

slight | anthropologies  
GABRIELLE LORRAINE FLETCHER

— I.

Inside the metaphor of nothing, something struggles to get out.  
The Dreaming made it so.

— II.

On the eleventh of November 1614, a cartographer clambered aboard the *Eendracht*, bound for Batavia by way of the Great South Land. When he unpacked his belongings, he realised he'd forgotten something. Unable to ring home, he wrote to his wife in Dutch.

'Take care of my skis, darling.'

On the first of April 1789, a man who stole a lump of bread shuffled aboard the *Kitty* bound for a less than hospitable penal colony. His hands were shackled and he felt the ship-board rats eating his toes. Unable to write, he spoke to the man beside him.

'Maybe it's me, but I don't have a good feeling about this.'

On the twenty-ninth of July 1803, a botanist's assistant sat below deck of *The Investigator* whilst on a circumnavigation of a former nothing place. He had a skin rash from the queer vegetation and thought he might be dying. Unable to talk, his fever sent a message to his mother as he lay wilting.

'You were right. I'm really sorry I came here now.'

— III.

a)

She grew up not knowing much. When she was three her stepfather told her that she had a lick of something on her skin, so she spent the next twenty-seven years trying to find out where. She showered four times a day hoping it might glide down a hole and out to sea. It didn't go. She checked motorcycle mirrors and shop frontages. Would turn on the people who stopped to stare, searching their fear for signs. She made friends with a photographer solely for the use of the whorish pall of his darkroom, thinking the strange light might reveal the invisible. In between she joined a theatre group, pretending she wasn't herself. All this, and still she couldn't see.

Her stepfather said 'Don't tell anyone,' as he rolled off and buckled up his belt. She didn't say a word.

Shame likes the quiet. She was still and it became her. She studied hard and loitered with difficult concepts, lacking the body of confidence to toy with their form. One day in the library she found a book that played on her mind. It was about a boy who was not one thing or the other. The breeds of polarity exiled him to a middle earth of deference. Here he went mad and grabbed an axe to cut himself a place to fit. Directly on the bones and flesh of these sharp and absolute meridians. Chanting while he chopped. She read it over and over, wanting to understand exactly how anger floats its charge. She went to her brother and tried to talk about her sense of nexus.

Her brother said 'Don't read what you can't read. Just read what you can.' She asked him what he meant.

'Look,' he said. 'Only learn what you know.'

She was silent after that. She collected some of the blood from the pages of the book about the boy and filled a vial, storing it in the back of her troubled head. Then cutting open her mattress, she inserted the story deep inside the springs. After this, she stopped reading.

As she got older, her stepfather's insistence that she keep her secret became louder. 'For Christ's sake don't tell anyone,' he said, as he wiped himself upon her as if she were an oily rag. So she didn't. One night when her mother was at bingo, he rocked the bed so much that the vial inside her troubled head broke open. The blood from the pages floated into her veins, and began to mix itself a living pulse within the split of a steamy second. She lay there feeling it lick at the sides of herself. Gliding down her ribcage, rung by rung. Drenching her uterus and claiming her tubing. Finally it found her feet, shy but surprisingly ready.

'Do something', it said. So she did. She went to the fridge and put a note under the magnet for her mother.

‘Meat trays are not enough. I need more’, she wrote. ‘P.S. Dad is a lousy fuck.’

She walked from the house. Moved under the stars and crouched in triumph. She lifted her arm to her mouth and tasted her skin for the first time. Running her tongue down to the wrist. Sucking her fingers. Wanting herself. Finding a small piece of broken glass, she cut a line down her calf. She daubed her fingertips in the trickle and wrote in the earth: ‘I am something.’

**b)**

She closed her eyes for six months. When she opened them, there was a scar on her leg. And two lines between her eyebrows. The words she had written in the earth were gone, replaced by a desk and an outgoing tray. The stars were now people of varying light. They seemed to flicker at will. There was one particularly large star who talked incessantly. The other stars told her he was just a man who refused to wear underpants. He introduced himself and she shook his hand cautiously, unaccustomed to speech as she was.

Opinion is always a risk. She was lucky, in retrospect. He could have extinguished her with his potent, pointing fingertips. Snapped her into ether, leaving soot. She did not realise he was actually a super star. She had thought he was just an average slob with sex on his mind. Until she saw for herself that he had a cause inside his pants. So she named it, and took him seriously. She boxed up her larynx so he could speak her. Gave him a direct line without the distraction of undertone to do his work, which was preserving what little was left of things. Shoving it in small holes, forcing something bigger. And promising to save her.

From the inside, she watched. She had allowed him to rehearse the truth on her. Hardly noticed the lack of charisma or the saliva that dotted her face. The spray of passion has a permanent wetness about it, so she paid the droplets no mind, presuming evaporation would claim the marks. She had never had to think about super stars before. She wasn’t sure if it just happened or they were born that way. She wondered how it would be to shine through life with such an overwhelming knowing.

She listened to his story. He had actually sat in the hearth as the Universe invented fire, belching volcanos to relieve the strange sensations of his gut. He was the first to have ever taken a piss in the whole of the fresh and mammoth dawn. Could talk about it so many dreams later, with an implacable confidence of accuracy earthed under the most profound imperative. He had lived as clay, grown like yam and been the cells of a woman’s nipple. All within the space of a quick epoch. Licked by ochre, enveloped by the rhythms of entity, she was inspired to say nothing. Too busy being utterly seduced by this cult of memory, as virgin tongues often are. She barely knew what time it was.

— IV.

*She:* What time is it?

*Creation:* What time would you like it to be?

*Elders:* About bloody time.

— V.

*Dearest,*

*Time is as wretched as all else in this bleakest of camps, and we can only dream of it passing quickly, hastening the glad day of our return home. The conditions of these last months have been a trial not to be imagined or endured by those who lack the purpose and grace of God's calling. The natives we were sent to teach accept the utmost squalor readily: indeed they seem blind to it and to the pitiful state of their surroundings. They resist our earnest efforts to improve their lot and are, although it pains me to say it, largely ungrateful for all our offices on their behalf. We, on the other hand, must struggle daily to maintain our spirits, and to provide ourselves with even the basic rudiments of civilised living. Mr Rutherford had warned us of the conditions here, but to work amongst these people has been a wearying blight, diminishing any hope we harboured of rectifying the utter uselessness of their lives.*

*So much is unfathomable. All that can be predicted with any certainty is that they will rise at dawn and retire with the sun. What happens in the intervening hours is a vast mystery wholly to be discouraged. The challenge for the enlightened mind is to find any semblance of meaning or reason in their brutal and disturbing exhibitions. The most notable of these occur when, like children, they are emboldened by the mistaken belief that their behaviour is escaping observation. As you might imagine, imparting knowledge to such primitive minds is extremely difficult. Only the very brightest are able to grasp the basics of the English language, and even these few cling to their own tongue. A common problem with natives we understand, and exasperating to the highest degree.*

*Death is one of the few markers of time that seems to have relevance for them, and is a trying interruption to our work. When it strikes, the whole camp is touched and it seems to curl around the people like the smoke from their constant fires. On one such occasion Old Wongali came down from the main camp, known as 'Dead Pan', in a frightful state. From time to time she would stoop to gather a small fistful of earth and fling it against her exposed person. She then proceeded to rub the earth violently into her skin, leaving small abrasions on her chest and abdomen. We all thought she was quite mad. As Old Wongali came nearer, we clutched our croquet sticks firmly to our sides, fearful of our own safety. We were quite prepared to use them. The native dogs were circling and watching, as if they understood the queerness of the old woman.*

*She must have observed our fear, for she turned and began to walk back to 'Dead Pan' with the dogs skulking behind her. As she passed others from the camp, they gave off low cries as if*

*acknowledging her state in some way. We none of us realised it was grief until we were told that Wongali's sister had passed, and the swept ground near the burial site corroborated the information. There was an uncomfortable still that hung over the entire camp for several weeks. We were able to presuppose this as a mourning period for the dead sister, which was reasonable and quite expected in bereavement. The fact that the burial ritual itself was hidden from us was disconcerting. Disciplining the savage mind is a trial, but we are determined to find a way.*

— VI.

### **The Way We Make Johnny Cakes**

What you will need to do them is

stick

hands

mouth

egg flipper

flour

water

salt

and for the topping to be put on them is

syrup

honey

You have to put flour and salt in a large bowl.

Then mix the flour, salt and water with your stick.

When all of this is mixed together you put it on a board that has flour on it as well.

Roll and shape by using your hands to pat it.

Cook Johnny Cakes on hotplates or a bit of car door over fire if you have it, flip now and then.

When hard put aside to cool a little.

Then you eat them.

It is good to ask the boss or his visitors if they want any if you would like to get all the things to make them again another time when you are hungry and tired.

— VII.

If she wasn't tired of her innocence

and bored with self-appointed luminaries.

If he was the brightest thing invented

and not a selfish man

clad in pockets packed with skittish cash.  
If he decided to wear underpants  
to catch misguided freedoms  
and not spill over everything.  
If he had not grown fat on welfare  
or eaten Mabo like a drumstick  
and hadn't tossed the bones.  
If he returned her voice  
and would let her speak  
her modulated mind.  
If she didn't have to argue  
with his methods  
he would never call her white.  
If people weren't offended  
by offensive ways  
then frankly she could stand it.  
Instead she sleeps inside the bedsprings of her mattress. Floating anger and avoiding swollen stars.

— VIII.

*She*: Why did you make swollen stars?  
*Creation*: What other stars would you like there to be?  
*Elders*: Stars that speak the truth.

— IX.

Under the stars on the riverbanks Auntie hid her childhood. Inside her Country where she felt there was somewhere to hang her skin, safe and clean. She is a woman in excess of sixty-eight now who has felt it all, and waded through the years regardless.

'He don't know nothin', Auntie says, speaking of the star who has a cause inside his pants. 'Them *gubbas* stole me when I was four. I didn't know that bein' black was wrong, 'ey? They put me in that Girls Home and I smelt the V.D. in the toilets. It was a disgustin' awful stink you don't never forget. After a while, this family come and got me. So I run away. Then another mob come. And still I run away.'

At this point her breath catches in her throat.

'They poked my *muna* dry.'

She remembers the nights of terror, the suckling on broomsticks, her head springing against the cot mattress. And her tiny hands waving from clay.

‘Since then I like it rough.’ She is silent for a moment, as her words smack the atmosphere. She purses her lips and shakes her head.

‘I was grateful for them rags they give me to hide my shame, you know? But him! He got no shame. Treat us like cows, he does. True! Waitin’ aroun’ so he can suck our titties dry. Takin’ everythin’ like only he got the rights. If them *gubbas* want to give us stuff to shut us up, then pretend we been healed like it never happened, it should be us that gets it. The ones they done it to. Not ones like him that only hear the yarns. He don’t know nothin’, bubba. ‘Cause if he do, he knows we ain’t for sale.’

Then Aunty rolls a cigarette, even though she shouldn’t. And bleeds a tear that collides against the air. It trickles down the drip lines of her face, in an unforgiving magnitude of silence. Her muddy, blistered eyes look up.

‘Arks him why he make us mob look bad.’

— X.

Looking out from a window high above civilisation in bad light, two women observe a third—

*One:* There she goes.

*Two:* She’s fat.

*One:* Remember when we thought she was pregnant?

*Two:* You did.

*One:* No. You did.

*Two:* How long have we been watching?

*One:* Long enough.

*Two:* Those shoes make it worse.

*One:* They’re too small.

*Two:* They’re the wrong colour.

*One:* They should be just black.

*Two:* Or plain red.

*One:* But not bone.

*Two:* No. Not bone.

*One:* Look at the way she swings her big arse.

*Two:* It won’t get her nowhere.

*One:* No man will want her.

*Two:* No. Not a man with decency.

*One:* It’s written all over her.

*Two:* Not hard to read.

*One:* I never had a problem taking pride in myself.

*Two:* No. Me neither.

*One:* They don't care.  
*Two:* Just do what they want.  
*One:* She's in trouble with the cops, you know.  
*Two:* Well that's hardly surprising.  
*One:* Got done drink driving.  
*Two:* If it wasn't the drink, it would be the drugs.  
*One:* Went on a grog crawl trying to find herself.  
*Two:* All she lost was good taxpayer's money.  
*One:* Our money.  
*Two:* Yeah. Our money.  
*One:* She'll get away with it.  
*Two:* They always do.  
*One:* I never would.  
*Two:* No. Me neither.  
*One:* They get everythink for free.  
*Two:* Bloody oaf they do.  
*One:* And then it ain't enough.  
*Two:* She don't even look it.  
*One:* No. She don't.  
*Two:* She could be anythink.  
*One:* From anywhere.  
*Two:* Hangin' around with them don't make you one.  
*One:* Nobody checks, I reckon.  
*Two:* That'd be right.  
*One:* You know what they say, If you lay down with dogs.  
*Two:* You wake up with fleas. That's what they say.  
*One:* She could be a nice girl.  
*Two:* Yeah. But you can't save them from themselves.  
*One:* No. You can't.  
*Two:* It's not our fault she wants to lie in the gutter.

— XI.

I am sitting in a gutter under the shade of a ghost gum. Flicking flies and remembering my voice. I turn my head to look at a large sandstone rock with a plaque affixed. 'This is the place', it says. Meaning history. Roots. Everything I will never be is here. There is an aquatic centre nearby. I watch the children enter. Feed two dollars into turnstiles to swim on bones

and never guess. 'You are diving into me,' another sign could say. 'Keep out.' Of course, I would never want such a warning mounted. Who am I to shut the summer down?

A tall woman with blonde hair approaches. Reads the rock and extends her hand to run her prints along its weathered surface. She closes her blue eyes and flattens her palm along the scratchy sediment. So intent and gentle as she unzips her skin for optimal absorption. Steady. Open. I like her unguarded pathos. It touches me. She could not suppose that I am touching her. I look more like a tourist than seems fair. But I am deep within her contours, passing through on my way to learning only things I know.

A child scuttles up to her. 'Is this the Aboriginal place?'  
'Yes', we think. Say. She and I. Me on my way to learning only things I know. She having read from tarnished brass.

The child moves closer to the rock. Swivels his body around. Turns a quizzical face to us. 'Why aren't they here?'

'We are', I think. Don't say. Looking more like a tourist than seems fair. I close my eyes in reflex. How can I tell this child what has happened? That the trees are more and I am less. I want to say there is nothing left but fragments, and I am one. How do I admit that I can only feel degrees, because my Scottish eyes and Irish legs conceal my Koori heart?

I blink and find myself alone. The mother and her child didn't wait for the answer I can't give. It's my fault, finally. I didn't speak. I slowly stand and move towards the ghost gum. My fingers reach to brush against its smoothly solid trunk. I feel a line of truth between us. These ghosts and part of me. The right part I assume. It's hard to tell. Genes that take live with genes that are. Inside me. Every day. I can't pretend I'm not an anxious tenant. Landlord? I drop my fingers. They fall against my side. This is not surrender. I just want to find a metaphor that tells me I am something.

— XII.

*She*: Tell me I am something.

*Creation*: What something would you like to be?

*Elders*: A something more than nothing.

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