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# From Somewhere

EVERYONE COMES FROM somewhere. Even if you like to think you are your own creation, a citizen of the world following your own whims and dreams, there is always a *somewhere*, or several, that provide the bedrock of your being. Places put a sensory stamp on you, even if you don't realise it at the time. It is often physical and always emotional. The memory can mug you when you least expect it, and reduce jet-lagged travellers to tears. It may be triggered by the way the light falls at a certain time of day, the mist rising over a valley, the sun glinting on surf, a shimmering mirage on a country road, or by the sound of a magpie, the roar of a football crowd, a howling wind, a song, or the intonation in a voice. Maybe it is the smell of summer rain steaming in tropical air, the crush of gum leaves, choking bushfire smoke, stale beer tramped into sticky carpets; or the taste of salty water at the back of your throat when you dive into a wave, or the melting ice-cream you ate to take away that bitter taste.

For years I tried to find the peppery smell of the summer wallum on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) in the dunes that guarded other beaches. I would embarrass my children as I reached

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into the bush to crush a leaf to see if it would release *that* smell. I did this up and down the east coast, crunching banksia and tea tree leaves, bits of pandanus, she-oak and casuarina before I gave up. It is a unique aroma of just one place, ‘Straddie’—the distillation of its unique flora, fauna, water, sand and wind, rain and sun. It is more distinctive than any spray puffed by the perfume ladies in David Jones as you make your way across its marble floors. And much more evocative. Even recalling the hunt for that peppery aroma immediately conjures memories from almost every phase of my life.

Long before it became the preferred holiday destination of Brisbane’s professional class, Straddie was a place rich with joy but laden with trauma and shame. For the Quandamooka peoples, it is a part of their being. I first travelled across the waters of Moreton Bay, rich with jellyfish, turtles, dugongs and dolphins, on a school biology trip, passing islands that had once been prisons, leper colonies and places of exile. We were to stay in the former asylum. Maybe it was because I hadn’t lived in Queensland long, but there was something about the lightness of the air and welling water that told me this was a special place. We were there to learn about marine ecosystems, carefully picking our way through mangroves to collect samples of murky water, mucking about on boats to gather seaweeds and scoop ladles of invisible plankton from the warm waters. It was a lesson in the links that sustain and nourish a complex network of life. The astonished joy of finding countless tiny creatures swimming in a drop of water under a microscope made me think I should become a marine biologist. It was an ambition that didn’t last the year.

In the early 1970s, the notion of an ecosystem was purely an ecological concept, explaining the complex connection between living creatures and their environment. But the bigger lesson I took from that trip was about the interconnectedness of human life and the cruel world in which it played out. Incidentally, because it was a science trip, it became an opportunity to begin to learn about the people who had

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lived on the island for tens of thousands of years. This signalled more than curiosity about scientific inquiry. It was a sensory experience in a place alive with human beings and their stories.

Over the next decade, tens of thousands of school children met the great poet and advocate Oodgeroo Noonuccal, whom we then called Mrs Kath Walker, and learned more about Minjerribah. Through her, middle-class Brisbane kids learned that Aboriginal connections with their city were alive, deep and close by. And beautiful. This marked the beginning of a very different way of seeing and being. It was completely at odds with the prevailing images of Aboriginality: segregation, impoverished settlements, foreboding missions or boomerangs, ashtrays and tourist shop kitsch. Her patient, impassioned and persistent storytelling shook these preconceptions to their core.

After years of measured and effective political activism at home and abroad, the well-connected and influential poet had a new mission. She had felt the pressure from a younger generation of activists to step aside. She retreated to the island of her childhood, and established a *gunyah* at One Mile where she and the other six children in the Ruska family grew up.<sup>1</sup> The bayside settlement had once been an Aboriginal mission, close enough to the asylum that accommodated ageing, destitute and mentally ill men to walk to work but far enough away to be invisible. The Ruska family had ties to the island that went back generations, but by the time Oodgeroo returned she was worried that the island was dying, the birds and animals disappearing. The shy nautilus that emerged from the ocean had been chased away; cars belched fumes; tourists scattered cans, cigarettes and even the hulks of their vehicles; and sand mining drowned out the sounds of natural life. She was determined to preserve and share the deeper drumbeat of a more complex sense of belonging. In 1972, the year after she returned and I first visited, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, her poetic recollections and stories, was published. It has been in print ever since and took root in my being.

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The transformative insight from that school trip, into the ancient human ecosystem, was an unintended outcome of my first journey across the bay my Prussian forebears had crossed five score years and twelve before. In the manner of Queensland school camps in that rough-and-ready time, we stayed in the ramshackle timber building where peeling paint revealed some of the scars of its past. At night the boys pretended to be the ghosts of the ill and destitute who had once lived there, carelessly reminding us to be afraid of what had come before. The place reeked of history, but, as was always the way, no one talked about it. It just was.

By the time I returned to the island as a university student, I knew that the building we had stayed in was the remnant of the dwelling that had given the island its purpose for many decades. Straddie had long been one of the many islands where colonial administrators deposited the sick, frail and criminal. First a manned lookout, then a prison in one of the most brutal convict settlements. Then, in 1850, a quarantine station where dozens of would-be settlers who had travelled to Queensland from Plymouth on the *Emigrant* were left to die of typhus. Soon it would become home to a Spanish Catholic mission. A lazaret where those suffering from that debilitating disease would not embarrass or infect the able-bodied followers, and then an asylum where the residents were confined to wards or housed in tents. Those sent to the island were left largely to see out their days with little support. The beauty and abundance of the place, the spectacular sunsets back across the bay, must have provided some comfort for the destitute and ill exiles, but as far as the officials and polite society were concerned, they were out of sight and mind.

This was not the first time I learned that places can carry an imprint of trauma and shame as well as joy. The frisson of embarrassment, the scar of a deep hurt, or the dimly perceived sense that something once happened there and left its imprint. Oodgeroo Noonuccal was always ready to share the stories. She spoke about the island as it was before

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Lieutenant James Cook called the rocky outcrop on the north-east tip Point Lookout. Before Matthew Flinders and NSW surveyor-general John Oxley recorded it as an island. Before the Quandamooka peoples gave refuge to escaped convicts, affording them a status as returning spirits that they did not deserve. Before the cruel Captain Patrick Logan sent troops to clear the Nunukul, Ngugi and Goenpul peoples' bora rings and fish traps to create another island prison. Before Governor Darling named it for the Earl of Stradbroke, and the port of the western edge Dunwich for an English viscount. She told of times before the battles between soldiers and locals left dozens dead. Before a matron beat a child to death and the Myora mission school closed.<sup>2</sup> Before it became a human dumping ground. Before massive dredges began to rip millions of tonnes of sand off the dunes, and out of the spine, of the second largest sand island in the world.

Oodgeroo was a beautiful woman, her graceful presence more imposing than her size, a fierce advocate and storyteller. She had grown up on the island; her father Ted Ruska had satisfied the Controller of Aborigines that his blood line was sufficiently diluted to allow him to work outside the control of Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of Opium Act 1897*, the law that terrorised the First Nations people and whose provisions would prevail (with amendments) for three score years and fourteen. Permission was granted annually, but the threat that at any moment his status could be revoked and the family sent to a reserve was real—even more so because he successfully campaigned to be paid as much as the white men.

Oodgeroo's mother, Lucy, came from western Queensland, and experienced the brutality of separation from her Aboriginal mother and Scottish father when she fell pregnant two years before Federation. By the time Lucy's daughter turned six she was classified as 'quadroon' and sent to an orphanage, never again to meet. The ever-present threat that officials could take children away has stamped generations of families with an enduring adrenal fight-or-flight response. Young

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Kath Ruska's island childhood, learning the ancient stories, language and dances from the old grannies as they chopped tobacco, peeled vegetables and collected firewood, along with newer stories from the *Queensland Reader* at Dunwich School, came to an end when she turned thirteen and boarded the ageing steamer S.S. *Otter* to travel across the bay for a job as a housekeeper and 2/6 a week.<sup>3</sup> Her life as a political activist and writer began a decade later.

Seven years before my school visit to Straddie, Kath Walker's first collection of poems, *We Are Going*, was published and went on to sell 10,000 copies, more than any Australian poet since C.J. Dennis. The great poet Judith Wright was then a reader at Jacaranda Press and spotted her talent. Judith Wright became her close friend, and fierce advocate. *We Are Going* was followed two years later by *The Dawn is at Hand*. Critics in southern newspapers dismissed her writing as protest poems, but she found a ready audience in those who shared her outrage. Kath Walker was proud that her poetry had, in her words, stimulated awareness 'about the plight of the aborigines', and helped set the scene for the 1967 referendum that Australians overwhelmingly supported. The constitutional amendment allowed First Nations people to be counted in the census, and gave people the confidence to vote and the Commonwealth power to make laws.<sup>4</sup> It did not ban racial discrimination, offer constitutional recognition or even require First Nations people to vote.<sup>5</sup> Kath Walker was a worldly woman who had seen politics up close, and suspected her sales were a '*succès de curiosité*' as 'the work of an Aboriginal'. There were limits, as she wrote in the preface to *The Dawn is at Hand*: 'even atrocities were never to be mentioned by nice people'. Her poems were described by the grand dame of political letters, Mary Gilmore, as works that 'belong to the world'. This was just one phase of Oodgeroo's life as an activist who believed change was possible, but in her poems she captured the enduring loss and grief: 'This site was ours, you may recall,/ Ages before you came at all'.<sup>6</sup>

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I HAD ALWAYS sensed this. I didn't know why or how I had absorbed this essential knowledge. Australian history in our schoolbooks didn't get much beyond explorers, bushrangers and goldminers, and geography lessons that required us to delineate the state boundaries and memorise the names of towns, mountains and rivers. Before our move to Brisbane, I had spent most of my life in a remote Lutheran settlement deep in the Western District of Victoria. There, my imagination had been my best friend. The one-church, one-school, one-hall, one-oval, one-cemetery, two-tennis-court settlement was ringed by giant pine trees. There were plenty of mysteries to try to imagine my way out of. A cemetery with graves going back a century held the remains of those who sought to create a religious utopia, farmers who made a living from the rich windswept plains, victims of the Spanish flu and tiny babies who did not survive infancy.

In the 1960s it was one of the wealthiest parts of Australia; the wool boom meant that the farmers with the biggest spreads and fleeciest merinos would get huge cheques for their produce—at their peak these cheques could be up to a million pounds, tens of millions of dollars in today's coin. My father, Noel, was a Lutheran minister, and the farmers in his congregation had been there for a long time. They were not the descendants of the squatters with the massive spreads. Still, they had enough land to ensure that throughout the 1960s the churchyard car park was full of lairy, brightly coloured cars with big fins, gorgeous petrol-guzzling monsters that they parked under the cypress trees every Sunday.

The area, which at the time we lived there radiated from the town of Hamilton, was rich for a very simple reason: the volcanic plains had produced extraordinarily fertile soils that provided sustenance for countless sheep and cattle. Seven thousand years ago, millions of years after the first volcanoes erupted, some were still active, providing enduring creation stories for those who had lived there since time immemorial. The physical residue of lava rocks, pockmarked

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like Aero chocolate bars, still littered the countryside. Many had been reshaped into fences and foundations. Long-extinct volcanoes popped out of the plains. It was windy, wet, hilly and lush with lakes, streams and waterfalls—we called the rugged sandstone Gariwerd mountains that loomed on the horizon the Grampians.

The descendants of the squatters who had taken the land for free had substantial houses, while survivors of more recent wars eked out an existence on soldier-settlers plots that were too small, except in the very best of times, to produce enough to support a family. These farms were dotted all over the country, on land that had been acquired or reallocated from Crown land and Aboriginal reserves, to provide a home and job for the shattered soldiers returning from the Great War. Returning First Nations soldiers who had previously lived on these same reserves were told they could not apply. A gift of land was a time-honoured practice in this imperial project. Distributing it to soldiers who returned from the European war was the big *land idea* in this post-war moment of crisis. Australia's economy was still primarily agricultural. It was not a success. Peasant-sized farms might have been sufficient in another age, but the end of the First World War marked the beginning of another era that gathered speed after the second global conflagration. By the 1960s, few soldier-settlers remained. Agriculture was being consolidated and industrialised.

I was a curious child who was free to roam the country roads and lanes on my bike; to take the chance of riding on railway tracks and bridges that were rarely used by trains; to explore; to pick mushrooms, fruit and wildflowers; to watch shearers and harvesters at work; and to wonder about what had happened before. Our pine-enclosed hamlet was dominated by two bluestone buildings—the new church and the old, which had since become a schoolroom—its perimeter was defined by soaring pine trees and the cemetery.

I probably spent more time than would be recommended for children today in that graveyard, wondering about the lives of those



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who found their final resting place there. Here were the shared plots of extended families. Many of the old men and women had the excessive consonants of Central European surnames, born in faraway places and buried in this untended plot. Ours was a community grounded in the nineteenth-century immigration from the Northern Hemisphere, which effectively ensured there was little chance of return for the Gunditjmara who had been forcibly removed decades earlier and later hustled into reserves. Prussians, Danes, Hungarians and Dutch had been coming to the Australian colonies for decades; by that century's close, German speakers were the fourth-largest group of settlers. They were a more than usually mixed bunch: religious exiles who became farmers and winemakers, intellectuals who had despaired of change in their homelands and left to help shape colonial debates, missionaries who sought to convert, goldminers seeking a fortune, peddlers who became businessmen, scientists who documented the mysteries of the land and its creatures, artists and land-hungry farmers who responded to the offer to clear what they were assured was unsettled land. They considered themselves culturally German, were loyal to England, but dreamt of an Australian nation.<sup>7</sup>

Twentieth-century German warmongering made many of these people, and their descendants, feel like enemy aliens. Settlements they had long lived in were given bucolic names better suited to the English countryside, schools were closed, speaking German was unacceptable. During the First World War years, 6890 people of German heritage were interned in an improvised and capricious system of detention camps dotted around the country during the war that killed 20 million and injured another 21 million, decimated a generation and destroyed families. Victory was not sufficient for Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who was determined that Germany should suffer and was instrumental in the decisions that made the next world war even more horrifying than the first. After the Great War, 6150 of the internees and

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their families were deported to a devastated Germany, a country that the Australian-born had never set foot in before.<sup>8</sup>

The pattern was repeated 21 years later when Germany again launched another even more catastrophic war, and another generation became enemy aliens in Australia, their names anglicised, and those under suspicion interned alongside those of Italian and Japanese heritage. People with German names had learned to be cautious, make themselves invisible, live quietly, engaging as little as possible with public life, change their names, speak softly.

In our little community, everyone had a German surname or one that hinted at its origins, but they felt safe. Those with English or Scottish names were our betters, sitting at the top of the district's hierarchy, living in once-grand houses, exuding certainty that they were of finer stock than the rest of us. If there was an 'other' in those still bitterly sectarian days, they were Catholic, people who also had their own schools and tribal alliances. Little had been forgiven since Martin Luther had nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of a church in Wittenberg in 1517. Class and religion were a potent cocktail, the gulf unbridgeable enough to split a family or kill a relationship.

So, armed with my imagination, I cycled along the roads and disused railway tracks, ducked under barbed-wire fences and walked across paddocks to find the remnant sites of disused farms and houses, pace out the stone foundations, pick what would now be heritage plums and apples from the gnarled fruit trees in long-forgotten orchards, pull the weeds from rusty fences around headstones, and imagine life for the settlers and the religious obsessives who set up intentional communities, scrapping tribes whose different theological interpretations of the same text meant they could hardly bring themselves to talk to each other. A lingering sense of loss and trauma was never far from the surface, ready to be gleaned from a grimace, a raised eyebrow, snatches of conversation or a silent response.

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WHAT WAS MISSING was any sense of anyone being there between the time the volcanoes erupted and the 1830s when the squatters descended. I had a feeling for the country, for the native plants and wildlife that hung on despite the crops and livestock. I was vaguely aware there had been reserves for Aboriginal people at Lake Condah and Framlingham, closer to the coastal towns of Portland and Warrnambool. My sister, brother and I played ‘cowboys and Indians’, re-enacting the American frontier battles we watched on television. When we were the Indians, we hid in the reeds, sloshed across muddy creek beds, crouched behind trees as we pulled arrows from our homemade bows. When it was time to be cowboys, we marched across the bridge above the creek and into the paddocks, cap guns at the ready. Cowboys always won.

I don’t recall if we even dimly wondered if other similar battles had happened in these green, lava-strewn hills and valleys. As a daughter of the Lutheran Church, I knew about Aboriginal missions in Hermannsburg and elsewhere in Central Australia, in the segregated outer reaches of New South Wales and even in the far north of Queensland. It took years before I learned that these fertile lands known as Gariwerd had been the home of the Gunditjmarra peoples for tens of thousands of years; that it carried their creation story, which was no more fanciful than the one we learned about the world being created in seven days; that they had built sustainable settlements, trapped fish, husbanded the land; caught kangaroo, yabbies and eels, and made cloaks from possum skins to protect from the fierce winter chill.

We now know much more. The richness of the First Nations cultural heritage in this part of Victoria is what you would expect for such fertile lands. The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape is now a national park registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List exclusively for its Aboriginal cultural values. As Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe reminded us in their respective books *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and *Dark Emu*, much of this had been known since earliest

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European settlement. Some of the uniqueness of the local civilisation was captured by the artists, the explorers, the anthropologists—those who asked the First Australians and those who looked, curious people whose humanity drove them. Of course, many others just saw an enemy standing in the way of something they wanted. To paraphrase Henry Reynolds, the historian who has done so much to make the frontier past visible, *why wasn't I told?*

I well recall as a child of about ten going to the South Australian Museum on North Terrace in Adelaide with my grandparents, who were conscientious members of the Lutheran community in the church's heartland. Their connection to the church's Central Australian missions was made tangible by the Albert Namatjira watercolour of a ghost gum in a creek bed on the wall of my grandfather's den, a boomerang on the sideboard. On this day, we looked at the Aboriginal collections that the museum had, and still has, including an extraordinarily chilling collection of brutal settlement artefacts.<sup>9</sup> I recall seeing human skulls and not knowing how to make sense of them. On the way out of the museum we passed an old Aboriginal man. He moved, and whether I jumped, took a step sideways or had some other reaction, I don't recall. I can feel my shame and his humiliation like it was yesterday. I remember thinking: *How can he be alive? We have just seen the exhibition. They are all dead.*

They weren't, of course. A fact that came into sharp relief the next year as the campaign to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as citizens reached even these most insular rural communities. By the end of my first year of high school, the great anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner delivered the ABC's Boyer Lectures. His sonorous voice crackled through the transistor radio that accompanied me everywhere: 'What may well have begun as a simple forgetting . . . turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard

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put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.’ At the time, Stanner thought optimistically that the ‘great Australian silence’ could not survive the research that was revealing the depth of complex cultures, research that he was confident would ‘renovate . . . categories of understanding’, along with community interest and goodwill. His unspoken fear was that 1968 might be another year when recognition seemed within reach, and become ‘just another year on the old plateau of complacency’.<sup>10</sup>

He was right to temper his optimism. Old habits of wilful ignorance die hard and can be easily revived when trying to decipher conflicting information. Especially when it is charged with politics. Bruce Pascoe’s book *Dark Emu* broke the silence as it made its way from the tiny Magabala Books offices in Broome to hundreds of thousands of bookshelves. He had unapologetically drawn on the records of settlers and explorers to explain how First Nations peoples husbanded their resources, kept themselves fed and clothed for millennia, and suggested the lessons that might be learned in a climate-challenged world. It was, on one level, an unremarkable explanation, but it found an audience hungry for information, sensing there was more to the story than they had heard. It inflamed critics, who disputed interpretations, questioned footnotes, pointed to more recent and sophisticated sources and understandings of knowledge systems, noted vast regional differences, and argued the danger of imposing the limits of one knowledge system on another. In 2021, when a fresh debate erupted about *Dark Emu* and its author, the process of silencing that Stanner described again came into focus. #GreatAustralianSilence briefly trended on Twitter. As if to prove the point of the power of silence to render us ignorant, many young people commented that they had never heard the phrase before but would use it in future.

To some degree, Stanner was right: ‘mythologising and disremembering are part and parcel of each other’.<sup>11</sup> On 27 May 1967, the

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year before he delivered his lectures, an overwhelming majority of people in all the states had voted to recognise First Nations peoples and enable the Australian government to exercise authority and usurp the brutality of the protectionist and assimilationist state regimes. Over the next few years after his lectures there was more talk that land rights, possibly even a *Makarrata* treaty and way of coming together after conflict, might follow. It was becoming clear, even to a teenager in the backblocks of the Western District, that the self-justifying notion of a doomed race that had so tangibly been exhibited in the display cases of the South Australian Museum was nonsense, despite the brutal efforts of the true believers and the complacency of the rest. The legacy of researchers—anthropologists, theologians, linguists, archaeologists, historians who listened—and the increasingly important work of Indigenous writers, activists and scholars began to build. The once blank slate of Australian history was again filled with the stories of human beings doing the things that human beings do—making meaning, families, societies; living with the land in a deep spiritual connection. It was another 29 years before the knowledge of traditional owners collected by anthropologists became publicly accessible. The colourful map of First Nations crafted by David Hoxton and published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was revealing. Unlike the arbitrary straight lines of state boundaries, which only occasionally twist to follow a river or mountain range, this map of language groups mirrors the land. Rachel Perkins, the filmmaker who grew up steeped in this knowledge, galvanised the nation when she said years later at the 2020 Summit in Parliament House, Canberra: ‘If you are looking for the one thing that makes Australia unique, it is that it is home to the oldest living cultures in the world.’ When you absorb the enormity of that fact, the way you see changes and what you see cannot be unseen.

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THE SILENCE THAT Stanner described is deeply ingrained and perpetually reinforced. He described it as ‘a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape’.<sup>12</sup> Silence is active as well as passive, a powerful way to ‘shun’. Maybe that was why the school trip to Straddie had made such a deep impression. My childhood had been marked by endless road trips, noting the two-faced white roadside markers that counted the distance from Adelaide to Melbourne, Sydney to Brisbane and back again. Our school holidays were divided between those long drives north and visits to my mother’s family in one of Adelaide’s poshest suburbs. There our grandmother took us as childhood emissaries to sing and chat at old folks’ villages and for those living in the cruelly named ‘Home for Incurables’.

Trips to Queensland took longer, through shimmering mirages that would eventually evaporate. We bounced on hard bench seats, endlessly I-spying through the Wimmera, over the Hay Plains, sleeping overnight in the car beside the road in granite boulder country alive with wild pigs and the ghosts of bushrangers, and on, over the border, to Kingaroy. There, in my paternal grandmother’s dark old Queensland, we settled into the very different routines of potato and pumpkin farms, in a town that smelled of roasting peanuts. Our visits drew an inevitable query from the police, *why we weren’t at school*, easily answered as holidays varied between states. Then we’d spend a few days fishing and paddling on the beaches of Moreton Bay, followed by a slow drive through the hilly city, over its snaking brown river and past distinctive-smelling factories that turned rough pineapple into sugary slices, hops into beer and wheat into sweet biscuits. It was impossible to ignore that Queensland was not only hotter and steamier but was rougher, poorer, with little gloss, closely tied to the agricultural production that happened beyond the ranges and further north. Secrets hung heavily in the air, occasionally aired late at night when eavesdropping children were not meant to hear—hand-me-down memories of trips

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down the pass from the Darling Downs to Ipswich on drays laden with produce, and skirmishes with Aboriginal warriors.

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IT TAKES A lot to challenge the reluctance to say shameful things out loud, to find a way of evoking the memories, examining them, learning the lessons to find a more robust truth. Keith Hancock published *Australia* just 30 years after Federation, producing a bestseller that put the short history of the nation in its imperial context. The first chapter was called ‘Invasion of Australia’ but focused on the blank slate that was remade, not the ‘predestined passing’ of the First Australians.<sup>13</sup>

In 1992, the Queensland Education Department withdrew a primary schoolbook that had been used for years but was by then considered racist and discriminatory. Two years later, the department issued a new Social Studies sourcebook for Year Five students, and advised teachers to use terms like ‘discovery, pioneers or exploration’ thoughtfully and in their historical context. The *Courier-Mail* ‘investigated’ and found plenty of fodder for politicians and readers who saw an attempt to ‘rewrite history’ by discussing why some might consider European settlement as an invasion. Wayne Goss, the state premier who had first made his name working for Queensland’s Aboriginal Legal Service, attempted to defuse the politically orchestrated pressure. But he cautiously concurred that ‘invasion’ went too far, the sourcebook should be rewritten and students should make up their own minds.

Badtjala artist and academic Fiona Foley grew up learning about her mother’s K’gari country, then known as Fraser Island. She has made it her life’s mission to find ways to tell truths and share the confronting knowledge she has learned. Hers are brutal stories of death and destruction, and survival against the odds. She presents them with poetic power in important public artworks that challenge the silence and force passers-by to notice. Some of her big public works



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include listing the names of 94 massacre sites where some of the estimated 66,680 killed in the Queensland frontier wars died, engraving them in tombstone-like paving in the footpath outside the Brisbane Magistrates Court; the evocation in the State Library of Queensland reading rooms of the way opium was used to poison, pay and placate First Nations people; an installation of aluminium sugar cubes on the banks of the Pioneer River in Mackay, naming and remembering some of the kidnapped Melanesians who were brought to work on sugar plantations; and, with Janet Laurence, the representation of the 29 clans of Sydney Harbour outside the Museum of Sydney, on the site of the city's first Government House that is now dwarfed by luxury hotels and office towers. These works, like much of her art, aim to bridge the 'abyss' of ignorance. It is designed to challenge and provoke. Only after *Witnessing to Silence* outside the Brisbane Magistrate's Court was completed did she reveal that names in the paving stones were massacre sites. She feared that if she had been truthful it wouldn't 'get up'.<sup>14</sup> She did not expect a silent response, which she found was another way of rendering invisible her 'work, intellect and voice'.<sup>15</sup> This haunting work outside the court where countless thousands of First Nations' people have been found guilty, evokes absence in the way the Holocaust Memorial in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin commemorates the Holocaust. Unlike that hauntingly famous memorial, *Witnessing to Silence* does not register on lists of the top ten things to visit in Brisbane.

This habitual silence is not limited to understanding the rightful place of the First Australians. It infects every aspect of life. It is there in the immigrant family who chooses to leave the trauma and stories of their past behind and not learn their parents' language, in the secrets and shame that prevent long-term residents from confronting the past, in the returning soldiers who cannot speak of the horrors they have witnessed, in the victims of institutional and sexual abuse, racism and homophobia who have until recently felt too ashamed to speak.

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At the time W.E.H. Stanner gave his celebrated lectures, the number of professional historians in the country had grown to several hundred, but their field of vision was still limited and resoundingly uncritical.<sup>16</sup> Only six years earlier, the revered historian Manning Clark, who later became the much-vilified *bête noire* of the Murdoch press and conservative politicians, published the first volume of what was to become his six-volume magnum opus. It began: 'Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century.' As the footnote at the bottom of the page carefully explains, the author considered the pre-existing cultures did not pass the threshold of coming 'out of a state of barbarism'. The same year, Rachel Perkins' father, Charles Perkins, a student at the University of Sydney, heard about the 1961 Freedom Ride in the United States that aimed to desegregate the south. Perkins gathered a group of students who, like him, were destined to become some of the most influential people in the nation. They decided to use the same tactic in country New South Wales, where segregation kept First Nations peoples in what was considered 'their place'.

Some of the most original thinkers and writers did not feel comfortable in this somewhere where much could not be spoken. Instead they took their brilliance to the world to shape global debates about the rights of women, homosexuals, animals and the environment. That has changed; the world has come closer. We know more and are discovering even more but uncomfortable truths are still avoided, critics are told to shut up. And now we apologise for things that those who were paying attention always knew were wrong. We have apologised to the stolen children and their parents and descendants, to those subjected to institutional abuse, to the unwed mothers whose children were taken, to the children who were forcibly removed from British orphanages, to those Australian-Germans who were interned and deported, to the welfare recipients who were penalised and hounded by ill-considered algorithms for debt they had not incurred, to the

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Afghan people who suffered at the hands of rogue soldiers. No doubt, in time, we will apologise to the refugees incarcerated on yet another set of remote islands. First, we need to be comfortable saying difficult things out loud and accepting the consequences, looking at both of Janus's faces rather than cringing from the dark.

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WRITER DAVID MALOUF is a close observer of this country, particularly the patch of south-east Queensland where he grew up. When he described ramshackle country-town Brisbane, its weatherboard houses perched precariously on hillsides, high enough to survive floods and catch the cooling breezes, the place became a literary character. In it the walls were thin; gossip spread easily and enforced social control. He viscerally recalls a time when much could not be spoken, when even great works of literature that had escaped the hyperactive censor's wrath—like James Joyce's *Ulysses*—were hidden under the chief librarian's desk. Malouf argues that television, which launched in Australia in 1956, taught Australians to talk.<sup>17</sup> Women had found a public voice a decade earlier when radio created a public audience for things that might once only have been said privately or in small groups.<sup>18</sup> As people watched and listened, things that had once been left unspoken worked their way into conversation. There were fewer subjects that drew the response *You can't say that*. Not long before his 95-year-old mother died, the demographer Bernard Salt asked her when things had changed the most in her lifetime. She said it was the 1960s. Not for the reasons he expected. She remembered that as the decade when school changed. 'In the 1960s, kids were asked their opinion. They were taught how to think. I was taught what to think.'<sup>19</sup>

That was my experience. Our tiny two-teacher school, Number 84 at Tabor, was an unlikely beneficiary of the shortage of local teachers: a young graduate and his wife were brought out from Chicago.

## The Idea of Australia

I am forever grateful that Jim and Joyce Born arrived in our isolated hamlet, a day's walk from the nearest township and a 30-minute drive to Hamilton. I am even more grateful that they were open minded and interested in the world. We could have got a fundamentalist. Instead, after singing 'God Save the Queen' and raising and folding the flag, we started each day creating a scrapbook of current events. It was probably our teacher's way of staying in touch with a world that must have seemed extraordinarily remote. But it was still, as it had been in 1880, a 'land of newspapers'. We clipped the *Penshurst Free Press*, *Hamilton Spectator*, *The Age*, *The Herald* and the *Sun News-Pictorial*, tracking stories about the huge number of road deaths, crime, censorship, disasters, assassinations of American leaders, politics, the Vietnam War, the execution of Ronald Ryan, referendums and local events. It was a lesson in civics and life. Whatever the limits of the newspapers, he encouraged us to think and wonder about life beyond the pine-fringed compound.

In his sermons in that bluestone church, my father spoke a lot about the soul. He crafted his sermons with meticulous care and spent Saturday evening, after the football, memorising the twenty-minute address he would deliver in the morning. The details suffused me, and the idea of a soul remained. These sensory experiences put a stamp on me; just like the aroma of the Straddie wallum and the smell of composting pine needles, it is etched in my brain. Like many other experiences they helped shape the way I perceive the world. In my search for the soul of the nation and her people, these experiences have become useful tools to make sense of the big picture and find meaning from small details and little stories. These sensitivities have helped inform the way I see things and the meaning I draw from places, events and people. They are my guide in this journey through the undercurrents of life in this *somewhere*.