1. Not Quite White in the Head

1. Very Small Story

Earthspeaking? You will think of it as a big story, a national story. Native Title. Salinity, Landcare. Turn the rivers backwards, or find that inland sea. It’s Burke and Wills, it’s the Bush Tucker Man, its drought and flooding rains, but no. Stop. Pause for breath, since people in a hurry cannot feel. You say: It’s a big country. I say: there isn’t much room for everyone’s big stories.

Things change. Down the track a bit now, some migloo might be thinking: Oh, The Land – something bigger than themselves at last. A chance to be Humble. (It’s hard to be humble when you’re not.)

Only, we are asking you, pause for breath. The earth is not in any great hurry for your prostrations, fabrications, speculations. Take one day for looking. For one day:

Do not plough.
Do not burn.
Do not plant.
Do not clear.


I am earthspeaking, talking about this place, my home and it is first, a very small story. Tell it softly, so that someone might by chance hear you. One valley. A tree with a crooked branch where children swung with children’s hands, a soft look of the pasture in the buttery afternoon light. The cold scent of dew on purple-tipped flatgrass, grass that can be stripped and played like a gumleaf if you know how. It is land with a small ‘l’ and the people? They are off to the side somewhere. They are important, yes, but they aren’t the whole story. Nothing is the whole story, by itself. Not the people and not the land either. They need each other. So gather round. This earthspeaking is a small, quiet story in a human mouth, or it is no story at all.

2. Pica

We grew in paradise, lost and found. My family lived on three acres in Brisbane’s bushy southern outskirts. Turrble land, but under Jagera care during the 70s and 80s. We were poor, but nobody thought to say it, and by the time I arrived, child number seven, nobody was going hungry anymore. We had land – what else mattered? Mum’s green thumb made anything grow. Magpies flung themselves theatrically into the kitchen, braked as sharply as military aircraft onto the back of empty chairs, and delicately took scraps from our hands. The winter wattle and oodgeroo blossomed along the fenceline each year, and there were blue-speckled yabbies in the dam if you had a string and a piece of soggy gristle. My mother smiles wryly at nature shows on tv, the ones with the baby birds in the nest, screaming for food. I know just how the
mother bird feels, she says every time. She means us kids, and before us, herself, growing up with wild oysters the difference between going on and starvation.

Early part. I climbed the mulberry tree, avoided my brothers, crouched in childburrows amongst gritty lantana stems. Most of all I watched my father use a sharp, longhandled shovel to feed us. He had left the meatworks by then, and become an earth scientist in the most literal sense: he gathered and mixed and sold soil to local gardeners, on a scale so tiny it was both heroic and ridiculous.

The rhythm of Dad’s shovelling - the brace of the long wooden handle against the pale boomerang of his left leg, the scrape of the blade as it picked up its endless burden, the plumping of black loam into long rows of heavy plastic sacks - that rhythm is the beat and echo of my childhood. It is a slow, deliberate beating, hour upon daily hour of his labouring, and I can still hear it. Every dollar that ever came to us came on that worn shovel blade, and the phrase ‘the sweat of his brow’ has never seemed abstract to me. If anything was less remarked on than the need to sweat in order to live, it was the value of the earth, the essential virtue and worth of the soil.

Everything that springs from the land is goodness, but we were poor and if I never see another choko, it will be too soon.

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At ten we were the grandchildren of Ukrainian peasant farmers or White Russians who had fled the revolution or middle class Czech refugees or… The answer depended who you asked, and their state of mental health at any given moment. Dad spoke - spoke? became - Russian with certain visitors. That was not exotic to me but a given. His accent otherwise was the broadest Australian, peppered with bush lingo. That was a given too. A dark teenager in Joh’s Queensland, I was quizzed constantly about where I was ‘from’, and given careful instruction in the following mantra: Your father is Russian. Your mother is Scots, Irish and English. When I was fourteen my mother confessed, lightly, as though her attention had lapsed: we were Aboriginal. In the same decade, the government stopped removing Aboriginal babies in Queensland.

A year later I read Gone With The Wind in a night. The racism passed over me, but I never forgot Scarlett’s heresy. Why did the Irish make such a fuss about land, when any bit of land was the same as any other? How ridiculous, I thought, how strange these Americans are. No bit of land is ever the same as any other.

At twenty I learned that my father, Wally Lucas, opalminer, canecutter, meatworker, amateur geologist, soil bagger, had been born Vladimir Lucashenko to a battered mother and a bigamist father with another family in the US. Uncle George had no birth certificate, Shanghai wasn’t the place for them in 1926. Aunt Vicky was really Vera. My dead grandmother had been a cardcarrying Communist Party member. Apparatchiks from Moscow once dined in the big house, long ago sold off to a local farmer while we seven were raised in a converted chicken shed.

If Russians are a riddle wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma, we were more Russian than any of us knew, and black to boot. So many of our stories go nowhere, double back on themselves, drift into silence. What was consistent in my life was
rarely people – so prone to revolution, subjugation, assimilation and madness - but the land that fed us. Red and pungent with the iron that Mount Tamborine had spewed millennia ago, clothed in the beautiful open dry sclerophyll forest of bayside Brisbane, bonecrunchingly hard as you fell from a galloping horse or out of a jacaranda tree – the land was what I turned to, just as my Aboriginal and Ukrainian forebears had. Blood memory will have the scientists scoffing but there are ways of knowing that fall outside science, for now.

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3. Sea People

Give me a yumba jahlh-jahlhlah, a home among the gum trees, I say, and among the blackboys (Xanthorrhoea) and acacias too. Yet the trend for our lemming nation is to plunge ever closer to the ocean, and I too have washed up in a coastal village on Bundjalung land. Our six-street village is like the inadequate shop in O Brother, a geographical oddity, exactly twenty minutes too far from anywhere to usefully commute and hence full of artists, single parents and speculators driving slowly up our street with their Queensland number-plates, peering at the poor.

When I tell people where I live, they usually develop a glazed, envious smile. Byron Bay, but no, thankfully, it isn’t Byron with its neverending sun-redened tourists, its overpriced groceries and traffic snarls. Home is another, more ragged version, where you know everyone’s name or at least their dogs’, and nobody locks their door at night.

But why the smile? Where has this particular craze for the ocean as sanctuary for troubled souls come from? Has Seachange got a lot to answer for? Or is it simply that the new international economy has deserted the cow and sheep cockies, and with that their cultural significance? Some say that with a growing knowledge of contact history, the gloss finally wore off the bush. We know – or should know - that blood has indeed stained the wattle, Henry, and the bleeding hasn’t stopped yet. Maybe in the imagination of sympathetic whites, the coast was just a tentative stepping stone to later inland savagery, and remains less tainted. I’m not so convinced. The rivers of far northern New South Wales ran red with all our bloods, just as the Maranoa and the Murray did, and anyway its not as if so very many Australians care.

Perhaps the lust for sea air grew in the misanthropic cities, where to the descendents of convict masters other people are inevitably a menace and the quarter-acre block no longer seems empty enough. The wildness is, after all, implicit and explicit in those shark-laden waves. With the deep marine at your doorstep, you’ll never be surrounded on all four sides, no matter how close the barbarians press in. The sea calls to us*:

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long roll the ocean, from which we all have climbed 
and into which all our cliffs sink 
and all our setting suns recline 
long roll the ocean, that is thickened up with ships 
and long live the bloody ocean, where the driftnet clogs and dips 
the dark water reminds us 
how shallowly we plant our feet,
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the solemn water nurses the soft paradox of boating,  
the water rocks and soothes us to a safe, undrowning sleep  
yes, the singing of the ocean runs a ripple through my sleep, yes  
I am counting on some kind of resurrection from the deep.

Christian humanity being Bad and in need of resurrection, the rush is on. Inland blacks are left looking at the broken remnants of the pastoral industry, and the faint breath of a chance to recover their lands as the defeated whites move off it. Coastal Murries and Koories take a deep breath, and dig in. We wait to be pushed out by skyrocketing real estate prices and the cries of delighted tourists.

“It’s so beautiful around here, so green and quiet and lush.”  
“Yeah, that’s why your mob stole it.”

Any real estate agent worth even half a pinch of salt can tell you if we all live by the beach, life will be an eternal surfing holiday with fish and chips, and there will never be bad times or pain. But no, sorry to say, life in Byron Shire means sand on the floors and sand in your clothes and sand in your lunch, and living in the muddy rain shadow of Mount Warning, and dolphins at the beach every day except when the visitors come. It means weekends full of blow-ins from Brisbane and no decent cinema within striking range, and an annual drowning or two at the beach you’ve stuck on your city fridge as a postcard. It means terrible food for the poverty-struck locals and smiling for the rich visitors in a Shire where award wages are a utopian dream and everyone pays for living in paradise, one way or another. And its green and quiet and lush, too, of course.

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4. The Law of the Land

Clay: 1. a type of small-particled earth used in the manufacture of bricks. 2. (archaic) the material of the human body

Aboriginal peoples around the globe recognise ourselves primarily by the landscapes we call home. We are saltwater people, freshwater people, island people, forest people, desert people. It is taken for granted that the landscape which has fed and nurtured our ancestors has shaped us in deep unspoken ways. Who understands this? Gardeners, perhaps. Stonemasons. Certain poets. Some farmers, and some fishermen, but by no means all.

In Yugambeh, the language of the Gold Coast and its hinterland, the inland peoples around Beaudesert greet each other jingawahlu? Literally, from where? Where have you travelled, stranger, and can you a tale unfold? There is a Russian moistness to this word, the ‘j’ pronounced ‘zh’, the vowels long and slow and softly spoken. Coastal Bundjalung further south have sharpened and hardened the word. “Gingawalla!” (latterly, ‘walla!’). Coastal people have always been more active traders, more accustomed to strangers arriving by both land and sea. Sea people have less time for long vowels and extended greetings.
Regardless of their origins, Aboriginal peoples share a common devotion to their own country. No matter how stony, cold, barren, dry, hot or harsh their country might appear to others, to its indigenes the country is the only place that truly matters. It is where they or their parents were born, where their ancestors are buried, where the generations before them have lived and died. It is indisputably where they belong. It is where a correct life is possible; your true country is the Good Life incarnate.

They want me to go to Paris! Why would I want to go to Paris - I'd rather go to Tennant Creek for a week.

Central Australian Aboriginal writer, upon being invited to a literary festival.

For Indigenous people steeped in meaningful tradition, to live outside one's country is to be constantly in peril, spiritually, emotionally and physically. Exile is a peculiar form of illness, and of blindness, since the stories which give life meaning – the pedagogies of the generations – are contained not in books or language alone, but in language expressed within and by landscape.

Young men walk through the land, knowing that a Sky Hero was punished for rape by being tied to an ant bed which became a sacred mountain. Every time they pass an ant bed, or see the mountain, they remember the Law. The land teaches them how to live, and what it is to be a man.

In a foreign land, the earth itself, the mountains, birds, flowers, rivers – all these are telling unknown stories, signifying unknown events and metaphors. Western culture lives in people, influenced by their environment which they conceive as more or less separate to themselves. Indigenous culture lives in the more porous space, the relationship, between humans, landscape and animal life. Identity becomes far more diffused and democratic than that of industrial people. With the merging of the self and the environs, a particular form of human arrogance simply falls away. I tell a local Bundjalung man that I mistakenly saw a branch floating in the bend of Simpsons creek, just upstream from the New Brighton bridge. As I watched, the branch turned into an enormous eel swimming lazily upstream. The creature as thick around as my lower leg. He says to me:

That's me. I am the Eel. That's me, the eel in this creek.

He is claiming many things. Totemic affiliation, cultural continuity, that this creek rather than any other creek is his Dreaming. But go beyond the political and the social, to where Indigenous identity transcends the body. He really is the eel, and any harm done to the eel is harm done to him also.

Known Indigenous country is healing, nurture, sanctuary, responsibility and safety. Unknown country is frightening, inhabited by dangerous spirits, liable to violent defence by its true people. Yet in an indigenous sensibility, there is (or was prior to the massacres and removals) no wickedness, no barren land, and no dead heart. The land is not cursed, and nor are its human inhabitants. Resurrection is not required where there has been no Fall.
Land is simultaneously myth, and resource, and history, and economy. Wilderness is a white idea of a land empty of people, but before white contact there were no such places. Every landscape had its Dreaming Law, and, for all their connections and shared stories, no piece of land could possibly be the same as any other. Just as all people had value, so did land, value that included but went beyond the economic. If humans could find no use for certain tracts of land, then the remaining creatures would. As sentient beings, their use of the land had value, and purpose, and spiritual meaning. The land is what it is. Only a fool would attempt to meddle too far with that.

The Europeans came and overstocked and overstayed. We know the results. White Australians still run from the parched land they have created, seeping to the coastal edges of the continent as though the stories of the inland have frightened them away. You fought the Law, and the Law won. You came in boats, and stepped onto the sand, but you forgot to pause for breath.

5. Geography in a Global Age

Read the real estate pages of Brisbane’s Courier Mail. Any house substantially of wood and older than twenty years is now a “Queenslander” it seems, and commands a premium.

At last available, this magnificent 1895 Queenslander with spectacular north-facing views over the city. Three bedroom plus sleepout, two rear decks, or simply relax on the front verandah. Spacious hallways and living areas recall the traditional ambience of yesteryear. This home will not disappoint.

The Queenslander lifestyle is meant to convey an atmosphere of summer indolence, perhaps by the pool but certainly taking in a verandah and an open-plan weekend where cold drinks and friends replace the claustrophobia and TV of the brick bungalow. The verandah is a way to be in the world while not amongst the throng; we can all be little Caesers with our hoop-pine heights to look down from. There is also a pleasing sense of history to a Queenslander – the patina of tradition is added to what is a functionally pleasant building.

Throughout high school and university, I mostly made my money painting houses. It wasn’t all bad. If you have to be a housepainter, Brisbane is the perfect place to be it – lots of wooden houses and a hot climate that means a steady supply of work. Today, when I see Queenslanders advertised as the epitome of the Leisure Class dream, I think not of iced drinks and barbecues, but of long hours with a heavy electrical sander in hand, masked against flying paint dust and my hearing, always poor, getting exponentially worse from industrial noise. I think of the wrist-ache of painting long, narrow battens, and the way every single wooden corner inevitably houses a redback or huntsman. I remember too, the icy touch of polished wooden floorboards in winter, and the marrow-freezing wind coming off the hills as I attempted one July to remove the gloss enamel from a west-facing Kenmore window. Living in a Queenslander then was substantially further away than a dream. Now, when it has become possible, I still remember the Queenslander in a wholly practical way and remain unmoved by the real estate section of the weekend paper.
Class has always altered perceptions of place, just as race and age and gender have. My point is that as specific environments – the Byron Shire; the ‘Queenslander’ - become more and more commodities rather than places to make our lives in, we are more easily divorced from their real nature. With few exceptions, we don’t know the land well, and yet (incredibly) we can live materially rich lives in spite of our ignorance. Leaving aside those with a real economic relationship to earth – small farmers, fishers, geologists – only those who lack motorised transport have much practical understanding of geography. Forced to walk it daily, live off it and sometimes sleep rough upon it, ignorance of the land is not an option for the very poor, many of whom are, of course, Aboriginal.

Despite having evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to be intimate with a particular place, the rest of us live separated from landscape by our lack of time, our cars, our electronica, by our intellects, our mythologising, and by our ridiculously high expectations of Nature. As Barry Lopez, puts it:

> People only able to venture into the countryside on annual vacations are, increasingly, schooled in the belief that wild land will, and should, provide thrills and exceptional scenery on a timely basis. If it does not, something is wrong, either with the land itself, or possibly with the company outfitting the trip.

Leaving aside the impact of Playstation, two-income families and Channel Ten upon our ability to connect with wilderness, Australians are among the most transient populations in the world. There are places, and nations, where you can expect to live and die in the same village as your great-grandparents, and where this is seen as unremarkable. But Australians have notoriously itchy feet. Non-indigenous people regularly spend hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to buy the dream of belonging in Byron Shire, and still not finding it, are disappointed, and move on to the next dream location, the next Seachange. It is far easier to move to the next city than to develop the courage to live locally, to commit to a landscape and to a community. In Alcoholics Anonymous, the rush for a new life in a new place is called ‘doing a geographic’ and we are a civilisation expert in this form of denial and avoidance.

For millennia, the opposite was true. Each part of the continent had its heroes, its band of indigenes who knew it in a huge variety of ways, from the mundane to the sacred. Each tiny part of Australia – every beach, every cove, every mountain and floodplain - was known, and named, and loved. Perhaps much of it still is loved by owners black and white. Landcare, and Clean Up Australia Day, and local environment groups are flourishing as some non-Indigenous Australians take care of the land they live on. The activities of these groups are the expression of finding personality in the landscape, which is the only permanent means to protecting it.

> The land is a blueprint for everything else. We have to look after it. And its not enough just to talk about it – you actually have to do it.

Kombumerri elder, Mary Graham

The Australian landscape has always held the powerful stories of those who love it, from Strehlows’ Aranda tribesmen to Patterson, Wright and Garner, Scott and
Winton. There is nothing especially mysterious or even Antipodean about this earthspeaking. All it requires is time, and a patient eye, and a certain amount of devotion to the task, a belief that the land matters as we do. It is this idea which is relentlessly battered by international capital, as we are asked to forgo belonging, and to accept that any place is the same as any other, that apart from purely functional aspects, the land has no personality, no infusion of spirit.

Big stories are failing us as a nation and will probably not save our natural environment (i.e., us) from the greed and stupidity and indifference which assail it. But we are citizens and inheritors and custodians of tiny landscapes too. It is the small stories which attach to these places—a single creekbank, an acre of remnant rainforest, what David Foster calls ‘the glade within the grove’—which might help us find a way through. The irony is that—with the despoiling well under way—white Australians are still learning to look to us, whom you call nomads, for a way to understand the nature of what was taken.

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poem extract from ‘The Harbour Colony’ by Cathoel Joerss, in her collection “Going for the Eggs in the Middle of the Night”

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