

A whisper in stone

Kim Scott

I had written you a letter which I had, for want of better...

But I am not writing to Clancy of the Overflow, even though my desired reader is similarly remote and isolated. Instead, I want to send a message of encouragement and support to a prison inmate, an Aboriginal man and—as we say—a *Wirlomin* brother.

It's probably unwise – let alone ethical – to use his name or that of the prison that holds him.

Initially, I thought of writing an open letter beginning, 'Dear X' but, since I've already mentioned Clancy of the Overflow, let's call my ideal addressee Clancy (junior). I'd realised that prison staff would probably be the first to read any private letter to Clancy, whereas an open letter would at least allow for other readers and the potential to enlist allies. And of course, eventually, Clancy would still get to read it.

I gave up on the letter, but not on the idea of writing something about, and indirectly *to*, a very special reader. Writing is such an intimate form of communication that every reader is important. However, on this occasion I intend to emphasise just one reader in particular and it is unlikely to be you. That may seem offensive

enough, but—even worse—I will also be shamelessly boasting. For all of this I apologise profusely.

However, as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person, it's not for me to apologise for my concerns being reduced to:

a whole new fashion in academia, the arts and professional activism to identify as Aboriginal (Bolt, 2009)

I also can't apologise for sympathising with those of whom it is said: they write for their conquerors, write in the coloniser's language and write for an audience of which their home community is but a tiny minority. In such a context even such the success of publication, let alone the winning of literary prizes can be strangely debilitating. 'Let us mistrust applause,' says Galeano. 'At times we are congratulated by those who consider us innocuous.' (1988, p. 116)

All of which might help explain why a reader like Clancy matters so much.

Last time Clancy was on parole he called my name across a busy street, and I turned and waited as he danced through the honking traffic. When he arrived he named a book of mine and said, 'I thank you for that book and your journey and you make me proud. I want to shake your hand, Kim Scott my brother.

I made *him* proud?

I have already apologised for boasting.



There's a story from the early days of the colonisation of Fremantle. An Aboriginal man (a *Noongar*, in this part of the world) was locked up. Under cover of darkness, the Noongar's family and friends crept up to the thick stonewalls and knocked and tapped and scratched on the stone to communicate with him. Chased away, they sang their voices across the wall to comfort him in his isolation. I'd like to think reader and writer can do that too: share words of comfort not only

across razor and steel-capped stone walls but also across the vast, yawning chasm that sometimes divides us.



Clancy came to his father's funeral handcuffed and chained to a security guard. His children wept to see him. They hung from his shoulders and hugged him and he had to shift his arms awkwardly this way and that to keep the shackles away from their bodies.

One at a time, people walked to the space where they could face the mourning crowd and recount their memories of the old man. Many sobbed as they did so. I saw Clancy's frustration, saw him lift his head like a chained dancer measuring his leap...

Handcuffs held out in front of him, he pivoted and, jerking the chain between him and the security guard, walked to the room's power spot. Walked? What is the word to say how he moved? It was too tentative and too graceful to be called a strut or swagger. He hesitated for an instant between each step and held his cuffed hands before him as if the cuffs and looping chain were the stuff of ceremony. The guard, surrounded by Clancy's children, meekly followed as the other prison staff impassively watched from where they stood among Clancy's brothers.

All eyes were on him as he stood at the small lectern and began calling out names of those who had been important to his father. Then: 'Kim Scott, my brother, dad loved you and what you and him were doing, our history and language.'

Yes, I am boasting, telling you this proudly. Clancy is a reader who matters.

Clancy's father and I spent a lot of time together in the first decade of this century. Clancy's father, Lomas, and aunties Hazel and Audrey Brown offered me stories and sounds indigenous to our ancestral country, and took me to places from where those same stories sprang. We joined their words with fragments in the archives, linguists' word lists and transcriptions and, gathering with other members of

a ‘community of descendants’, began to breathe life into them. ‘Too sad and strange,’ someone said. ‘We mostly only ever get together like this at funerals nowadays.’

We had sent the results of our work to Clancy, and he began sharing his growing body of Aboriginal (Noongar, in this instance) language and stories with a few other inmates. For over a year Clancy, with the help of another long-term Noongar inmate, held ‘classes’ attended by other, mostly younger inmates. They came to be called ‘culture and healing workshops’, and had the support of senior staff at the prison.

Clancy’s father was a generous man who grieved for what he had not been able to leave his children, though of course Clancy carries something of his father’s legacy of being a black man in a little country town, even after the arrival of citizenship (or ‘drinking rights’). It’s a legacy that includes the experience of drinking with a farmer at the end of the week you’ve spent slaving to clear your ancestral country for him, and then being arrested as you enter town. Imagine it, if you will: the policeman locks you up, grins through the bars, talks about the weekend he’ll spend with your wife.

Clancy and his brothers asked me to be a pallbearer at their father’s funeral. One of the brothers—Geoff—was so free a man that he had no Centre-link number, no bank account, no fixed address. I relied upon Geoff in many ways, and was honoured to be one of those carrying his father’s body that very last time.

Several months after the burial we held a workshop in the prison to generate some illustrations for some bilingual stories we’d put together. The prison allowed Clancy to select inmates to participate, most of whom had been attending the classes he had organised. One inmate was invited because, although ‘one of us’, he was particularly estranged from clan and country.

For two days inmates and family from outside the prison walls shared the ancient language and stories of their ancestors, those who had created human society in this part of the world. (Diamond 1998, p. 321)

At the end of our time together, Clancy addressed the group. 'Last bit of time, as you know,' he said, 'I've been in solitary.' He'd spent the time reading, he said, and then listed all my books. Yes, again, I am boasting.

Wiping his eyes as people prepared to leave, Clancy said, 'What you doing to me, Kim? I got a reputation to look after in here.'

Those who remained when we left the prison were entrusted with finishing the illustrations. A few days later the inmate who'd been invited because he was 'lost' asked Clancy what was in it for him. How much money was being made, anyway?

'I nearly hit him,' said Clancy. 'You don't know who you are, I told him. That's why we're here, and we're angry. This is our old people talking, and this is for when we get out of here.'

'Healing' and 'identity' and 'culture' are words he uses.

Clancy talks about how he must control his anger, his drug-taking and violence. His short-fuse lets other inmates, and security officers too, goad him into a reaction that gets him back in solitary and delays his release.

We had left some art materials behind after the workshop—good paper, paints, good quality brushes—to finish off the job. Next day all that material had disappeared from the storeroom. Weeks later a security officer told Clancy it had been replaced, and held out a paintbrush.

'A 50c brush,' Clancy told me. 'We both knew it wasn't like what was left for us, not proper brushes. He wanted me to be grateful. I didn't say nothing. I let it go.'

Clancy has spent a lot of time in solitary. They want you isolated from society, he says, that's why we're here. And then they isolate you again. He was in solitary for two weeks. But it didn't work. 'I wasn't alone,' he said, and named characters and people I'd written about. 'Man, I was with all my family and friends in that book you and Auntie Hazel did. Bobby too.'

Clancy choreographed dances from some of the stories we shared, and he and other inmates performed at the prison's NAIDOC celebrations. That made people proud, too.

Clancy's paintings were propped at centre stage for the launch of our bilingual picture-books. Afterwards and elsewhere, we sat around a flickering campfire. Clancy was at a distance, but is intrinsic to these pulsing, concentric circles.

And my shameless boasting? An Aboriginal person who would like to be inclusive of his other heritages, I am trying to speak of what it means to be a descendant of the people who first created human society in our part of the world, and trying to tell a story of recovery.

I told Clancy of how *Kayang* Hazel made us stop the car at the edge of the bitumen road, beside an over-cleared paddock. Despite needing a walking-stick she crossed the wire fence and led us across the shifting soil to a rocky outcrop. She pointed, there: a series of neat circles in the rock that grew small, then larger again. '*Yongar* and *Miak*, she said, and told the old story of Kangaroo and Moon. Kangaroo complains of inevitable death, and how his bones will turn grey and crack in the sun as the hill grows around them. And Moon? Moon gets very sick and wastes away, but doesn't die: the moon always returns, and grows strong again.

It is both a responsibility and a privilege to stand beside where that story is imprinted in stone, and hear its ancient utterance. Either side of a stone wall capped with razor wire, at least one reader and writer lean forward, listening, hoping.

Works Cited

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