadi dreaming. Like Geera it is formed within the folds of the escarpment, just a little further south (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation 2016, p. 1).

¹⁷ For both Le Guin and Mitchell the power of true names is transformative. To speak true names evokes rightful place and power for the entity whose name is spoken (Le Guin, U 1993, pp. 15-17; Mitchell, D 2014, p. 24 & 436).

¹⁸ Geographer John Wiley narrates a single day's walking on the South West Coast Path in England, as a folding and enfolded sensorium, occurring between the self and the world, so too in this walking essay (Wylie, J 2005, p. 240).

violent ruptures is intergenerational, remains in me, in the colonial
society I inhabit
a settler colonial Australian, artist and activist, I long to belong

*Buckmaster most likely originates in Buckinghamshire in England, but
my roots are also Scottish, Irish, Norwegian and Germanic. I descend
from people who arrive in Australia in the 1830s, as convicts and free
settlers.*

Though their arrival is more an un-settlement¹⁹

*we descend from displaced people, carrying grief for trauma and loss
their mis-placement displaces First Australians*

we are mis-placed people

all my life I feel this disruption in my body. I too, long to belong

my name calls me to active hope, hope in the dark.
To live with this history, in this place at this time, I must invoke
what writer Rebecca Solnit calls “Radical Hope”²⁰: recognising that
while acknowledging the darkness of the world, we also need to see
those remarkable achievements towards its restoration. It might
become a place to recover symbiosis with all that is
more-than-human, for mutual survival. This requires that we
choose how to act and then carry it through: activism as a daily
practice

*I enter into conversation with Country²¹ during and after the Black
Summer fires. I am trapped for three days with my family on Yuin
Country in Manyana and experience a shift in my psyche from a heady
disembodiment to a guttural depth; to hold space for myself and
family. Later I return to Manyana, and am led by this newly centered
sensorium, to wander through the bush, to “budge thick tar-like grief/
sticky, staining, tricky, blaming”²². I feel that the fires burn away our
skin-thin settler narrative, exposing the deep wound of this country,
pressing upon an urgent need for all Australians to face the truth of
our shared history. With Country, the rhythm and cadence of walking
illuminates a path to follow; where everything is connected and
intertwined,²³ revealing reciprocal ways for healing the self and*

¹⁹ Dr Anthony McKnight challenges the use of the word “settler”, suggesting “unsettle” is a more appropriate word for the ongoing violence of colonisation (personal conversation 2023). Tensions arising between these two words and realities tremble throughout this essay.

²⁰ She explores and elaborates on this theme in *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Solnit, R 2016).

²¹ “We use the word Country with a capital C as an act of solidarity” (Buckmaster Dove L, 2023) with First Peoples and all that is more-than-human.

²² Buckmaster Dove L, 2020.

²³ In the Yuin ontology of oneness, everything is connected (Arnold, Atchison & McKnight 2021, p. 132).

*Country; single slow, bare steps toward belonging. Walking as
tremulous relation; walking as activism*

*today I walk beyond the immobilisation of grief, with a quiet
thrumming optimism felt first in my feet, meeting the earth.
Rearranged, earth spells “heart”; a second “h” makes hearth: our
home*

the Ancient Greek word for home is oikos, which is the root word of “ecology”²⁴

*this earth ... our home, ground on which we all turn, with radical
hope at the central heart of the turn. Martin Luther King says, “We
must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope”.²⁵
Radical hope then is the opposite of stasis: an expansion into the
shared stories belonging to this time, with our more-than-human
collaborators
an opening to emergent possibility²⁶*

I step up onto dark trachyte stones of the Joshua Stokes Memorial,
welcoming its familiar curves ... almost a folly...
an Edwardian lookout with no vista to behold.
A line of steps fans onto the intersecting roads and opens to a flat
lozenge. Stone paving ends in a curved low wall on either side of a
gap.
Pause and it takes your gaze to the summit of the mountain,
a secret line of sight, a threshold
A brass plaque remembers Alderman Joshua Stokes’ unpopular
vision: to limit privately enclosed land, he urged that public funds
purchase land for a nature reserve, a place for local people. He
loses his seat on Council, but the park expands to protect much of
the mountain and its fragile, endangered, more-than-human
communities²⁷

gratitude sluices through me

I follow the wallaby tracks to where grass and scrub give way to
the hard, eroded trachyte core. There I wander and wait for my
shadow to appear, and wonder where you are

*where I walk, there is one kilometre between Merrigong and the coast.
This sliver of land bears a suburb and a rail line, its foothills contain
coal seams, shales and claystones. Nutrient-rich soil supports
rainforest and sclerophyll bush. The sliver continues to narrow,*

²⁴ Schwarz A. and Jax K 2011, p. 145.

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words in a Washington, D.C. address in February 1968.

²⁶ Adrienne Maree Brown’s model for emergence strategy “emphasises critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and mind” (Brown, A 2017, p. 3).

²⁷ Lemann et al 2009, pp. 49-50.

travelling north, where escarpment becomes continent edge with Dharawal Country in the Royal National Park.²⁸ This is 120 km from where it begins at the juncture of the Shoalhaven and Kangaroo Rivers in the south.²⁹ Like Bow-rell, Merrigong is an ancient volcanic upthrust through sandstone, weathered by wind and rain.³⁰ For almost seventeen years I walk this narrowing strip in various configurations. For the last six months or so, Dr Anthony McKnight³¹ and Wadi Wadi elder Dr Aunty Barbara Nicholson³² guide me to walk a small loop out from my home.

I walk north along the road where a single line of houses perch atop the low cliff edge, through the cemetery, then below its headland to a sheltered cove and sea pool. When the tide permits, I walk back along the seafront, navigating boulders and slippery rock platform.³³ At the beach, I pass through a fringe of banksia, lomandra and weed, up a short bush track to home.

*This walk is less than two and a half kilometres.
This is where it begins*

I am looking across Mirriigaang, following water coursing to the
Nattai River and its northward flow through ravines to
Warragamba, the Burragorang valley drowned for Sydney's water

my shadow shortens

I follow wallaby paths – fresh and older scat – to the bare rock near
Mittagong lookout; I am tracking water flow.

I double back south along the loop road. I find the first culvert and
track the water's exit (blackberried) under the road.

While it is wide enough to shimmy through, its concrete pipe is
bare, dry and uninviting

this day forces me from my imagined path

²⁸ The Royal National Park (RNP) is a part of Dharawal Country. RNP was designated a national park in April 1879, the second natural area of beauty to be accorded national park status in the world, after Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (Local History Sutherland Shire Libraries).

²⁹ Merrigong/escarpment is formed from an ancient subsidence of sandstone which began rising above sea-level about 180-200 million years ago. It is between 300 and 600 metres at its highest. It looks like a fault-line but is in fact the product of erosion (Young, RW 1979, p. 3).

³⁰ and also tsunami, I'm told, but have found no supporting written scholarship for this claim.

³¹ Dr Anthony McKnight is an Awabakal, Gumaroi, Yuin man; educator, academic and advocate for embedding Country within academia; also associate supervisor on my creative research.

³² Dr Aunty Barbara Nicholson is a Wadi Wadi elder and Doctor of Laws; and guide on my creative research. In the body of this paper, I refer to her as Aunty Barb as I do in conversation.

³³ Rock platforms are geological formations created when cliffs are worn down by the sea (Readers Digest 1968, p. 124.) The rock platform between the pool and home is strewn with sandstone boulders slipped down-slope from the escarpment. Turbulent weather of the last decade alters boulder configurations, dramatically shifting known, well-walked paths across the platform, prompting foot-prod-stability-testing and new route finding.

Oola-boola-woo,³⁴ the west wind presses against me. I am rattled. I wonder how to manage the day. As I arrive at Wombarra pool, I look for willie wagtail who skits above saltbush and acacia shrubs, into the wind protected interior part of a boobialla³⁵ shrub. She shows me what to do

on this side of the headland out of the wind there is a sense of calm. I feel the invitation³⁶ to stillness. I sit down

I briefly follow the excoriated route of piped water into an ecstasy of swift little birds – masked stubby tailed scrub wrens, a splash of limey yellow, a raucous white cockatoo

this is a day for immersion in small spaces; in creeks and fissures, an invitation into crevices

a tall Brown Barrel gum, all but dead in the drought, has healthy new growth maturing from its dying epicormic cry
It marks the second culvert.
Fire and humans ensure all tall trees on the mountain are the same age, about 110 years. I know deeper folds with mightier trees, far older, that escaped both

with every intake of breath, we begin

you and I exist because of the outbreath of trees. We literally breathe in and out with trees in the most fundamental and generous act of reciprocity³⁷

³⁴ Wadi Wadi people know the west wind as Oola-boola-woo, a protagonist in the creation of the Five Islands (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation 2016).

³⁵ The word Bubiala is believed to be derived from an Aboriginal Tasmanian language, to describe a different species to that known as Boobialla today. Boobialla or *Myoporum insulare* is a hardy native juniper-type plant, endemic to Australian coastal areas, stabilising dunes, banks and cliffs. Its edible purple fruit is used for making jams, jellies and gin!

³⁶ Attunement to invitation and permission form the marrow of this walking essay. Lizzie's research considers how artists might work with place and permissions which build respectful, reciprocal relations with Country; where Country includes land, flora, fauna and people (Arnold, Atchison & McKnight 2021 p. 132.) Annemaree's research uses deep listening while walking Country as a strategy to investigate how our bodies remember the grief and guilt that our society forgot; to recall forgotten stories that haunt us until we remember and make peace with them. Attending and asking permission is central to this. Therefore, our walking/deep listening pays particular attention to affective resonance, and direct connection with Country, such as exchange with birds, wallaby or shell. We walk actively, nurturing exchange with the more-than-human. At times we are invited into relation, at other times permission is withheld.

³⁷ Janine Bailey is an artist, PhD candidate and friend of both authors. Janine invites participants to breathe in and out with trees during a masterclass with Finnish Professor Daniel Peltz, organised by Robyn Backen, at Sydney College of the Arts in 2022

this culvert feeds water from a lovely
birds-and-flower-and-maidenhair glade in the fissured mountain
top, a heaven of crevices. I could wriggle through it and avoid
setting foot-to-road ... a third culvert takes a rock-sheet-rivulet
from a smaller glade, with its sweet pittosporum fringe, under the
road

*a culvert ferries the creek under the main road, then out again, to
where I breathe with trees. Water glistens, in rightful relation with sun
and air. Refracted light briefly blinds though mesmerises. Frogs
crrekkk. Next to the sea pool, the creek disappears underground again.
I'm uncertain where it emerges next. Is it the concrete-staining-trickle
piped through the new retaining wall a little north? If so, it's a
diversion, and its creek identity is obscured.*

*remnant bush and community gather in the places where water
courses Merrigong to the coast.
Banksia integrifolia, she-oak, saltbush, grevillea, a lone norfolk pine,
two rabbits, plastic, polystyrene, currawongs, magpies and myna birds
co-exist.*

*Emergent crevices of native and mis-placed.
I am still, in place*

I bin the rubbish and continue north

I follow the road home, tracing the fall of water in grassy soaks
through first one neighbour's place, then another and another to
mine. I eat breakfast, make yoghurt and drive Djon to his train

*three repeated cycles of La Niña drive large waves in a series of east
coast lows, carving out the beach and eroding the shoreline. It is a
rapid unmaking and re-making of this coast. This year, La Niña has
ended, and smaller waves bring the sand back.³⁸ Beaches are
unusually wide. I walk beyond headlands further than I've walked for
years, until dreams of coffee and breakfast return me home along the
seafront. I pick a few sea-side mustard leaves and place them on my
tongue, biting down to extract their juice, to assuage and damp down
my hunger. I arrive at 9:15 as you drop Djon to the train*

³⁸ Brander, R 2023, p.28.

The Second Loop Sensorium

I leave for where Chinaman's Creek navigates a grassy path to the
ravine. It may rain but I don't take waterproofs, knowing I will
seek shelter

*I leave as cumulus cloud banks atop Merrigong, pushed from the west.
I leave my raincoat at the front door, wanting lightness not bulk. With
willie wagtail's teachings, I slip into the first creek crevice, across the
road*

I head down the back, pulling spring grass, wild lettuce,
nasturtiums and milk thistle for the chooks on the way. I track
down to the creek's grassy route

*insects flick click clack as they rise collide land back on leaves.
I lever into the creek, enclosed by canopy over steep eroded banks*

soon the creek bites deeper into rock, the mountain enfolds its path.
I pass rusted corrugated tanks, jettisoned decades ago when
municipal water suppliers banned household rainwater tanks,
descending to where a rock-strewn creek bed develops

*sunlight filigrees the fascia of the concrete culvert, through gaps
between the leaves of pittosporum, sandpaper fig, banksia integrifolia
and casuarina trees, which line the creek. I stand with trees, still,
transfixed*

crevices abound with lomandra, nodding lilies, native geranium,
maidenhair and other ferns; a gathering growth of sweet
pittosporum lime-lights my path. Three years of rain has watered a
rich seedbank

*curiosity calls me to walk under the road to reach the beach on the
other side. The culvert is large and I can stay upright. My passage
accompanies insects skitting water, a dense and dark surface. Trainers
sink in sandy soil and I stop short; a milky blue-green wall of
phragmites and vivid green cunjevoi³⁹ illuminate the beach end, gently
blocking my way. My curiosity ... do I mistake call for invitation?
Ground shifts, water laps my feet.*

³⁹ Cunjevoi is a Bandjalung name for *Alocasia brisbanensis*, native to northern NSW and south-east Queensland. (Qld Dept of Enviro & Science, Species profile). Though not naturally occurring in the Illawarra, they thrive here, gathering at under and above-ground watercourses. I know we are in for a long-dry, when they die back beside my letterbox. Similarly, I feel a surging lightness when their thin delicate vivid green leaves reappear.

the crreckk of frogs above and below a weir and pond, collapsed
arboreal skeletons and a chorus of suburban roosters. Cockatoos
and forest birds background an invisible jet headed for Sydney. A
kookaburra hunts and calls. No reptiles in sight but ratcheting frogs
ward off the traffic noise scaling the mountain

*I track a path up the creek, hopping rocks instead. Memory of my
children playing here echo with each carefully placed foot. I look for
'Big Red', a water dragon elder. Does he retain superiority? I see no
sign. At the place of a resident eel, a vortex sucks sand down a
plug-hole through rocks from one small pool, to another below. The
lower pool billows clear then earth-clouds to mud. Ten minutes later
the suck hole ceases and the lower pool is clear again*

I photograph a tree, a great basal split reaching high up its long
dead trunk to where it leans into and props a long dead neighbour.
Logs lie everywhere, little caves forming where falling wrenches
roots clear of soil

*fallen sticks, branches and weed line the creek. Ferns root in fallen
logs.
Trees cling, their complex root systems cantilevered over the bank,
hollowing space a small child might slip into; or oversized, crouch
like spiders ready to spring*

lomandra sprays pale yellow flower heads held in red-maroon
clusters. Indigofera pea flowers are almost spent but Hardenbergia
pea flowers bud and climb delicately. Tree roots and trachyte
boulders nurture new ferns, moss and lichens, with long-legged
ants and iridescent flies enfolded deep

*I centre on slippy stones, make holds with roots and rocks.
My hand presses against a bank of dense soft clay ground. I probe
with fingers, inside clay body, cool and welcome, flooded with
sensation ... of moulding, holding a vessel. Mottled clay-smudge
striates my hands red and white*

while the creek is empty, unlikely pools perch unexplained, stray
water seeps over rocks. It tells me a big dry is coming. I crouch
against a small plane motoring overhead. As I near the ravine, the
creek traverses bared trachyte and a pool forms. Just beyond, five
concrete stepping-stones carry the Ravine Walking Track over the
creek bed's stone sheet to ascend the mountain

*sticks scratch my ankles and wrists, thoughts of spring-time waking
snakes form. I falter and turn, abandoning my short essay up the
creek. Permission denied. I pass by slipped sandstone blocks, the
remains of an old bridge over an earlier more inland coast road; now*

*returning to ground. Blocks exist as wall, slip, fall, narrating the
story-passage of all living things. At the culvert juncture, cars lure me
above and I follow their sound*

traffic sounds rise and I wonder if the ravine is truly clear of traffic
noise as I tell you. Perhaps I filter sound selectively in this place,
tune into my more-than-human companions, find a fond crevice of
imagination

*drawn by frogs, I slip off the road into the second culvert. Logs florid
with autumn fungi-remains, purple-brown translucent when first
flourishing. In April I lie here, horizontal with insect-hopping earth,
observing their fragile, permeable flesh-like folds, illuminating in
sunlight, shimmering*

*in autumn cunjevoi mass this creek, blocking passage to the rock
platform
now they reveal a path, their rhizomatous corm-systems in drier
ground, their earth greets my feet*

I am happy here. I sit on the rock bottom; impulses thudding
through my buttocks. Attention energy. Overhanging the creek
ahead, a casuarina lacks its glossy blacks. Air pressure shifts,
meeting the fluid flow of my eardrums as I open to bird sound

*I shelter in a small shale declivity as fat splotches of rain arrive.
Ferns lace the overhead rim, framing my vision south to the
steelworks and Five Islands, just visible through gathering sea spray
cloud. Sea and sky mirror grey, white, bruised, blustery. Rising and
melding together. Dirt and twigs caught in abandoned spider webs are
sticky in my hair*

I sketch the casuarina without the patience or habit to catch the
delicate calligraphy that transfixes me. The caress of the tree settles
me into the rock, peace comes upon me⁴⁰

*rising tide rushes the rock platform. Seaweed clumps crab, shifting
sideways, closer with each rise. Ever and always, all is in constant
flux and change, so utterly apparent on the coast. I think to you
somewhere in the southwest, in your own cycle of walk - pause - write
- repeat*

⁴⁰ A.R Chisholm describes Gaelic idioms surviving in the English language poetry of Australian lyric poet John Shaw Neilsen (AR Chisholm (Ed), 1976, p.46). My writing “peace comes upon me” rather than “I was peaceful” is such an idiom. In so describing this experience, I suggest that affect derives from a connection to all that is more-than-human, rather than being an autonomous human reaction to the sensory world.

a tumble of rocks and a tangle of long fallen limbs bark twigs
challenge my path. I sit. A geebung⁴¹ and its grape green fruit says,
“Stay. Feel the boom of water that made this accidental weir.’ What
force will it take to wash this weir away, disperse its skeletal story?

*I sit on a grassy bank, grey-brown sea with white-froth-topped waves
unfurl the rock platform edge. Spume and mist lower and settle, I wear
their thin sheen. I search for a sign of what I know is beneath and at
last see one, then another, then another. Water surges up from rock
tunnels undersea imprinting swirling circles on its surface. They stay
in place despite the surf torrent*

just here the creek rifts the mountain, to expose the river flat below.
Industrial complexes and warehouses sprout where market gardens
once flourished. A sea of steel and concrete surround where
earthmovers excavate and flatten red soil. This ravine frames the
world I am born into. I hear a souped up V8 roar the highway,
oblivious to the stippled birdsong holding me here

*on a low-tide-still-day entirely unlike this one, I snorkel with my
family here. I witness my son Wilkie’s passage through these tunnels,
honing free-diving skills learned in lockdown spearfishing with friends*

the ravine steepens and thin, rocky plates shear off like stingrays,
awaiting unwary tread. A semi-circular divot holds water and
masses of gum leaves, before another weir of tumbled rock and
scrumbled trees marks the top of the next near vertical drop

sea circles widen,⁴² eyes to the incoming storm. Points of knowing

eastern spinebills and tiny scrub wrens gesture me to a rock floor.
Rock walls rise to foot paperbark bottlebrushes that offer me
shelter from misting rain. Here maidenhair dries from trembling
green life to arid crackle, beside a fringe of blooming *Lomandra*
longifolia and piled up branches remembering unstoppable water,
ferocious rain. This is pause to feel

pause, to feel a place

a tall tree fern announces rain is coming with new, just-unfurling
fronds. I find myself in the sound bubble I claim exists. I feel relief
at truth being with me, where ochre sludge and iron-rich rock
cradle red pools. This place IS insulating us from the boom of

⁴¹ Geebungs are a small native tree or shrub growing on the mountain. This one is the broad leafed *Persoonia levis*, (noted in The Gib 2009, p. 138).

⁴² Poet Rainer Maria Rilke lives “in widening circles / that reach out across the world” (Rilke, R M 1996, p. 45).

traffic. Its pre-colonial rainforest life hears no cars, and if I strain, I
hear that rainforest

a point of departure

my path is “dangerous” for a human in boots. Yet this scramble and
climb roots me deep in a self that grows more porous, less bounded
by skin, attuning, rhizomatous ...

*you walk out of yourself “and into the mountain,” walking “the flesh
transparent”⁴³*

...it is both delicate and brutal here, no excuses or rescue, no
malicious intent or malevolence. It just is

*I shelter from weather in the ley-side of the cemetery headland,
cross-legged and still. Drizzle mists leaf, skin and hair. I am
unbothered.
Rain just is; I just am*

we are in pleats, folded into Country, mountain and coast

*my eyes fluctuate closed and open, feeling for connection, attuning to
the voiceless ones.⁴⁴ the self, slippery with place*

thirsty and carrying no water, I head home along the nearby fire
trail ...
rain showers strengthen

*cold chases me on to the road to home
and the dry wind-protected warmth of the studio*

The Third Loop Pool

POOL LOOP

is a palindrome

a reflection

⁴³ Shepherd, N 1977, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Anthony McKnight says the eyes are always open when we “look, listen and see” because otherwise “how will you hear the voiceless ones?” (personal conversation, May 2023).

*a reminder of the infinite echo of footfall
that near imperceptible tremor connecting me to you*



the tremor is faster than water flowing down my mountain

*there are fifty kilometres between us, as the crow or currawong flies.
Yet, it is an immeasurable distance if we plot it by waterways weaving
from your highland home down mountain, rocky cliffs and Merrigong
to coastal plains, into the sea, alongside mine*

These creeks and ravines flow into rivers. Gundungurra rivers take eels to the sea, to their oceanic migration, to their moment of conception.⁴⁵ As they swim north, river water dissipates in ocean currents, flows south, tides and swell taking it to you. Great cycles of evaporation, cloud and precipitation return it to me. On the brow of the mountain pools form ...

*pools brim, Merrigong a precipice
spilling to more than fifty creeks down-slope*

*we recognise the internal waterways of one another, the way water
moves through the tissues, the sensoria and landscape of our bodies*

our collective watery body

*water is both “conduit and mode of connection”.⁴⁶ We walk to recall
an elemental flow through altered landscapes, experiencing
“ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies”.⁴⁷
Walking and writing are embedded in a circular relation of oceanic
thinking,
in the ebb and flow of being*

*Aunty Barb describes relationships as overlapping circles, where none
are distinct or separate and all are connected. Symbiosis and
reciprocity are inherent in these connected relationships even between
far-flung circles – as they are connected through a series of other*

⁴⁵ Eels in this part of NSW make their way to the sea and swim far north to New Caledonia to breed and die. Their tiny transparent offspring begin a long journey south. Those that survive find their way inland along rivers and creeks, living many years until it is their time to migrate north to breed (Allen, GR 1989. p. 26).

⁴⁶ Neimanis, A 2012, p. 97.

⁴⁷ Neimanis, A 2012, p. 96.

*circles, like links in a chain. We care for one another.⁴⁸ We walk, feel
and write with relational circles, tracing yet more circles with
Country. We are implicit with the more-than-human; complicit in care
for Country*

my parents are in their 90's and have only a little time still to live;
my beautiful twin grandsons live in their own temporal crevice, in
their less-charted paths to connection. So I walk impending loss

we walk

*as I walk, memories of walking with my friend Anna,⁴⁹ Anthony, Aunty
Barb and Dusty, my thirteen-year-old daughter arise. Dusty's lifelong
friend Maggie walks with us as well.
She recently left her life*

*Maggie is here: with first light, and the lingering moon.
She is part of our waking thoughts, and every intake of breath.⁵⁰
She is with the rising sun in the east, filling our bodies with warmth as
we walk*

I walk down my creek to an overhang I know, high on the steep
side of another ravine, another creek.
I pass through a scorch of banksias, remembering a recent
fuel-reduction burn.
I come close and ask, 'How are you?'
Hear relief in their fuzz of unfurling sprouts ...

*I cradle the grief of Maggie's loss,
like the welcome swallows' cupped nests of mud and grass,
folded closely into cliff crevices below the cemetery, above the sea
pool*

a fantail and little rufous birds speed me past tree-hollow king
parrot nests
while unseen ravens draw my ears south,
the wallaby trail is north ... I pause, await permission to use it

⁴⁸ (personal conversation, August 2023).

⁴⁹ In April 2021, I walk with artist, friend and collaborator, Anna Hart, every day at first light. Anna walks a work entitled *Red Rag* in her last hour of light, in London, with a different woman every evening. She walks a conversation concerning women, identity, and safety in protest to the then British government's advice for women to stay home after dark to avoid men's violence; following the well-publicised murder of a young woman by a policeman. For *Walking with a Friend at Sunrise who is Walking with Another at Sunset*, I walk into a new day over and over on the other side of the world. This is an act of hope; toward a new dawn where women might be safe to walk alone, without fear.

⁵⁰ Citing *The Book of Endings*, Jonathan Foer Saffron tells how our every breath contains molecules from Julius Caesar's last breath (Foer, J F 2019, p. 3). Thinking with this, it becomes possible that Dusty breathes in molecules from Maggie's last exhalation, the two of them remaining connected by an endless looping breath.

*all year Dusty and I accept invitations to walk
through the cemetery to the pool,
expanding a gentle, tender space for difficult and brave questions,
to practise the heavy work of carrying grief*

I see wallaby scat and sit apart, leave their camp to them.
It is wind sculpted here; spiders inhabit its myriad pocks.
I face the trachyte shoulders and summit that bear me each morning

as I walk, grasp, shimmy, pull up, or lever myself into a ravine, I
think of the boys

I carry the boys with me; they need us to pause, make time,
listen and help them connect

in this temporal crevice, where walking is pausing

Toby sings and Malcolm runs, living in movement – joyful, lissom,
agile

*we listen, hearing them with all our senses, our whole bodies trembling
water carries us each to the other, a conduit for connection*

Autism is a “disorder” of connection⁵¹
of which ‘stimming’⁵² is a symptom

...but how can we reduce such purity of delighted song or a joyful
body in motion, to self-soothing?

to honour their gifts requires different attention, new ways of
relating.

It is as I succumb to the deep fatigue of grief, of knowing all this,
that I reach out to you today, to slide towards your words.
I begin to mourn

⁵¹ Autism (noun) is defined by The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition as:

1. A pervasive developmental disorder characterized by severe deficits in social interaction and communication, by an extremely limited range of activities and interests, and often by the presence of repetitive, stereotyped behaviors.
2. A mental disorder characterized by inability to engage in normal social interactions and intense self-absorption, and usually accompanied by other symptoms such as language dysfunctions and repetitive behavior.
3. Behavior showing an abnormal level of absorption with one's own thoughts and disregard for external realities.

⁵² Stimming is a general term that many clinicians use to embrace the many repetitive movements, sounds and actions seen in people with autism spectrum disorder. They believe stimming may regulate emotions (Personal conversation with my sister, a kindergarten teacher with expertise on children diagnosed with autism, 2023).

*grief comes from multiple directions all at once, captures us with
forceful, muscular blows*

*we surrender, rag-doll as waves hold us and pummel; and wait for the wave's retreat
every day our shadow forms anew; we begin again*

walking is both companion and remedy for grief

we walk it/work it through⁵³

*in the company of one another and our more-than-human
collaborators*

there are wounds in our nation's soul that stiffen and constrain us,
that separate us from our more-than-human context. Artist and
scholar Ross Gibson⁵⁴ suggests our culture needs to remember, to
see and feel its violent past, to find rituals of mourning that can
relieve the melancholic narcissism that haunts us, occludes our
being, our belonging

this is the heart of the matter

*it is with hope that you and I walk, in this time of tumultuous turning.
The turning is both large and small – a walking loop which turns back
toward home at the point of the pool, the tide, the weather, the season,
the climate, the reason, rhyme, the politic*

radical hope is the centre of the turn

*each step, intuition, imprint, impression, thought, memory and words,
rising up out of the day, takes us deeper into connection, with the
multitudes of place. We walk together, pacing, mapping, witnessing;
embodying both inner and outer worlds. Our adjacent walking weaves
these worlds into relation as surely as if our steps are stitches into the
earth⁵⁵*

the definition of autism I find, to help me understand what is seen
as a disorder in two little boys, sounds very like First World
colonial cultures: a competitive, industrialised world of
fragmentation and disconnection; a self-centred individualism that
easily develops varying levels of violence towards one another and
the more-than-human we arise in. bell hooks calls this an “overall
crisis in human values generated by dominator culture”.⁵⁶ Our

⁵³ Here walking is central to remembering and mourning. Historian Dominick La Capra discusses mourning as a form of “working through” loss or historic trauma that requires “socially engaged memory work” so that people can reinvest in life (La Capra, D 2001 pp. 65-66).

⁵⁴ Gibson, R 2002, pp. 165-167.

⁵⁵ Solnit, R 2013, p. 130.

⁵⁶ She describes dominator society as “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, b 2018, p. 29).

dominator society demands that we turn our backs, disconnect from what we in our privileged ways do to the world and its climate, showing no empathy, even to one to another

Tim Flannery suggests that to have real hope, “we must first accept reality. We must cut through the dense and complex debates about climate that leave many feeling lost and paralysed”.⁵⁷

in returning to the place of her childhood and generations of black farmers in Kentucky, bell hooks finds a remedy in her custodial care for this place.⁵⁸ Reciprocity with place, with Country, becomes a fulcrum for a tipping point toward restoration, where life sustains

Climate experts, Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac say that “tipping points are non-linear”⁵⁹ meaning that we can’t know what action or series of actions might influence or be a remedy to climate change. Could the tipping point arise from a pool loop, from a series of relational circles with more-than-human collaborators?

such relational circles exist still in Indigenous cultures around the world; how easily we forget that we are all Indigenous to somewhere. Our mis-placement takes most of us far from our more-than-human knowing-places and the memory that resides in them. We ache for them⁶⁰

*remains of a midden⁶¹ unearth during sea pool restoration
... large-cut grey-blue rock quarry from another part of Country
re-earth it again. With time, shell fragments chatter their way to the
surface, they’ve so much to say. What is muted or unsaid rises, loops
around, begins again. I graze fingers along fragments exchanging
silent words with shells and the people who place them here*

⁵⁷ Flannery, T 2015, p. 1.

⁵⁸ hooks, b 2018, pp. 6-22

⁵⁹ Christiana Figueres is former UN Executive Secretary, and Tom Rivett-Carnac, senior political strategist for the Paris agreement (Figueres, C and Rivett-Carnac, T 2020, p. 55).

⁶⁰ In writing lovers, John Berger and Anne Michaels invoke the power of remembrance, the Angel of Memory, to transform Walter Benjamin’s despairing Angel of History. Rather than allowing amnesia to take hold, the “Angel of Memory ... collects these souls from the ruins of history”, and “... carries lovers in her arms ... the way one man carries another man” (Berger, J & Michaels, A 2012 p. 76). Memory is critical to radical hope, and central to Yarralin understanding of the interconnectedness of all things and to “the future of life on earth” (Rose, D 2000. p. 24).

⁶¹ Middens are shell mounds, the remains of food shared over millennia, connective signposts for food source, seasonal variety and sustainability. While “unsettler” culture understands the word midden to mean rubbish heap or discard pile, I understand this to be far from the truth.

welcome swallows carry whispered shell-song with the wind
we tremble⁶²

Fourth Loop Archipelago

*on the final late afternoon loop I take the dog. I need the fortitude of
her company to re-engage with the weather*

I return to the summit. As mists roll in and clouds form,
Mirriigaang's peaks are islands. My dog country mountain(s) and
your coastal edge are islands in an archipelago, floating in the
proto-sea of misty water particles, that links Country we are
walking

*on from the pool a small sandstone tumble-down wall marks where
earth and beach meet. The wall shelters sea-side parsley, warrigal
greens, a flat edible leaf and nasturtiums. All but the warrigal greens
are mis-placed, like those who built the wall; complicit in the rapid
unfolding, unmaking and remaking of this stretch of coast*

together these plants tremble and thrive

*despite constant avalanche of loss, the shedding of all we know, hold
dear, yearn and hope; life keeps finding and insistently streaming
through us*

the space between our footfalls shines as a reverberant sea,
drowning suburban clatter and engine noise. The interstices of our
footfall are crevices in the fluid shimmer that draws us into the
possibility of relation with one another and Country

into crevices of relation

into a space where we can truly remember and feel

I fill my palm then pocket with parsley, the salty taste of sea.

I sprinkle some on most evening meals all the following week

⁶² In deep listening, in attending to the more-than-human as we walk and write together, we find ourselves in another way of thinking. Caribbean born writer, poet, philosopher and literary critic Édouard Glissant calls this '...tremblement ... neither incertitude nor fear ... thinking in which we can lose time, lose time searching, in which we can wander, and in which we can counter all the systems of terror, domination and imperialism with the poetics of trembling - it allows us to be in real contact with the world and with the peoples of the world' (Glissant É & Obrist HU 2021, pp. 140-142).

this sea carries vast trust – in it we tremble and find generosity. It
fills crevices that shift and change, every footfall a particle in an
incoming wave, in a rising tide and an imminent retreat, infinitely
looping

*three La Niña cycles re-site a large clay bank on sand, beside the
sandstone wall. Water rives a new free-flowing course through clay. I
pause with these complicated places, a parsley crevice and slip of
clay, attuning to a strange shimmery sacred*

I pause

On a rock high on the peak, I see a fissured space where wind water
sunlight and a million molecules split the rock in two. This fractal
reminder tells me that continental thinking is an edifice that may
split.

Riven by vulnerable lines it can fracture unexpectedly

*a coastline after all, is fractal⁶³
the further one zooms in, the longer it grows
the finer the scale for mapping, the more you notice an infinity of
creases,
infinities of connection*

a singular rock becomes two, islands in an ever-forming
archipelago⁶⁴

*these islands summon and connect us
cycles of hope live here, find sustenance in crevices
the continent faces itself, remembers its archipelagic possibility, its vast island relations
we trust seepage, into each other*

walking with moon, earth, sun, place, one another and Country

this is the beauty of Relation⁶⁵

⁶³ Liptrot, A 2016, p. 259.

⁶⁴ Glissant uses a geographic metaphor of a chain of islands, an archipelago, where flow around and between ensures encounter with otherness, in contrast to the staid insularity of a continent. He calls us to archipelagic thinking, “a place where we can begin to understand and resolve the contradictions of the world ... Archipelagos are able to diffract, they create diversity and expansiveness, they are spaces of relation that recognize all the infinite details of the real ... They open us to a sea of wandering: to ambiguity, to fragility, to drifting, which is not the same as futility” (Glissant É & Obrist HU 2021, pp. 19-21).

⁶⁵ “Relation” is capitalised here in deference to Glissant, for whom new and poetic forms of relation can emerge from archipelagic thinking. According to Hans Ulrich Obrist, one of Glissant’s favourite sayings: “I can change

clouds gather at dusk on the mountain, my shadow goes

I stand in the cemetery. The sun drops to the top of Merrigong

I walk west to farewell the sun, as clouds enfold it

*I stare through cloud until the sun becomes a blank white disk, sunken
and distinct from the sky*

*grief seeps like water gathering in windworn pools
Country takes grief into deep calm
memory, peace and place take hold
relation enfolds us
this is where it begins*

*as exhausted as the light we walk home.
clouds swallow the sun and the day is done*

~

On the Origins of *Let me Tell you About a Place*

This is the full text of an original paper published by the Creative Practice research group at Charles Sturt University for the inaugural edition of *Journal of Creative Practice Research* 2024.

The piece grew out of two exploratory walks with Wadi Wadi and Gundungurra Country, from first until last light (6 October 2023) by Lizzie Buckmaster Dove and Annemaree Dalziel. Informed by field-notes collected during the walk and recollections elaborated after, this embodied essay emerged as a spoken text, a piece best read aloud, preferably while walking.

When writing together, words and rhythm reverberate through the authors' bodies returning them to memory of feet meeting uneven ground. The authors imagine performing the text together while walking an infinite pool-loop of relation.

Our process honours seepage, of words, thoughts, affect and attention. Perhaps particularly attention most of all, the attending to all-that-is-not-me.

Let me Tell you About a Place owes its form to John Berger and Anne Michaels mesmerising and lyrical *Railtracks* pre-performance text; commissioned by the production agency Artevents for the 2005 London season *John Berger: Here is Where We Meet* (2005).

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through exchanging with others, without losing or diluting my sense of self'' is what archipelagic thinking teaches us (Glissant É & Obrist HU 2021, pp. 11-12).

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