

Out of Place By Chris Barry

Hidden Valley runs off Undoolya Road. These are Santa Teresa people. Catholics. I re-remember the flotsam and jetsam of aboriginal life. Mattresses in the open, cars, dogs, belongings, debris. The feeling seems contained, relaxed. We sit on the ground and prepare Christmas lunch. Here Margaret Mary is the boss, we her servants. The hierarchy is established and obvious. The grandchildren play under the tree with a hose. The old women tell them off continuously, complain about paying for wasted water. In this system everyone knows their place.

Diana arrives at the homelands with a truck full of women and children. I hop in the back, the lowest position in this social ordering. The women are highly animated and in good spirits. The excavations look like archaeological digs. Crowbars, spades, axes, are used to shift these great roots. Punu (wood carvings) for the tourist trade. All the women laugh at Pantjiti's tenacity to pull logs. I wonder whether we'll get out of this creek before dark.

One step in a different direction can change histories. Anangu feel sorry for anyone that's alone. One doesn't exist in their culture. People automatically take two biscuits.

Opposites create confusion. First world money preys on third world poverty. Ambiguity and misunderstanding. This place becomes the threshold of some other thinking, some other reality. The ghosts infiltrate and make their presence known. Mad dogs and Englishmen go out into the midday sun. Difference creates havoc.

A female lawyer travels to Tennant Creek to defend 150 charges, the consequences of zero tolerance. Intolerance towards another culture. The systematic removal of people occurs on a regular basis, but no-one notices.

I look outside and view heat. Ernabella is crisp, potato chip crisp. There is no generosity in this severity. Days of distances. A motel becomes a bus stop. Kulgera sits between self and other. This exotic is brutal. Fierce temperatures make the uninitiated afraid. Thirst and death enter the imagination.

I view photographs of naked aboriginal children, assembled within the formality of a school portrait. Is it the formality or the ordering that remains the most offensive? White social desires placed onto bare flesh.

Erica tells a lot of stories. About her lineage which goes back nine generations. She knows the history of Alice Springs. Can still find local bush tucker. She remembers different town camps located in a different time. Erica does all the talking. Charmaine listens and feeds her baby, Mason.

I meet a young camel woman who traverses large tracts of country with her husband, two children and a train of camels. She has never met Robyn Davidson. The gesture of travel is fundamentally romantic. I write this place into existence. History, after all, consists of specific lives.

The natural grasses are bleached yellow. Abject in their dryness. Dense and hairy. Two histories clash head-on and everyone walks away with severe headaches. For superiority to exist, there must be inferiority. Gestures of historic exclusion. A forest of she-oaks passes by my car window. The mathematics of desire. It's 7.00pm and the light is dancing. I notice the spaces between things.

Anyupa's fathers remind me of the men from my own past and heritage. They throw me back into my own history. I look over to the trampolines and see bobbing heads. Little kids mimic big kids perfectly. Repetition and precision. The local hoods walk past, they have the attitude and gait of trouble.

Mythology states that spirits and wild running women occupy the cemetery just past Jay Creek. Three young boys break down near the cemetery, eyes wide open. They urge us for a tow.

The River becomes a social bonding, a social body. A place that people enjoy. Tell stories. Life in the River is complex, it exists within its own cultural frameworks. Aboriginal culture exists and survives in the River. People go there to reunite with kin. White frameworks remain privileged and exclusive.

This is a very big white house. I sit inside behind my own wire cage. Fly wire windows surround the front verandah. I carry the burden of colonisation. The white colonialist sits inside, looking out. Observing. Repetition and perspective.

A young boy suffering from malnutrition walks through Yepereny shopping centre. An old man holds his hand. Men roam the shopping mall carrying coolabags. There are too many women walking around with white bandages. A local sculptor reconstructs camp dogs from clothing found in the landscape or in the streets. A pair of Reeboks hang from the branches of a gum tree. Each morning the stream of people converge to the centre of town, like the flow of a river.

The procession is just leaving the church with the child's body. A small white coffin. This is the second child that this young mother has lost. Too much death.

The community wails. A deep wailing for a lost child. Life resembles a war zone, but there's no war. New paradigms for survival become urgent. I follow this procession, holding Anyupa's small hand.

The water is murky, thick like milky coffee. He kept looking out at what he knows. His past. Another life.

We sat at Glen Helen near the refrigeration, away from people. He seemed totally outside. Removed.
People don't necessarily fit into white frameworks.
We left. And they just kept staring.

A pack of dogs fall asleep together, articulate in their arrangement. Heat arrives at 10.00am and leaves at nightfall. Aboriginal life exists on the ground, you can see everything. A father hoses down his naked child, there's too much heat. We experience dusk on Sammy's metal verandah, a house on stilts, that looks out onto space. Papunya, a place full of puppies.

Excessive heat is followed by excessive rains. Alice becomes Darwin. Rocks cascade like the movement of water. The country becomes musical in its rhythmic motions and spatial arrangements. We swim at Ormiston to the sound of running water and a chorus of frogs.

You mob get out! You mob coming on this bus now!
Mandy, get out! You mob that came earlier, get out!
Yeperenye at the swimming pool, Friday afternoon.

Anyupa tells me, this isn't my friend, this is my sister. If you're a Napurrurla, you're my mother. If you're a Napanangka, you're my aunty. She understands skin names, non-linear and root-like. Horizontal lineages that spread like plant roots. Anyupa, at age seven, understands Deleuze and Guattari.

The women assemble in their wit and camaraderie. A female paradise, set in the desert. The shadow reality of place and time. Other histories. The night is stormy, dramatic, unpredictable. A flock of birds screech far away, in the distance. Geckoes dart in every direction. Frogs croak noisily. The cacophony of sound and movement. Night shift, the realm of insects and other nocturnal life.

Where in the schema of things, in one's own lifetime, does this nomadic tendency manifest. The desire to displace oneself – from what is known, knowable. To remain restless. Is this simply the logical extension of migration. The lot of a migrant's child? At age seven, I discovered the Nullabor. Understood saltbush.

Ewaninga. Red powdered rocks, fossil-like and brittle. How many millenniums before this brittle rock turns into sand? Stillness, except for the wind. The wind roars wild, but the country breathes a haunting stillness.

I gauge this place via my body. Memories compound like layers of rockbed. The black silhouettes of Emily Gap, on a clear night in January, look like two protruding breasts. At night, cattle and wild brumby graze or stand motionless, transfixed in the middle of vast roads. This evening, driving home from Ormiston, the MacDonnells looked like soft baby's skin.

Lush, a green word. A third of Australia is underwater. The Todd is fat and flowing fast. People come to observe

this great swelling. Roads to communities have turned into mud. Food drops are immanent. Water, the arbiter of life. Without water, there is death. Different summers, different histories.

She plays in the waterhole non-stop, amused and self absorbed. This goes on for several hours. All one sees is a bobbing head. She bobs up and down in this great volume of water. Crystal is four years old. She has no fear.

To catch a fire. Energies remain contagious.
Today, Julie turned 13.

OK Yeperenye mob get out! Don't look at me, jump out now! You mob get outa the pool! Daniel, get out! Let's go!

What's your name? I tell him Chris. He tells me Cameron. I ask him, what grade are you in? He holds up two hands, ten fingers. Cameron speaks Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte. Julie walks past and bangs the head of the boy next to her. I wonder what he said.

My lipstick attracts kids. I'd forgotten. Renae is 13, Rosanne is 8, and Leroy is 12. They're all kin, kids from Hamilton Downs. The two girls ask a lot of questions. Do I have children? Do I have a boyfriend? Can I speak Arrernte? Why do I dye my hair? Leroy speaks four languages.

Lawn has spread throughout the whole country. Soft growth, luminous, lime. Flocks of lime green budgerigars reinforce this greening. At dusk, soft pinks and mauves compliment the colour chart. Opposites emerge. As evening grows, the softness begins to resemble frost.

I come from big-breasted women and soft skin. Skin changes colour and creates a new personae, like a shadow. The night is black and deathly still. Moist, balmy, erotic. I take this memory and store it in my body. Everything, after all, is delegated to this great storehouse. The roof creaks and I smell rain.