

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

No Bones But In The Mouth

Creative Work

&

**Korangan: Deep Time and Deep Transformation
in Noongar Country**

By Cassie A. Lynch

0000-0002-2503-224X

**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of
Curtin University**

July 2020

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

Date: 29/07/2020

Abstract

Recent research suggests that Indigenous stories that feature ‘cold times’ and rising seas are in fact eyewitness accounts of the last ice age and the rise in sea-level that followed it. Building on this notion, this research explores whether writing fiction in the scale of deep time can be employed to explore colonial pasts, the contested present and radical futures.

The main outcome of the research was the production of *No Bones but in the Mouth*, a novel set in River Country, an alternative version of the Swan Coastal Plain located in the southwest of Western Australia. The world of the novel is the southwest ‘through the looking glass’, where colonial notions of ‘arrival’, ‘discovery’ and ‘progress’ are upended to tell a story about integration and belonging. The European-like Erin people arrive on the shores of the Aboriginal-like River Country in leaky wooden ships as refugees fleeing climate change in the northern hemisphere. They are starving and traumatised, having watched their homeland turned black and sink into the sea. They arrive in River Country as grateful newcomers who are motivated to peacefully integrate. The novel is a thought experiment on what an integrated southwest might look like without the colonial violence of massacre, land theft, displacement, starvation, indentured servitude, deaths in custody and stolen family.

The novel also reimagines ‘arrival’ so that a creative space can be made to see how an absence of colonialism doesn’t necessarily mean an absence of inter-cultural conflict. The teenage protagonist Meka is caught between two worlds, and this

manifests in the novel as Meka becoming ‘unstuck’ from Country and falling into ‘deep time’. Her journey to escape deep time reflects the beliefs and values needed to negotiate an integrated society, namely connection to Country, strong kinship systems, and recognising how Country is resilient in the face of change.

Writing fiction of this kind requires multidisciplinary research into deep time, geology, colonial history, colonial ideology and Aboriginal storytelling. The exegesis, *Korangan: Deep Time and Deep Transformation in Noongar Country*, takes a two-way learning approach inspired by two landmark papers: one which suggests that some Aboriginal stories contain eyewitness accounts of climate change, and one authored by Aboriginal and settler academics that makes comparisons between the Aboriginal and Western scientific accounts of the formation of the southwest. The exegesis builds on these two papers and discusses how writing fiction that combines narratives from geology and climatology with Aboriginal narratives featuring creator beings is a fecund creative space to articulate difficult ideas around Aboriginal and Western cultures co-existing in the southwest. The exegesis also investigates how the colonial ideologies of the British colonisers have made integration harmful and damaging in the southwest, and there is a study on Noongar stories that feature *korangan* (change/transformation) to give precedence to the bodily transformations experienced by characters in the novel.

Acknowledgements

This research is indebted to the research of Nunn and Reid (2015) and Robertson et al. (2016). I acknowledge the great influence of their exciting and rigorous work on the exegesis and novel. Peter Lane's book 'The Geology of Western Australia's National Parks' was also a crucial resource when researching the geology under and around Noongar Country.

Thank you to my main supervisor Dr David Whish-Wilson for the guidance and encouragement throughout the five years of this PhD. Our discussions around European history were crucial to the novel's development. Thank you to Dr Jo Jones for guiding me through the exegetical writing and for helping me contextualise my research within wider literary movements. Thank you to Prof Kim Scott for sharing your experience and expertise in conducting ethical and meaningful research. And thank you to Dr Janice Baker for getting me through my Honours year and for being a great theory supervisor in the first two years of this PhD.

Thank you to Andrew Cameron for being my sounding board throughout the ups and downs of the PhD journey. I don't know what I would have done without you.

Thank you to my partner Dave for the love, support and motivation. Thank you to my nana and my parents for the faith and encouragement.

I dedicate this thesis to Noongar Elder Noel Nannup, whose discussions of Noongar climate memory around the campfire introduced me to a new and nourishing dimension of connection to Country. Yanga birdiya.

Table of Contents

<i>Declaration</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Language Statement</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>No Bones But In The Mouth</i>	<i>1</i>
Part 1	4
<i>The fish traps</i>	6
<i>Afternoon moon</i>	14
<i>Storms in the north</i>	21
<i>Strange weather</i>	26
<i>Stone teeth</i>	31
<i>Clay bowls</i>	41
<i>Giants of River Country</i>	48
<i>Family yarns</i>	53
<i>Mussels in the stream</i>	57
<i>Heart in a sac</i>	63
<i>The sundial</i>	71
<i>Kylie fires</i>	76
<i>Making resin</i>	85
<i>Empty rockpool</i>	89
<i>The eagle ray</i>	96
<i>Rumbling hills</i>	103
Part 2	109
<i>The Albion</i>	109
<i>Sea wall</i>	115
<i>Red cloak</i>	119
<i>Tears by the river</i>	129
<i>Erin songs</i>	131
<i>The shark</i>	142
<i>Dead quendas</i>	154

<i>Heavy heart</i>	165
<i>Sea floor</i>	174
<i>The cave art</i>	189
<i>Yam terraces</i>	202
<i>Salty spring</i>	212
<i>Execution</i>	220
<i>Taboo</i>	226
<i>Granite and ghosts</i>	233
<i>The flood and the wave</i>	242
<i>Stone ears and eyes</i>	248
Part 3	259
<i>The trench</i>	259
<i>Time shallows</i>	275
<i>Sundial mountain</i>	286
<i>Journey upriver</i>	304
<i>Procession</i>	312
<i>The Home Of Rain Up High</i>	319
<i>Gliding over the plain</i>	328
<i>No bones but in the mouth</i>	338
<i>Korangan: Deep Time and Deep Transformation in Noongar Country</i>	346
<i>Introduction</i>	347
Plot	348
Scholarship.....	351
Discipline	353
Methodology	356
<i>Chapter 1 – Noongar Memory of Deep-time Climate Events</i>	360
Introduction	360
Geological Eras of the Earth	363
How Geomorphic Forces Influence the Climate.....	367
Deep Time in Noongar Boodja	370
<i>The Swan Coastal Plain</i>	373
<i>The Southwest Cape</i>	374

<i>The South Coast</i>	375
Coastlines Changed by the Holocene Warming.....	376
Aboriginal Memory of Deep-time Climate Events	381
Noongar Deep Memory – The Ngalak Paper.....	386
<i>A Note on Time</i>	390
Nyitting – the Cold Times	390
Waardanak Boodja – The Flood	396
<i>Chapter 2 – Korangan: Transformation and Metamorphosis in Noongar</i>	
<i>Storytelling</i>.....	405
Introduction	405
The Noongar Language.....	407
Etymology of Korangan	411
Noongar Story Sources	413
Korangan in Noongar Stories.....	415
Thematic Discussion of 15 Noongar Stories Featuring Transformation.....	431
<i>Chapter 3 – Colonial Transformation in Noongar Country</i>	439
Introduction	439
Geography and Circumstance	441
Recognising and Naming the Colonial Experiment.....	445
Definition of Settler Colonialism	446
Colonial narratives that serve the settler state	448
<i>Discovery/Extinction</i>	448
<i>Empty Land</i>	453
Case Study 1. New Norcia Mission	455
Case Study 2: The Wheatbelt	459
Postcolonial Amnesia.....	462
<i>Chapter 4 – Constructing the World of No Bones but in the Mouth</i>	464
Introduction	464

Part 1 – The Characters	466
<i>The Shark – Patient One Under the Waves</i>	466
<i>Sharks in Noongar Stories</i>	467
<i>Sharks in the Fossil Record</i>	471
<i>No Bones but in the Mouth</i>	475
<i>The Serpent – Rivermaster and Rainlord</i>	480
<i>Meka – Unstuck from Time</i>	483
<i>Perfidious Albion</i>	485
<i>Erin from the Land of Ire</i>	490
Part 2 – Explicit Process	494
<i>The Turn of the Kaleidoscope</i>	494
<i>Deep-time Stories</i>	497
<i>Colonial vs Indigenous Metaphor</i>	500
<i>Referencing Noongar Cultural Heritage</i>	504
Conclusion	511
Bibliography	515
Appendix	530
Permission for Figure 6 and Figure 10	530

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1.	Devil’s Lair field trip photo..... 347
2.	Eranondoo Hill in the Jack Hills belt..... 363
3.	Earth Rocks by Age: Geologic Data..... 365
4.	Basic geological regions of Australia, by age..... 371
5.	The variety of aquifer types and their productivity across Australia..... 373
6.	Sea-level change over the past 150,000 years..... 377
7.	Milankovitch Cycle..... 378
8.	Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia: Detail 1..... 380
9.	Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia: Detail 2..... 380
10.	Map of Australia showing the 21 coastal locations from which Aboriginal stories about coastal inundation are described in this paper..... 382
11.	The limestone cave Wagyl Mia at Garungup..... 399
12.	Our Changing Coastline..... 402
13.	Dialect Map of Noongar Country..... 410
14.	Boyikaatap (granite hill at centre) at Little Beach..... 418
15.	View of the Albany Gap, Western Australia..... 419
16.	Kalgan River..... 420
17.	Sugarloaf Rock..... 426
18.	Mandaboornap/Frenchman’s Peak..... 428
19.	Paleozoic Timeline..... 472
20.	4.5-million-year-old great white shark fossil at Gordon Hubbell’s private gallery in Gainesville, FL..... 477
21.	Laurel Nannup. 2006. Old Spirit of the Sea..... 489

Language Statement

Noongar was a spoken language until British colonisation in 1826. From this time, whenever linguists and anthropologists recorded Noongar words and their meanings the words were transcribed phonetically. As a result the same Noongar word might have a variety of spellings in the archives, for example Noongar/Nyungar/Nyoongar. In this research Noongar words and names are spelt as they appear in historical documents. When discussing language or writing poetry I default to the Marribank orthography for consistency where appropriate.

No Bones But In The Mouth

For all those who came before, and all those to come

Waaliny bilya / wedjan djalang boodj-ool / warn wardan nyorn ngibart-abiny

The weeping river / gathers salt from the earth / to embitter the sea

ý

Madjit baal barang kwetj djel bwora daa / baalang koonger bilang baalang daa-

djoorla-k / baalang koort dalang baalang ngorlak

A shark has no bones but in the mouth / the body propels the jaws / the heart follows

teeth

ý

Wagyl warn moonboorli-wardan-boodja unna? / baalap kaadatj / windji baalabang

moort koorl?

Did serpents make the lands of Britain? / do they wonder / where their people went?

Part 1

Down through the clouds, past the white wisps of cirrus, around the hazy altostratus and through the cushion cumulus, thick and low, blue water appears, glinting. The broad waters hug the curved southwest edge of a vast continent composed of ancient rock. Down below the soil and sand, The Serpent rolls deep beneath Country, its watery coils feeding the reaching roots of plants, its breath warming the subterranean homes of burrowing creatures. Its body is sweet water, pure and cold, and it can smell the acrid salt of the ocean beyond the shores of its terrestrial territory. There are many enemies that the salt can hide, but the Serpent protects its own.

Deep in the earth, The Serpent is restless. Its coils fill every space in the rock, its body fed by rainwater dripping through the limestone. But it is not enough space. Long ago its territory was bigger, wider. The air that blew down into the caves was colder, the salty ocean sucked up and frozen around the lands to the south. In the cold times The Serpent had great creative power, it came to the surface and cut valleys and made mountains with its hard, icy body. But the world has warmed once again, and The Serpent lives under the surface, feeling the ice melt in

the south, sensing the enemy ocean creep up over its shores. Heat and cold, heat and cold. That is the cycle. But the ocean has crept back so fast this time, aggressively taking land quicker than The Serpent can pull its plants and people back. The salt keeps coming, toxic to plants and people alike. The oceans have also brought the Newcomers: new plants, new animals. New people. There are many but The Serpent must care for them all.

The Serpent senses all the creatures, plants and spirits that inhabit its Country. It is difficult to focus on individuals, as it sees everything currently alive, as well as all the creatures that were alive in the past and will be alive in the future. Life and death are linked circles, all part of the great cycling of water through breath, cloud, river, plant, blood, ocean and rock. Despite this wide view, on its marshy western territory where forests meet wetlands and wetlands meet ocean, the great water snake can feel the pale feet of Meka O'Noorn. Something about the girl disturbs The Serpent. She is not stuck to Country. She floats, and The Serpent can't tell if she is alive now in the present, or is a memory from the deep past, or a vision of the future. The spirits in the landscape are also provoked, they writhe beneath the ground, raising their hands from the sand to grope blindly for her. The Serpent sends fire up through the bedrock and limestone and sets alight a grass tree near where Meka stands. A cool breeze rolls the sweet smoke through her hair and across her skin. The restless spirits she awakens won't stick today.

The fish traps

It was close to dinner time in Serpent Country and the fish were circling in their traps. Meka leaned against the limestone outcrop that bordered the bay in this part of the river, bouncing a woven fishing basket off her thigh. The tide was draining out, exposing the stems of the bulrushes and leaving the bream trapped within the weir of rocks her aunties had arranged in tiers in the riverbank. Meka could smell a scrub fire nearby, and she glanced around, looking for the source before going back to watching the river. This section of the river was the confluence, where sweet water met salt. Just around a watery bend the ocean thundered in and out, smashing the beaches, throwing debris onto the sand. Sometimes cuttlefish skeletons, sometimes seaweed ripped from its rocky bed by the power of the sea. Sometimes straight cut pieces of wood came in on the waves, or ropes, or bowls. Pieces of ships that sunk far off the coast, their pale crew sent to live with the spirits on the ocean floor.

There was a splash and Meka's head turned quick enough to see a single fish launch itself out of the tiered pool and back into the river.

“Not meant to be,” Meka called after it. “Go brother.”

The afternoon sun was starting its descent toward the horizon. It had been a hot day and the animals were emerging now as it cooled down. Little wrens were bouncing around in the sedges behind her, chirping as they searched for insects to eat. Overhead the sky was filled with stippled clouds, like the scales on the belly of a

snake. Rain was coming. Further around the curve of the bank, the women of Meka's family were gathered with the young ones, playing with the dogs. Her dog Dwerda was sniffing around a fish carcass not far from where Meka sat. Dweda was a beautiful golden sand-coloured female with a white muzzle and big dark eyes who faithfully followed Meka everywhere she went.

The wrens all flew off at once and Meka glanced behind her. A tiger snake was making its way through the sedge, past her spear and bag, looking for a meal itself. Its body was like the river she was standing near, a winding powerful body with graceful bends, and a capacity to punish if you didn't know the right ways of doing something. She watched it slide past and disappear among the rocks. Meka stretched her foot out to dip her toe in the water. She spoke a few words to the Creator Serpent, the spirit of the river, the giver of life, the maker of the land, the bringer of language, the lord of Country. I see you, I hear you.

A small boat appeared around the bend from upriver and Meka saw the familiar form of Fionn, a newcomer from the Far Away Lands that were no longer alive. He was making his way toward her, coming back after an afternoon of exploring the river. One of the newcomer camps was not far from where Meka was sitting, and Meka sat at this part of the river beach to encounter him on his way home. Some dolphins took an interest in Fionn as he paddled, and he smiled and leant toward the water, speaking to them. When he got closer he nodded his head to her, she nodded back, and he made his way to shore. He navigated around the fishtraps and then pulled his boat up on the sand.

“Hello niece,” he said in Country Language.

“Hello,” she replied. “Find anything today?”

Fionn shook his head, and they both sat on the bank, overlooking the fish traps.

“Crabs, prawns, mussels, bream, yes,” he replied. “Anything else, no.”

“I heard you haven’t found much recently,” Meka asked, “what do you think that means?”

Fionn shrugged.

“The mob up the coast haven’t had any ships arrive,” he said, “and no one has been blown south, or we would have heard about it.”

Meka’s shirt was made from sail cloth that had washed ashore. A cormorant shrieked nearby.

“Two years without an arrival?” Meka said.

The arrivals of the Far Away ships had been a familiar occurrence for most of Meka’s life. A rotting, creaking vessel made of wood and propelled by woven sails would appear on the horizon, turn its nose toward River Country, and slowly

limp toward shore. Damaged by the wind and the salt, most of the ships didn't make it as far as the sand, disintegrating against the rocky reefs that edge the coast, sending most on board to their deaths amongst the waves. Meka's people did all they could to rescue survivors and bring them onto dry land.

Things thrown up on the tide.

"I don't think anyone could have survived out there this long," Fionn said.

"Any more survivors would have to be a meerkool."

"What does that mean?" Meka asked, not recognising the word.

"Meerkool means helped by the creator being of my homelands," Fionn said.

"It's saving someone when all hope is lost."

Ships from the Far Away Lands had been arriving on River Country shores for many season cycles, and had come in three distinct waves. The First Wave arrived when Meka's nana was a teenager. When the River People had first noticed the ships on the horizon, her people had thought that they were giant sick birds, flying low to the water on ghostly wings, pitching and dipping, their claws dragging in the sea. When they came closer, the River People saw that they were large wooden vessels skimming through the water, their decks filled with starved and dying people. Pale-skinned people, who spoke an unusual language and dressed themselves in flat garments made from woven fibre. Meka's people had rescued these strangers from the water and nursed them back to health, wondering at their

resemblance to ghosts. These ghost bird ships of the First Wave arrived all together in a flock, bringing around a hundred people to River Country and their neighbouring territories. The newcomers all knew each other and called themselves the Erin people, and said that their land across the seas was dying, and they had fled looking for green earth. These newcomers were integrated into River Country life, married in around the territory, given a role in cultural life, and given totems. Meka's nana married one of the newcomers, a man named Shay, whom Meka never knew.

Then twenty season cycles ago, just before Meka was born, the Second Wave arrived. This time hundreds of people arrived in different ships across many moons. They were also all Erin people, but they were all different clans, and in terrible condition. The last ship to limp in during the Second Wave had only two occupants: Fionn, and Meka's father Gray, who was a teenager at the time. They were aboard the little boat that Fionn travels in now, and were totally alone.

There were no more arrivals, and Meka's Elders thought there were no more out there on the seas, looking for shelter. But then, when Meka was ten season cycles old, the Third Wave arrived. Dreadfully unwell and dying people were aboard those ships, some were Erin, some were new people who spoke other languages with different attires. Meka remembered standing on the beach and seeing people burst out from the edges of wooden ships that were disintegrating around them, watched them fight the waves to reach the shore. Many drowned and some of those who made it to shore died anyway. These people of the Third Wave arrived for most of Meka's teenage life, and spoke of their island homeland deteriorating into dust and

being swallowed by the ocean. These people had nothing to return to, and Meka's Elders took them in as well.

The Third Wave newcomers integrated easily, so grateful to be on solid ground untouched by the black creeping darkness that had consumed their home. They were very happy to see the other survivors, who had been in River Country for generations by that point. There were even some family reunions, parents and children separated by time and a world of water. It was clear though that the spirits of the Third Wave people were hurt, some irreversibly so. Some died even after being in River Country a season cycle or two. Meka's own father, from the Second Wave, did not live long after Meka was born, and neither did her River Country mother. Talking about the dead was taboo, and all Meka knew was that the ocean reached out and took her parents for reasons that she would never know.

Fionn wasn't Erin like her father, was in fact the only person of the Second Wave who wasn't Erin. He said that his people were called Albion, who lived on a neighbouring island to the Erin, and had fled the dark death with them. Fionn was in fact the only Albion person that Meka knew of in all the Serpent territories. Fionn declined a marriage match in River Country, seemingly satisfied to spend time alone or teaching Meka what he could about the lands over the oceans. Meka's nana pitied Fionn. He has his eyes on the sea, she said, always looking for another family, another land. He collects things from the water, fragments of a dead nothing. Meka was fond of Fionn, and Noornangk allowed them to spend time together.

Fionn reached into his boat and pulled out a length of rope.

“This is the last thing I found,” he said, “the last thing of interest.”

He said something in Far Away language and Meka hissed at him.

“That’s taboo talk, Uncle,” she said. “You’ll bring the death of your homelands down upon us.”

“I’m sorry,” Fionn said, throwing the rope back in the boat. “I thought if I asked the rope where it was from in my language it might reply.”

“The Creator Serpent isn’t going to be impressed if you don’t speak our language,” Meka said, “especially this close to the river.”

“I wonder if I appeal to the Creator Serpent it might give me more pieces to work with,” Fionn said wistfully. “Bring me clues on its watery coils.”

The light changed and Meka saw the women start to get up and get about collecting dinner. Dwerda trotted over and Meka tugged on her ears to annoy her, and in return her dog snapped playfully at her fingers. Meka stood and stretched, and peered into the fish traps. She picked up her basket and spear.

“Is that why you were talking to the dolphins?” she asked, scooping her basket through the water to try scoop out a trapped fish. It came out empty.

“Their whole Country is water,” Fionn said, “saltwater, sweetwater, they are masters of both.”

Meka scooped the basket through the water again and missed all the fish.

“Are you trying to enlist them in your efforts?” she asked, trying to scoop a big bream with no luck.

“Who knows what they’ve seen, out there beyond the horizon,” Fionn said.

Meka dropped her basket to one side and picked up her spear. With a deft movement she speared the elusive fish. She lifted its pierced body out of the water with satisfaction, and dropped the thrashing fish into her basket.

She looked up and noticed Fionn’s eyes lingering on the fish struggling in the woven seagrass. He met her eyes and smiled nervously.

“It’s good to have you back, Niece.”

He nodded to her and walked away toward his camp. The fish in the basket thrashed one last time, and went still.

Afternoon moon

Meka walked out through the marshes to the higher ground away from the river. She moved through the Erin camp, past their tents made of fabric and huts made of tree limbs. She could hear a mix of Country language and Far Away language, which was to be expected. Some of the newcomers had only arrived in the last few years, and were still learning the language of River Country. They would not get very far in life without it. She felt eyes on her as she walked. She had been away for a few months, and people were curious to see her. She was the eldest daughter of Noornangk's eldest daughter, and would one day be boss of River Country. This would be sooner than it might have been, since her own mother had died many seasons ago.

Dwerda walked ahead of her, darting around campfires and picking up morsels of food from the ground.

There was another reason the Erin camp were staring. Every newcomer of a certain age had to marry into a River Country family, so they could live good lives in Serpent Territory and have healthy children. Originally Meka had been matched to a newcomer boy from the Second Wave. However that boy had taken up with another newcomer girl not intended for him, and he had been put to death. The newcomers found this severe, but Noornangk and the other Elders were firm in upholding the Law. Not only was the kinship system passed down by the ancestors, there was a fear that a child born on Country with no Country parent might not stick to Country, and be a ghost. The newcomer girl would have been speared too but that would have

had a knock-on effect, complicating all the other arranged marriages, and in these new times compromises had to be made. Whilst Meka was away with her cousins these last few months she had learned that the newcomer girl had since married the River Country man she had been originally matched to.

Noornangk and the Elders knew who was related to who, who had what totems, and what the most beneficial and strategic match would be. Meka's next match was another Second Wave man, whom she did marry last Cool Warm season...but that had been cut short. She felt eyes on her as she walked through the Erin camp, a place full of people who knew what happened there.

A willy wagtail flew at Meka, headbutting her and chirping aggressively.

"I'm not after your eggs," she told it.

A raven called out overhead, which set off more chatter, and Meka looked up to see a whole family laughing with their throaty caws.

"Don't you lot start," she said, "or you'll wind up like the bream!"

She lifted her spear and the ravens all flew off in a flurry. Meka smiled to herself and noticed an Erin family eyeing her warily as she passed. She sighed, hefted her bag of bream over her shoulder, clutched her spears, and walked up the sloping ground to her nana's camp.

Noornangk's camp for the cool dry season was in the lea of the low hill that rose near the river. The camp was ringed by Ancestor Trees, whose leaves carry the whispering voices of the Old People. Meka stopped short of the trees and took a deep breath. Dwerda darted off to investigate something in the nearby scrub. Meka could see smoke rising from the campfire through the trunks. A breeze swept down the hill and the trees swayed and whispered.

Pale Meka. The afternoon moon. The nightside visitor in the day.

Meka looked up and saw the moon hanging in the blue sky. She held her hand up to the sky, her palm like a lined moon itself. The breeze moved past her and the whispering continued.

Remember the cold times. River high about the sea. Enemies far below.

A chill came over Meka. As she stood there another sound reached her ears. A soft sound. Waves crashing on a distant beach. She turned and looked down and across to the ocean. By habit her eyes scanned across the horizon, searching for ghost birds looking for a place to roost. There was none. She turned back and as she did, she came face to face with her nana. Noornangk pointed toward the afternoon moon with her digging stick.

“I knew you were nearby,” she said. “Welcome home.”

Noornangk was a short and stocky woman dressed in a wrap skirt of cloth and a kangaroo fur shoulder cloak. Meka followed her through the Ancestor Trees to the Elder's camp, which consisted of three huts made of grass tree needles, clay and branches. In a secret place higher on the hill, a spring bubbled and spilled, feeding a little river that met the main one, which reached the sea. Her nana's dogs hovered around as Meka leaned her spears against a tree trunk and dropped the bag of bream near the fire. Noornangk settled into her spot by the fire and started cutting open the fish for cooking.

“What were the ancestors saying to you?” Noornangk asked.

Meka sat next to her and arranged the cooking stones in the fire.

“They were talking about the long-ago times,” she replied, “the Cold Times.”

“I tend to find people hovering out here,” Noornangk said. “Only half my visitors will walk under the trees.”

Noornangk threw the fish guts to the dogs who leapt to catch them. Dwerda trotted in, yawned widely, and lay down next to Meka.

Meka placed the gutted fish on the cooking stones and cleaned her hands with water in a carrying bowl. She glanced at her palms, paler than her nana's, and sighed.

“What’s on your mind,” her nana asked.

Meka took a deep breath, and then Dwerda’s ears pricked up. Meka swivelled on the spot and saw a man walking in between the trees. It was her uncle Miro, Noornangk’s son, carrying a basket of crabs.

“Hello mum,” he said, coming to stand by the fire. “And hello niece, you’re back.”

“I am,” Meka replied.

Miro placed the basket of crabs down by the fire.

“I was bringing you some dinner, but I see Meka has already looked after you,” he said.

He glanced at the fish on the cooking stones that were pierced through, and at the spears leaning against the tree.

“You show your nana disrespect by carrying men’s weapons,” Miro said to her.

“They were my dad’s,” Meka replied, “and Old Djara gave them to him.”

“It’s taboo,” Miro said.

“She’s not married,” Noornangk said, “it’s fine for now.”

Miro eyed her darkly and Meka met his gaze. Noornangk thwacked the fire with her digging stick, sending up sparks.

“Enough!” she said sternly.

Meka returned her attention to the cooking fish. She could see Miro fold his arms in annoyance out of the corner of her eye. Her uncle had five sons and was used to being the boss of his family. He wasn’t the boss here.

“Son, tell me about the weddings inland,” Noornangk asked.

Meka got up and lifted her bag with the remaining fish.

“I’m going to take this fish back to the camp, see who wants it.”

“Come back up soon Meka,” Noornangk said. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“Like finding you a husband,” Miro said.

Meka lifted her spears with a flourish and turned away. She walked out back under the sheoaks, in the direction of the camps. As she passed under the branches the whispers reached her ears once more.

*Afternoon Moon. Remember the Cold Times. Snake of ice in the mountains.
No bones but in the mouth.*

Storms in the north

It was a humid morning and Meka awoke in the Erin camp under a wooden shack with a Balga needle roof. She had slept with her cousin Karla and her two kids, a boy and a girl. She filled Karla in on the gossip from her last few months at Noornangk's brother's community down the coast, and entertained her niece and nephew, who were more interested in seeing Dwerda than her. Meka got up without disturbing the kids and crept out.

The Erin Camp was in the same place for most of the year. Where River people move their camp a couple of times a year, the Erin only really moved during the coldest weather, preferring to send small groups out to hunt, plant and collect more broadly. Fionn said that their island homelands were very cold, and River Country was mild in comparison. Meka had stayed with her cousin last night, but she had her own hot season camp spot near where her nana and her aunts camped closer to the river, which was not far to where Fionn had his solo camp.

The Erin Camp was on high ground above the river, the long snake of water that wound down from the hills and kinked around just before the sea. There was a long sand bank over part of the mouth of the river, that was drier or wetter with the tides. Dolphins came and went around the sand bar chasing bream in the river and salmon in the sea. The bend in the river near the Erin Camp was where the big fish traps were, and the area was full of prawns and crabs, which Meka's community ate in the warmer months. There were mussels and oysters in the shallows in the colder months when it was too cold to walk through the deeper water for food. During that

time the River people usually moved up into the foothills to keep away from the wind, and be protected from the rain by the huge jarrah trees who lived in massive interconnecting communities. All the spiders, insects and snakes in the hills were asleep in the cold part of the year, so it was a nice place to spend the season rugged up in grass huts. In the cooler seasons, Meka had her favourite spot up in the jarrah forest under a granite overhang in the hills. Dwerda blocked the breeze and it was cozy when it got cold and rainy. Her grandmother had her preferred camp higher up in the hill that she shared with her sisters. Meka loved sharing kangaroo and possum on those cold nights.

The Erin were more attached to their homes, and preferred to stay in one place. They had initially tried to make stone shelters but the River Elders discouraged it. The river can flood without too much warning, and the scrub near the river needs to be renewed and cleared with fire lest it become unmanageable to walk through and dangerous to live near. The Erin eventually built solid wooden homes that could be dismantled and built in a variety of locations, with the blessing of the Elders of River Country. The Erin were more wary of fire than the River people, but understood how fire made it easier to get around and feed everyone.

On quiet nights the Erin Elders talked of how different River Country was to the Erin homelands far over the seas. Fire was not part of their land, it lived only in the camp flames and the candles the Erin said lit up their homes. The Erin described a rainy, green, grassy landscape with rocky outcrops and large lakes, black cliffs covered in green moss that stand high above the sea, sacred trees in groves where they performed ceremonies. They said in the Erin homelands that Noornangk would

have been something called a *kweeny*, and would have worn a headband of metal rather than the possum skin one she wore now. They recalled with sorrow the arrival of the Albion, who invaded them and cut their trees down and controlled them, became their *kweeny* or *keeney*. The Erin consider the arrival of the Albion as the beginning of the end, and associated the disappearing trees with the arrival of the black death that crept over all the land.

Fionn is the only Albion person in River Country, and Meka understood that he had helped the Erin escape during the calamity that befell their neighbouring homelands. Fionn didn't talk about it much, but the Albion were masters of boat-building, and crafted the ghost birds that got the survivors over the sea, far enough from the black death as they could possibly get.

Fionn kept to himself and had no wife and no children. He spent most of his time alone out on the river plains, looking at the wetlands, the beach, the hills, the heath. Fionn was the last of his clan, the last of the Albion. Noornangk said that she had never seen Fionn enter the ocean again, not since he was dragged up onto the beach half dead all those seasons ago. Noornangk said that Fionn's spirit never recovered from losing Meka's father Gray, and if it weren't for Meka, Gray might have sprouted wings and left River Country.

Meka walked into her nana's camp and the Ancestor Trees whispered around her.

Moon reflected in salty sea. Waves break the light. Wind carries it.

She found her nana drinking tea by the fire. Noornangk's favourite Erin thing was the clay pots they made, and the hot drinks they created.

"Humid," Meka said, coming to sit by her.

"Storms in the north," Noornangk said, handing her a teacup.

She then leaned over and ran her finger over the sand in between them, making swirling, circular patterns.

"There'll be fog on the beaches by tomorrow," she added. "I'm not letting anyone near the sea until it clears."

Meka took a sip of her tea. It was a cool peppery mint from the trees that grow by the river.

"How come?" Meka asked. "I've seen fog before."

"That's land fog," her nana said. "This is different."

She added more swirls to her design in the sand.

“There are angry seas and winds and rain in the north, and their spirits protect them,” Noornangk said. “But down here, we have calmer seas, calmer winds. The sea fog isn’t our spirit, isn’t our Country. They get lost down here, so we have to leave them to their business until they find their way back home, up north.”

“Why are the wind and sea spirits up north angrier than down here?” Meka asked.

“Just different Country,” her nana replied. “It’s not our business.”

Strange weather

Noornangk was right, when Meka woke up the next day a thick sea fog had settled over the ocean, right up to the beaches of Serpent Country. It was so strange, following a hot run of days. Against her nana's wishes, Meka walked toward the beach with Dwerda trailing behind. At the edge of the camp escarpment she saw it: a long, low cloud, mottled grey, white and dark purple, lying like a great snake all long the horizon. She walked in the heat with Dwerda darting in and out of the saltbush to the edge of the dunes and looked down at the beach. She'd never seen anything like it, the fog was settled on the water and the beach, as she walked across the sand she was walking in a cloud. The temperature changed too, the sun was blocked out, cold water clung to her skin. It was like the rainy season had suddenly settled. She could only see a few bumps in the ocean as the water lapped against the shore, beyond that it was grey and white. She looked down and Dwerda had dashed off to her right, and disappeared. Meka knew she would be the only one down here, Noornangk had told everyone to stick to the rivers.

The beach was quiet, and Meka saw a cluster of silver gulls all standing together further up the shore, feathers fluffed up, looking out in all directions. She imagined the little shorebirds had gone back to their nests in the dunes, hiding out against the strange weather. She looked up, wondering if the hawks and osprey were caught in the fog, lost and trying to find their way home to their nests high in the trees inland. Dwerda trotted up to her with a dead skink in her mouth, perhaps caught out in the fog after sunbaking for the last few days.

Dwerda dropped the skink and it came back to life, making a mad dash for the thick grass on the dunes. Dwerda chased after it, digging her snout in the grass to drag it out again.

“It’s strange weather, Dwerda,” Meka said.

Meka wandered further down the beach and climbed up on the limestone outcrop near where the little blue and white penguins nest in the colder months. Dwerda stayed down on the soft sand, eating her skink purposefully with both paws holding it down, should it spring back to life again.

It was so quiet that the lapping of the water against the rocks filled her ears. The fog shifted and she couldn’t even see Dwerda anymore; she was completely surrounded.

Meka looked out and imagined that the ocean had disappeared, leaving a dry path out to the islands. Meka was transported for a moment back in time to one of her earliest memories of Serpent Territory, when her mother and father moved with her from Whale Country on the south coast to here. Her father Gray had arrived a few years earlier, and didn’t know the histories of Serpent Country. She remembered standing at her parents’ feet and looking up to see her nana’s mother, the oldest person Meka had ever seen, her great-grandmother Maya. Her father Gray listened as Maya pointed out to the west, gesturing to the islands, gesturing to the sea. It was one of Meka’s earliest memories, and later, years after her parents’ deaths and the death of Maya, her nana Noornangk would tell her the story of the giant tuart trees

that grew in the valley below, and the terrible waters that rushed in and flooded all that land.

The fog shifted and another memory drifted up into her mind from that day, or a day soon after. Of her mother Mayakawa standing on the beach, angry and upset, shouting at her father, shouting at the sky. Shouting at the birds floating soundlessly above.

Meka rubbed her eyes and willed the memories away. Her mother had died not long after that, her nana would tell her. Taken by the sea, was all Noornangk ever said about it. It was taboo to talk about Mayakawa, and her father too. Neither Noornangk nor Fionn ever talked about what happened to Gray, and Meka was not allowed to ask.

Meka looked out at the sea erased by fog, and imagined walking down into the valley shaded by giant tuart trees, and finding her mother, alive and well, sitting by a camp fire while her father skinned a wallaby. Her mother would throw scraps to Dwerda and her father would tell stories about the strange dead lands that he and his kin escaped. Sisters and brothers playing games on kangaroo fur cloaks.

Water droplets were settling on her skin and Meka shivered, brought back to the foggy cliff she sat on. She wondered why the Creator Serpent had made this fog, why it had brought this thick cloud down to earth and sea. Although Noornangk had told her that the fog rolled in FROM the sea. Or was it a deep breath exhaled from the sea? What lungs could sustain this fog?

A sound reached her then,

woolwool

She looked up and around, a futile action, in the fog.

woolwool

It sounded like the call of an albatross, so Meka called out to it.

“This is dry land,” she said loudly, “and it’s not your nesting season. Head back out to your home hovering above the sea.”

She waited for a response and heard nothing, so she hoped her human voice unsettled it and it flew off in the opposite direction. Albatross don’t often come near land so this one must have been disoriented in the fog, but Meka was happy with the opportunity to care for its wellbeing.

There was a sound behind her and she spun around, crouched on the limestone. Her hand recoiled suddenly, because there was something sharp on the rock. Her palm was cut and starting to bleed, and Meka looked closely through the mist at what she had leant on. She looked around for the source of the noise, it had sounded like footsteps, but she couldn’t see anything in the fog. She looked down and saw what she had cut her hand on, the rock was jagged and uneven. She probed

it with her finger and the spikey ends jiggled and loosened, they were some sort of teeth lodged in the rock. She lifted it before her face and saw it was a shark tooth, buried with others in a lump where she was sitting. She put the tooth in her pocket and climbed down the limestone rocks to wash her hand in the ocean. She found Dwerda at the bottom of the cliffs looking very damp.

“Our home is dry land,” she said, “so let’s go find some of that.”

Stone teeth

The day had gotten ever hotter and Meka was stretched out behind some sedge near the river. She was hoping Fionn might float past, but he was likely napping in his boat upstream. Dwerda was nowhere to be found, and had probably dug herself a hole somewhere. A pair of black swans waddled past her and floated out into the water, crossing the river to find some shade on the other side. If it were breeding season they would have chased her out of their territory, but their babies would have grown up by now, and so Meka was left alone. A whistling kite was preening on the branch of a dead tree overhead, probably wishing there were some cygnets to swoop down and eat. The cicadas were shrieking their shrill chorus and Meka shut her eyes and tried to make the most of this shady spot she had found. She moved her hands under her head and winced, forgetting momentarily about the cut from the shark tooth.

She heard women's voices and her eyes cracked open. The kite had soundlessly left at some point, the branches of the dead tree were empty. A group of people were walking nearby and Meka could hear snippets of conversation.

"Why is everybody whispering about birds at the moment?" a girl's voice said.

Meka didn't recognise the voice, it must have been someone from a visiting family.

“It’s not your business, Shannon,” an older woman, Alma, from camp, said.

“Why was Noornangk’s granddaughter shouting at the birds anyway?” the girl Shannon asked.

“She was talking to the magpies,” Alma said, “that’s just her way.”

“I hope she doesn’t go mad like her mother,” an unfamiliar voice said quietly.

“Hush now, respect Serpent Country,” Alma said.

There were some more whispers and the group moved out of earshot. Meka stared at the sky and saw the kite high above doing lazy circles in the sky.

Meka sighed deeply and shut her eyes.

When she opened them again there was a wet black nose blocking her field of view.

“Ok,” she told her dog. “Let’s go find Fionn.”

There was a cool breeze coming off the water as Meka walked along the thin track that ran alongside the river, with Dwerda trotting behind. She found Fionn

sitting on a fallen log repairing the rope for this boat, making it thicker with sedge from the riverbanks.

She sat against a peppermint tree, pulled some quandong berries from her pouch and began to eat. Dwerda darted off between the trees in search of something.

“Seeya then,” she called after her.

“You’ve been back a few days and you’re already hanging out alone,” Fionn said, not taking his eyes off his work.

“I remember why I left,” Meka said.

“They’re not so bad,” Fionn said.

“You’re out here alone too,” Meka replied.

Fionn laughed.

“They’re not so bad for short periods of time,” he added.

Meka stretched out and looked up at the underside of the tree.

“You know that there aren’t any newcomers in the Dolphin Clan,” Meka said.

“Is that why you’ve got the sulks?” Fionn said. “Too many pale faces here?”

Meka thought of her Uncle Miro trying to boss her around.

“It’s not just the pale faces,” Meka said. “Though sometimes you newcomers don’t respect taboo topics.”

“Did anyone catch your eye down the coast?” Fionn asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Meka said, smiling. “Not that it matters, Nana and Miro are planning my next marriage.”

Fionn affixed his repaired rope to his little boat.

“Maybe that will give everyone something else to talk about,” Fionn said.

Meka reached into her bag for another berry but pricked her finger on something sharp. She pulled the shark tooth out of her bag and held it up. Fionn glanced over at her.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A shark tooth,” Meka replied.

“You didn’t find that around here did you?” Fionn said. “It looks pretty big.”

“I found it down at the beach,” she replied. “Well, it found me.”

She showed Fionn her cut hand.

“It was lodged in the rock of the cliffs,” she said, “along with a couple more.”

Fionn took the tooth and inspected it.

“Meka this tooth has turned to stone,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Meka asked.

“This was shed by a shark long ago,” Fionn said. “The tooth was either spat out or the shark died, then the tooth settled in the sand, and the sand became stone.”

“What was it doing up on the cliffs then?” Meka said, taking the tooth back to look at closely. “The waves were far below where I was sitting.”

“The limestone along the coast is full of sea creatures,” Fionn said. “Your nana’s father, Old Djara, used to talk about the floods, about the seas that rushed in

and separated the islands from the coast. Those rising seas might have deposited all the old bones on the shore, where they became one with the land.”

He picked up some more fibres for the rope. A pair of wrens were watching him earnestly as he split apart the dried grasses.

“It was the same in my home Country,” Fionn said, somewhat absentmindedly now that he was concentrating. “Sea creatures in the rocks, little crab-looking things, shells, and fish. Sometimes big things, things we couldn’t imagine and would never want to meet. Above the water line, above even the high tide. I didn’t understand that until I met Old Djara, now I think I know why.”

One of the wrens pinched a bit of Fionn’s grass and he let it take it. Meka saw it fly away, probably to its nest nearby.

“And shark teeth,” Fionn said, starting to weave. “Thousands and thousands of shark teeth.”

Meka inspected the tooth. It was indeed, stone, not a regular tooth as she had originally thought. What a strange world, the sea taking the land between the coast and the islands, and the coast taking the bones of the dead of the sea.

“The coast is not quite land and not quite sea,” she said aloud.

Fionn was back braiding his rope and gave her a hmmm in response. Dwerda trotted back and stretched out next to Meka. Meka looked at the river and saw a tired dragonfly swimming circles on the surface of the river. She fished it out and placed it on a branch.

“Why so many shark teeth?” Meka asked.

“If you ever see a shark it has many many rows of teeth,” Fionn said. “I saw a shark out in the open ocean, during the great flight, of unbelievable size. It followed our boat, probably hoping we’d sink and give it a feast. At one point it reared out of the water and I saw inside its terrible mouth. It had rows and rows and rows of teeth. When one falls out, there’s five to take its place. It’s a creature that was made to grow teeth, made to bite things. It’s the only part of the shark that lasts.”

“What do you mean?” Meka asked.

“A shark has no bones but in the mouth,” Fionn said. “Their whole body is powerful muscle, but they’re like a stingray, there’s no bones in there. We have bones, a kangaroo has bones, a snake has bones, a whale has bones. But the only bones a shark has are its teeth.”

He pointed to her shark tooth.

“And they last forever,” he added.

Meka turned over her injured palm.

“And still biting long after the shark is dead,” she laughed.

“I’m glad that shark is long gone,” Fionn said. “Just let me know if you find any teeth up this end of the river, ok niece?”

Meka smiled.

“You’ll be the first to know.”

On its mid-western edge, The Serpent reveals its body on the surface, the long trunk of its belly stretching from the eastern hills high above the coastal land, down through the forests to the marshy plains and out to the ocean. In the sky the belly scales of the great snake are reflected in the stippled clouds. The Serpent feels the worship of the creatures it cares for. Animals, plants and people alike gather around its watery body, and birds and fish live in its aqueous coils. Here wallabies dip their faces to drink, water reeds dance softly in the currents, dolphins talk to each other as they pulse beneath the waves with powerful flicks of their tails. Overhead a black swan comes down land, skidding across the surface for a few moments before settling gracefully. The Serpent loves them all, from the largest Kangaroo to the tiniest gnat, from the thirsty eucalypts to the miniscule floating algae. People are also attracted to his watery body, both here on the west coast and also on the south coast, down where the Serpent carves out pathways in the granite boulders under the cool shade of giant karri trees... but this coastal country is especially popular with the new people, those who came from other lands across the salty abyss of the ocean.

The newcomers have a strange air that clings to them. It surrounds their feet, their hands, their eyes, their tongues. They place their palms against the trunks of tuart trees but don't make contact, their skin of air prevents it. Perhaps this grew around the newcomers to protect them as they travelled far from their homelands through water, wind, salt and cold.

Do the Serpents who made those lands wonder where their people have gone?

Clay bowls

The heat of the day was cooling, and Meka walked along the crest of the escarpment that rose above the still lakes near the river. She was on a stretch of land south of the Erin camp where the trees gave way to marshy swamps, and where banks of deep red clay sloped into the water. She found a path that descended toward the water, and she walked down among the pink wax-flower bushes and the white grevilleas. The path veered backwards and forwards down the hill, and Meka watched Dwerda trotting ahead of her, disappearing into bushes on her right and reappearing on the left. There were people sitting around fires by the lake and smoke drifted up toward her, carried on the sea breeze. The land south of the lake had dark patches in it, having been burned with cool fire to clear the scrub and help the seeds germinate.

This land had been burned a season late because of the floods that moved through River Country last summer, ahead of the rainy season. The land had been saturated, and couldn't be fired. As a result there hadn't been many flowers in the spring, the orchid bulbs had slept right though. The orchids of that lakeside Country were yellow and resembled bees and wasps, and Meka wondered if it had been a lonely summer for the insects without flower relatives. The land had been fired recently though, so the flowers would return next warm season.

Meka saw her cousin Karla and her kids by the lake and headed in their direction. Karla was sitting with her Erin father's family as they made clay vessels for drinking and eating. The Erin men and women had permission to take small quantities of clay for the cups, bowls and plates they use for cooking and storing

food. Meka walked along the shoreline of the lake, where children were playing in the shallows and Erin women were gathered around a smouldering fire pit. They were preparing the fire to bury the clay bowls they had shaped, where the soft clay shapes would be placed in the pit and covered in sand and sticks. This would make the clay cook and harden, and be able to hold water.

Karla was also sitting with their pregnant cousin Djindalee. Karla had a small knife and was carving a picture into the inside of the bowl she had made. Karla gestured for Meka to sit, and Meka sat on a grasstree leaf mat and Dwerda stretched out beside her.

“We’re making bowls for Djindalee’s baby,” Karla said. “Djindalee’s mother-in-law has shared with us their old people’s designs for mother and baby.”

Meka saw the familiar design of multiple knots wrapping around the bowl, and a single knot in the bottom of the inside of the bowl.

“The knots on the outside are the families connected back to the ancestors of Erin Country,” Karla said, “and they’re knotted in with all of Djindalee’s ancestors here on Serpent Country.”

She pointed to the single knot on the inside of the bowl.

“And here is the new baby,” she added, “tied to mum and dad and their ancestors.”

Djindalee's Erin mother-in-law Alma came over, a woman in her 40's with very pale skin and wispy blonde hair that emerged as curls beneath a strip of fabric that was wrapped around her head. Karla handed her the soft clay bowl and Alma turned it over in her hands.

"I think it's done," Alma said in accented River language, "I'll just make some of the indents deeper so they stand out more."

Alma took the bowl back to the women by the fire, where they passed it around, evening out the designs and each considering it before it went in the pit fire. The River Elders were wary of Erin customs when they arrived, especially when learning that their home had died and disintegrated away into the sea. The River People came to enjoy Erin cooking though, and permitted the creation of clay plates and cups. But not all Erin ways were allowed.

Djindalee was carving an image onto a plate, and lifted it out of the way as Karla's toddler boy ran through them.

"What are you making there?" Meka asked.

Djindalee lifted her plate to reveal the image of an oval shell on the back.

"Nana says that one of my baby's totems will be the swamp tortoise that lives here," she replied, gesturing to the lakes. "Nana wants to ensure that the swamps are

cared for now that we take clay from the tortoise's Country. This plate will remind my baby."

Karla's boy climbed into her lap and pointed to Djindalee's belly.

"Baby!" he shrieked.

"That's right bub," Karla said, "you're going to be the big brother."

He scrambled off Karla's lap but she caught him.

"Now you know the swamp tortoises here are asleep?" she said, holding him close.

"Yeeees?" he said unconvincingly.

"It's the dry season when the tortoises come out of the water and sleep under leaves, tree roots and in holes in the ground," she said. "So be careful where you're running, stay on the path so you don't step on their heads."

"Yes mum," he said, and Karla let him run away after his sister.

Meka patted Dwerda's head and looked off at the recently burnt land that bordered these lakes. The Erin people of the First Wave were mortified to see the River people firing the land. The blackened grass had frightened them, reminding

them of the brittle earth that they had fled from across the seas. The Erin had been occupied by their neighbours, the Albion, Fionn's people, who had cleared Erin land to grow food in large quantities. They associated this widespread clearing with the disaster that befell them. The flames moving across the ground itself frightened the Erin, because in their lands across the sea fire was something to be feared. The River Elders taught the Erin how to walk with fire, and be a partner to this force that cooked food, warmed spirits, opened seeds and lit the faces of families at night.

“How's nana?” Karla asked Meka.

“She's out at the ochre place,” Meka said. “Her and the Aunties are preparing for the Eastern mob to visit.”

Meka sighed deeply.

“You don't want to see them?” Karla asked.

“I think nana wants me to get married again,” Meka said. “Uncle Miro's in her ear, and this could be a convenient time.”

“It's still too soon surely,” Karla said, and Djindalee nodded.

Everyone went quiet after that, and Meka noticed eyes on her from the women sitting around the clay fire. She nudged Dwerda and got up and left.

Meka walked along the linked swamps back to the river. Before heading into camp, she sat on the bank by herself. Dwerda ran on ahead, probably keen to nap by the fire, not willing to wait. Meka heard something scurry away as she settled among the grasses, maybe a quenda or woylie who wanted to get to sleep itself. She sighed and wrapped her arms round her knees, thinking of the stares she'd been receiving the past few days. Her nana has sent her away for the spring to be with her Dolphin People family, whom her cousins had married into. They didn't really know what had happened during the floods, and she had spent the spring doing her own thing. She pulled up some sedge in frustration, fidgeting with it. She saw movement in the river in front of her and stopped. She kept watching, and then a ripple of rainbow moved across the surface of the water.

“Two Erin matches,” Meka said aloud to the river. “One gone before I met him, and another taken by the water.”

There was no response, just the heartbeat ebb of the water against the shoreline.

“I didn't want to marry him,” she continued, “I didn't want to marry the Erin man, but I did, and your waters took him away.”

A cormorant shrieked overhead. The waterlogged river sand beneath her feet was cold. The image of a peaceful face rose in her mind, closed eyes, blue lips. Pulled onto the river bank not far from here, caught up in the floods that swept through the Country in the previous rainy season. Lungs full of water, a spirit pulled

away on the tide. There was no breath of Country in his body, a young man not much older than Meka, pale skin, dark hair. He was gone. His Erin people had survived the death of their own Country, the journey across the vast ocean, and the shark-filled swim to shore, only to drown in the Serpent's body. A wild and angry Creator Serpent thrashing its body through the Erin camp.

Meka's husband was gone before any babies could come. Pale spirit children also dragged out in the tide.

"I keep losing people," she whispered. "It doesn't feel right."

A fin appeared in the river and quickly disappeared. Meka scoured the river for her dolphin family, but none surfaced. She looked down at the sedge in her hands. She had braided the sedge and formed knots in a few places. Knots that were frayed, splitting and unravelling.

Giants of River Country

Meka leant against a tuart tree and watched for the arrival of the southern and eastern clans for trade. No one had come for a while due to the flooding of last warm season, when the streams in the hills broke their banks and flooded huge volumes of water over the Country. It had taken a while for the water to recede and the earth to dry out a bit. Next to her face the long stringy tuart bark was home to a variety of mosses, lichens and fungus. There were veins of bright green lichen, a scattering of buds of mossy green lichen. It was probably a sign of the saturation that River Country experienced, to see so many colours on the tree. It was almost like sea anemones and urchins Meka had seen in rockpools. Noornangk said that not all things can thrive at once, some rise and fall away with the changing of Country. She said that the tuart trees once grew all the way out to the islands off the coast, but lost that territory when the sea levels rose. Only the Creator Serpent could stop the flooding; not even the mighty tuart could do it on its own.

The tuart trees were the giants of River Country, reaching higher and spreading further into the sky than any other tree this side of the mountains. They were home to cockatoos, lizards, moths, spiders, beetles, possums, and parrots. Other River Country tree and plant families liked to live near tuarts, all around her were wattle, banksia, peppermint, sandalwood and jarrah. Meka saw some silk threads near her face and lifted her hand and lifted a section of bark with her fingernail. A huntsman spider was looking back at her, all flattened with its legs arranged in front, huge eyes watching. Just one more thing living in the protection of the tuart giants.

This spider had reinforced the bark with silk, so she let the bark drop down again so the spider could get back to sleep.

Looking back out to watch south for her father's mother's family arrival, Meka saw that even the Ancestor Tree liked to position itself near the tuart trees, within reach of the great protector and guardian of River Country. She looked down and wondered at the great intertwining of roots and seeds underground, the conversations the trees might be having with one another. She looked west toward the drowned tuarts off the coast, to those tree spirits trapped under the water, and wondered if these trees beside her could still speak to them. A cool breeze moved up from the south and the ancestors murmured with it.

Remember the cold times. Homes lost to creeping sea. Spirits sleeping in the salt.

The breeze turned chilly and Meka shivered. She thought of her first home down in Whale Country on the south coast, ten days walk from River Country, where she was born. That was her great-grandmother's Country down there, where giant granite boulders sat on squeaky white beach sand, and wide shallow bays of cold clear water stretched from headland to headland. Mother whales came to Meka's great-grandmother's Country to give birth to calves in the sheltered bays in the rainy season. Like Meka, those calves took their first breath of air on the south coast, their whole world was shallow water, sea grass and white sand. The whales don't stay though, the mothers led their young far out to sea and out of sight, disappearing into the deep saltwater territories over the southern horizon. They were

just like her, born and grown on the south coast, then sent away when weaned to the unknown territories in the northwest, River Country, run by her maternal grandmother Noornangk. Perhaps the whales themselves return to their own Whale Grandmother Country.

Meka had vague memories of her own mother, Mayakawa, who was taken by the ocean before Meka had seen her fourth rainy season. She wouldn't have been much older than Meka was now, had maybe seen a couple more season cycles, but Meka couldn't remember much about her. She remembered long hair, a fur belt that had shells woven into it, and the smell of the sea. The possum skin bag she carried was her mother's, and the kangaroo fur cloak she wore in the cold. From the stories she heard from Noornangk and Fionn and overheard from people gossiping, her mother was restless in River Country. Noornangk had sent Mayakawa away to Whale Country when she married Gray, to stay with Ngoola, one of her mother's grandmothers. Meka had vivid memories of old Ngoola, her great-grandmother who was one of the heads of that south coast Country. Meka remembered being with Ngoola as she sang to whales, watched honey possums feed in the evenings, ate oily emu meat while sitting on orange earth filled with sparkling crystals, and walked along paths edged by tall hakea and their stacked, spikey leaves. In the background of these memories was the ever-present dark pointed hill, inland from the sea, that rose out of the orange and green landscape like a giant shark fin. She lived down in Whale Country until the death of Noornangk's mother Maya, whom her mother Mayakawa was named for. Noornangk became an Elder and Mayakawa had to come back to River Country.

Meka looked up the long trunk of the tuart and the thick pale branches that stretched into the sky like veins in an eye. An image came to her of sitting on her father's shoulders and looking up at the trees. They were on the long walk from Whale Country to River Country, and she remembered the feel of her father's soft beard against her arms as she hung on to his neck. She was looking up at the trees and then down the black drawings on his skin, winding knotted ropes that wrapped around his arms. He also had a skin drawing of a peregrine falcon, which lived in Erina, the Erin homeland, as well as River Country. They met inland people as they walked north, people who stared at Gray, people who stared at Meka, with her green eyes. Gray had told her about his own grandmother, who had green eyes and long dark hair, just like Meka.

Though she couldn't remember his face, her father seemed happy in her memories. Her mother less so, her conversations seemed tense, people around her mother seemed tense when Mayakawa spoke. Her father was happy to go back to River Country where so many Erin people lived. Noornangk had told Meka that the Erin people preferred the western coastline of Serpent Territory, which was pleasant and warm compared to the Erin homeland, but also where the rains fell in the cooler season, and frost covered the ground during the coldest moon of the year. They were reminded of their homelands before the great death, the one or two moons of the year that felt like home to them. When they arrived in River Country Meka saw Fionn for the first time, who embraced Gray and wept to see him. They had a bond between them, just the two of them arriving together on the shore of River Country, half dead on an oily tide. Gray was the last person connecting Fionn to their life over the sea, and when Gray and Mayakawa were taken by the sea Fionn was devastated.

Meka grew up with Karla as her sister and was raised by her aunties. Meka remembers Fionn always being around, but her nana said that Meka was seven or eight season cycles old when she and Fionn started spending time together.

Noornangk said with Gray gone Fionn withdrew from River Country life for a long time, and had his own camp further up the river. Meka didn't know why he came back, but he was a big part of her life ever since.

A line of smoke appeared above the trees and Meka glanced up. The clans had arrived.

Family yarns

Over the next few days the visiting clans began to arrive. Meka stood by as Noornangk and Miro welcomed the southern Dolphin People, and eastern Echidna People, the eastern Bush Pea People, the eastern Rock Wallaby people, and the southern Whale People. The southern Whale People were the last to arrive, having walked for eight days from the southern beaches to River Country. They had a couple of nights of song and celebration and Meka got to hear all about what had been happening around Serpent Territory.

Meka sat with her cousins from Whale Country near fire in the Erin Camp. There was a men's ceremony happening out in the hills that had taken most of the men and boys away. Her cousins Dalyara and Cowra were her nana's brother's family, who married into Whale Country. Dalyara was older than Meka and had three children, all boys, who were off with their eastern Echidna People father, who was happy to mix with his family again. Cowra was Meka's age and newly married, her husband Omer was an eastern Curlew man whose clan walked the hakea cliffs east of Whale Country.

"Everything seems to have recovered here," Dalyara said, unrolling some twine. "The ground is dry, there are kangaroos around."

"Everything dried out over the last few months," Meka said. "The flood took what it took and now Country is back to how it was."

“How terrible for your husband to travel here from the wild seas of Dolphin Country only to drown in the river here,” Dalyara said.

“No one was expecting that flood,” Meka said. “The Creator Serpent was angry about something, all the water came from up in the hills.”

“Lucky for the hot summer,” Dalyara said. “Everything is back and you can marry again.”

“The fires in Omer’s Country were terrible,” Cowra said, as she repaired the ties on her kangaroo cloak. “It had been so dry, no water, no animals, no insects, and then it burned for a whole moon cycle.”

“Too much water here and not enough on the south coast,” Dalyara said.

“There was sea fog here,” Meka said, glancing down at her cut palm. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Dalyara saw and looked at Meka reproachfully.

“You’re still carrying those spears around?” Dalyara asked Meka. “Is that how you cut yourself?”

“No,” Meka said, hiding her hand. “Fionn said that Old Grey Djara gave them to my father when he first arrived, and took a liking to him, recommending he marry my mother.”

“Djara?” Dalyara said. “Noornangk’s uncle?”

Meka nodded, and glanced over at her spears, short and sharp, ochre-painted with the ghost bird story.

“My grandfather died not long after my mother was born, so Djara gave the spears to my dad,” Meka said. “I want to give them to my sons one day, I don’t want to let them go yet.”

“Are you getting married at this meet?” Cowra asked. “Have you been matched with anyone?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Meka said. “Although Uncle Miro has been talking about it, so he and nana will probably match me with someone.”

Dogs ran into camp, signalling the return of the men from ceremony. Meka got up to find Fionn, hoping to avoid Miro.

She ducked out of camp, around the reaching arms of a giant banksia tree, its branches dotted with tall orange flowers almost skimming the ground beyond the trunk. The ground sloped after it and Meka was able to sit for a minute without being

seen. Little finches were bouncing around in the banksia, chirping softly as they ate from the flowers. Below her the ground sloped down toward the river, all banksia and paperbark until the sedge started at the water's edge. Meka looked above where a hawk was hovering, probably looking for lizards or mammals who might dart out into the open.

Meka got to her feet and walked down between the trees to the river. The Erin tended to have their own gatherings during trade meets, and Fionn may or may not be with them. Fionn tended to disappear completely during these big meets, but it had been a while since everyone had been together. Even Fionn liked to hear the gossip.

She walked under the trees until she heard voices, and saw a group of people by a cool beach. Some very pale, very old people from over the sea were seated beside some piles of grass tree needles, and they were surrounded by men, women and children, all speaking a mix of their Country language and the faraway language of their dead homelands. They hadn't seen her, and Meka leaned against a tree as she listened in. She recognised one of the women as the mother of her drowned husband, and a wave of cold dread came over her. Meka hung back, knowing this place must bring back bad memories for the mother as well.

Meka skirted the group and continued to where she might find Fionn. She was creeping softly through the sedge when she ran into someone, lost her footing and fell backward on the ground.

Mussels in the stream

She looked up and saw a man of around her years looking back at her. He was a warrior from one of the eastern clans, initiated, and he looked like he had no parentage at all from the lands across the sea. He helped her up and she watched his chest flex as she got to her feet.

They looked at each other for a moment and he nodded, and kept walking. Three more men walked past her, two more warriors and a younger one from River Country, Djangkang, one of Miro's nephew's boys, whose mother was Erin. Meka smiled, she knew that he had been looking forward to the men's business of this great meet and while he didn't look at her, she saw him drop his head and smile as he walked by. Miro emerged from the path and eyed her on the way through, and the smile left her face. They all passed by in silence.

Meka continued up the river and sure enough, she found Fionn along a creek filled with tree roots and overhanging foliage, a shaded and cool realm where the freshwater mussels grow and the water rats roam. He was drawing on a smooth stretch of dried bark with a charcoal stick, and little fire burned by the river bank.

“Hey niece,” he said.

Meka sat down and saw that he was drawing pictures of the water rat.

“Did Rakali come out during the day?” she asked.

Fionn shook his head.

“No,” he said, “I saw one a few nights ago, a female. I can’t draw at night so I come back during the day to bring it to life.”

Meka settled against a tree.

“Where’s that dog of yours?” Fionn asked.

“Don’t know,” Meka replied. “Off somewhere. Lots of activity in camp.”

Fionn nodded gravely.

“My cousins were talking about the fires on the south coast,” Meka said. “They got out of control and burned more than they should have, took on a life of their own.”

“Your father told me about the hot winds that used to roll in from the Desert Country,” Fionn said. “Perhaps bad spirits from the desert sent them down to Whale and Eagle Country.”

“Why would they do that to us though?” Meka said. “They’re not our spirits, why punish the coastal mobs.”

“Who knows what’s going on in other people’s Country,” Fionn said, looking thoughtfully at his drawing.

Meka lay on her stomach on the riverbank and reached for the freshwater mussels in the stream. She moved her hand around until she felt them, a group of little mouths with the meaty tongues sucking nutrients from the water, clamping shut as her fingers touched them. She touched all around their base, where they stuck themselves to rocks underwater, and to each other. All grouped together in a colony, defensive and communal. Caught in the stream but not carried away by it. She plucked two and pulled them out of the water, dropping them on Fionn’s fire.

Thankyou little water spirits, she told them wordlessly.

Meka let them cook for a few moments while Fionn continued to sketch. She pushed them onto the sand to cool down and then leant back against the tree.

“There were floods on my Country and wildfires on grandfather’s Country,” Meka said. “What have any of us done wrong?”

The sound of Erin songs drifted between the trees, of men and women singing in the Erin language. Meka looked down at her hands, paler than her nana’s, paler than Miro’s. Paler than the warrior she had met just before. Paler than the dark mussels that anchored themselves against the push and pull of the river. Her mind turned toward her promised man, picked up and carried off by the flood, his pale

hands unable to hang onto Country, washed away, his spirit carried back out to sea.
A breeze moved through the forest, carrying voices of her ancestors.

The weeping river gathers salt from the earth to embitter the sea.

“Not even my mother could stick to Country,” Meka said aloud.

“What did you say niece?” Fionn asked as he sketched.

“Nothing,” she replied.

It was getting late in the afternoon and Fionn had left while she napped. He had probably gone up the creek looking for more locations where mussels grow. Fionn was an admirer of Rakali, the water rat that comes out at night and eats the shellfish. It’s the only furred animal in River Country that hunts for food in the water, living a completely different life to the animals similar to it: the quokkas, quendas, bettongs, wallabies and kangaroos that eat grass, roots, berries and seeds on land. Fionn liked to locate families of mussels and gilgies close to the shore during the day, then comes back at night to quietly watch Rakali hunt in the watery darkness. Maybe he felt a particular kind of kinship with it, a fellow water-dweller. Fionn had never given up the little boat that brought him and Meka’s grandfather to shore, that carried Erin people across the shark-filled reefs on the stormy night of arrival. The Erin people had taken no more interest in watercraft since setting foot on Meka’s Country, leaving the memories of the sinking of their own vessels forever.

Meka saw movement on the opposite shoreline, thinking it might be a water rat family, but it was a wren taking off from the underbrush. Fionn could never bring himself to eat Rakali, so Noornangk had assigned them as Fionn's totem so he could look after their spirit.

Fionn and his obsession with searching the rivers and shorelines for pieces of his home country irked the Erin, and the River People of other clans, but her own clan were much more comfortable around Fionn, which Meka thought should be a sign to accept him. She had crept away from the gatherings herself; without a husband she was the centre of community gossip. She walked straight out of the Erin camp and down to Fionn's shack, only to find him missing as well. This was the deepest part of the creek, and where Fionn liked to launch his boat from, so she figured she'd wait for him there.

Meka saw movement again, this time on the water. A few bubbles were collecting near the surface, over the deeper part of the creek. Meka watched a large collection of bubbles then burst up on the surface. It looked like a dolphin releasing a breath but this creek was too shallow in most parts for her water kin, they probably couldn't even reach this deep part. She kept watching and another patch of bubbles emerged, this one closer to where she was sitting. Then another, closer again. Meka stood, alarmed. The creek had gone completely silent, no sounds of birds or insects. Even the breeze had stopped. Perhaps this was spirits, annoyed at her about something. She scooped up some river sand, rubbed it on herself then threw it in the water.

“Hello, Creator Serpent,” she called out, “it’s Meka O’Noorn, I respect you and see you.”

The bubbles kept approaching and Meka stepped further up the bank.

“This is my grandmother’s Country,” she said aloud. “You see me, you know me.”

The bubbles stopped, the creek was still and the breeze returned, shifting the leaves of the paperbark trees above her. She turned and walked back in the direction of camp, but on the wind she thought she made out some words.

I know you

Heart in a sac

Meka was sitting on the shady side of a sand dune, cleaning out some oyster shells to repair her knife with. She heard her name being called and raised her hand in the air, hollering back. She heard the sound of small feet trampling through the saltbush and she knew immediately that it was a child of one of the visiting clans, and was a newcomer. Little fingers grasped hers and she yanked a fair-haired boy into her lap. She recognised him as one of the O'Grady children, only on Country for two years, having blown in half-dead on a leaking boat two salmon seasons ago. His family had joined the Banksia people who lived near the limestone caves further down the coast. She tickled him and he squealed and babbled in the language of his far away homeland.

“RESPECT THE SPIRITS IN THE DUNES,” she said slowly, enunciating each word firmly in the Country language. Children picked up the language of Country pretty quickly, and this one, only six years old, would soon forget the strange, poisonous lands of his birth, and become one of them.

“THIS COUNTRY DOESN'T KNOW YOU YET AND THE SNAKES WILL BITE YOU”.

The boy was looking at her quizzically as she spoke, trying to understand, but he looked alert when she said the word SNAKE. He knew that one. He chatted away again, escaping her grasp and pulling her to her feet. She allowed herself to be pulled along but pointed to her feet as she walked, stepping carefully and softly on the sand,

and the small boy mimicked her. As soon as they hit rocky ground he let go of her hand and ran ahead. Up the path Meka could see a group of children who were gathered around something on the ground. Old Niall was standing with them, who was her grandfather Shay's brother who arrived with him in the First Wave, all those seasons ago.

“Meka my girl,” Niall said. “Dugite is your totem, yes?”

Niall spoke in a mix of Country and newcomer language, no doubt for the benefit of the young and recent arrivals standing with him. Meka nodded and peered into the circle. A snake the length of a man was on the ground, its chest split open and its head severed.

“The kids were playing and disturbed it, I had no choice,” Niall said. “Will you speak to the spirits for us, apologise?”

Meka nodded and reached down to pick it up.

“Can we eat it?” asked a red-headed ten-year-old girl, in heavily accented Country language.

“It wasn't hunted the right way,” Meka said. “We'll leave it for the animals to eat.”

The little ones who didn't understand her language looked disappointed when their potential meal was taken away. Although there was plenty to eat on Country they still remembered the hard, hungry days back over the seas and on the boats. Meka carefully pulled the snake under some bushes, speaking some words of apology.

"There were no snakes back home," said the red-headed girl again. "Saint Pater drove them away."

"That's right Millie," Niall said. "He drove all the poisonous snakes up a mountain, and then into the sea."

"I wish he left some for us to eat, though," Millie said.

"It wasn't always so bad," Niall said.

He began talking about Saint Pater and the far away lands before the Bad Times. The children were excited to hear the old stories and Old Niall seemed to enjoy telling them. Meka noticed that he had fallen back into newcomer talk. It made her uncomfortable, and she was glad her mother's family weren't there.

Meka sensed movement and looked down. The dugite under the saltbush moved. She instinctively stepped away. She peered at it and saw its chest area twitch. She crouched down and spoke a few more words of apology. Please die in peace. We are sorry. We will teach the new people the proper ways.

The body twitched again and a pool of blood appeared at the snake's neck. Meka leaned forward and saw that the tiny heart within the split chest was beating. Blood started pouring out of the severed neck and trailing over the sand toward her. It touched her finger tips and she flinched away, and her head spun.

She stood up and found herself standing between two Country women in the proper way of dress. They looked tense. Was this culture business? She stepped back from them and started apologising.

“I'm sorry about the snake, I'll make sure the Elders...” she babbled.

But they didn't turn to look at her.

“Hello?” Meka said.

They still didn't look at her. Meka started to sweat. Was there something taboo here? Was she being shunned?

She glanced around. The landscape looked different. The trees seemed shorter. The plants looked denser. Niall and the children were gone. The dead snake was gone. She looked back at the Country women. One was older, a grandmother, and the other was younger, her daughter perhaps.

“She's my daughter, I don't want this!” the younger woman said.

“We have decided that this is the best thing to do,” the older woman said.

“Hello?” Meka said again, but got no response.

“Why our family?” the younger woman said. “That boy doesn’t even speak our language.”

“Maya, please,” said the older woman, “we can’t live as two separate people, and their reckless hunting is causing problems.”

“My Djeta is supposed to marry the boy from up north,” said the younger woman, “it fits well with him. This other boy brings nothing!”

Djeta was Meka’s nana Noornangk’s name when she was younger, and Maya was her Noornangk’s mother. Meka was perplexed. Who were these people?

“That boy up north is marrying a new arrival as well,” the older woman said. “We are all doing this together, all across Serpent territory. River Country, Whale Country, Echidna Country, Dolphin Country, all of us. We are bringing the new people in.”

“They come from a dead homeland, mum,” the younger one, Maya, said. “What if the baby spirits don’t come to these new pale women? What if they can’t even find them?”

“Babies have already come,” the older woman said.

“We don’t know anything about those children yet,” Maya said. “What if the Creator Serpent rejects them? I only have one daughter.”

Maya’s voice was breaking and she became upset. Meka stood there watching the exchange, baffled.

The older woman reached into her kangaroo skin pouch, pulling out a quandong.

“My totem is the carpet python, and so is your daughter’s,” the older woman said.

She held up the fruit.

“This fruit is about the size of a python’s heart. A snake’s heart sits high up its body, close to its head. Now how does a python swallow a quenda without crushing its heart on the way down?”

Maya shook her head. The older woman placed the quandong on Maya’s chest and held it there.

“The python’s heart isn’t stuck in place like ours or a kangaroo’s,” the older woman said.

She moved the fruit lightly over Maya’s chest.

“Its heart sits in a sac”, she said. “It moves around as the quenda is swallowed.”

The older woman looked meaningfully at Maya and handed her the fruit. Maya rolled it between her palms, thinking.

“The Creator Serpent is flexible in ways that we can never be,” the older woman said. “It will not abandon offspring that drink from its body, if they live the right way. And these new people need us to teach them that.”

“I hope you’re right mum,” Maya said.

“It’s either that or put them all to the spear,” the older woman said, “and commit to putting any new arrivals to death as soon as they step foot here. But what if that is the act that makes the Serpent abandon us?”

Meka smelled eucalypt burning and looked around. When she turned back the two women were gone and she was standing with Old Niall and the pale children again. The cut on her palm was burning. She looked down and the dead snake was back under the bush, lifeless.

A blonde child looked up at Old Niall.

“Did Saint Pater drive the Creator Serpent of our home away too, Uncle?” he asked. “Is that why all the plants and animals died?”

Niall shrugged.

“Maybe, Kieran,” he replied. “Maybe.”

The sundial

Meka felt muddled from what she had seen and went looking for Fionn. She found him in the clearing behind his camp, smoothing some wood with a rough rock. The clearing was strewn with wood, rope, and fabric from the newcomer's ships that he had collected over his time in River Country. Fionn had also constructed a large shed made of wooden planks to keep the more precious things out of the sun and rain. He nodded to her and she picked up a piece of fabric she liked holding, an Albion flag according to Fionn, a brightly coloured bit of cloth that was attached to the ghost ships. It was red like ochre with two white lines crossed on it.

“How are you, niece?” he asked.

“Having a strange day,” she said, swirling the flag around. “I think the ancestors were speaking to me.”

“Speaking about what?” Fionn asked, continuing to smooth out the wood plank.

“Just what I've had on my mind recently,” Meka replied. “Having to get married again...”

Meka trailed off and Fionn nodded absentmindedly as he worked.

“...maybe not wanting to marry a newcomer,” she added.

Fionn's eyebrows raised.

"And what did the ancestors say about that?" he asked.

"That I have to be flexible," Meka said. "I think anyway. I think it was nana's mum and grandmother."

"I remember Maya," Fionn said. "She was a wise woman. I never met Maya's mother though, what was her name?"

"Old Nana Dingo," Meka said.

"You said they spoke to you?" Fionn said.

"I don't know," Meka replied.

A shark fin appeared in the corner of her eye. Meka spun her head around, and she saw there was a pile of stones in the corner of the shed with a curved, triangular fin on top. She walked over to it and saw that it was a flat stone covered in markings with a fin of metal upright in the middle. It reminded Meka of the navigation tools carried by the sea travellers.

"Have you seen a sundial like this before?" Fionn asked, coming to stand beside her.

“Oh, it’s a sundial,” Meka said. “I thought these had to hang upright.”

“The better ones do,” Fionn said. “I made this one based on an old design from back home.”

“It looks like a shark fin,” Meka said.

“It certainly does,” Fionn said. “Perhaps sharks are the timekeepers of the ocean.”

Meka traced her finger over the inscription.

“Is this Albion language?” she asked.

“No,” Fionn said, “it’s the language of a people that lived on our lands long ago.”

“Did they flee with you?” Meka asked.

“No, they were an old society,” Fionn said. “They had an empire that fell. They’re not around anymore.”

“But they lived on your land?” Meka said. “Are they your ancestors? From your long ago times?”

Fionn was a quiet for a few moments.

“Yes, they are,” he said. “They are our ancestors. They taught us our laws and how to live. I know their language from books they left behind.”

“What does it say?” Meka said.

Fionn read the words out. It sounded so unusual, Meka couldn't have repeated it with ease. Temputj edatj errum?

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“‘Time is the devourer of all things’,” Fionn replied.

Meka ran her finger over the fin.

“Do all sundials say that?”

“No, they say all sorts of things,” Fionn said. “‘Time flies’, ‘seize the day’, ‘we are dust and shadow’.”

“Why did you pick that one to carve on here?”

Fionn swallowed deeply.

“There’s nothing left where I’m from,” he said. “No birds. No grass. No water. Consumed by the darkness. Devoured.”

“Why isn’t your sundial out in the sun?” Meka said.

“I thought I needed it, so I built it,” Fionn said. “But when I first put it out the shadow moved backwards through the day. The numbers didn’t fit. I turned the whole thing around and it worked. True north is not true here. Here south is true. Up is down, backwards is forwards.”

He too touched the metal fin.

“The fin is called the ‘gnomon’,” he said, “a word that means ‘one that knows or examines’. But it knows my homeland, not this place. And I knew then that I had to leave our idea of time behind.”

Kylie fires

The sun was setting when Meka sat with her nana, aunties and cousins by the fire in the Erin camp to eat, dining on seafood caught that morning. All the visiting groups were spread out on the open grounds, ten different fires with Elders, men, women, and children sitting around, eating, talking about the day. Meka passed a roasted lobster to Noornangk and her nana pointed to the cut on her hand.

“I cut it down at the beach,” Meka said.

She reached into her pouch and pulled out the shark tooth that she had dislodged from the limestone.

“I couldn’t see where I was going in the fog and I leant against it,” she said, holding the tooth up in the orange evening light.

“Your nana told you not to go down the beach,” her Auntie Yaatj said. She was visiting from Dolphin Country and was Noornangk’s niece. “This is what happens when you don’t listen.”

“You shouldn’t carry that around,” her older cousin Djer Djer said. She was Auntie Yaatj’s daughter-in-law. “The spirits won’t like it.”

“Shark was my mum’s totem,” Meka said. “It reminds me of her.”

Noornangk didn't say anything, just looked off into the fire.

"You know who's here," Aunty Yaartj said, looking somewhere over Meka's shoulder.

"Shoosh," another Aunty, Koolbardi, said.

Aunty Yaartj smirked and Meka turned to see who she was looking at. A group of men were sitting at another fire, including the young warrior she had run into earlier. She heard a few whispers and laughs before Noornangk interrupted.

"Enough," Koolbardi said. "What's past is past."

They ate until night fell and the orange firelight danced across the faces of her family, shadows coming forth and dancing back in the flickering beat of the fire. Like the men when they dance, darting forward, skipping back, light and dark wrapped around, wrestling, never still, never stopping. Dwerda came to lay by her, yawning hugely, her ears pinned back against her head as her jaws hyper-extended. She then turned on her back and scratched around in the sand.

"Are you covered in ticks again?" Meka wondered aloud.

She got out her knife and pulled Dwerda close. She searched through her fur and flung fat blood-filled ticks off into the bushes where the spotted chuditches could eat them.

“Spoilt dog,” Meka said. “You don’t get told off for going down to see the fog, do you?”

A low howl sounded off the side of camp and Dwerda stopped squirming, going still to listen. A few more howls joined and the camp dog’s night chorus started. Dwerda gave out a few soft howls and Meka slapped her flank.

“Off you go then,” she said, and Dwerda got up and trotted off to join the others.

An Erin woman from a visiting group came to sit with Meka. She was around Meka’s age with red hair that was braided down one side of her neck.

“Hello, you’re Meka right?” she asked.

Meka nodded.

“I’m Nessa,” the woman said. “Your cousin has gone to the birthing place, she wanted you to know.”

“Thank you, my other cousin is taking care of her,” Meka said. “I’ll go see her and the new baby tomorrow.”

“This is your grandmother’s Country, yes?” Nessa said.

“My father was Erin, my mother was River and Whale Country,” Meka replied.

“Your husband was my brother,” Nessa said. “I was up north when he died.”

Meka looked at her closely and her stomach dropped, noticing a resemblance. They had the same grey eyes. Meka nodded and stared off into the fire.

“I was hoping you might be pregnant or with a child but I guess not,” Nessa said.

Meka shook her head.

“No baby came to us,” she said softly. “Not in time, anyway.”

Nessa sighed deeply.

“It’s like he was never here at all,” she said. “I wish he’d never come to River Country.”

“The Elders make those choices, not us,” Meka said. “And we don’t control The Serpent and its waters.”

“I heard you weren’t even supposed to marry him,” Nessa said. “That you were promised to someone else. Dayin, or something. What happened with that?”

Meka shook her head in bewilderment.

“I don’t know anything about that,” she said finally.

Nessa eyed her warily then got up and left.

Meka stared after her and furrowed her brow. Who was she talking about?

The next day the women did ceremony around her cousin’s new baby. Meka found Noornangk and asked her about what Nessa had said.

“Who were the women talking about last night,” Meka asked. “Is it something to do with what Nessa said?”

“Do you always take such heed of gossip, Meka?” Noornangk asked. “You’re going to be an Elder woman of River Country, you need to rise above this.”

“Was I promised to someone else?” Meka pressed.

Noornangk signed deeply.

“Yes,” she said finally. “But I don’t see how it helps to know who.”

“How come it didn’t work out?” Meka said. “What happened to him?”

Noornangk sat down and Meka joined her.

“A lot of changes have had to be made in the marriage systems,” Noornangk said. “The newcomers needed to be incorporated into totemic way, you know this. We as a council of Elders decided which marriage promises needed to change as more newcomers arrived. It was decided before you were born that you were going to marry an Erin man. You had an Erin father so it was deemed suitable.”

Meka thought of her strange backwards memory out at the coast.

“But not everyone agreed to integrate the newcomers?” she asked.

Noornangk looked surprised but nodded.

“We can still see both ways, the old way and new way,” Noornangk said. “And there’s no point looking only at the old way because those days aren’t coming back.”

“Is he here?” Meka asked quietly.

Noornangk sighed.

“He is,” she said.

“Is it Dayin?” Meka asked.

Noornangk grasped Meka’s hand and held her cheek, looking into her eyes.

“Stay in the present, granddaughter,” she said. “Look ahead, not behind.”

“Everyone is talking about it,” Meka said.

“You’re going to have to enforce the kinship laws one day,” Noornangk said. “If we don’t respect them then we’ll be as lost as the ghost birds who landed on our shores.”

That night the moon was nearly full and the families and visitors had gathered for the song and ceremony to welcome the new month. Meka could hear the Elders singing by the fire nearby, but she would join in the song tomorrow night. The inland mob were throwing kylies alight with fire, lighting the faces of Meka’s younger family and friends who were watching. The kylies arced through the air, flames spinning, like shooting stars across the night sky. They were caught by deft hands then thrown again, throwing sparks as they circled the dance ground. The man she had seen earlier was there, and Meka watched his hands as he caught and threw the curved wood. Long fingers gripping and releasing, attached to flexing forearms, muscular biceps and broad shoulders. A neck, a jaw, a smiling mouth. The returning kylie lit dark eyes, lashes, a head of curls. Someone started singing and the men and

boys started a dance, as the women sung about their Country east over the hills. Echidna Country, that shuffling fella with the backwards feet, his story was danced backwards and forwards toward the large family fire. Meka watched him still, the feet, the strong legs, the thighs. The muscular stomach, the ochre-painted chest. He leapt as he speared the Echidna in the dance, crouched as he, the Echidna, was speared. Meka almost reached for him when he stepped near her, compelled to hold him close, her spirit reaching for his.

A breeze shook the sheoaks and Meka heard her ancestors whispering.

In the Cold Times the Serpent is Master. Beware of those hidden in the melt.

But there was nothing cold about that night. Meka, watching him circle and flex, was filled with warmth, a liquid fire that crept through all her body and limbs, heat rising in her cheeks and behind her eyes. An expanding warmth that settled in her chest.

Meka was about to throw a bit of meat to Dwerda but she wasn't stretched out behind her. Meka glanced around at her family and the visiting families around the fire and found that none of the dogs were in her eyesight. She turned again and spied Dwerda's footprints, the imprint of her paws creating little shadows in the sand. She stood and walked away from the celebration and followed her tracks out under the grove of Ancestor Trees and in the direction of the coast.

Pale Meka. The full moon pulls the tides. Drags ocean across sand.

Meka followed the tracks up the side of a low hill, careful not to brush against the banksia trees and disturb the tiny possums that fed on their flowers at night. She ducked under and around the foliage and spotted her dog at the crest of the hill. She walked up and saw her sitting on the sand, looking out toward the sea.

“What are you doing,” she asked her quietly. “You chase something up here?”

She waved the meat over her head but Dwerda didn't move, her eyes were fixed. She looked around to see what she was hunting and saw another dog sitting nearby, looking in the same direction. She saw another under a myrtle tree, and another standing in the grass. All the camp dogs were up on this hill, looking out to sea. Meka peered at the horizon as a cold wind moved through her hair and Dwerda's fur, but saw nothing out on the dark ocean.

Making resin

The sun had risen over the tops of the tuarts, and Meka went looking for her nana. She found Noornangk in Fionn's camp, under the flooded gums, sitting on a tree stump that had been rubbed flat. She was instructing him on making resin to patch up his canoe, and he was busy pulverising balga sap into powder. The crows in the tree overhead were chiming in with their advice too.

Fionn lifted his head when he heard her coming.

"You're not going to tell me how to do this too, are you?" he said, sweating.

Meka glanced at his grinding stone and smirked. Too much sap at once, Fionn.

"Hi nana," Meka said, "I thought you didn't like boats."

"The mushrooms I like are up the river," Noornangk said, "so I'm making an exception."

Meka leaned against a tree and Noornangk eyed her.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

Meka glanced sidelong at Fionn, who was earnestly crushing the balga sap down.

“I want to marry the man I would have married if the Newcomers never arrived,” Meka said. “I want to marry Dayin.”

“Meka you don’t choose who you marry,” Noornangk said. “You marry who you need to keep Country healthy.”

“How do we know this is going to keep Country healthy?” Meka asked. “How do we know if any of this is going to work out?”

“This is the way, granddaughter,” Noornangk said. “We’ve brought in the Erin and made them part of Country.”

“The ocean took my parents,” Meka said. “The river took my husband. Country doesn’t like what we’re doing.”

Noornangk lifted her digging stick and looked at Meka.

“We have laws Meka, laws about people coming onto our land. If an outside clan abandoned their Country and tried to come to River Country and live among us, then they would be put to death. We had no laws about strangers from far-away places whose Country has died.”

Fionn stopped his grinding and the crows in the tree above quietened down. Noornangk settled back into the log chair and eyed Meka.

“Would you have killed those people, Meka?” she said. “Would you have put a spear through the heart of someone standing in the waves, dying of starvation and thirst, trying to get their feet onto dry land?”

The crows in the trees shuffled their wings.

“Who’s Dayin going to marry?” Meka asked.

“A Whale Country girl,” Noornangk said. “The Echidna people are leaving tomorrow to go down there.”

“And who am I going to marry?” Meka said.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Noornangk said. “But it will be someone from the recent arrivals.”

Meka’s eyes burned and she looked up at the silent crows. One cawed loudly, followed by another, and then they took off in a noisy flock.

“If they don’t join our families,” Noornangk said, “then they are just outsiders who live among us, which is unacceptable.”

“But they’re not sticking,” Meka said quietly. “Surely you can see that.”

“This is the only way, Meka,” Noornangk said. “You must marry one of them. You must reinforce the bonds and tie them to Country.”

Meka looked down at her pale palms, one cut through. What about her ties to Country, she wanted to say, but didn’t.

“So many have come,” Meka said finally. “What if this is the last green place in the world? How many more can we take?”

Fionn glanced at Noornangk, with an expression Meka didn’t understand.

“The Serpent decides that, Meka.” Noornangk said. “We follow its laws. It knows how to keep Country healthy.”

Empty rockpool

The morning sun was warming the dunes as Meka walked down to the beach with her family. Meka's cousin Djindalee was walking by her side, carrying some woven baskets. Her newborn baby was strapped to her chest in the Erin style, albeit with possum fur instead of fabric. Meka's older cousin Karla was walking ahead, with two short spears hefted over her shoulder. Karla's two young children and their dog followed closely behind, along with Dwerda. Meka smiled, thinking of how she used to follow Karla around when they were younger, and the trouble they both got into for carrying spears. The smile left her face though. The visiting clans had left today, and Meka had watched Dayin walk south back toward Whale Country. Away to meet his promised bride. Her eyes stung again and she looked away from Djindalee, who was absorbed in her baby anyway.

Karla's mum was Mayakawa's cousin, who had also married an Erin newcomer. Karla was Meka's whole world growing up, being without her own parents from a young age. Meka spent her young time as daughter-niece to Karla's parents, and many outside clans believed Meka to be Karla's sister. Karla's father encouraged her to use spears, so Karla carried some like Meka did.

They walked down to the shore and Karla's little boy piped up, pointing at the waves.

“Shark!” he yelled with exuberance.

Meka looked out beyond where the water was breaking on the reef, and saw a grey fin moving in the waves.

Karla lifted her toddler son to her hip and held his cheek close to hers as she pointed out to sea.

“Dolphins bub,” she said. “See how their fin is curved?”

She made a curved motion with her arm, her hand cutting through the air in an arc.

“And there’s a few of them see, they’re a family, just like us, getting a feed.”

She put him down and lifted her hand, fingers pressed together and pointing toward the sky.

“A shark fin points straight up, to the moon,” she said earnestly.

“No moon,” the little boy said, pointing up.

“No moon,” Karla echoed, “and hopefully no sharks. You call out if you see one.”

The tide was out and the water was low on the reef, so a shark couldn’t get to them anyway. They would be sticking to the reef as they looked for lobster.

Meka and Djindalee walked toward the rocks and Karla pointed a finger at her girl.

“Watch your brother, Biara,” she said, and the little four-year-old nodded.

She whistled at her dog.

“Watch the kids.”

“You too, Dwerda,” Meka added.

Meka, Karla and Djindalee set off for the reef and behind them the dogs scratched a ditch in the sand and settled in.

Out on the reef, Karla crouched periodically in the calf deep water to feel around in rock holes for lobster. Djindalee was complaining about her new mother-in-law bossing her around.

“Those northern mob are so set in their ways,” she said. “She wants me to sit around all day with her doing maintenance in the camp.”

“I never see mine,” Karla said, scooping to catch a lobster, and missing.
“They don’t like us fair mob, I think it spooks them.”

Karla and her two children had been pushed to the side by her husband's family. She was her husband's second wife so she largely did her own thing. She spent most of her time with Noornangk and it didn't seem to bother her. Meka had only been away for a few seasons and was surprised on her return to see Karla so independent. Karla and Noornangk were similar in a lot of ways.

Meka wasn't having any luck finding lobster, and called out to Karla.

"Where's a good spot?" she said, "Maybe over there?"

She pointed to a sandy hole in the reef to their right.

"Nah nothing grows in there," Karla called out.

"How do you know?" Meka asked.

"It's fresh water, sis, a spring that comes up and pours out under the reef,"

Karla replied.

Meka walked over and peered inside. There was nothing there, no urchins, no lobster, no anemone. Not even sea grass.

"Why does it do that? It makes no sense," Meka said.

Karla glanced at her children playing on the shore, then gestured out beyond the waves.

“Pops says the sea has crept across the land,” she said. “He says a long time ago the beach was out there, beyond the islands.”

She gestured out toward the rocky forms sitting off the coast.

“Those islands were hills, and as the ocean moved in, only their tops remained.”

Meka and Djindalee looked out at the couple of islands that sat beyond their reach in the sea, touched only by the birds, and the Far Away ships that wrecked themselves on their reef.

“You used to be able to walk out there,” Karla said, “and we used to get water from that spring.”

She pointed at the hole in the reef Meka was standing next to.

“There was good tucker out there before it got cut off,” she said.

Meka looked again into the empty pool. The sand at the bottom swirled backward and forward with the waves coming in and out. Djindalee looked out over the bay.

“Creator Serpent must have been mad,” Djindalee said, “mad enough to flood its own Country. Probably to try keep our mob away.”

Meka thought of the Creator Serpent seeing the ships on the horizon, and flooding the Country to try to wreck the sickly ghost birds before they reached the shore.

Karla shook her head.

“Pops said it flooded long, long ago,” she replied. “Said it was something to do with someone here breaking taboo.”

Djindalee raised a meaningful eyebrow and Karla and spread her arms wide. Karla scoffed.

“You’ve been listening too much to your husband’s family,” she said. “They’re not even coastal mob, so what would they know.”

“True,” Djindalee said.

Djindalee came over to stand next to Meka, looking into the pool.

“What a waste,” she said, stroking her baby’s head as she looked. “Serpent blood going nowhere.”

“It still thinks this is its Country,” Meka replied. “Maybe the Serpent didn’t want to give it up. Maybe this land was taken by the sea.”

“By what in the sea?” Djindalee asked.

Meka didn’t know.

The eagle ray

That night Meka lay in Karla's hut in the Erin camp, looking up at the stars. She could hear the snores and grunts of people around her, of Djindalee's baby waking up for a feed nearby, dogs being pushed off mattresses, frogs chirping in the grass. Her mind drifted to those eyes, and cheekbones, and shoulders, and lips. It seemed that he knew that they had been promised to each other, yet he had not paid her any particular attention. She squeezed her eyes shut. Why did it hurt so much to see him, when she barely knew him, didn't know they had been promised for each other until now? Perhaps she had been too long at the coast, where so much change had occurred. She wanted to anchor herself to that scrub country, that place where cockatoos breed and skinks sunbathe on rocks. She didn't want her children with one foot on land and one foot in the ocean. She thought of the spring bubbling up under the reef, of that sweet water lost to the salt, an invisible bleed, wasteful. She wished she could choke the part of her that reached for him. It wasn't going to do any good. Nothing grew in that rockhole. It was empty and dead.

Meka could still hear the ocean, laying there in the hut. Seawater moving backwards and forwards, the soft murmur of gentle waves lapping at the shore. Then under that, the sound of water moving among the rocks, reef and rippled sandy floor. Saltwater dragging through anemone fronds, lobster antennae swaying, sand eddying in between rocks. Meka lay there in that sound, and soon felt the tides in her hair, around her ears, moving over her face, trailing across her body. She felt the moon in the sky pulling the sea toward it, and her heart rose up a little, lifting her chest off the sleeping mat. A deep breath let her back down and she sunk into sand,

feeling herself being buried in the moving grains. She was laying on the sea floor on a sandy patch with seagrass at her fingertips and coral at her toes. The ocean looked so dark and cold at night but Meka didn't feel it, she was warm and enveloped.

A slick body skimmed over her and her eyes sprung open. A dark form moved over her face and when it was gone she lifted to her elbows and looked around. She looked just in time to see an eagle ray glide out through the opening of the hut. She shook her head and sat up. She looked out of the hut again and saw the ray glide over a smouldering campfire and disappear into the darkness beyond.

Meka stood slowly, careful not to disturb her niece and nephew, and walked out of the hut and into the camp. It was after midnight, everyone was asleep, and all the campfires had burned down to embers. Even in the darkness she could tell that there were no dogs in camp, which was unusual, because she thought she had heard them snoring only minutes before. She must have fallen asleep and the ray had been a tail end of a dream. She walked around the campfire in the direction that the ray went, listening for any sign of Dwerda and the camp dogs. She walked downhill toward the coast, between paperbarks and club rushes, her eyes adjusting to the gloom now that the light of the campfires was at her back. The sound of the sea was still around her head and in her ears, and she could almost feel the resistance of water as she walked.

She stepped near a wattle and her foot brushed something wet. She recoiled and then something else moved past her face in the dark, and she froze on the spot, one foot off the ground and her hands by her head. Her eyes darted to the

right in time to see a jellyfish dance through a shaft of moonlight and disappear into the shadows. She looked ahead and saw the ray gliding up the path. She waved her arm in front of her and touched only air, but there was slight resistance there. She looked at the wattle tree next to her and little fish were moving in and around the yellow blossoms. She took a deep breath and it felt strange, she could feel something in the air. Her hair was lifting and moving in an unseen tide, and everywhere her eyes were picking up forms moving around her.

Meka located herself in relation to the camp and mentally searched the area for the nearest high ground. She turned and walked in the direction of the hill behind the Erin camp, taking shallow breaths, and moving quickly. She walked back through camp and saw rock lobsters moving over the stones that ring the campfires, their shells reflecting a ruddy glow. A school of herring flashed past and around her, silver and gleaming, like eucalypt leaves on a branch bent by a storm. Meka ran then, past her sleeping community members in their huts and tents. Past the goannas hung from wooden frames and the piles of mussel shells waiting to be cleaned. She finally reached the hill and scrambled up, limestone cutting into her hands and knees as she climbed. She pulled herself to the top and stood with her hands on her hips, lungs heaving, body aching. A cold wind blew past her and it felt like air, she took in deep breaths and felt like she was on dry land again. She felt relief and looked back at camp in time to see something dark move over the top of a campfire. She turned her back to the camp and the ocean and looked east to the mountains. She decided that from now on she would sleep in the jarrah forest high above the coastal plain where her oceans dreams couldn't reach. She took a step and nearly fell over a furry lump on the ground. A pair of dark eyes blinked sleepily at her in the moonlight, and

she saw it was Dwerda, who yawned hugely. Meka looked around and saw all the dogs sleeping among the grassy caps of the hill. Meka took one last look at the ocean, then walked toward the mountains, with Dwerda trotting behind.

High above the coastal plain, in the rocky hills that tower above the riverland, the Serpent can taste salt. Not on the wind, not carried on the feet of creatures retreating into the hills for the cooler months, not salt from the sweat of running bird or climbing mammal. Was it blood from a dying creature, perhaps a savaged water rat, dropped by an eagle on the grey granite? No. The Serpent considers the scent. It is seawater. Up in the hills, where sweetwater holds domain, the sea is present. The Serpent can't see it. There are no waves crashing against the forested escarpment, no dunes forming amongst the waterfalls. No sea urchins in the nests of owls, no starfish clinging to the trunks of Jarrah trees. No dolphins leaping over banksia and wattle. But the sea is there, its essence, ebbing, flowing.

The Serpent senses an uneasiness in the landscape. It looks deeper into the rock that makes up this part of its body. The hills are a granite cerebrum, folded stratum of memory, storytelling of the Serpent making this Country layer by layer. Rocks melted and squeezed, crystals grown, plant matter pushed deep and turned to stone. The Serpent's body formed this barrier alongside the sea long ago, when it split the land in two and pushed that other land mass far away, watched it move up through the warmer waters beyond this Country, to crash into the continents in the north. The Serpent feels the layers: the drought years, the cold times. The flowing of molten lava, the thin layers of silvery ore from rocks hitting the earth from space, throwing up dust and fire, exploding on impact. Forests rising in warm climates then disintegrating back into rock in the cold. The long quiet years of wind rounding the ragged edges of rocks, bearing everything smooth and flat.

The Serpent turns its attention down to the foothills.

There.

Movement.

Here is a layer of soft brittle stone. Granular clusters, pale as the moon, made from the shells and skeletons of ancient marine creatures, who lived and died in oceans during the Warm Times. Their bodies drifting down for a long sleep on the sea floor, their forms cementing together into rock. Their ocean has long since receded, all that water pulled away and sucked up onto land in the form of glaciers and ice caps. The Cold Times, that time when the Serpent is strongest, the rivers turning to ice, the Serpent's icy body carving the land up, sea levels far down below the continental shelf. This marine rock was exposed to the cold air and formed sand dunes, then the Serpent drew rain that hardened the dunes into cliffs. Those cliffs eroded down to form the foothills of the hills of Serpent Country. A ring of old ocean around the the Wagyl's domain of sweetwater, the home of rain up high.

Movement.

Those brittle shell granules are vibrating. Something has disturbed their sleep. Bad dreams are drifting up the mountainside, carried by the wind to roll around the granite peaks, salt and trauma misting through. The Serpent sends rain

*down the slope of the hills, cool water to soothe the limestone as it slumbers. But the
Serpent finds that it too cannot rest.*

Rumbling hills

Meka woke up to rain falling on her face. She sat up and shuffled back against the trunk of the balga she was sleeping under. A yam stalk was creeping up the side of the long grass tree needles and the bright green leaves formed a canopy from the rain. She pulled a couple of seed pods off the yam stalk and ate them, enjoying their taste. It wasn't a plant that married women could eat so she enjoyed them while she could. She couldn't see Dwerda, who must have wandered off somewhere. She heard some shrieking and looked out from under her green roof. A flock of black cockatoos flew overhead, one hundred or more, and Meka looked curiously in the direction they came from. She pulled some more seed pods off the yam stalk and stood up, peering around. She had a peaceful sleep up there in the hills, and no sea creatures had escaped to swim around her. She wasn't in a hurry to get back to camp, her heart was heavy and she wanted to walk a while in the soothing greenery of the forest. She picked a track that wove beneath jarrah trees and walked off east through the hills.

A flock of ringneck parrots flew overhead, again from the east, and Meka stopped. She was looking at them flying off in puzzlement when the ground began to tremble. She frowned and crouched on the spot, her palms pressing down against the mossy ground. It was definitely trembling, and Meka thought that the Creator Serpent must be moving underground. She stayed low for a few moments, her body vibrating and the trees swaying, and then the shaking stopped. An eerie silence descending in the forest, and Meka realised she was holding her breath. She released it in a huff, and then a pair of rosellas hidden in the nearby scrub whistled softly,

followed by other birds shuffling and preening, along with the sounds of quolls and bandicoots rolling over in their burrows. The forest returned to normal and she kept walking.

The sky was grey through trees and Meka stretched her arms up above her head, her hands reaching at branches many times her height. The jarrah trees were so huge in this part of the hills, almost as big as the tuarts on the coast, and she imagined that their roots held the whole of Serpent Territory together.

A bronzewing fluttered past her, its iridescent feathers flashing in the wet morning light, and it hooted softly as it landed on a log. Meka sighed and kept walking. The crows were up and about, scratching around in the fallen leaves looking for grubs. The wrens were bouncing along the edge of the track, probably wishing her dog was here they could eat insects that fell off her. Bad luck for them, Dwerda was still off exploring somewhere. She peered momentarily into the bush around her, looking for a blonde tail whipping around amongst the scrub. She rounded a granite outcrop and did a double take, thinking someone was looking down at her. But it wasn't a person, it was the white trunk of a ghost gum growing up out of the rocks. Its smooth white bark stood out among the colours of the forest, and Meka shook her head, surprised at her initial alarm. Who did she even think was out here? The Erin never come this far into the hills. She looked up and a single magpie was watching her from the pale branches. She kept walking and her hands went to the short hunting spears she had brought with her, strapped to her back. She drew both spears and struck out at imaginary and unfortunate wallabies in the undergrowth.

The ground rumbled again and Meka went into a crouch, her spears spread. The vibrations were stronger this time and she fought to keep her balance. The quaking stopped and Meka stood cautiously. Something felt wrong and she looked back at the ghost gum that had surprised her a moment ago. The magpie was still there, watching her, and it gave a long low warble before flying off. She had a look around and it occurred to her where she was. There was a taboo place in the valley on the other side of this hill, and all River people were forbidden to cross over or near it. She sheathed her spears and turned her back on the hill, walking back past the ghost gum.

A high-pitched bark reached her ears, coming from behind her, and Meka spun around.

“Dwerda?” Meka called.

Dwerda didn't usually bark, and she was somewhere nearby, in the direction of the taboo place. Meka jogged further down the path, around more granite outcrops and deeper under giant Jarrah. The rain had stopped and she could smell her salty sweat as she ran, her eyes darting around for sign of her dog. She held one of her short spears, not knowing why, just having it at hand. The track wrapped around a thick stand of banksia and she almost ran into the back of Dwerda, standing dead still in the middle of the path. Meka stopped and looked around. The scrub was quiet, no birds stirring, no insects chirping. Her dog was staring down the track. Meka stood there a few moments, and then she heard it. Heavy breathing.

“Who’s there?” she said, and her dog barked once, to back her up.

There was silence for a few moments, then a rustling sound. Then to Meka’s astonishment, pale faces appeared from behind trees, the faces of newcomer people. First three, then six, then ten. They came to stand together on the path, about fifteen people all up, and they looked dreadful. White cheeks sunken in, red-rimmed eyes. Cuts on their legs and feet. Their clothing was torn and filthy. There was movement behind them and a few children crept forward to join them, making them twenty people in all. A man at the front took a step toward Meka and she raised her spear, and Dwerda barked sharply again. He stepped back immediately and the group bunched together in fear. Meka stepped ahead of Dwerda and patted her as she did. Her dog relaxed and sat on the ground. Meka pointed her spear at the group.

“Is this all of you?” she asked.

They didn’t seem to understand her.

“What are you doing here?” she said slowly and loudly.

The group spoke among themselves for a few seconds and the language they spoke sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t place it. The man produced a rolled-up piece of bark from a sack and handed it to her. He said a word to her that she didn’t understand, but she unrolled the bark and looked at it. There was a charcoal message that was partly written in symbols from the eastern desert mob,

and partly covered in the newcomer language Meka has seen on Fionn's belongings. It was smudged and hard to read. The man spoke the words again and Meka could almost understand him.

“Are you trying to say ‘message stick’?” she asked him.

The group all nodded vigorously.

“This is not a message stick,” she told them, “you do not have permission to be here.”

They still didn't seem to understand her, but they took stock of her tone. They pointed to their children, who were clearly hungry and unwell. They pleaded with her in their language. Meka looked down at the symbols on the bark. It was a confusing mess, but she recognised the desert symbols for ‘fight’ and ‘hungry’. She looked down at the children who had spinifex needles holding their shirts together. Surely they couldn't have walked alone here from the desert?

“Are you Erin?” she asked, gesturing to the group. “Erin?”

The man shook his head.

“Albion,” he said, putting a hand to his chest.

The people perked up at the mention of that word.

“Albion,” he repeated, gesturing to his group.

Meka shook her head in disbelief. Fionn’s people were Albion. He thought he was the last one. Or at least, that’s what he told her people.

Part 2

The Albion

Meka leaned against a marri tree as the setting sun shot spears of light across the dance ground. Her community of River and Erin people were standing under the trees in a ring around the activity in the centre. The Albion people were all seated in the dust, legs crossed and facing away from her, looking at up Noornangk. Not even the dogs entered the ceremony space, they stood among the legs of the people watching. The Albion had been fed, and now Meka's nana was attempting to get an account of what the Albion were doing in River Country. Miro stood to one side of her, and the Erin Elder Joanna to the other. They were conversing with difficulty, because the Desert languages were a similar tongue but the Albion people had not mastered it. The Erin and Albion languages were vastly different. Meka glanced around. The one person that could help wasn't here. Fionn must be up the river in his boat, doing his investigations, unaware of the happenings at home camp, although by now he might have sensed a change in the air: the quiet and unsettled birds, the lizards stopped out in the open, tongue tasting the breeze. He would notice that something had disturbed the Country, and he would be back soon. Dwerda sat still as a rock at Meka's side, and she scratched her dog's head as she listened in.

“What are the names of the Elders you lived with?” Noornangk was saying to the group.

The Albion talked amongst themselves briefly then responded with a variety of words, none of which made any sense. The Erin Elder Joanna tried, and asked something Meka couldn't quite catch, speaking in a tongue without Country words, what must have been the language of the black, dead lands over the sea. The Albion seemed pretty baffled by Joanna's words as well, and Meka looked around, willing the arrival of Fionn. Noornangk gestured to be handed a water bladder they were carrying. It was one which came from the dead lands, made of animals long dead on that side of the sea. It was empty, and Noornangk brought it her nose and sniffed it deeply. She then gave it to Miro to smell.

“What do you think, nephew?” Noornangk asked.

“The water smells strongly of wattle,” Miro said. “They crossed the north-eastern river on their way here.”

He pointed to the group.

“They've got red dust on their clothes,” he added, “and their belongings are held together by silky pear vine.”

Noornangk nodded in agreement.

“They’ve come from the great red-dirt woodlands to get here, from the land of the thorny lizard,” Miro concluded.

“I agree,” Noornangk replied.

“That is a week’s walk away at least,” Miro said. “How have they got this far without being stopped?”

“They couldn’t have,” Noornangk replied, “Which means they didn’t want to stay with our immediate neighbours or they’ve been moved along.”

“Why was there no warning?” Miro said. “No fires? No messenger?”

“That I can’t explain,” Noornangk replied.

“Where are you going?” Miro asked the Albion group. “What are you doing here?”

Blank looks were all he got in response.

The sun was nearly set when Meka heard movement behind her and turned. There, emerging from the banksia, was Fionn.

An Albion woman ran up to Fionn and threw her arms around him. She spoke rapidly in the Albion language and Meka could only make out a couple of

words. She seemed very happy to see him, and hugging him tightly and speaking excitedly. There was also a great commotion amongst the Albion people. They came over and grabbed his hands and stroked his face. Fionn looked completely astonished, and was looking around trying to speak but no sound was coming out. An older Albion woman was calling Fionn something over and over again that Meka didn't recognise, saying 'preetj' or 'preetja'.

The River and Erin people were standing around wordlessly, watching the display unfold. Noornangk came to stand next to Meka.

"Fionn," Noornangk stated loudly, and all the Albion went silent.

"These people have shown up here, and they seem to know you," she said. "Ask them what they are doing here, where they've come from."

Fionn still looked dazed but he came over with the first woman under his arm.

"Aunty these are the other people from the ship I left the dead world with," he said, gesturing. "We were separated in a storm, my nephew Gray and I, from all these people."

Meka knew the story. Fionn and her father, Gray, were travelling on the last boat out of their dead homelands. They had travelled for months out in the ocean, which Fionn said went from horizon to horizon to horizon. One day Fionn and Gray

were in Fionn's small boat, trying to catch fish that were massing near the surface of the water. They became detached from the larger boat during a sudden storm, and Fionn and her father became separated and couldn't find their way back.

“These people are from my billaj, my camp, back home,” Fionn said, “I thought I'd never see them again.”

The Albion woman was marvelling at Fionn, perhaps at his proficiency at speaking River Language.

“Where have they been all this time, Fionn?” Noornangk said. “Where have they come from?”

Fionn appeared to ask this question to the group of Albion. They all spoke to him excitedly.

“They say they've been in a sandy, dry place to the east of here,” Fionn said to Noornangk. “That they've lived near and around a few tribes, but never settled anywhere. They couldn't go further east for some reason, so they've come west, hoping to find somewhere green and cool.”

The woman Agnes was calling Fionn 'preetj' again and was weeping.

Fionn looked moved as well.

“It seems impossible that they’ve been here this long and I never knew,” Fionn said. “My nephew Gray was a young man and Meka was yet to be born.”

Meka knew that the world of the Creator Serpent was large and flat, and surrounded by ocean. Was it so large that it had taken in all the people that had fled the deadlands over the sea?

The Albion woman was saying something else now, something Meka had heard Fionn say once before.

“Meer-kool”, she was saying, and Fionn said it back to her.

“Meer-kool”, he said.

Sea wall

That night the Albion were given beds in the Erin camp and Meka was ordered by her nana to stay in the area. Meka walked around the camp as everyone was settling in to sleep, glancing about surreptitiously to see if any starfish, anemones or bream were still lingering by the fires, cooking gear or huts. She met eyes with a young man from the Albion group who was watching her walk by and she held his gaze until he looked away. She was satisfied that there weren't any sea dreams hiding and she retired with Karla and her kids in their hut again.

Later, with eyes shut and drifting up out of black sleep, Meka heard a soft noise. It sounded like Whale Country down on the south coast, where patient water drips and drips and splits the granite drop by drop. Where the rain pattered on the banksia branch roof as she lay between the warm bodies of her mum and dad. The dripping was joined by a bubbling, the sound of water running over rock and between reeds, the sound of the serpent river of the south hissing past. That river that emptied into cold ocean where mother whales nursed their calves in the shallows and dolphins chased salmon along the shore. She heard the ocean then, the breathy rush of foamy water spreading over sand, the distance coo of seabirds sleeping in groups out beyond the waves. The sound muted then and Meka heard the tides from underneath the surface, of water dragging across rock, the click of lobster shuffling in their burrows and the high-pitched, tinny crash of waves moving overhead.

She still felt warmth by her side and she knew that she was in the sea with her parents, lying with them in their watery grave, together and away from all the

change on land. Meka looked up and saw her mother's peaceful face, with seahorses anchored to her hair and sea grass fringing her cheek... Meka cracked her eyes open. She was in a hut in the Erin camp, where she had stayed with Karla for the night. She wasn't on the south coast, she hadn't even been there since she was a child, since her parents were alive. The bodies she could feel were her cousin Karla's kids, they were curled up next her, sleeping soundlessly on the kangaroo furs.

Meka sighed deeply. The sound of water was still there though, whispering through the air, and she lifted onto her elbows and looked around. The camp was still, the fire smoked lightly and the Albion were all asleep. She got up and saw that all the dogs were there, snoring, even Dwerda who hadn't woken when Meka stirred. She walked out of the Erin camp and toward the coast, following that whispering sound. She took a path through the orange wattle grove that edged a depression in the ground where water ran into the nearby wetlands. The air was still and the land was quiet. There, was nothing was stirring in the branches, no frogs calling out in the damp ground, no claws shuffling in the long grass at her feet. The only sound was the whisper on the wind; it was almost like words, but she couldn't make it out. It sounded like it was coming from the beach so she kept walking until she hit the dunes.

The whispering drew her to the part of the coastline where the first ghost bird had arrived, the first rotting, half-sunk ship that had limped past the reef and collapsed on the sandbank. Meka walked across the dunes to the beach where her great-grandmother had brought the pale arrivals back to life with smoke, and breath, and fire. The children rubbed with ash and wrapped in kangaroo skin cloaks, sung

back to life with Serpent song. Meka's old people had known nothing of the dead world they had hailed from, they had just washed the sea from their bodies and hair, laid them on grasstree beds and fed them snake fat and possum meat. When they recovered the pale people marvelled at the trees, and birds, and animals, and clear waterways. The children touched the banksia flowers with wonder, seeing something so colourful for the first time.

Meka crested the sand dune that dropped down to the water and was hit with a wall of noise. Words flooded past her, sound hitting the dune and shooting up into the night sky. Below her was the sandbank where the first ghost bird had landed. There was still a single thick length of wood jutting up out of the sea, the last piece of the hull not destroyed by the waves. Surrounding the sandbank was a pool of faint light on the water, like the oil slick surrounding a whale carcass that has washed ashore. The light clung to the edges of a shadow on the sandbank, like the ship was still there, its body rotted away but its essence remaining. The slick of light extended out to sea, into the west, and it was the source of the whispering that filled Meka's ears.

As she stood there, the light slick lifted up from the surface of the water and a cloud of glistening fog drifting up. Meka took a step back, and watched the lights form a dome shape across the sea. The dome formed a huge wave that was lifting off the sea, high above even the dune, positioned to smash against the beach. Meka took another step back, then felt the earth beneath her vibrate. The vibrating beneath her feet increased and she felt something bumping past her in the darkness. Dogs, hundreds of them, a mass of furred bodies were rushing down toward the water from

the sand dunes. More dogs than the camp had, more dogs than Meka had seen in her life were leaping into the sea, climbing over one another in the face of the wave. They kept piling up and the mound of dogs was getting higher and higher as the glimmering wave swelled up. The dogs at the bottom stopped moving and Meka could see that they had turned to stone, and more and more dogs were joining the pile. Soon there was a wall of dogs as long as the beach and high as a karri tree, a writhing mass of bodies that blocked the sea completely.

One last dog rushed past and it was Dwerda, her powerful hind legs launching her across the dunes. Meka reached for her with no luck, just grasping air. Dwerda leapt at the wall and disappeared into it, and the whole barrier stopped moving, and solidified. The wave hit with a thundering crash unseen against the wall and not a drop of seawater splashed over the top.

Red cloak

Meka walked into the Erin camp with Dwerda at her heel and found everyone pointedly not looking at her, and pointedly not looking at the three people standing under the moodjar tree having a tense conversation. Fionn was standing with Noornangk and the Erin Elder Lorna, and Meka gave them a wide berth as she walked over to the drying hut to drop some sedge grass off for weaving. Meka couldn't see any of the Albion newcomers in camp, and she wondered where they were, and why they only liked spending time with each other. Meka picked up a few words as she stacked the fresh grass near the hut.

“We don't agree with this,” Lorna was saying. “We remember the Albion, they had their chance.”

“They're from my home camp,” Fionn said, “my billatj, they're my relations.”

“We don't know anything about them,” Lorna said. “We need to find out what happened in the desert.”

“It is decided,” Noornangk said.

The three of them looked at Meka, who was caught staring. She walked quickly off and heard Fionn calling after her.

“Wait, niece,” he said.

Meka turned and saw her nana walking away toward the river and Lorna standing with her arms crossed. Meka put her hands up in defence.

“What have I done this time?” she said.

“Nothing,” Fionn said. “This is good news.”

He said that strangely and Meka looked sceptical as Lorna walked over to join them.

“What’s going on?” Meka asked.

Lorna looked at Fionn, who smiled somewhat uncomfortably.

“Meka, your nana has matched you to my nephew Kian,” Fionn said.

“Kian?” Meka asked, stunned.

Lorna glared at Fionn who avoided eye contact.

“One of the Albion?” Meka asked.

“Yes,” Fionn said, “he is one of the two boys among them of suitable age.”

“We don’t even know where they’re from!” Meka said. “Or what they’ve done.”

“Their arrival is a meerkool,” Fionn said. “They were meant to come here and join River Country.”

“You would say that, Fionn,” Lorna said.

And then she said something in Erin language and Fionn’s face darkened.

“That’s all in the past,” Fionn told her. “Everything changed when our homelands died.”

“Everything changed when the Albion arrived on Erina,” Lorna said.

“Noornangk makes the decisions,” Fionn said. “She knows what’s best for River Country.”

“Meka’s mother wouldn’t have allowed this,” Lorna said. “Had she lived she would have been a wise Elder of River Country.”

“Don’t bring that up,” Fionn said, “it’s taboo.”

Lorna glared fiercely and then turned to Meka.

“The Albion were cuckoo birds who laid their eggs in our nest,” she said quietly. “And when the eggs hatched darkness spilled out, then everything died.”

Lorna turned to Fionn.

“There were no meerkools for the Erin,” she said. “I didn’t believe in them then and I don’t believe in them now.”

Lorna walked off and left Fionn and Meka alone. Fionn started to speak but Meka held her hand up, and went after her nana, with Dwerda following behind.

She found Noornangk sitting on a fallen log under a peppermint tree on the path to the river. Something large passed overhead and Meka flinched. An eagle flying low. Dwerda trotted ahead and lay at Noornangk’s feet.

“Nana, we don’t know anything about the Albion,” Meka said. “This is happening too fast.”

“You won’t be marrying the Albion man this season,” Noornangk said. “But he is now your promised marriage match.”

“They came from the taboo place,” Meka said. “How can we just accept a group of people into our community that we don’t know?”

“We had no laws for newcomers,” Noornangk said. “We’ve had to adapt with all the arrivals. This is the only way.”

“How can this be the only way,” Meka said, “why can’t we help them built a boat so they can leave?”

“You’ve seen what happens to ghost birds on the ocean,” Noornangk said. “You’d likely be putting them to death.”

“But why us?” Meka said. “Why me?”

“We’ve had these conversations many times over the years,” Noornangk said. “We always come back to the kinship system.”

Noornangk got out her digging stick and made some lines in the sand.

“And we’ve been having this conversation longer than you know,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Meka asked.

“Alright, sit and listen,” Noornangk said.

Meka came and sat next to her on the log. Noornangk took a deep breath.

“The First Wave weren’t the first newcomers to arrive,” she said.

Meka was stunned.

“An arrival before the First Wave?” Meka said.

Another shadow moved overhead and she flinched again.

“Yes,” Noornangk said.

“How many people arrived?” Meka asked.

“Just one,” Noornangk said. “Now Nana Dingo told me this story, and I’m going to tell it to you.”

“That first ship arrived in the cold season of the sharks that followed the warm season where all the bats died,” she began. “My grandmother spoke of the whale that died but didn’t reach the shore, and the sharks ate it down over a couple of weeks. It wasn’t meant for the River People, and the water was oily and cold. We pulled our camps away from the beach and it was my grandmother, as a child, who went back to watch the sharks, and saw the first ghost bird wreck itself on the reef.

“She had no idea what it was. She shouted, eagle! eagle! to her family. She thought it was a giant white sea eagle who had crashed into the waves. Maybe it had tried to pick up one of the sharks, maybe it had tried to carry off the whale carcass itself. But then people came out of the ghost bird. Emerging from within the torn

feathers and wings fighting the waves, people in red clothing fell like blood from a wound into the oily water, screaming and shouting. They were then set upon by dozens of white sharks who stopped feeding on the whale carcass and started feeding on them.”

“But one of these strange people who rode on the giant eagle fought through. They swam through freezing, crashing waves and were thrown on the shore, their face pale as the moon, near dead on the sand. Their thick cloak was blood red and their leg coverings were white like their skin. It was a spirit without a body or a body without a spirit, my grandmother’s family couldn’t work it out. They thought the pale person could be our ancestors returning from a resting place under the sea, and that the colour drained out of them through the water and the salt.”

“They carried this spirit up through the dunes, and lay them out by the fire fuelled by wattle and hakea wood. The family inspected him and concluded that it was a man, with skin the colour of bone and eyes the colour of the sea. My grandmother’s family fed him kangaroo tail and goanna until he was well enough to get up and walk around. There was nowhere for him to go. There were no other survivors, the ghostly eagle he arrived on had disappeared into the waves, he didn’t speak our language but he gestured that he had come from a place far across the sea.”

“What was Nana Dingo’s family supposed to do with him?” Noornangk said. “He existed completely outside of their knowledge. If he were from a neighbouring

tribe who showed up without permission then he would be killed on the spot, but they had no idea what to do with a pale person who arrives on eagle wings.”

“When he recovered his strength he was very bad,” Noornangk said. “He stole spears and knives and hid from us up the hills, in the Home Of Rain Up High. The Elders went up with warriors and found him, he had lit a huge damp fire, there was so much steam and smoke. Nana Dingo’s family thought he was trying to signal another of the giant eagles to come and take him away. The warriors speared him through the chest but he was cursed, and black filth poured from his wound and spread all over the Serpent Peaks. His black blood caught the flames and created a terrible fire that burned all through the hills. It burned hot and fast, a storm of fire that tore through everything, nothing could flee fast enough, not kangaroo, emu, goanna, cockatoo, spider, frog or snake. The fire burned so hot it killed the trees, they exploded sending more cursed fire into the surrounding areas. Angry Serpent clouds formed above that shot lightning down that chased everyone left down to the sea. The hills burned for days, and finally the Serpent sent rain to extinguish it. However there were no trees or plants to catch the water, and the rain created a flood that swept down from the hills and across River Country, killing many of our people.”

“It was a sorry, sorry time, Meka,” Noornangk said. “This was many, many season cycles ago, and it took a long time for the plants, animals, families and spirits of the hills to recover. And one newcomer did that. One. We marry them in so they don’t spill their darkness on our Country.”

“So we marry them in out of fear?” Meka asked.

“We treated the red cloaked newcomer as something outside of our laws,” Noornangk said. “Nana Dingo’s Elders decided should any more pale people arrive, they should be taught our laws as if they are River people. This means marrying in, being given responsibilities and the chance to live the right way.”

“So my next husband is full of darkness?” Meka said. “I’m marrying a venomous snake I hope doesn’t bite me if I tread on its tail?”

“Let us Elders worry about this,” Noornangk said. “It’s difficult and not your concern.”

“Lorna said that my mother would not agree with this,” Meka said. “What did she mean by that?”

Noornangk paused and a haunted look passed over her face.

“Stay in the present, Meka,” she said. “Think about what needs to be done today to keep Country and family healthy.”

“This is important,” Meka said.

Noornangk sighed deeply.

“Who will look after the little things, Meka,” Noornangk said. “While you’re busy fighting me on this? Who’s teaching the little ones not to run in the dunes when the terns are nesting, or not to pull bark off trees before the moths can emerge from their cocoons. Who’s noticing if enough quandong seedlings are establishing along the emu walk trails, or if we’ve disturbed the nesting tortoises when the Erin collect clay?”

Meka shook her head in frustration.

“We haven’t had a bad fire like that in the many season cycles since,” Noornangk said. “When the Erin people of the First Wave arrived Nana Dingo was a grandmother, but she had not forgotten what had happened. She is the reason our land hasn’t turned black and died like the newcomer’s has.”

Meka felt her heart sink in her chest, and her blood burned with grief.

“There is so much to do to keep Country healthy,” Noornangk said, “and so many new people to teach, and so many changes already. The marriage system has been a powerful way to care for the land that cares for us. It is irresponsible to interfere with it.”

Tears by the river

Meka's head was full of confusing images as she walked down the hill from the Elder's camp. Fire. A red cloaked newcomer. Black blood. The hills burned flat by a devastating and angry fire. The Ancestor Trees were whispering around her but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

She changed direction and headed away from the Erin camp, cutting through some hillocks of wallaby grass to head toward the river. She trod her way noisily under the swamp paperbarks and between bushy honey myrtle to a secluded part of the river where the bank cut in and large rocks were sunk among the sand and water. The area was fringed by large trees and tall reeds and was relatively private, especially at night. Meka stepped over onto the rocks and walked along until she reached the large rock large enough to lay on. She touched her fingertips across the smooth rocks until she found a dry patch, and she sat down and drew her knees up against her chest.

It was a still, cool evening, with no breeze to disturb the tops of sheoaks that lined the river. The night songs of the frogs and crickets were a vibrating rattle in her ears. Meka let her hand drift down to the water, her fingers moving with and against the current, drifting back and forth. Coldness began creeping up into her wrists, and she willed it to go further, up her arms, into her chest and up into her skull. Cool water to carry her thoughts away, like wattle blossoms shook loose from a burdened tree. Yellow dots washed downstream, bobbing along on the quickening currents, sucked out into the ocean to be drowned in pounding waves. Is there a river

somewhere for what ails her? The streams of blood within her are a closed system, rivers that carry her problems around and around and around and around. From the brain, where they burn, to the lungs, where they restrict breath, to the heart, where they ache, and around the limbs which cannot be comforted in their lack of that other body they want so much.

She lay on her stomach and reached both her arms down into the water. She willed her pain to travel down her arms and into her fingers.

Carry it away.

She let her fingertips rub across slime-covered stones on the submerged floor of the sloping river bank. Give me some of that ice from the Cold Times. Cool these fires that turn thoughts to steam.

Her arms were going numb and she withdrew them from the water. She rolled onto her side and folded her cold limbs against her. And yet she still burned. Looking out across the water a single hot tear slid down her cheek and against the rock. Another bit of saltwater to be washed out to sea. She may as well be crying underwater, for all the good it did her.

A slick reflection of light caught Meka's eye and she lifted her head off the rocks. Sitting up, she peered across the dark river. A pale dorsal fin was moving through the water toward her. A dolphin? The fin veered to the side and disappeared.

Erin songs

The next day Meka sat under a tall bottlebrush on the edge of camp repairing her possum skin pouch. She was sewing up a split with savage movements and glaring mutinously into the surrounding bush. Dwerda was curled up next to her on the ground, her golden ears twitching every time Meka muttered under her breath. Grey and white wrens were bouncing joyfully around in the dust in front of them looking for grubs, completely oblivious to Meka's dark mood. A wren bounced over to pick at the hairs on Dwerda's tail and got swatted away in return.

There was movement in the camp and Meka noticed the Erin Elders leaving with their families. They looked sombre and she thought there must be some ceremonial business going on. Fionn emerged from behind her and gestured for her to follow them. She glared at him and he lifted his hand entreatingly. She glared again and then packed up her sewing and she and Dwerda went with Fionn and the Erin as they walked east toward the hills.

Meka and Fionn followed the Erin from the coastal scrub by sea, up through wetland Country into the beginning of the jarrah forest in the foothills. High above their heads, among the granite outcrops that topped the escarpment was the domain of the Creator Serpent, the home of rain up high. The jarrah forest was a special place for River people, they spent the rainy season in this area, eating kangaroo and wallaby, and sheltering from the wind and rain under the giant trees. Elders did ceremony up near the peaks, a place forbidden to everyone else. The jarrah foothills had become a special place for the Erin too, who in their homelands had a special

relationship with tall trees. From up here she could see smoke rising from the various camps down on the coastal plain below.

Fionn stopped and took a sharp left turn into some honey myrtle bushes. Meka stopped and climbed up on a granite boulder to wait for him. She stretched out on the grey rock and heard Dwerda snuffling around the bushes below. In the jarrah trees overhead the white cockatoos in their hundreds were screeching as they ate, having many conversations at once. She smiled at the sound of it, then the cockatoos flew off all at once, as they do, in a great flock to feast elsewhere. They left a loud silence behind, and Meka's thoughts went to what her nana had told her about the first newcomer.

She couldn't imagine all the forest there blackened and burnt, all the nests, hollows and burrows destroyed, nothing for the surviving animals to eat, nowhere for them to live. The spirits crying in the ground, their home reduced to ash. River Country emerged green and vibrant through the black ash of fire, but Meka wondered if a fire could burn so hot that it killed the seeds rather than breaking them open. And she wondered if you killed enough animals and their young and their eggs, whether the creature would disappear forever. Meka remembered what Lorna had said, about the Albion being cuckoo birds that laid their eggs in other people's nests, replacing them. What if the fire caused by the red-cloaked newcomer burned so much that every person in River Country died? Meka felt very dark and cold about that.

Her thoughts then drifted to Dayin. A dull ache grew in her chest. He was from Echidna Country, just over these hills and across the plateau. If she married him her children would be a part of River Country as well as tied inland, able to dig into Country, dig deep. Meka looked at her palms, pale, with one cut by the shark tooth. Her children would not have as much water and salt in them as the newcomers, they would have more earth and blood. She placed her hands over her aching heart. It was fixed in place like a rock itself. A rock she could hold onto.

Meka heard voices and rolled over on the boulder. Below her a family was approaching, singing as they walked through. It was a mix of Erin language and Country language, and they were singing about fire in the banksia flower, and fairies carried with them in their hair on their long journey here. Little pale Erin babies they imagine living among the gum and wattle flowers. She wondered if those fairies really were here, and if they carried the death of the Erin homelands with them.

She wondered where Fionn had got to. He spoke a different language to the Erin people, and he seemed to know a lot about what caused the newcomers far away lands to die. The Erin people didn't seem to know as much about the catastrophe that sent them over the sea seeking green earth, but grieved that dead earth as much as Fionn did. The Erin certainly blamed the Albion, and Fionn's sadness was different, guiltier perhaps.

The songs of the Erin family reached her ears again, a different song this time, about the children born at sea who had never seen trees. Children who thought the whole world was water, shifting beneath them, never still or solid. A world

thirsty and salty and starved and cold. Children who couldn't imagine the colour green, no matter how many songs of their old Country their Elders sung to them. Meka listened as the song told of those children coming to River Country, and how the giant jarrah greeted them in these foothills. They sung of how the children understood then what roots and shelter and home meant, of belonging to solid earth, and what green really meant.

Meka had the heard the song before, but it wrapped around her aching heart. She couldn't imagine not having trees overhead, and grass at her ankles, seagrass in the ocean, banksia pulling at your hair as you walked past. Even this boulder had little pink flowers growing in the moss; glorious life. Meka rolled onto her back and looked up at the sky, a hand behind her head. The crowns of the trees stretched over her, with glimpses of blue sky between.

She heard footsteps below and Dwerda trotted out of the bushes. She looked down and Fionn was leaning against the boulder with a fistful of honey myrtle and flame pea, listening to the Erin. The family's voices faded as they moved away and Fionn looked up at Meka.

"They've never forgotten the great gift it was to find some green earth left in the world," Fionn said. "The River Country Elders don't want us talking about the deadlands, that was the condition of us all staying here, and obeying the laws."

"But they're singing about it?" Meka said.

“Secrets can fester,” Fionn said. “It’s better to talk about painful things. The River Elders let the Erin sing songs about them.”

Meka saw the Erin gathering together around a granite boulder further up the hill.

“Your people understand that,” Fionn added. “They sing songs about things that are important, things we should never forget.”

A cool breeze moved through the trees and Meka sighed, wishing the Albion would sprout wings and fly away. Who knows what might have happened if they hadn’t shown up. She might have been able to marry Dayin after all.

“The story is always out there, in some form, the truth to be discovered,” he said.

A faint rumbling sound filled the air. Meka stood up and looked around.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

Fionn shook his head.

“Hear what?” he asked.

Meka looked around and saw that Dwerda was also on alert. The rumbling stopped though, and she crouched back down to sit on the rock.

Ahead of them, a mournful voice cut through the forest. The Elder Erin man Cian, oldest among the Erin, was sitting on the rock ahead, singing. The Erin people were gathered around him listening. Meka listened for a few moments then realised that she hadn't heard this song before, and couldn't understand any of the words. The song finished and Cian got up and walked away. Meka glanced over at Fionn, who was shedding tears.

“What was the song about?” Meka asked.

Fionn stared out at the forest for a few moments.

“It's a terrible thing, to not belong where you live,” Fionn said finally.

“Does Cian think that he doesn't belong here?” Meka asked.

“It's more than that, niece,” he replied. “He was singing about his home, over the seas, where his people are from. How green and full of life it was.”

Fionn sat down on a fallen tree branch.

“It's a terrible thing to lose your home, the earth that made you,” he continued. “It's a terrible thing to never to be able to go back.”

“But the Erin have River Country,” Meka said, “they have somewhere green to live.”

Fionn wiped the tears from his face and his eyes lost that faraway look.

“Having my Albion family here has brought up bad memories for the Erin,” Fionn said. “They’re worried that what happened there will happen here.”

Meka eyed him coolly.

“They’ve tolerated me because I was the only Albion here, and I never married,” Fionn said. “But twenty more Albion people?”

“Nana told me about the first newcomer,” Meka said. “And the black blood that bled from him and burned these Serpent hills nearly to death.”

He exhaled with emotion and pulled out his necklace of crossed metal.

“I have a confession to make, Meka,” he said.

“What’s that?” she replied, not understanding the word.

“A confession is when you tell a story that you’re ashamed of,” he said, “that you carry around and don’t tell anyone.”

“Go on,” Meka said.

“I said that I didn’t know where the darkness came from,” Fionn said, “that no one knew where it came from, but that isn’t entirely true. It was so baffling at the time, so terrifying. There is a great river that snakes through my town, my village. The water turned black, the water that flowed into our homes turned black. We couldn’t drink anything, our animals couldn’t drink anything. That’s where it started, in Albion Country, and it spread out from there. Everything turned black, the water, the earth, the sky, the animals. We ran from it as it spread, those of us who survived fled over the water to our neighbours in Erin Country, but it followed us there too. Everyone was piling onto boats but there weren’t enough. Our warriors had fled in our large ships, and they were floating out in the sea away from the land. Us ordinary people, we had to find ships where we could, or build them as fast as we could. We all leapt onto ships, but there were so few of us left. It all happened in a single moon cycle, and I think nine out of ten people perished.”

“We wound up on a giant sea, huge sea, and one by one the ships rotted and sunk or the people died of thirst and hunger. Your father and I got separated from our ship when we were trying to catch fish, and we thought we were done for, doomed to be swallowed by the sea. Who knows what kind of magic pushed us here to the shores of River Country. I couldn’t imagine a place with so many trees, I forgot what trees were out on the ocean, what trees could be. And there were Erin people here, and new people. I was so relieved that the Erin had escaped, I-“

Fionn's voice caught and Meka watched him grip his necklace again.

“There were no Albion here,” he continued. “That little boat your father and I came in on was made in Erin Country, and it got us here when the other boats sank out of sight.”

Cian's voice drifted through the trees again and Meka listened in. After a few moments the forest was quiet and Fionn sighed.

“So Cian sings because he can never go back,” he said. “And I weep because I thought I was the last one left as punishment, like the Albion are responsible somehow.”

“But you don't think that anymore?” Meka asked.

“My family have been here the whole time,” Fionn said, still holding his necklace. “Everything has changed.”

“But the darkness still came from Albia,” Meka stated.

“I think so,” Fionn said, “but now I'm not so sure.”

“Does nana know this?” Meka asked. “That the darkness was in Albia first?”

“She does,” Fionn said.

It didn't feel right to Meka.

"Lorna said the Albion were cuckoo birds who stole nests," she said, "who didn't want to gather food to feed their own chicks. How can I marry one of them?"

"There's only two men of marrying age amongst them," Fionn said. "It's like your nana said, they can't live as a separate people, they must be integrated."

"They could leave," Meka said.

"This might be the last green place in the world niece," Fionn said.

"Or be killed for invading?" Meka added.

"Are you going to be the one who decides that Meka?" Fionn said. "Would you have killed me?"

"If you were Erin and Albion arrived on your shore," Meka said, "would you have killed them, knowing the darkness that they were bringing?"

Fionn looked deeply pained.

"You have a lot of your mother in you, Meka," Fionn said. "For all that you look like Gray you think just like her."

“What does that mean?” Meka asked.

Fionn sat back and breathed heavily against the trunk of a jarrah tree and looked up at the sky.

“I can’t believe this is happening again,” he said. “It’s too painful, I can’t...”

He trailed off, shutting his eyes and clutching his chest. Meka frowned, not understanding. She climbed down from the rock and whistled to Dwerda, who followed her faithfully out of the foothills.

The shark

Meka sat on limestone cliffs that jutted out from a protected beach north of the river mouth. Here pale rocky islands dotted the curved bay, and there were patches of dark seagrass against the clear blue pools where nothing obscured the view of the sandy sea floor. Meka was hidden from sight from the shore in a little cave, and was shielded from the wind. The sun was dropping down and piercing into her eyes but she didn't care, she was going to hide out here until after dinner. She couldn't face the Albion or her supposed-husband, especially after what Fionn had told her. Fionn hadn't come back to camp after the Erin ceremonies in the hills yesterday. She didn't know where Dwerda was, and her nana was busy with Miro. Even Karla was off helping Djindalee with her new baby boy Yoondoordoo, who looked more like a newcomer than any of the three girl cousins.

Meka dug at the ground with her knife, dislodging shells and old seaweed. She glanced up at the cave walls around her and inspected them. She remembered Fionn's words about the limestone being filled with dead sea creatures, and she ran her fingers along the rough, crumbling rock and searched for any sign of teeth or shells. The cliffs were a stacked burial ground for the dead of the ocean, and the cave she sat in was where the bones have been blown to dust by the wind. She scraped a bit of the cave wall off with her knife into her hand to have a look at. She ran her fingers over the granules, imagining what fish or crustacean skeleton it used to be. She blew the grains off her hands and into the sea.

“Go rest with your own kind,” Meka said.

Thankyou

said a voice.

Meka got a shock, and looked around.

“Who’s there?” she called out, looking up and around at the cliffs.

I’m not up there

Meka looked left and right, and then down at the sea.

Then she saw it. Something big in the water, coming up toward the surface. A pale face. A broad mouth. Rows and rows and rows of teeth. The pointed snout stopped before it broke the surface of the water. Meka looked down in astonishment and horror.

Meka O’Noorn

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

I know many things about you

Realisation came over her.

“It was you,” she said. “In the river.”

A wave rolled over the top of the pale face, distorting the features of the shark momentarily, magnifying the teeth.

“What do you want?” Meka asked.

You have something that belongs to me

Meka pulled the stone shark tooth out of her pouch and held it up.

“Do you mean this?” she asked. “Would you like it back?”

The Serpent turned it to stone, I can't use it anymore

The shark shifted under the waves and the tip of its dorsal fin emerged momentarily from the sea. It was huge, much bigger than Meka originally thought. A cold chill ran around her body.

“I'll get out of your way,” she said, and got up to leave.

You called me here

The shark's words seemed to come from inside her head, not from the sea beneath.

"How did I do that?" Meka replied, starting to think that she might be dreaming.

Your tears spoke to me

I'm here to help you

"Thank you but you can't help me," Meka said. "Serpent Territory isn't like the sea, and you are very different to me."

Humans have saltwater in them

Otherwise you wouldn't be able to hear me

"Are you talking about tears?" Meka asked.

Tears

Blood

Serpent water goes in

Shark water comes out

“Who are you?” Meka asked.

I'm the Patient One Under the Waves

The Eater

“I'm a creature of Serpent Territory,” Meka said. “I don't think there's much you can help me with.”

Things are changing

One day you might need my help

“Help with what?” she replied.

Help with what brings the tears

Meka looked over her shoulder in the direction of camp, and thought of how the arrival of the newcomers interfered with her marriage to Dayin. But then she would never have met Fionn. And she would never have been born. She turned back to speak but stopped.

The sharp jaws under the waves was gone.

The Serpent sees The Shark. Grey creature in the blue saltwater. Breather of salty water. Eater of seals and snapper. Whose young eat one another in the womb. The Patient One Under The Waves was there, watching, when The Serpent made River Country. The Shark's Country is the vast oceans, those deserts of saltwater. An acidic water that is toxic to River Country. The Serpent made this Country for the creatures and plants that live on sweet water. Split the land in two, filled the void with soft soil. Built beaches from the skeletons of sea creatures. Perhaps The Shark, The Eater, didn't like that, and that's why the oceans are creeping back in, swallowing up Serpent Country grain by grain. Bashing the beaches with waves, wearing away The Serpent's good work. Slowly The Serpent rebuilds stone with water and lime.

They have shared the world a long time, The Serpent and The Shark. The Rainmaster and The Eater, pushing and pulling the water in the world. In the Cold Times The Serpent takes all the water up on land, freezing it and using its icy body to carve new Country. In The Warm Times The Shark swells the ocean and pushes its water in and consumes land.

However, something changed when the creator serpents of the world made humans. For the first time, The Shark took notice of a creature outside of itself. It has begun talking to humans, and the ones that listen fill with salt.

The Serpent listens closely for its friends in the ocean, those who used to walk on land and still breathe air. Whales spread language energy around the sea, and the humpbacks have returned from their breeding grounds in the north with songs of death and silence. There are serpent lands in other parts of the sea that used to sing with spirit and life, but have fallen quiet. The whales tell of once white cliffs falling black into the surf, turtles and birds disintegrating into black shores. They can no longer hear the heartbeat of those lands, their creator serpents gone or dead.

Dead.

They sing of ghost birds scattering out from lifeless islands and fleeing across cold, dark seas. Birds that turn sick with salt and rot and sink. The whales swam beneath and blew rings of bubbles to try and keep them afloat, but the wooden vessels sunk like rocks, airless and hopeless into the depths. The dead islands stood black for years, and now they have crumbled into the water, and the sea has covered where they used to be.

The whales heard the whispering in the water too, the soft voice of The Eater as it circled those islands for years and years and years. They hear these whispers in the waters off River Country.

The Shark's power is growing. The Serpent fears that it has found a way to kill Serpent Land, and seeks to make a saltwater grave of the whole world. The Eater is hungry, pushing its influence from the waves, up the rivers, and onto River

Country. The girl, Meka, continues to float, her steps on Serpent Territory as light as a spiderweb seeking anchor as it moves on the breeze.

It was quiet and dark in the early days of the ocean. Then there was tiny life. Then larger life. Then the sharks.

Everything that walks on land came from the sea. They climbed out of saltwater country and onto sweetwater land. Those that once breathed water began to breathe air. They turned their back on the ocean, and forgot about the rhythm of the waves.

But the whales came back.

Life on land is a burden. Without the support of water, land animals developed heavy bones to keep upright. They grew sac-like lungs to gasp oxygen from the air. Their helpless young fed from their bodies. Their hearts and minds grew large and complex to cope with this new Country. They developed voices to sing songs grieving their hard new lives.

The small, many-legged things were the smartest. They simply hardened their armour and retained vast populations. They eat their mates. They sacrifice their siblings. They do not love. They do not grieve.

But the whales came back.

The Shark watched the whale ancestors glance back toward the sea. Their focus lingering on the waves. Seeing with new eyes what they left behind. The Shark watched them haul their heavy bodies and heavy hearts back into the ocean. Their tails and fins returned but they were not the same. Their gills did not reappear. They are forced to breathe air from the surface, forever marred by their foray on land. Their young follow them for years. They congregate in groups, singing and clicking, needing one another in desperate co-dependence. Their multi-chambered hearts beat hot blood around their bodies.

The Shark has seen this. But the sharks are not the oldest minds in the ocean. There are little things in the water, old things, older than anything. They whisper to The Shark. About how they eat the sunlight. That their descendants left the water too, and live in the leaves of plants. Their Dreaming stories tell of their ancient ancestors eating too much sunlight when the world was young and plunging the world into cold darkness. Nearly every living thing died, and those that survived the darkness are the parent of everything alive today. That even the sharks exist by the grace of that frozen world finally thawing.

The sharks have survived cold times since. They have felt the oceans drop and seen glaciers rise. Perhaps the sunlight eaters are testing them.

They say that the sharks will be the last to perish should the ice return.

But the whales, no, they whisper. The whales will not survive another frozen world. And nothing on land as well.

*Everything comes from the sea. And in one way or another, everything
returns to the sea.*

Dead quendas

The afternoon sun was falling toward the horizon as Meka was walking down a narrow animal trail and stopped between some Quandong trees that were fruiting. Dwerda trotted ahead, probably looking for quenda nests in the undergrowth. Meka plucked a red fruit off the tree and ate the sweet flesh of the outside, sucking on the hard nut inside. She dropped the nut into her pouch for later and looked around. She saw some emu tracks, which didn't surprise her; emus would have noticed the trees were fruiting and come running. The tree probably liked the emus better, they swallow the berry whole and carried the seed far away while its belly worked on it, depositing the seed somewhere new when it passed through. The tree was probably not as fond of Meka, who was going to crack the nut open and crush the seed inside to make medicine.

Noornangk told her that she had seen quandong trees uprooted after a storm, and saw that the roots of the quandong was wrapped around the roots of an acacia tree, tapping into it, sharing its food. The one in front of Meka was very close to a black wattle, so perhaps under the ground this quandong was drawing life as she stood there. Her nana didn't have anything bad to say about quandong trees regardless of this somewhat unsavoury fact, perhaps they were weak trees that needed help to survive. The Ancestor Trees whispered nearby.

The Moon drags sea across land. Salt in the waterhole. Salt in the wounds.

Meka plucked a few more berries off and kept walking. As she munched on another quandong she felt pressure on her ankles. A slight drag against her gait. She leapt forward a few steps and kept walking. She felt it again, invisible hands holding her legs. She kicked and leapt up onto a fallen log, and ran along it. She stood at the other end and looked back. She couldn't see anything on the ground, just fallen fruit.

Back at camp Noornangk threw some gum branches on the fire, along with some balga trunk flakes. Meka stood in the smoke that was being blown gently from a westerly breeze, and Noornangk spoke to the spirits, welcoming good spirits and chasing away bad spirits.

“Where were you?” Noornangk asked.

Meka rubbed her skin and hair with the smoke as Noornangk slapped Meka's body a few times with a smoky branch. Dwerda was laying in the shade watching.

“Over on the emu track that cuts through the quandong trees,” Meka replied. “The spirits don't like me anywhere on this River Country.”

“You've been here since you were a baby, barely two season cycles old,” Noornangk replied. “The land knows you, so what were you really doing over there?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “Eating quandong berries and walking down the emu track with Dwerda.”

Noornangk motioned for Meka to step out of the smoke and Meka rubbed her body and hair with her hands.

“You know I need you here in camp with these new people,” Noornangk said, throwing the branch on the fire. “They need to learn the way of this Country.”

Noornangk tilted her head and Meka saw Fionn standing on the dance ground nearby. He was speaking to the Albion as a group, and they were all listening in keenly. She hadn't seen him since their conversation in the foothills, and she could hear that he was speaking in what must be the Albion tongue, because she couldn't quite understand him.

“They've been here as long as I've been alive,” Meka said quietly. “How come they've all stuck together and not married in anywhere?”

“They must have already had their matches,” Noornangk said. “And now the children are old enough to get married themselves.”

Meka saw the man John that she was supposed to marry. She couldn't even speak to him, he spoke a mix of Albion and the language of whomever they had lived near in the last twenty season cycles. Noornangk noticed Meka looking at John.

“That’s the power of marriage,” Noornangk said. “Without having anyone to marry off these Albion have not been included anywhere. Look how thin and sad they are. You can’t live a good life without community.”

Meka nodded and looked again at John. He was looking up at Fionn with reverence, and Meka wondered if he had been born at sea, or born on the shores here. No matter which, he was still a stranger, with no ancestors in Serpent Territory. She frowned. Was it always going to be like this? Would their future children marry newcomers too? Was it the destiny of her people to marry strangers so they can belong to Country? Is this what the Creator Serpent wants from her?

Fionn was talking quietly and raised his hands to the sky and the Albion mimicked him, palms up to the clouds, fingers outstretched. Then Fionn looked up and spoke louder and the Albion spoke along with him, all together, like a song being sung without a tune.

“What’s Fionn doing?” Meka asked.

“It’s Albion culture,” Noornangk said. “Has Fionn told you anything about it?”

“Not much,” Meka said. “In Albia the Creator Serpent lives in the sky I think and looks like a man?”

She sighed deeply, leaning on her digging stick.

“Fionn said that the Albion have been practicing their culture this whole time,” she said. “No one has taught them how to care for Country and spirit.”

“Well, they’ve got no ancestors here, do they?” Meka said. “No one to show them how to live a good life.”

Noornangk glanced over at Meka meaningfully.

“That’s right Meka,” she said. “This is why they need us. Without being part of a family of Serpent Territory they may as well skip being people and become ghosts.”

Meka thought of the spirits in the ground that grabbed at her when she walked. What kind of disturbed ghosts would the Albion become?

Fionn and the Albion ended their tuneless song on a loud note then they all clapped their hands. They broke into laughter and stood up, embracing each other. Meka and Noornangk stood watching from a distance.

“Who was Fionn to this family group?” Meka asked.

“Fionn said he guided people in spiritual ways,” Noornangk said. “He was the one who spoke to their creator.”

“Like an Elder?” Meka asked.

“It’s more than that,” Noornangk said. “I think Fionn is the reason why they are open to staying here.”

Meka remembered the excitement and adoration from the Albion when they saw Fionn for the first time. After spending nearly twenty season cycles alone in the desert woodlands they were going to settle in river Country because of Fionn.

“All this time, they thought Fionn and your father had drowned,” Noornangk said. “This is magic to them.”

“Meer-kool,” Meka said.

An image came to Meka’s mind, of Fionn and her father Gray being pulled away in the small boat, while a ship full of Albion people cried and screamed as the waves carried their leader away from them. They had lost the most important person to them that day, and had tried to keep their spirituality intact. She looked at Fionn, and he was smiling, really smiling as he spoke to the Albion. For the first time she had a sense of what Fionn might have lost, his own people, his own way of doing things. That is why he rowed around in a boat looking for things that might be from his community.

“Fionn told me things about the Albion,” Meka said. “Terrible things.”

“These people are not the same as when they left,” Noornangk said. “The death of their lands has changed them, look at them.”

Meka looked over at their sunken cheeks, dark-rimmed eyes and tattered cloth coverings that they must have been wearing since they arrived.

“Fionn is the only one that can speak to them,” Noornangk said. “I’ve asked him to explain our laws to them. If they’re going to stay, they’ll have to follow them.”

Noornangk walked off and Meka leaned against a tuart tree. A shadow moved overhead and Meka jumped slightly. She looked up but missed whatever it was, a wedge-tailed eagle most likely, from the size, unusual as it was for it to be flying so close to the coast. She walked around the tree trying to see a patch of sky to look for it and as she did her foot brushed something wet. She looked down and saw a savaged quenda in the dirt, its brown fur torn and bloodied, its arms and legs curled in death. Perhaps the eagle dropped it, and Meka knew one of the camp dogs would enjoy the meal. She spoke a little offering to the spirits and was about to go make amends with Fionn when she saw another dead quenda. Then another. She looked further along and saw that there was a trail of brown little bodies amongst the hop-bushes that lead down toward the river.

Meka hadn’t seen anything like this before, and she walked among the grim collection to see where it led. Another shadow passed overhead and she flinched again. It really was unusual to see a wedge-tailed eagle so far west. She thought it

could be a particularly large osprey. She kept walking and she saw her nana ahead of her. Noornangk was talking to two new people and they had their back to Meka. She'd got around the dance ground quick, and Meka admired the legs of the old girl. As Meka walked toward them the three of them turned, and Meka stopped still.

It was her nana, it must have been, but she looked different, younger. The noise faded out and Meka watched her nana's lips move as she spoke, but not one sound reached Meka's ears. Meka looked around and the area they were standing in looked different too, the light was brighter suddenly. Fionn and the Albion were gone, Dwerda was gone. She walked up to her nana slowly and confused, but Noornangk didn't even notice her. She was standing with two men, both newcomers, and the older one stood close to Noornangk, and the younger one stood in front of the two of them. Noise returned to her and the older man was now speaking in fluent Erin language. Meka couldn't follow it, he wasn't using any River words at all. Meka turned her attention to the younger man, who was listening attentively. She walked a few steps to catch his face and when she did she couldn't believe what she saw. The man was around her age, maybe even younger by a season cycle, and looked just like her. It had to be her father Gray. The land was showing her its memories again.

A dull ache formed in her chest and she pressed her palms against her body, feeling like her insides were going to fall out. Her father, her wonderful father whom she had missed so much, was there, right there in front of her. He was taller than Meka, with dark hair, pale skin and green eyes. He had black tattoos around his right forearm resembling knotted rope, and was wearing the long pants and long white

shirt of the newest arrivals who had not made kangaroo cloaks yet. He wouldn't have been able to speak River language at this point, and Meka looked at the man Noornangk was standing with. Was this her grandfather Rowan, a newcomer from the First Wave two generations ago? Meka had never met him, and didn't know what he looked like. The man turned to Noornangk and spoke to her in River language.

“He's a good boy,” the man said, “he wants to get married here, wants to learn our ways.”

“This might be the one for our daughter,” Noornangk said.

“I just don't think Mayakawa will agree to marry,” Rowan said. “Maybe we should give her a few years.”

“Nana Dingo is firm on this,” Noornangk said. “Mayakawa will marry a newcomer, and I've heard this one has a mind for community, and helped people escape the darkness that enveloped your islands.”

A pained look crossed Rowan's face.

“Yes, according to the Albion man he arrived with, this boy saved a ship of Albion people,” Rowan said. “It takes a pure heart to do that.”

“She is going to have to marry this boy,” Noornangk said. “What's his name?”

Rowan gestured to Meka's father and he smiled.

"Gray," he said, placing his hand on his chest and bowing forward in introduction.

A shadow passed overhead and Meka looked up. This time she caught the creature flying overhead. It wasn't an eagle. It was huge, and white, and came to settle on a peppermint tree which creaked under its weight. It spread its ragged wings that were wider than the canopy of the tree, and when it turned Meka saw that its body was the size of a kangaroo, and it had a long head and beak like a wading bird, but with claws like an eagle and milky white eyes. It clutched a dead emu in its claws, and it stabbed its long beak into the limp body and pulled its insides out. Meka heard beating wings and looked around. Her nana, grandfather and father were gone, and she was standing alone in the dance ground. More giant, morbid birds landed in the trees around her, all clutching dead or dying kangaroos, emus, wallabies, quendas, goannas and snakes. One had even pulled up a quandong tree and was trying to eat the fruit. A black wattle dangled alongside the quandong tree, their roots entangled, the black wattle sharing the grisly fate.

Meka heard a voice shouting and turned on the spot. Behind her, a young woman had her back to Meka. She had long dark hair and dark skin, a kangaroo cloak over her shoulder, and short spears at her waist. Meka watched her raise a fist to the birds in the trees.

“Eaters get out!” the woman shouted, then she grabbed one of the short spears and launched it at one of the birds. Meka saw the spear go right through it; the giant ghostly bird was undisturbed.

Meka ran over to see if the woman was her mother but as she took a step the light changed, and she was back among the peppermint trees of her time. Her nana was over near the fire, Dwerda was asleep under a banksia tree and Fionn and the Albion were talking at the edge of the dance ground. There were strange shadows on the ground, overlapping shadows coming down from the trees and resting on Noornangk. Meka walked in a semi-circle but couldn't see what was casting darkness across her nana. Her foot nudged something and down at her feet a single dead quenda remained, looking for all the world that it has been speared through the chest by a monstrous beak.

Heavy heart

That evening Fionn wasn't in the Erin camp, and neither were the Albion. Meka left Dwerda dozing by the fire and went looking for them. She walked toward the river and saw a fire blazing in the black night near the fish traps. When Fionn saw Meka approach he got up and met her.

“I'm going to be spending some time with my family,” Fionn said. “Just us, to get them settled in.”

“Your family?” Meka asked. “I thought you didn't know them that well back in Erina.”

“My Albion family,” Fionn said. “Your nana wants them to be family.”

“Did nana agree to forgive them for causing the darkness that destroyed the Erin homeland?” Meka asked. “And their own?”

Fionn looked taken aback.

“The land is showing me things, Fionn,” Meka said. “Visions of my parents. Visions of awful white birds that kill everything.”

“Meka, the Albion aren't evil,” Fionn said.

“I’m seeing warnings,” Meka said. “There is something wrong here.”

“I was like them once, Meka,” Fionn said. “Just an Albion person starved and dying of thirst on a ghost bird in the ocean.”

“They’ve just spent twenty season cycles alone,” Meka said. “Why do you need to be alone with them?”

“This has Noornangk’s blessing,” Fionn said.

“But it wasn’t her idea,” Meka said.

“You need to trust your Elders,” Fionn said. “Noornangk and me.”

“And how did the Albion invade Erina?” Meka asked. “Did it start like this? With a few people just harmlessly scheming on their own?”

Fionn sighed in exasperation.

“I’m glad that I’m going to be spending some time with the Albion without you, Meka,” he said. “I can’t have you around, you’re hurting me.”

Meka was stung by that, and stepped back.

“You’re not an Elder, Meka,” Fionn said. “This is the wisdom of your grandmother, and her mother before her, and her mother before her, back to Old Nana Dingo.”

“My mother didn’t agree with any of this,” Meka said. “I know that she didn’t want to marry a newcomer.”

“No, she didn’t want to marry Gray,” Fionn said. “But she did in the end. She did what her Elders said.”

Meka turned and walked away. She felt Fionn watching her and then she heard him turn and walk back to the campfire. The Albion began their tuneless singing again and Meka wiped hot tears from her face. She headed along the river toward the sea. She passed the fish traps and saw that there was a high tide. This meant that no fish could be trapped in the weirs tonight, and only the ones left behind as the waters lowered again would be trapped. She saw the outlines of bream moving under the surface of the water.

“Get out while you can,” she told them.

She walked down to the ocean through the thick sedge growing on the dunes. She stepped down through the soft sand and came to stand on the damp shoreline, where River Country meets sea. She thought of her father’s smiling face when talking about marrying her mother, and the obvious objections her mother had. But their story died with them, out there in the sea. What were they doing in the sea

when they were killed? A breeze started blowing and she shivered. She imagined her parents walking out of the sea and sitting by her on the sand, telling her their story, helping her decide what she should do. Should she fight it like her mother? Or embrace it like her father? They both died anyway. She cried a hot tear and gasped a little, taking deep lungfuls of the salty air. She crouched in the cold sand and brought her hands to her face.

Dayin was meant to be her match, her heart burned for him, but she was so confused. Her mother had married Gray in the end, not straightaway as she could work out, but she did marry him. But why had they died? It was clear that people of River Country, newcomers included, didn't like Meka's mother. But it was clear that they had loved her father. Her parents had worked it out, at least for a few years before being lost to the waves. She wished she knew how and why.

High above her namesake, the moon, was shining brightly but obscured by moving clouds. A single beam escaped and shone down upon something in the water. A pale fin emerged from the surf, cutting through the waves in an unnaturally straight line. The shark.

Back by the sea, Meka O'Noorn

“Yes,” Meka said.

The fin in the water was as tall as she was, The Shark beneath the surface must be huge.

Is there something on your mind?

“I have a cloudy mind,” she said, “and a heavy heart.”

A heavy heart is a terrible thing. This is why I have a heart that floats on the sea

“The water carries it?” Meka said.

It is an easier life in the ocean. The whales used to live on land you know

“What do you mean?” Meka asked.

All creatures that live on land used to live in the sea. The whales didn't like life on land. Too hard on the heart. They returned to the sea

“You saw this?” Meka asked.

I watched The Serpent make the land you live on

Meka thought of the whale mothers on the south coast where she was born, having their babies in the shallow waters there.

“They come back every year,” Meka said. “Why did they leave?”

The Serpent gave warm-blooded creatures large, difficult hearts. It was too much for the whales

Meka placed her hands over her chest and felt her heartbeat. The cut on her palm stung as the wound was stretched as she pressed her hands close.

“We have a difficult heart?” Meka asked.

Four chambers. Mine only has two, and I have the support of the water

“Four chambers,” Meka repeated.

The Serpent only has three-chambers in theirs. Hardly fair, I would think, to make a creature like you and not be able to understand its pain

“How did the whales survive in the sea?” Meka asked.

There is no hard boundary between Serpent Territory and Shark Territory. There are salt water places on land, and sweet water places at sea

Meka thought of the freshwater spring under the reef.

Saltwater is in you. In your blood, your muscle, your tears. You could return to the ocean at any time

Dayin's beautiful face floated across her mind again, then the face of her drowned husband, then her new match, the Albion man. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

Even now the sea breeze in your lungs carries saltwater to your blood

"I wish an ocean could pass through me and wash the clouds from my mind," Meka said.

Everything comes from the sea. Sooner or later, everything will return

Meka thought of what she had seen in camp, the sea creatures, the waves.

"I thought I dreamed that," Meka said.

The land remembers being under the sea

"Why would you take over land with your ocean?" Meka asked.

The Serpent has become weak. I'm not the only one invading

Meka was affronted.

“We follow The Serpent’s laws,” she said. “That’s why I have to marry a newcomer.”

You don’t have to do anything. Walk your own path, Meka

That didn’t sound quite right to Meka, she loved her community, and her nana. She even loved Fionn. Maybe it was the four-chambered heart making her follow laws.

“You said that you’re the master of the sea,” Meka said.

I am, and I have a territory three times bigger than The Serpent

Meka swallowed heavily.

“Are my parents in there?” Meka asked quietly, pain shooting through her heart.

Yes

“And you said that I can come into the ocean at any time?” Meka said.

You were born on Whale Country. You are pale like a shark. I’m sure it’ll be easier for you than anyone

“Are my parents alive, like the whales?” Meka asked.

A wave passed over the fin and the shark was gone.

Sea floor

Meka woke up on the beach as the sun was stretching orange beams of light up into the dawn sky. There was a furry body next to her, Dwerda had perhaps noticed she was missing and had come looking for her. She had slept on the lea side of the dune under a red wattle, too distressed to go back to camp. She sat up, causing the hidden wattle birds above to chirp in consternation, and Dwerda stirred next to her too, yawning hugely then looking at Meka with big dark eyes.

“I know, I should have brought you along,” Meka said, giving Dwerda a scratch behind the ears.

Meka looked around at the dunes that were stirring with life as the sun rose behind her. There were terns roosting under domes of green sea heath, the tracks of dugite bellies moving across sand, a family of emus walking by in the distance where dunes met the wetlands. Beyond those wetlands was the Erin camp, but Meka couldn't bring herself to go back there. The vision of the giant white birds in the trees had deeply disturbed her, and she didn't know if they were a dream or a memory of River Country. She stood and looked back at the sea, remembering the shark's invitation to come into the sea. Surely it couldn't be as simple as walking in, but she did want to know what had happened to her parents. The camp had gossiped about her mother shouting at birds, and it had to have something to do with the terrible birds in the trees. Meka's hands went to her spears. Maybe that's why her uncle Miro didn't like that she carried them, because her mother had, and was throwing them at creatures that perhaps he hadn't seen.

Meka walked down the dune toward the ocean, with Dwerda trotting beside her. She remembered her nana's stories about when the sea was lower and this beach was connected with the islands in the distance. The shark really had taken a lot of land. Had the Creator Serpent really lost its ability to care for its creatures? Meka thought of her dreams of the sea moving in the Erin camp, and thought that perhaps the sea was already there, and hadn't been noticed yet, just like the giant birds. Maybe Meka and her mother had been the only ones to notice. Meka's feet hit cold wet sand and Dwerda stopped. She gave a low whine and Meka glanced back.

"This is something I have to do," she told Dwerda.

Meka walked further into the water as Dwerda paced back on the dry sand. Each step took her deeper, the cool water wrapping around her calves, then knees, then thighs, then waist. She stepped in up to her chest and she felt a rush go through her, like the sea was air and she'd just taken a deep breath. She turned back to signal to Dwerda that she was alright and she just saw her dog sitting still and staring after her. Meka turned and kept walking, her next step sending her chin under the water, and then after another her mouth. A wave moved toward her and she shut her eyes as it washed over her head.

Meka opened her eyes and saw a sandy sea floor sloping toward a field of seagrass. To her right was a rocky reef filled with colourful fish and dotted with coral, starfish and sea urchins. To her left a school of silver herring gleamed in the shafts of sunlight breaking through the surface of the water. Above all this the

ceiling of the sea foamed with waves moving rhythmically toward shore. Meka could feel the push and pull of water flowing in, and then being sucked back out again. She walked down the sandy floor toward the sea grass, crabs scuttling away from her feet. It was almost as easy to walk in the ocean as on land, and she felt refreshed with air as the sea moved around her.

She walked down to the seagrass meadow which glistened green in the morning light. A sea turtle lifted up out of the fronds to bite a jellyfish that was wobbling past. She stepped through the grassy floor, careful to avoid stepping on any rays or sea cucumbers. She descended down a steep slope and found herself walking on sand again. Next to her the reef loomed high, and she sat down for a moment. The sea floor continued dropping ahead and Meka could see that it levelled out below. It wasn't as deep as she thought, the sea seemed so dark from the shore, but a tuart tree might grow as tall as the sea was deep down there. She remembered what Old Djara had said, that tuart trees did grow there once, before the sea moved in. Meka looked around and thought of what might have been here before: kangaroos instead of dolphins, wattle instead of seaweed, quolls instead of rock lobsters, kestrels instead of stingrays, fungi instead of abalone, banksia instead of anemone.

Whales instead of people.

She leaned against the rocky wall of the reef, and found herself surrounded by red octopuses, all sitting among the sea anemones and coral. A small octopus next to her shoulder extended a curious arm that pulled at the edge of her shirt, and another arm that gripped a few strands of her hair. It seemed satisfied that she wasn't

going to eat it so it withdrew to watch her like the others. It was so quiet and peaceful in the ocean. The water and its inhabitants appeared luminescent, her eyes picking up light with clarity and depth. She stood to keep walking and she felt a weight come to her. A hundred little suckered arms gripped her hair, arms and legs, and she looked down and saw little sea slugs fixed across her hands, lobster claws gripping her shirt and starfish clamped over her feet. She was being held down by all the little inhabitants of this rocky reef.

I have to go, she told them, pulling sticky tentacles off her arms and legs. The curious little octopus from before still clung on though, refusing to be dislodged, and she let it sit on her shoulder as she walked forwards. The waves rolled high overhead as Meka walked on the soft sand to look for her parents. Would they be down there, having that picnic where the tuarts used to grow? Did they go to the islands out there to live among the spirits? She walked for a bit and then the ground dropped suddenly, an incline into a darker, deeper part of the sea. The little octopus was a flurry of legs as it launched off her shoulder and projected itself frantically back in the direction of its rocky home.

Meka walked along the sea floor to the islands beyond, looking left and right to see if she could see her parents. The shark said they were down here, but this area beyond the seagrass and coral reefs was deserted and quiet. Her feet were still illuminated by light as she walked on the rocky sea floor, and she could see sea sponges, starfish with long arms, creeping worms and some crawling crabs. There were little things floating in the water, that seemed to speak in whispery voices, but everything else existed on the ground, and it was quite lonely. She started to hope

that her parents weren't down here, because it seemed quite desolate. If this were still Serpent Territory there would be groves of grass trees, wallabies foraging, black cockatoos flying overhead, spiders building burrows in the ground. There would be magpies warbling from swamp paperbark, echidnas shuffling past fallen logs, frogs singing under leaf litter, orchids unfolding in moonlight. There would be people too, campfires burning, children laughing, dogs playing. This was not somewhere that she wanted to live, and she wondered at the whales coming to live in such a big empty place. Their heart must have been heavy to live out here.

Meka saw the islands rise from the sea floor to her right, saw how colour and life clung to the edges of land. Anything close to Serpent Territory was recognisable to Meka, but out there on the plains between land she felt isolated. She turned to walk to the island, but saw a strange darkness beyond it. The whispering of the things in the water was louder here, and Meka could almost make out what they were saying. She kept walking west, skirting the island and all its vibrant life at its fringes, walked a little beyond, and came to the edge of a vast underwater cliff. To her left and right the cliff extended as far as she could see, and it dropped out below to absolute black nothing. There was a bit of a slope before it dropped off and Meka stepped to have a closer look but recoiled as her foot encountered something sharp. Thinking it was an oyster shell, she stepped around it and found more sharpness. She backed away a few steps and looked at her cut feet. She crouched and crawled forward and saw that the ground leading down the cliff ahead was covered in row after row of triangular sharp rocks, as far as she could see, sticking up out of the sea floor. She dislodged one and it looked like the shark tooth that cut her hand. Fionn

has said that a shark sheds hundreds of teeth, and Meka thought that she must have finally entered the realm of the giant shark who had seen her parents.

The voices in the water became louder, and Meka made out a few words.

THERE IS ONLY LIGHT

AND DARKNESS

AND EATING

AND BREATHING

MIND OF

THE OCEAN

BREATH OF THE WORLD

“Who are you?” Meka asked the little things floating around her.

WE ARE THE SUNLIGHT EATERS

“What are you?” she asked, attempting to peer close at them.

FIRST THINKERS

IN THE UNIVERSE

AS NUMEROUS

AS STARS

IN THE SKY

“Do you know the shark who is the master of the ocean?” she asked.

WE HAVE NO MASTER

EXCEPT THE SUN

AND WE EAT

OUR MASTER’S FLESH

Meka couldn’t work out what they were, or what they were talking about.

“Have you seen my parents down here?” she asked.

WE CAPTURE THE

RAYS

OF THE DISTANT SUN

Meka sighed and looked deep into the dark trench ahead of her. She couldn't make anything out in the gloom, and couldn't find any way to climb down where she would get cut or stuck.

WE FEAST

AND THE WORLD COOLS

THE OCEAN SHRINKS

“Have you seen my parents?” Meka repeated. “They're my family. They will look like me, humans who live on land.”

OUR FAMILY LIVE ON LAND

IN THE LEAVES

WE ARE THE FIRST

WE WILL BE THE LAST

“Well, thank you anyway,” Meka said.

She left the whispering flecks and began the long walk back to the shallows. On the drowned plain between the islands and the beaches of River Country she looked around for the shark but saw nothing bigger than a jellyfish in the waters. Her heart began to ache and she held her palms against her chest, wishing she could reach inside and hold it up. It was an effort to reach the sloping rocky sea floor that led up to the coral reef and seagrass fields. Her body felt like it was made of rock and when she made it back to the octopus grove she sat and rested for a moment. She shut her eyes and felt their suckered arms hold her against the reef, their multiple hearts beating at a fast pace through their soft bodies.

“They weren’t there,” Meka told them.

It was peaceful there, the sunlight filtering down to illuminate rockholes and caves, the seagrass dancing in the tides, colourful wrasse poking around the coral. The sea slugs were anchored to her shoulder and pulling morsels of food out of the water, and rock lobster were hiding behind her knees. There were seahorses attached to her hair, their little fins a blur of motion as they kept themselves upright.

“You would love tuart trees,” she told them. “They’re the big protectors, lots of animals shelter in their branches.”

She got up and gently disentangled all the little bodies from her own. Her heavy chest was like a boulder and she grimaced trying to walk the rest of the way

up the sandy slope and back up to the surface. Her head broke through the waves and she coughed a little and she walked out of the sea. Dwerda was still sitting there, and leapt up when she appeared.

“Hello girl,” Meka said, and she staggered back to the dunes.

She took deep breaths, but it didn't feel as refreshing or nourishing as her ones in the sea. She couldn't make it far, she was exhausted, and her body was so heavy. She walked over the dune and found the red wattle again, climbing under it to rest. She felt Dwerda settle next to her as she glanced around with heavy lids. Above her a pair of wattle birds were feeding young in a nest. Meka felt tears gather as she fell into a deep sleep.

The Serpent breathes deep underground, its watery body expanding and contracting as it shifts under the green earth. It used to be able to spread out in great caverns under River Country, but now so much of the sea has encroached. It had high hopes for the soft coastal plains it made on its western edge, a new green place for frogs, birds, people, dolphins, water rats, swamp banksia and pygmy possums. Built on porous limestone that let the air and water through, a fine filtration system for The Serpent's rains to come back and join its body again deep underground. So much has been taken by the sea, and now only a thin strip of this swampy, watery Country remains. This coastal plain is strong Country that holds up a host of creatures and plants, but it is soft and crumbly compared to the lands the Serpent made in its youth. The green clings to the edge of the hard heart of Serpent Country.

Inland Serpent Country has thick rock that has survived every assault by the ocean for billions of years. The oceans have risen and fallen by hundreds of metres, but this hard heart has never been overtaken by saltwater, and when the water drains away it has never cracked. The battle against the sea has been long, and the Serpent made this shield of rock when it was young, made it tough, immovable, impenetrable. This dense body moved north toward the warm centre of the world, then back down south toward where it was cool. Other Countries split around it, were buried underneath, but the Serpent's heart persevered. It was so sure of what was needed to survive. The animals that live on this part of its body are tough and small. The rivers have thin strips of green alongside them.

The Serpent had hardened itself against the cold times, but when the world warmed again it craved creating something that wasn't merely defensive. It dreamed of a soft, cool place, a landscape of new creatures, and new ideas. The Serpent had worried when it realised how close to the ocean this special place would be, but it was worth the risk. The Serpent's hard heart was heavy, and it didn't want the creatures that drank from its body and swam in its veins to be weighed down.

Swimming in the great blue of its territory, the shark can sense the curvature of the seafloor deep below. Saltwater Country is like the fluid in a squid egg, clear liquid wrapped around new life, the surface of the ocean the soft, enclosing shell.

The tiny voices in the water confirm this.

YES, THE WORLD IS ROUND LIKE THE MOON, they say in their multitude, choral voices. WE EAT AND EVERYTHING FREEZES, FROZEN BALL TO MATCH THE MOON.

It is a story The Shark knows well, the only story the Sunlight Eaters tell.

Out in that vast Saltwater Country, The Shark can smell Serpent Country before seeing it. Snake blood drifts in the water far beyond The Serpent's territory, invading the shark's senses, reminding it of the great battle.

The Shark follows the scent to the edge of the vast continent where The Serpent holds dominion.

Here The Serpent's tongue darts out from the western border of its territory as a secret river running on the ocean floor. This is The Serpent's defiance in the face of The Shark's captured Country. This part of the sea floor was dry land back when The Serpent was master during the Cold Times, when the frozen body of the

snake carved valleys and pushed up mountains. The tongue of water running out over the ocean floor is the last remnants of the freshwater river that thundered over the cliff edges high above the sea in the Cold Times, its waterfall digging a huge trench in the ground below. The Serpent was powerful, The Shark was weak. The snake is a Rainmaker, with the ability to take freshwater from the ocean to shower it as rain over its plants, animals and spirits. Then the water returns to the sea in rivers flowing off the land that are full of salt and dead things washed from the land. This process leaves the ocean saltier.

The Shark watched the inferior subjects of Saltwater Country scrounge for these morsels. But The Shark, Patient One under the waves, waited.

Soon the conditions changed. The world warmed, and The Serpent lost its grip on the balance of fresh and salty water between them. Feeling power return to Saltwater Country, The Shark took its chance.

First to go was the pride of Serpent Country, the waterfall that thundered over giant cliffs. The Shark pushed its ocean higher and higher, until it swallowed the waterfall, drowned the cliffs, and inundated The Serpent's coastline. It swelled and swelled, grew and grew, taking many kilometres of Serpent Country, its trees, its creatures, its freshwater springs. Ate away its soft coastline, nearly all the way to the hard heart of Serpent Country. Now the snake is forced to live high in its escarpment, that place of rain up high, and watch The Shark gnaw at its edges.

Still The Serpent sends its pathetic river along the ocean floor that flows into the deep canyon under the sea. Little things live in the depths of this submerged trench, feeding on The Serpent's blood and tears. Traitors to their saltwater roots. The Shark approaches the canyon itself, and sees whales circling above the abyssal drop, perhaps sensing their old master sending them scraps of their old lives on land.

EAT, the little voices, as always, chime.

EAT.

The cave art

Meka walked back into the Erin camp with Dwerda trotting behind and noticed that the Albion were missing. She remembered Fionn saying that they were going to spend some time alone and she couldn't help but think that Fionn had finally found what he was searching for, his own people thrown up on the tide.

Meka felt slightly out of breath when she walked up to the Elder camp to find Noornangk.. She walked through the grove of Ancestor Trees and they were whispering to her but she couldn't make the words out. They were fuzzy, garbled. She rubbed her ears and walked through, and saw that her uncle was standing next to her nana, who was sitting by the fire with her kangaroo cloak wrapped tightly around her. Her nana was coughing as she approached.

“Nan,” Meka said, coming to sit next to her. “Are you alright?”

Dwerda went and stretched out on Noornangk's feet by the fire.

“You smell like the sea, Meka,” Noornangk said.

“Fionn has gone off with the Albion,” Meka said. “I was thinking about my parents.”

“You should have come up here,” Noornangk said, coughing.

Meka glanced up at Miro who was glaring at her.

“If I’d known you were sick I would have,” Meka said.

“If you stayed in camp like Mum said, you would have known,” Miro replied.

“If the Albion weren’t here then I would have,” Meka said.

“You can’t run off when things get hard, Meka,” Miro said.

“There’s something wrong about them,” Meka said. “They’re not like other newcomers.”

Noornangk tried to speak but coughed.

“What is this doing to your spirit, Meka?” Noornangk said hoarsely. “Why can’t you accept what your Elders and ancestors tell you.”

“I think the ancestors are trying to tell me things, show me things,” Meka said. “Signs, omens.”

“What kind of signs,” Noornangk asked.

“Birds,” Meka said. “Giant birds wrecking Country.”

Miro looked down at Noornangk, astonished. Meka was taken aback.

“And the sea,” she said, with consternation. “I think my parents are trying to contact me from the sea.”

Noornangk looked at Meka with an inscrutable expression, then looked back up to Miro.

“This has eaten our family from the inside out,” Noornangk said.

“What has?” Meka asked.

“It’s taboo,” Miro said.

Noornangk coughed some more and Meka felt her heart grow heavy again in her chest.

“You need to forget all that and sit here with your nana,” Miro said. “Or the same thing that happened to your mother will happen to you.”

Meka shrunk back at those words, and Miro walked off under the Ancestor Trees and down toward the camp.

“Where are you, Afternoon Moon,” Noornangk asked. “You’re here, you’re not here, you’re half here, you’re full of light, you’re dark and shadowy.”

She coughed heavily and Meka started making her a hot tea drink with banksia flowers.

“I’m sorry nana,” Meka said. “My heart feels heavy.”

“I can see that,” Noornangk said. “You need your people, stop spending time alone.”

Meka sat with her nana while family members came and went with food and medicine. The cough sounded like something rooted deep in Noornangk’s lungs, and Meka didn’t like the sound of it. She thought of the strange shadows she had seen on Noornangk, the same day she had visions of the giant morbid birds. She felt short of breath herself, and the smoke from the fire was making her throat burn. She couldn’t hear very well either, the voices of her aunties and cousins seemed muffled. She cuddled her cousin Djindalee’s baby boy for a while but he fussed a lot and needed his mum. She ate food, not registering its taste, and sang with dinner without hearing her own voice. After the meal Meka stared off into the trees, the voices of her ancestors swirling around but making no sense, they were blending in with the wind, the calls of birds and the croaking of frogs. There were other voices on the wind, but she couldn’t make them out either. She watched the moon rise as night fell, and her nana rested on furs by the fire.

Dwerda's ears flicked up and Meka saw her muzzle lift in the air, her eyes darting from tree to tree.

“What are you looking at,” Meka said quietly, “is there a possum up there?”

Meka leaned back and her cut palm pressed awkwardly against the ground and the scab split a little. She winced and shook her hand, and when she looked up something had changed. Dwerda was gone. Her nana was gone. Her family members were gone. She looked all around her, she was completely alone. Then, across from her on the other side of the fire she saw a young woman sitting on a log seat. She had long dark hair, high arched eyebrows, and hazel eyes, and was wearing a dress that was a mix of Erin cloth and possum skin. She had a grinding stone next to her and Meka watched her collect rocks of red ochre from a pouch and place them on the stone, where she ground the rocks into powder. The woman then added water which she mixed with the powder, and then added animal fat from a stone at the edge of the fire. The result was blood red ochre paint, which she scooped into a clay bowl decorated with grooves shaped like knots. The woman tied the pouch to her belt and Meka looked closer. That was her pouch, the one she wore.

Meka looked again at the woman sitting across from her. It was her mother, Mayakawa, perhaps a couple of years older than Meka was now. Meka wondered what she doing up here at the Elder camp alone. Mayakawa got up and Meka stood too, and she watched her mother pick up a wooden carrying dish and place a smouldering banksia cone inside. Mayakawa walked out of the Elder camp and

walked east toward the hills. Meka picked up a clay bowl and placed her own burning banksia cone in for light and followed her.

Mayakawa was moving quickly through the banksia woodlands that lead toward the hills. The burning banksia cone illuminated her outline in the dark night, and threw fiery light against the tall yellow flowers of the surrounding trees. Meka walked with effort due to her tired lungs and burning throat but she kept pace as best she could. The land began to rise and Meka was struggling, falling behind. She stumbled and caught herself, and as her hands hit the ground a rumbling went through the landscape. She heard something and lowered her ear to the ground. The sounds of the ocean emanated from the ground, a rhythmic rumble like waves hitting a shore. She looked up at the glowing form of her mother climbing higher, so she stood gingerly and kept moving. Meka had an idea of where Mayakawa might be going. There was history painted on the walls of a sacred cave in a granite outcrop in the hills. Her mother was carrying ochre paint and light so she must have something to record.

They entered the jarrah forest and even though there was no wind the trees seemed to sigh with whispers around them. They made their way through the forest and came to stand at the base of a sheer granite face that stretched high above their head. Meka's mother gathered some grass tree needles and fallen branches for the firepit and then touched her burning banksia cone to the kindling. Fire licked up through the leaves and a warm glow filled the rock outcrop. The granite wall in front of Meka came to life with animals, people, plants and spirits. The whole rock face was decorated with stories told in ochre. Meka saw Mayakawa take some reeds out

of her pouch, and crush and split the end against a rock. She crouched at the far end of the story wall and began to paint.

Meka hadn't seen the pictures here since she was a child. She walked along the flat rock wall, and saw rivers being dug by serpent belly, the first sunrise pierced through on the beaks of magpies, the cold times of the Old People, the floods and the story-paths that were lost. Pictures and symbols in red earth, stained onto the rock. She saw the Creator Serpent, over and over, building mountains, fighting invaders, caring for the People. She came across newer ochre works that depicted ships, and sharks. She stopped there and stood back. Above her was the familiar story of the ghost birds arriving from the sea with long wings touching the horizon of the ocean as they flew. Their eyes huge and lightning sparking all around them. Then stormy seas, people in the water, and sharks circling around. There were images of newcomers lying on the shore, being warmed by the fire. Of children being rubbed with ash to warm and clean them. Of the newcomers standing under Ancestor trees to meet the Old People. There were handprints all around these stories and Meka lifted her hand to hover above them. She thought of the women she saw from seasons long gone, who fought over whether to welcome the new people from across the sea. The hands told their own story, of taking in and caring for those who need it.

Meka looked over at Mayakawa, whose face was in shadow as she drew with the reed. Meka walked over to stand by the fire and watch her mother painting. She wished she was really there, wished with all her heavy heart. The land had seen this, not Meka, and she longed to hold her mother, ask her advice, when she had clearly disagreed with the Elders about marrying newcomers. And why had she finally

accepted her father Gray in the end? Why was Meka here? Why did Mayakawa and Gray leave Meka after coming together to make her?

Her mother stood to add to her painting higher up the wall. It was then that Meka noticed the cuts down one of Mayakawa's legs, three parallel lines that ran down her right calf. Meka couldn't think of any animal that could have scratched her like that, a goanna's claws are wider set, they were too deep for a kangaroo, too close together for an eagle. Her mother must have slipped and cut herself on something sharp. Her mother kept painting, her movements causing huge overlapping shadows to dance up the walls. A cool breeze moved through and her ears cleared momentarily. The whispers of her ancestors moved through her hair and clothing.

Seas rising and falling, and rising, and rising

Mayakawa stepped back and Meka got a glimpse of what she had painted. It was a shark. A giant shark. Meka looked at the cut on her hand and then the cuts on Mayakawa's legs. Had her mother met the shark?

Everything melting, everything dying

Above the shark were Mayakawa's painting of awful birds with long sharp beaks and blank eyes, surrounded by pieces of other animals. These weren't the ships that brought the newcomers, these were a different kind of bird. These were the

birds that Meka had seen in the trees, the kind that killed creatures just to spread death across the land.

Sickness over the sea, carried on the wind

Mayakawa turned around and pulled something out of her pocket. It was a gleaming stone that filled her palm, transparent and milky in appearance. Mayakawa stood peering around the rocky outcrop, holding the stone in her hand, almost looking straight at Meka as she did. It was almost as if she thought someone was there with her. Mayakawa looked purposefully around, and then put the stone back in the pouch. Meka looked again at the shark and the birds above it. Meka had seen this, she had met the shark, she had seen the birds. She looked closely at the shark, and Meka saw that Mayakawa had painted it with one of its eyes missing.

Remember the Cold Times

The shark was associated with the evil birds. This painting was a warning to anyone who saw it.

Beware those that thrive in the melt

Meka looked at hers and her mother's cuts again. The shark teeth that became rock. The spirit of the sea living in Serpent Territory. The shark pushing its territory wider and wider. What if her mother had slipped on the beach like she had?

What if that is how the shark took hold of people? Traps in the sand from the Patient One Under The Waves.

No bones but in the mouth.

Meka watched her mother stand back and place her hand over her belly.

“We can’t disappear,” Mayakawa said aloud, rubbing her palm over her midsection.

“Don’t disappear.”

The campfire went out and Meka was stood there in the dark, a small glow emanating from her lit banksia cone on the ground. Meka walked over to the firepit and found it cold. She filled it with grass tree needles and fallen branches and touched her banksia cone to it, bringing the fire to life. When the flames got going she turned back the wall. The painting her mother had made of the shark and the birds was missing. She ran her palm over the wall and could make out red streaks running down to the ground, where perhaps an unseen hand had scrubbed the painting off.

“Don’t disappear,” she said aloud to herself.

She opened her pouch and felt around inside. There was no milky white rock. Meka looked up at the stories, so many new ones added over the last few

generations, so much had changed. Whispering voices filled the trees but Meka couldn't make them out, the world had become muffled again. Her throat and chest ached, so she snuffed out the fire, picked up her clay bowl with the banksia cone and walked out of the rocky outcrop back toward the Elder camp.

A rumbling went through the ground and Meka crouched, holding the bowl against her. The rumbling was pronounced, and she put the bowl on the ground to grab a handful of mulga grass to hang onto. A little mardo shot out from within the fronds as she did and darted beneath a nearby kangaroo paw.

“Sorry, sorry,” Meka told it, steadying herself as the ground shook.

The ground trembled for a few more moments then everything went still. Meka stood and looked east. She wasn't that far from the taboo place, which was just through the valley and over the hill. She wondered if that was where the trembling was coming from. She was also near the Home Of Rain Up High, the place of the Creator Serpent, who looked down from the highest granite peaks. Meka turned and looked up at the sacred stone. She saw something, light from a fire. She couldn't quite make out where the fire was, so she looked around for a tree to climb. There was a gnarled powderbark gumtree near a granite boulder, so she left her clay bowl with banksia cone on the ground and clambered up onto the rock to reach the lower branches. She got a hand hold and lifted herself into the tree, climbing up toward the crown. Some roosting cockatoos got a fright, and shuffled away from her. She couldn't even see them, they were so black against the shadows of the branches. Further up she saw a possum retreating from her with a leaf hanging from its mouth.

Meka got to the top of the tree and could see over the canopy of leaves. She looked toward the abode of the Creator Serpent; the highest granite peaks of River Country. The starry sky was huge behind it, countless generations of ancestors all living up there, looking down at their families on River Country. Some ancestors were bright and close, other ancestors were further away, just faint dots against the blackness. Their starry campfires sent clouds of smoke drifting across the sky in a milky arc. Meka peered closely at the rocks and saw that there was light from a fire there, a dull orange glow reflecting against the granite. Meka watched the light, and after a few moments she knew that the movement of the glow wasn't from a forest fire, or someone moving with a lit banksia cone. It had to be from a campfire. The peak was a sacred place, and no one but Elders were allowed up there.

Meka wondered who it could be, because her nana was back at the camp, sick and asleep. She couldn't think of a reason why Noornangk's sisters would go up there, not at this time of night. Unless something had happened back at the Elder camp? Meka looked back toward the Elder camp feeling guilty. She should get back, she'd been gone too long already. She looked back at the Home Of Rain Up High and saw a shadow move across the glowing peak. She froze, watching closely, then another shadow. Then another. Something flying around up there, but Meka couldn't work out what it was. She sensed that she was not alone and she glanced across the branches. A barn owl was looking in the direction of the peaks as well, completely still. Meka was momentarily stunned at how beautiful it was, white feathers that gleamed against the night shadows, its shoulders draped with a tawny cloak dotted with drops of moonwater. She'd never been this close to one and was overtaken with

awe. Meka let out an involuntary sigh and the owl turned to her, its pale face enigmatic and delicate. It lifted its wings and took off, quiet as a ghost.

Meka returned to the Elders camp and lay down on kangaroo furs next to her nana, with Dwerda curled up at her back. She listened to Noornangk's congested breathing and fell into an uneasy sleep, dreaming of shadows moving over her in the night.

Yam terraces

Noornangk couldn't sit up the next morning, and Meka stayed with her all day as she lay by the fire, shivering and wheezing. Noornangk's sisters and Miro's family brought medicines and sang healing songs. Meka's own throat still burned and her heart felt heavier in her chest with her nana being so unwell. Meka asked Miro if he knew who was on the clifftop, and he said that he knew nothing about it. No one knew where Fionn and the Albion were, and Meka couldn't leave her nana's side to go look for them. Meka's hearing got worse and worse, she could barely hear any of her family, couldn't make out Miro's words when he spoke sternly to her, pointing backwards and forwards between Meka and the prone form of Noornangk. A breeze moved through the trees which brought the whispering of the ancestors, but Meka couldn't make out their words.

Meka was glad when everyone left in the late afternoon, so she could have some peace. She stared up at the trees with Dwerda next to her, watching the rosellas fuss about. Noornangk loved the whistling call of the little red, green and yellow birds, and Meka hoped her nana could hear them. Their chatter sounded muffled and muddled to Meka, and she massaged her ears, trying to clear them. Meka had a little fire going which wafted cleansing smoke through the camp. It filled her lungs and she felt suffocated, but she watched over Noornangk, looking for any sign of improvement or deterioration. She took a drink from a clay cup, hoping the cool water would soothe her throat, but to no avail. She spoke to the Creator Serpent quietly, asking for a healing rain, asking for help. A cool breeze moved through the camp, but instead of the muffled whispers of the ancestors, she heard something else.

CURRENTS FORMING

CURRENTS

DYING

Meka looked around sharply. The regular sounds of the forest disappeared and another noise entered. A foamy, bubbling rush, the sound of ocean, reef, and tide.

THERE IS ONLY LIGHT AND

DARKNESS

AND EATING

AND BREATHING

Meka stood and looked up. High above the treetops waves were crashing in the sky, rolling in across the clouds and foaming out toward the horizon. Meka looked around the camp and she was surrounded by a swarm of jellyfish. She batted them away with her hands, feeling their soft, slick bodies, and made a path to Noornangk.

WE ARE THE FIRST

WE WILL BE

THE LAST

Meka saw crabs scuttling around the clay food bowls, and starfish clinging to her spears. Dwerda was eyeing off a stingray that was digging into the soil near where she was laying, and Meka gingerly stepped over a spiny cobbler she spotted near the campfire. Meka reached Noornangk and she found colourful sea anemones where growing in the folds of her nana's kangaroo cloak. Meka stung her fingers trying to pull them off with no avail. Noornangk hadn't awoken but her breathing sounded laboured and loose, like she was drowning.

"The sea," Noornangk croaked. "I can smell the sea."

"I'm sorry nana," Meka said, panicked and cradling Noornangk's shoulders. "I tried to find my parents in the sea and it's all gone wrong."

Meka was startled by a green sea turtle lifted up from within the fire.

"The sea is here," she said, "and I don't know how."

Noornangk continued to mumble.

“Your father died in the sea,” she said, coughing, her eyes closed, “but we buried your mother beyond the hills.”

Noornangk had a dreadful coughing fit, and Meka looked around for help, finding herself amongst a growing coral reef. High above her the waves still crashed against the sky, and Meka feared they were all about to drown on dry land.

“Taboo place,” Noornangk said.

Meka felt a rumble through the ground and the trees began to shake. The sea creatures faded away, along with the anemones, crabs, fish and turtles. The waves disappeared from the sky. The rumbling stopped and the Elder camp looked like it always did; fire crackling in the centre, water heating nearby for tea, rosellas singing in the trees. Noornangk coughed and coughed and Meka held her as she did. It was like her mind had been struck by lightning, the notion that her mother might not be in the sea, that she might be buried at the taboo place. She thought of the vision of her mother and the milky rock she had in her possession. Was Mayakawa trying to tell her something? Would the rock help Noornangk somehow?

That night Noornangk’s sisters were by her side and Meka made an excuse to leave for some yam leaves. She ordered Dwerda to stay with Noornangk, and her dog complied, staring after Meka as she left. She walked into the foothills of River Country and headed up the slopes in the direction of the taboo place.

Walking under the jarrah forest Meka felt very uneasy. She didn't know what to expect in the taboo place, and couldn't understand why her mother had been buried there. And she might never have known if Noornangk hadn't gotten sick. But why was she sick? Meka couldn't hear much, couldn't pick out any of the noises in the forest. The sounds of frogs, owls, possums, bandicoots and moths were garbled together in her ears. Shadows moved overhead, barely perceptible in the night time gloom but Meka could almost feel them move across her. She thought about what her mother had painted on the wall, and what someone else had washed away. The shark and the morbid birds were connected somehow with the strange stone Mayakawa carried.

Meka saw something pink and spiky to her right and stopped still. Was that a sea urchin in those bushes, was the sea back to haunt her? Meka looked closely. No, it was a hakea tree, whose round pink flowers had spikes like a sea urchin, caught in a sliver of light from the moon. So strange to see such a similarity between a dweller of the ocean and a dweller on land. And what had the little things in the water said? That their ancestors lived in the leaves of plants. Meka leaned in closely but couldn't hear the leaves whispering, but then again, she couldn't hear much at all anyway.

Meka walked up the hill and saw that the granite peaks of the Creator Serpent were glowing again. The taboo place was further around but the yam terraces were on the way to the peak, so Meka decided to find out who was up there. She started up the steep hill that led to the peak. The higher she got, the more her throat burned, the shallower her breathing became. She got to the yam terraces and sat on a terrace

row against a marri tree, its red sap bleeding down its side. Her chest heaved as she tilted her head up, shut her eyes and rested.

When Meka awoke there were no clouds in the night sky and the stars danced overhead in a huge glowing display. She leaned back against the stones and watching the occasional bat flit overhead as it hunted moths. The woody root vegetables were too hard to pull out of the ground as they twisted between rocks when left to grow their own way. Her old people were clever, they learned how to grow the yams between flat stones so the roots grew directly down and could be pulled straight out when they were ready to be eaten. There was a puff of wind overhead and an owl, glowing in the moonlight, silently swooped over her head and snatched something wriggling amongst the stones. There was a barely audible crackle of the stones and the owl took off again, without sound, and carried its meal off.

The distinct sound of rocks falling reached Meka's muddled ears and she sat up. It was far too noisy to be the little creatures trying to avoid being eaten by an owl. She couldn't see anything, just the quiet hillside of the yam terraces. She again heard the clap of rock against rock and spun around.

Further up the hillside, stumbling amongst the loose stone, the Albion girl Ashlyn emerged from behind a grass tree, trying to scale the yam terraces without much luck. She looked up and got a fright at seeing Meka, and stepped backwards, slipping even more. Meka ran up and caught Ashlyn's arm before she went tumbling down the hill. She righted them both, sat Ashlyn down on the flat stones.

“What are you doing out here?” Meka asked.

Ashlyn’s pale face was lit up by the moon, and Meka saw her confused expression. Meka repeated her question slowly with gestures and a couple of Erin words, hoping she might know those at least.

Ashlyn nodded.

“Run away,” she said.

“Run away?” Meka repeated.

Ashlyn nodded.

“Where is Fionn?” Meka said slowly. “Where are the Albion?”

Ashlyn turned and pointed up the hill toward the Home Of Rain Up High.

“Camp,” she said.

Meka shook her head in disappointment.

“Why did you leave?” Meka asked.

Ashlyn pointed to her head.

“Bad dream,” she said, looking distraught.

“What dream?” Meka asked.

Ashlyn shivered, sat on a terrace step, and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Dream I was bird,” she said. “so happy, fly away from black dead lands.
Then land here, Serpent Territory, have egg.”

“You had an egg?” Meka asked.

Ashlyn nodded.

“Egg hatched, black death inside, spill out, make land sick. My baby make
this land dead lands too.”

Tears fell down Ashlyn’s face and Meka couldn’t hide her horror.

“It’s just a dream,” Meka said.

“I hear women speak,” Ashlyn continued. “This baby medicine place, eat
medicine leaves, no baby grow in me.”

Meka nodded. It was true, this hill did have plants that stopped babies from coming to women who already had many babies.

“I can show you the plants,” Meka said, “but you need a husband to have babies.”

“No husband,” Ashlyn said. “I carry the dead lands in me always.”

Her face crumpled and she sobbed into her hands.

“Don’t belong,” she said into her hands. “Don’t belong.”

Meka reached out and rubbed her back. Ashlyn looked up at the sky.

“I was flying,” Ashlyn said. “I was flying, why am I here?”

Meka didn’t know what to do with Ashlyn. At least she knew now that it was Fionn and the Albion trespassing on the sacred peak.

“Why are you camped up there?” Meka asked.

Ashlyn pointed up.

“Close to creator in sky,” she replied.

Noornangk would be furious if she knew that Fionn was up there, but she was so ill that she didn't even know. Meka needed that stone her mother showed her.

“Stay here,” Meka said. “I’ll come back and I’ll help you.”

Ashlyn nodded, chewed on some yam leaves, and leaned in under the canopy of a grass tree.

Meka walked down the hill and back to the path that led to the taboo place. Fionn would have to wait, she needed the stone.

Salty spring

Meka walked under the giant Jarrah trees through the hills on the way to the taboo place up on the plateau behind the peaks of the Creator Serpent. The moon was dim but the stars were bright, and she could see her way through the forest as she walked. She was feeling very dark about Fionn, who was not only trespassing on sacred ground but must have known that her mother Mayakawa was not lost to the sea. Did her mother even die in the sea with her father? Meka didn't trust anyone anymore.

White tree limbs appeared around a bend and Meka came to the place where she had encountered the Albion initially. The ghost gum glowed in the gloom, its branches reaching down the path to the taboo place. Though she had never been to this forbidden area before, she knew the general location of where it was. She wondered if she should have known it had something to do with her. She walked down the path and deeper in the hills.

She walked for a while, wishing that she had brought Dwerda with her for company. Eventually she saw sky through the tree trunks ahead and the forest ended suddenly. She found herself on the edge of a valley, ringed on all sides by tall trees. The area below was flat and bare, with no bushes or shrubs. A few dead gum trees reached their skeleton arms up to the night sky. As her eyes adjusted she saw that the valley glittered. Meka looked up at the stars then down at the valley. Was it filled with water? Was it reflecting the sky? She stepped out and the soil beneath her feet crunched. She heard some whispering and she stopped, looking around. She looked

back into the dark forest and saw a single Ancestor tree just back from the edge of the valley. Its whispers swirled around but she only caught one word amongst it.

the heart

She turned and walked down the valley. The crunch was salt, the entire valley was covered in white salt. Meka had seen this before, where salty lakes dry out in the sun, leaving behind a hot, acrid landscape impossible to walk near during the day.

She walked across the encrusted landscape, the brittle crystals disintegrating beneath her every step. The stars burned a smokey river into the sky overhead. She could see nothing alive on that flat Country, it was like the rock hole in the reef, the saltwater as toxic to sweetwater Country as sweetwater is to the sea. At the centre of the lake Meka saw a rock stack that stood alone in a glittering field of cold salt.

Meka felt a vibration in the earth and stopped. She stood still and silent. Then again. A soft rumbling going through the ground. She stood on the spot, watching and listening. It came and went, and she sensed a rhythm to it. Something repeating, something passing under her feet. Like the fish circling in the traps by the river. She felt slightly dizzy, lightheaded. She crouched and placed her palms on the ground. There it was, something passing underneath, swimming through the rock. Circling the burial mound at the centre of the lake.

Very gently, she walked over to the rocks, stopping a few lengths away. Somewhere under there her parents' bodies lay, covered in earth, face up watching the ancestors. Their spirit departed.

She looked around, and next to the rock stack, in its shadow, three short spears were sticking out of the dry salty clay, long dark wood with carvings down the side. Similar to the spears Karla carries, the same as Old Djara used to make. She peered closer in the shadowy dark and saw that there was a mound beneath the spears, pushed up from under the earth. The spears splayed about, slack against the air. Water seeped from the mound, the source of the acrid salt that filled the valley.

There was something alive there, though. Tiny yellow flowers dotted the mound, seemingly impossible amongst all the salty water. She leaned in and peered through the starlit shadows of the burial mound. She moved around to get a closer look and then a slice of moonlight struck upon white. A tooth. A shark's tooth. Meka pulled at the waterlogged clay, and saw another triangular tooth, then another. A whole jaw. This grave, with a saltwater spring beneath, was pushing bones toward the surface. But it wasn't her mother's bones. It was a set of shark jaws, bleached and cold, with yellow flowers rooted amongst the serrated teeth.

Meka dropped the jaws and stepped back. Shark bones, in her mother's grave? She felt the rumble in the ground again. There was something trapped here in the earth, bound to the valley. Lazily circling the salty bones. Unable to leave, poisoning the ground.

“Mum?” Meka whispered.

The rumbling continued for a few moments, then stopped. After a few moments it started up again.

The salt was beginning to burn Meka’s skin, and her eyes watered. Her mother’s spirit was trapped, perhaps corrupted. She had finally reached her mother, and she was in pain. Meka looked around the grave and there weren’t any firesticks to mark the grave, no trace of a funeral fire to warm her mother’s spirit. Whoever buried her wanted her spirit to stay in the ground. Meka looked up to the stars, and she wept a tear that burned. Her mother’s spirit had not been able to travel up to live with the ancestors in the sky. Meka had nothing with her to light a fire, she would have to return to try and free her mother’s spirit.

The rumbling continued to circle below her and Meka walked around the rock stack, looking for the stone Mayakawa had up at the wall art. The Erin People put rock stacks at the heads of graves to look over their spirit as it left the land, similar to the way that Meka’s people light a firestick and put it in the earth next to a grave. They were usually less than knee high though, Meka had never seen one as tall as this, it was taller than her.

Meka wondered where her father’s spirit was, if it was here with her mother or out in the sea. Where did Erin spirits go when they die? The Erin Elders talked about an island off their homelands where their spirits went after they died. Did the spirits of the Erin travel back across the seas? Or had their afterlife island died as

well? The size of the rock stack perhaps meant that whoever had buried her parents tried really hard to get Gray's spirit back home.

She came back to the grave with the bones and she saw something twinkle against the darkness. She reached down and moved the jaws to the side and saw it, a round rock nearly the size of her fist. She picked it up, stepped back into the moonlight and held it up. It was a nacreous pearl colour, like the inside of an oyster shell. It wasn't a pearl though, it was too big, and too heavy. It was definitely the rock Mayakawa had shown her up at the ochre rock face. She turned it over and around in the dim moonlight, admiring its sheen.

She didn't know where her mother had got it; Meka had never seen anything like it in Serpent Territory before. Maybe it was from the deadlands, and Gray gave it to her from across the seas. Maybe it was part of Mayakawa accepting Gray as her husband. Meka dropped the rock in her pouch. She walked away from the graves, and began climbing the valley edges. The rumbling in the ground became intense. Meka stood on the lip of the valley and looked back. The cold salt landscape beneath her glittered, a reflection of the night sky, her mother's spirit a moon circling inside the ground. She was going to use the rock to help her nana, and then she would be back to free her mother's spirit.

Meka walked back into jarrah forest towards the Elder camp. She was determined to get back to her nana, but when she reached the fork in the path that lead to the yam terraces Meka paused. The Albion girl Ashlyn was very distressed,

and Meka did say that she would come back for her. She decided to go collect her on the way and bring her to Noornangk's sisters.

Meka walked back in the direction of the Home Of Rain Up High and the yam terraces. The moon had disappeared behind the clouds and the night shadows were deep beneath jarrah trees. She couldn't see much beyond her own feet and it was like looking into the deep, dark trench in the sea floor out beyond the islands offshore. She thought of all the shark teeth in the floor there, and stepped lightly through the forest. Her throat was burning again and she looked for one of the streams that trickled down from the Creator Serpent's home up in the granite peaks; the water that was the lifeblood of River Country. Usually Meka could hear the streams but it was blending in with her affected hearing.

She followed the contours of the land until she could smell water, finding a stream meandering around a granite boulder and under the canopy of some paperbarks. She scooped some water up and drank, the cold liquid soothing her throat. The backs of her hands brushed the open shells of mussels on the rocks, and she looked around for rakali the water rat. They were too clever at hiding though, they would have heard Meka coming long ago. Meka rubbed her ears, not understanding why they were so blocked. Was it being underwater too long in the sea? They were aching all the time now.

She drank more water and thanked the Creator Serpent. The water was very cold, colder than any water down in the wetlands or in the shallow parts of the river, and it was beginning to numb her hands. The memory came to her of being numb

with cold, fighting against surging floodwater, trying to drag people from the river. It was last rainy season, where her new husband was carried away, drowning in serpent blood, then being washed up on the shore further downstream. Her heavy heart returned then. Meka did her duty, she had married who her Elders told her to, and then the Creator Serpent had taken him away. And then she was denied her true match, Dayin, and now had to marry the Albion man, John. She felt the weight of the stone in her pocket and got up. She kept on her way to collect Ashlyn and get back to Noornangk.

She came to the base of the yam terraces and carefully climbed up the stone steps. Even with her bad ears she could tell that the hillside was silent. She looked up and around, and found pale faces watching her from the branches. Barn owls were lining the trees, looking down at her with their enigmatic expressions. She didn't know what to make of that, and made her way to where she had left Ashlyn higher up the hill. She made her way up the terraces and looked around. It was so quiet, there wasn't even a breeze moving the leaves of the canopy above. No frogs croaking, no crickets singing, no nightjars chirping their barking call. Then she saw the grass tree Ashlyn had sat under and walked toward it. Meka got close but didn't find Ashlyn under the long needle-like leaves. A white ball of some kind was underneath, gleaming faintly in the shadows cast by the surrounding trees. Meka got closer and crouched, and saw there was a large seabird curled up asleep on the rocks and leaves, its head turned around with its beak tucked in between its wings. Meka looked all around and couldn't see Ashlyn anywhere, just this visitor in her place. The seabird shifted as it slept, moving its head, revealing a long beak and grey wing feathers. It was an albatross.

Meka looked up at the trees at the owls who were watching intently. No wonder they were so interested. Albatross rarely land on the coast, let alone roost inland on a mountainside. Meka didn't want to disturb it, so she backed away quietly. She would have to find Ashlyn later, she needed to get back to Noornangk. She stepped awkwardly against a stone, dislodging it and sending rocks clacking down the terraces. The albatross awoke, spinning its neck back around and getting to its feet. It spread its huge wings wide and appeared to panic, flapping them and shaking itself. Then, in front of Meka's eyes, it swelled in size, its legs growing, its wings thickening and lengthening. Its beak extended down and its eyes grew and turned white. Meka dropped to the ground and backed away down the terrace, not taking her eyes off it. It grew to a huge size, taller than a person, and then spread its wings wide. Meka only had a moment to take in its horrid form before it took off from the ground and launched into the sky. She watched it flap its wings to gain height above the jarrah forest and then it flew off in the direction of the home of the Creator Serpent.

Execution

The next morning Meka sat with Noornangk, her mind spinning. She placed the stone next to her nana on the furs, hoping it would do something. Her nana's sisters Yoowintj and Ngaw made medicines from aromatic plants to try clear Noornangk's lungs, and the Erin Elder Lorna was there as well with her daughter Roisin. Her aunts were talking to Meka but she could barely hear anything, the whole world had been reduced down to the sound of Noornangk's breathing and her own heavy beating heart. She couldn't even hear Dwerda walking around, and kept getting surprised to find her wet nose in her neck or elbow. Her nana had said nothing since yesterday and Meka was getting desperate.

“Please wake up,” she whispered. “I don't know what to do!”

Lorna came over to sit with her. She looked at Meka's salty feet pointedly, and Meka looked away.

“We should talk,” Lorna said.

Meka sighed, and looked at her aunts who were busy making medicines.

“Did everybody know that my parents are buried in the taboo place?” Meka said quietly.

“We knew,” Lorna said gravely. “We respected your nana’s wishes to not break the taboo. We thought it would keep your spirit safe.”

“The Albion are bad news,” Meka said, “I’m sure of it.”

“You think we don’t know it, Meka?” Lorna said softly. “We’ve tolerated Fionn all this time, haven’t we?”

“I thought the Erin people here had never seen Fionn before they came to River Country?” Meka said.

Lorna nodded.

“No,” she said, “but when we escaped the worst thing imaginable, the creeping blackness that killed our land, our spirits and our bodies, we escaped the Albion too. We were so happy to have this second chance at life, second chance at caring for Country.”

Meka looked up and saw her uncle Miro approaching under the Ancestor trees.

“When we saw Fionn here, we weren’t happy, but he was the only one,” Lorna said. “And we were guests in the last green place in the world. But your mother saw something, had visions. She knew what the Albion were, knew what they had done. But it made her sick somehow, and then everything went wrong.”

A tear slid down Meka's face.

"Are they both buried out there," Meka asked.

"No," Lorna said, shaking her head. "Just your mother."

"Did she really poison the ground at the taboo place?" she asked.

Lorna looked at her sadly.

"I saw it before and after there," she said. "It's true. What was a green meadow became a huge dry salty lake."

"...and my father?" Meka asked.

Lorna shook her head.

"We never found his body," she said. "It was taken away by the sea."

She sighed deeply.

"We built a burial mound for your mother and father," she said. "Too young to go, and under such terrible circumstances."

“There were shark bones in her grave,” Meka said. “Did you know that?”

Lorna nodded, tears coming to her eyes.

“What happened to her?” Meka asked. “Please tell me, I need to know, I need to help free her from that place.”

Lorna nodded.

“When a ship arrived sixteen season cycles ago bearing the Albion flag, your mother did what she did to stop them arriving.”

“What?” Meka asked.

“She threw lit spears and burned it up before it could reach the shore,” Lorna said. “There were no survivors.”

Creeping cold entered Meka’s veins.

“Your mother was executed, Meka,” Lorna said in a fierce whisper.

Meka’s whole world distorted for a moment. The horizon tilted. The ground felt soft and she started sinking down. The sounds of Lorna’s voice left her completely and she was lying on the bottom of the sea beyond the island, rolling toward the canyon trench, blacker and deeper than the sky, rolling over shark teeth

tearing her up as she started falling into darkness...then she was being shook, and she heard Lorna speaking to her, pulling her back into a seated position.

“I’m sorry Meka,” Lorna said.

Meka rubbed her face and ears and looked around at the camp, making sure she was really there. She looked up and she couldn’t see the waves crashing in the sky, but she could hear them. She shook her head to try to shake off the presence of the sea. Meka then remembered what she had asked Fionn.

“Would you have done it?” Meka asked. “Back in Erina? Would you have killed them if you knew what they were going to do?”

Tears filled Lorna’s eyes.

“I used to think that the Albion are like cuckoos,” Lorna said, “that they move in to replace you. But cuckoos don’t kill the land.”

She shook her head. “Their spirits are in the clouds, where ours are in the land.”

Meka thought of Fionn and his idea of meerkool, and how that came from his Albion god.

“We look the same, the Erin and Albion,” Lorna said. “I don’t think its right to kill the body when it’s the mind that’s the problem. River Country could have changed the Albion on that ship.”

“Was my mother like this?” Meka asked. “Someone who changed?”

“Your mother did change,” Lorna said. “But not in the way that you’re describing.”

Lorna leaned in close.

“Your mother changed into something terrifying,” Lorna whispered. “But maybe River Country is still alive and healthy because of what Mayakawa did.”

Miro walked into camp carrying special wood to burn in the fire.

“Not all things that come in on the tide should be kept,” Lorna added. “Some things should be thrown back.”

Taboo

Miro walked over and Lorna got up and left to the other side of the fire. He said something to Meka but she didn't catch it the first time, her ears were so muddled. The sounds of waves crashing in her ears was deafening.

"I said," he repeated. "Where were you last night?"

"Collecting medicines," Meka said.

"At night?" Miro responded.

"Yes," Meka said.

"Meka do you understand that if Noornangk dies you're the last woman of our line?" he said. "You need to stay here in camp!"

"There's something bad going on," Meka said. "This isn't right."

"What isn't right?" Miro asked.

"Nana being sick, my mother dying young," she said. "The Albion showing up, it's not right."

A strange look crossed Miro's face.

“Why are you talking about your mother?” he asked, and looked accusingly in Lorna’s direction. She didn’t look up from her medicine bowl.

“What about the Albion, Meka,” he asked, looking back at her. “Is this because you don’t want to marry the Albion man?”

Meka took a deep breath.

“I don’t think they’re who they say they are,” Meka said. “And nana got sick before we could even ask the woodland desert communities.”

“Who are they then?” Miro said.

“There are monstrous birds in River Country,” Meka said. “They’re making us sick, you need to go to the Home Of Rain Up High and get Fionn and the Albion away from here.”

“Fionn is down in the southern lakes,” Miro said, “not in the sacred peak.”

“He is up there,” Meka said. “I’ve seen campfires and I met the Albion girl Ashlyn on the yam terraces near there. She’s been dreaming that she’s a bird. I saw her transform in her sleep.”

“That’s exactly what your mother said to me,” Miro said. “My mad sister Mayakawa, and my mad niece Meka, what a pair you are.”

There were hushed gasps from the female relatives when Mayakawa was mentioned. Noornangk’s sister Aunty Ngaw stepped forward.

“That’s taboo, nephew,” she said.

“She needs to know,” Miro said.

The women turned their back to stand over Noornangk. Meka looked over at her nana in panic, wishing she were awake.

Miro took a step closer to her.

“My sister had funny ideas about the newcomers,” he said. “Said they were ghosts, said they were spirits, said they were monsters. Didn’t want to marry your father, even though nana Maya had instructed her to do it.”

Meka shrunk back, her ears roaring.

“Your nana sent her away, her and Gray, to live in Whale Country where there weren’t so many newcomers” he said, “and I thought that she would kill him on the journey south, I really did.”

The Ancestor trees around them began to whisper.

“But Gray somehow talked her around, and you were born, and we thought everything was alright. But it wasn’t.”

Meka glanced around, but her family were singing softly to drown out the noise of the taboo talk. Miro stayed in her face.

“Then Maya passed on and Noornangk needed my mad sister back to learn Eldership, and to bring you to River Country,” he said. “And what does she do? She burns a ship killing everyone on board!”

“No Miro,” her aunties and cousins called out. “You’ll disturb the spirits, you’ll kill Noornangk!”

“Mayakawa and Gray spotted the ghost bird, they called us for help,” Miro said. “We gathered at the bay and Fionn saw something, the colours of the flag. They were Albion.”

Miro pulled his short spear out of his belt.

“My mad sister lit a spear and flung it at the ship. She burned them, she burned the whole ship,” he said. “All the people, all the poor people coming for green earth.”

“Then she turned on Fionn, used another spear and flung it at him. She missed his heart and pierced his shoulder, but I didn’t miss.”

There was fire in Miro’s eyes.

“I speared my mad sister straight through the chest!” he exclaimed. “For murder.”

The sounds of wailing reached her ears and rolled around in her head, echoing and bouncing. For a moment Meka felt cold water rushing around her, and a cold dark rush, but then it left and she was back in the camp.

“-your poor father,” he was saying, “he swam out into the waves after Mayakawa fell in, and he drowned! He drowned out there trying to save his mad wife.”

Miro scoffed.

“Imagine that,” he said, “to survive the journey here, across endless ocean, to find green earth, to drink serpent water, only to drown a few lengths from the sand to try save a women already dead.”

Meka could see them. She could see her father flailing around in the dark surf, calling for Mayakawa, calling for his wife. Meka looked at Miro and his eyes were burning into hers.

“I’ve been to her grave,” Meka said, “her spirit is restless. She’s been trying to tell me how to protect our community.”

“You went to the taboo place?” Miro said.

“Nana was talking in her sleep,” Meka said. “Talking about my mother and where she was buried.”

“And did you see what she did to the place where we buried her!” he said. “She has poisoned the land with her poisonous spirit.”

“You buried her without the flames,” Meka said. “She’s trapped there.”

“She was disturbed,” Miro said.

“My mother wasn’t a bad person,” Meka said. “She could just see things other people couldn’t. I see them too.”

Meka looked behind her. The women were hunched over Noornangk, who was very still. Meka walked over and looked down at her nana. The Ancestor trees roared around her, filling her ears for the first time in days.

the weeping river is full of salt

Noornangk took a shallow breath in

the salty river burns the sea

Noornangk held that breath, her face tightening

the sea cannot give it back

Noornangk released that breath, her face relaxed, and did not breathe in again.

the sea cannot give it back

Meka sunk to the ground.

Granite and ghosts

Meka didn't know what to do. The only thing she could think of doing was finding Fionn. The shadows cast by the morbid birds had killed her nana, and they could kill Fionn too. She walked up to the Home Of Rain Up High, the granite peaks of the Creator Serpent with Dwerda trailing behind. She stood outside the entrance to the peak, reluctant to go any further.

“Fionn?” she called out. “Fionn are you there?”

A voice emerged from her left.

“I'm here.”

Meka got a shock and saw Fionn sitting on the ground, leaning against a tall granite boulder. Dwerda trotted up to him and he patted her gently.

“Nana's gone,” Meka said.

Fionn was shocked.

“What?” he said. “How?”

“She was sick,” Meka said. “The Albion made her sick! Where have you been, why are you up here, its sacred!”

Fionn buried his head in his hands.

“What are you doing up here,” Meka said. “I’ve really needed you and you haven’t been around.”

Fionn started to talk but choked up.

“The Albion,” he said, “the Albion-”

He couldn’t get the words out. Meka slunk against the rocks too, sinking to the ground.

“I saw Ashlyn,” Meka said. “When she was awake she was a woman but when she was asleep she was an albatross and then she was an awful bird.”

Fionn nodded, and took some deep breaths.

“I thought I was imagining it,” Fionn said. “But you’re right.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Meka asked.

“I never told you this,” Fionn said, “I didn’t tell anyone this.”

He took a deep breath.

“My family haven’t aged,” he said. “They’re no older than when we were separated out at sea twenty years ago.”

“What?” Meka said. “How can that be?”

“Everyone else has the signs of age,” Fionn said. “The Erin people that were young when I got here are older now, Old Djara has passed away, Noornangk is older, I’m older. My bones creak, my face is lined, my hair is grey. But my family have not aged, they’re exactly the same,” he said. “I didn’t understand it, but I thought it was a meerkool.”

“Your family were saying that when they saw you,” Meka said.

“Yes, meerkool,” Fionn replied. “That word from Albion Country, tied to the power of our god in the sky. It describes when someone who was dead is brought back alive again.”

He shook his head.

“Them being here is a meerkool,” he said, “but I don’t think it’s a good one.”

“A bad meerkool?” Meka asked.

Fionn got a haunted look in his eye.

“The Albion have come back from the dead,” he whispered hoarsely. “I know that now, and that’s why they have appeared out of nowhere. Their ship sunk out at sea twenty season cycles ago, and now they’re back.”

“They died?” Meka asked. “So they haven’t been out in the desert woodlands?”

“My Albion family died out there,” he said. “These are sea spirits walking amongst us, ones that look like people but aren’t people.”

“They’re spirits?” Meka said.

“And they don’t know it,” Fionn said. “They think they’re my family, they have false memories of living in the desert woodlands.”

“My mother could see ghost birds,” Meka said. “How could she be seeing them if there weren’t any Albion back then?”

“You know about that?” Fionn asked.

“I went to the taboo place,” Meka said. “I know Miro killed her because he thought she was bad in the head. But I see them too! How can this be?”

Fionn looked up at Meka with wild eyes.

“I think I’ve worked it out, niece,” Fionn said.

He stood and looked down from the edge of the peak, across the foothills, the lower forests, the wetlands, the dunes then out to sea.

“I’m a ghost too,” he said. “I drowned out at sea, and I’m as dead as they are.”

“You’re not dead Fionn,” Meka said, swallowed heavily. “You’re as alive as I am.”

“Your people said it,” Fionn replied. “They said our ships were ghost birds, that they thought we were ghosts.”

“The Erin arrived on boats,” Meka said. “They’re not dead. You and my father arrived on that boat together, so you’re not dead.”

“How do we know?” Fionn said. “My Albion family think they’ve been here the whole time, just like I do.”

“Nana saw you arrive,” Meka said. “It’s painted on the cave walls!”

Fionn shrugged, and a weight began to form in Meka’s stomach.

“The Erin have children,” Meka said. “My cousins, Gray had me!”

Fionn looked at Meka with a scared expression.

Meka raised her finger and started backing away.

“You think I’m the offspring of a ghost,” Meka said, pointing with a shaky finger. “You think I’m not real!”

Fionn gestured forlornly with his hands, tried to talk but didn’t say anything.

“This is why the spirits hate me,” Meka said, “why they try to grab me and trap me. This is why I’m not connected to Country!”

Meka backed away.

“The shark was right,” she said. “I don’t belong here on River Country.”

She ran away and heard Fionn shouting after her.

“Wait, Meka!” he called. “What shark...”

High up in the mountains the heart of The Serpent aches. So much salt has encroached on Serpent Territory. It has nowhere to go, it's bleeding out of its creatures, blood and tears. The bloodline of the River People is haemorrhaging, like an earthquake beneath a river, it has split and shattered. Land custodians that have lived for countless generations on Serpent Country are attached by a thread. The last one in a line of women is bleeding out into the sea, an undersea spring seeping out and disappearing amongst the salt.

The Serpent looks down into its rocky cerebrum, the layers of memory that make up its Country. There are shadows in the rocks: leaves, crustaceans, birds, ferns, rodents, insects, algae, fish, snakes, grasses. Part of Country that have turned to stone, fossils that have no living relatives. Dead ends of a flow of life. Like the ancestors in the sky look down on their relatives on earth, so do these spirits frozen in rock look up, hear them walking around, feel the rumbles in the earth.

The Serpent weeps for the creature lost to the past, who never leave, who live in the rocks, whole and preserved. Those who saw the flash in the sky, and burned in the wall of fire when the rock from space hit the ground. Those who faced the great cold and lay down and died, starving, when the warmth evaporated away. Those who were buried under volcanic magma, the sudden and violent spewings of the earth. Those that were drowned by the sea during the last Warm Times, when The Shark brought its ocean all the way up to the hills, the home of rain up high. Then all

the little sea creatures left behind when The Serpent fought The Shark back, using its might to bring on the Cold Times, shrinking The Shark's ocean right down.

The Serpent thought of the people on those green isles across the sea, who fell into black earth, to become strata in that dead land. Even now, an Elder of River Country is taken in by the ground, the newest layer of those taken back by the earth.

The Serpent's heart aches. The girl, Meka. One branch of the blood-river of Serpent Country is at risk of ending forever.

The salt has encroached further than it ever has, not just into Serpent Territory, but into its people. There is a great salty wound on The Serpent's back, festering behind the hills. The Shark might actually win this time. But there is still fresh water in the bloodlines of River Country. A drop of water exists in the girl, Meka, even as she is nearly lost out in the thundering waves.

The Serpent feels a spirit passing. A cool touch on its rocky face. The Elder woman of River Country passes by, floating high up to sit with the ancestors around their fires in the sky. Passing is a fact of life for the soft creatures that live in Serpent Territory. But they need to leave something behind. Children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews. Without the River People, the newcomers will not survive, and this land will blacken and die under the control of the Shark.

Tears, tears, tears. The Serpent's heart is breaking. Salt has got into the cracks. Tears to wash the splitting salt away. Dilute it before it wins.

The flood and the wave

Meka ran down the path and away from the Home Of Rain Up High. A fierce wind buffeted the peaks, forcing squalls through the paths that wound down beneath the boulders. She was flung between rocks as she ran, Dwerda darting back and forth ahead of her.

Meka had nothing left. She was a ghost, not stuck to Country, not tied to family. No wonder the Creator Serpent took her first husband in a flood, it probably didn't want her having any ghost children at all.

Don't disappear

Rain began to fall amongst the blustering wind and Meka stopped at the bottom of the peak and looked back. Raindrops hit her face and she shut her eyes. Dwerda came and sat next to her, squinting her eyes against the breeze.

The wind changed and a hot land wind hit them. Meka thought this was strange, as the warm land wind usually blew at night until morning, and the cool sea wind blew in during the afternoon. But here it was, blowing the sea breeze away. Then a rush of cold hit her face, the sea breeze was back. Was she in the middle of a wirli-wirli? She looked around but the air wasn't spinning, it was just blowing back and forth. Cool breeze in, warm wind out. The land was breathing, in out, in out. A tide of air, rolling, cresting, retreating. It got noisy, the trees murmured as their

leaves rustled in their thousands, a noise like a wave breaking on the shore, an ocean of leaves rubbing and moving and thrashing.

The shark's voice cut through the roar of the wind.

It's coming

“What's coming?” Meka shouted.

She looked out at the direction of the sea but didn't get an answer. The wind got stronger and she kept running, down the steep path that led away from the peaks and down into the jarrah forest below. When she and Dwerda reached the slopes of the foothills the ground began to shake slightly. She crouched, sinking her palms into the grass. It was similar to the rumbling out at the taboo place, but instead of one large spirit it felt like lots of little spirits. She thought about what Fionn had said about the pale rock here, that it was filled with sea creatures. They were vibrating, talking, jostling. Dreaming in death, sleeping through time, memory in the rock speaking of drowned coastlines, drained seas.

DROWN DRAIN

DROWN

DRAIN

Meka clamped her hands over her ears to block out the cacophony of voices. Then another sound entered, a deep noise, a dull roar, that cut through everything else. Meka looked back up the hill and saw something above the trees, a low cloud moving down, misting moving through. The ground began to shake and it wasn't a cloud, or fog or mist. It was a wall of water advancing down the slope. Cockatoos were exploding in black flocks up and away from the trees, kangaroos were racing past her, quenda and bandicoot were scrambling down the rocks. Meka stood, transfixed, and out of the corner of her eye she saw that Dwerda was looking intently out to sea. Meka followed her gaze, turned and gasped. The sea was had pulled away from the shore, pulling out to sea. The seagrass meadow was exposed, the reef was exposed. A great ghost bird wreck emerged from the water, its long beak of wood piercing the sky, draped in seaweed and encrusted with barnacles. And the sea kept pulling, and the horizon was swelling, climbing up into the sky. Meka looked back to the hills and the mass of water was advancing toward her and Dwerda in the foothills.

“Run, Dwerda,” Meka yelled. “Get out of here!”

Dwerda stood still, her muzzle pointed toward the sea, watching with an unwavering gaze as the wave approached. There were the dark forms in the ocean surge, whales, sharks, dolphins, caught up in the wave, about to be dumped on dry land. The flooding river was nearly upon them, and there were trees, animals and mud churning in the torrent as it moved toward the foothills. Meka had no idea that there was this much water in the world, and they were about to be crushed between the river and the sea. Whispers reached her ears, barely audible against the din.

pale Meka

the moon rules the tides

drags water over earth

“Is this it?” Meka called back. “I’m the last in the line of ghosts, getting washed away?”

She looked back and the wave was over them, and Meka crouched with her arms around her dog. Dwerda clamped her jaws on Meka’s shirt and Meka hugged her tightly. She felt Dwerda’s body become heavy, and her fur stiffen. She was turning to stone under Meka’s touch, weighted down, sinking into the ground. Then the water hit and Meka was flung up off the ground, her feet up above her head, her hands gripping Dwerda’s stone shoulders, her shirt caught in Dwerda’s teeth. The water surged and Meka couldn’t hang on, she lost her hold and hung in the water for a moment, gripped by Dwerda’s teeth, before her shirt tore and she spun away into the mix of river and sea.

She spun and spun, the water in front of her eyes a blur of light and shadows. She couldn’t grab anything, couldn’t hold herself still, she rolled in the mixing of the waters, as helpless as a gum blossom dropped on river rapids. Around and around as the two surges of water collided and fought. She moved a great distance over the plains, carried by the water from the hills and dragged by the sea. Then the spinning

stopped, the bubbles stopped, the rushing stopped. She was still, and perhaps even upright, with her hair floating above her head. She looked up and there was an almost imperceptible light above. An incredible pressure had built in her chest, and she kicked upwards, desperate for breath.

Meka kicked and kicked but was going nowhere, in fact, she was sinking. Dropping down and down, further away from the surface, further away from the light.

She sank and sank until her feet touched rock and sand, clearing a little dust cloud in the water as she did. She looked around at the blue world she found herself in, her hair drifting like tentacles around her face. The surge of floodwater was settling, the bubbles disappearing and the water clearing. She couldn't immediately see where she was, if she was on River Country in floodwater or on the underwater plains dotted with ghost birds between the coast and the islands. She looked at her feet and saw something there. She crouched down and lifted it up. She recognised the shark fin embedded in stone, it was Fionn's sundial. Maybe it had been washed into the sea by the flood? She looked up and guessed that she was in water as deep as a tuart tree. She carried the sundial with her and kept walking. She could see the glow of the sun above and judged that she was travelling east, hopefully back to the shore.

Her foot kicked something and she bent down to pick it up. She brought it up to her face and it was a clay bowl covered in knotted designs. Meka's heart sank a little then and looked around where she was. She crouched and felt a ring of rocks,

and realised that it was a submerged campfire, but instead of fire there was bright coral growing from the centre. She looked around and saw the vague shape of huts that were now reef covered in anemone, with rock lobsters poking out from underneath. An eagle ray glided past following the old path to Fionn's camp, and a school of herring flashed in the sun. This water wasn't receding, this water was here to stay.

She placed the sundial on a rock, noticing the diffused light wasn't enough to cast any kind of shadow. She jumped up, trying to see if she could swim to the surface to have a look around, but she just sunk back down. She crouched on the spot, hugging her arms around her knees. It had happened, the sea had taken River Country. Where were her cousins, her aunties, her nieces and nephews? Where were the Erin? She had lost everything.

The whole world is saltwater now

She crawled along the seafloor towards where Karla's hut would have been. It was now a tall reef covered in coral, anemones, sea slugs, and starfish, with a cave in the bottom. Meka sat in the mouth of the cave and found herself with a community of octopus all regarding her curiously. She lay down and felt tentacles pulling on her hair and as she closed her eyes. Everything went dark and the last thing she heard was the *woolwool* of the sea birds high above, creatures of air looking down with pity at this new creature of the sea.

Stone ears and eyes

Meka awoke on the sea floor, reclined against the rocks. Her limbs by her side in the sea grass, her fingers sunk among the fronds. Starfish creeping across her calves, leafy sea dragons entwined in her hair. Sea anemone flowers over her shoulder, lobster crouched at her waist. The water was dark, it must be night time. She could see the stars through the waters above, still and twinkling. One star moved against the sky, wheeling around overhead.

woolwool

she thought she heard, life going on above the waves.

She was lying in the position she imagined her mother was lying in all these years. But it was a lie, her mother's spirit was stuck in the salty lake over the hills. She wondered again if her father's spirit had made it to the Erin afterlife islands, or if they too had crumbled into dust during the spreading of the creeping blackness. Where was his spirit now? Was it wandering, or had it found a place to rest? Meka looked up into the night sky again, wondering if people in the sea can ever join the ancestors in the stars.

She sat up, pulling all the little sea dwellers off her skin, clothing and hair. She noticed that her skin felt thicker, spongier, and underneath of her arms were paler than before, and her stomach. She looked around and found that she could still see her surroundings in the night ocean, everything seemed to glow in the low light.

She walked out of the drowned Erin camp and headed up the slope toward the Elder camp. The old path was now a sandy trail between seagrass meadows, and when Meka saw movement she expected a kangaroo to lift their head from the greenery, but instead saw a sea turtle resting among the fronds. She tried to take a deep breath but couldn't, she was breathing as shallowly as she had been after her sea walk a few days ago. Too long in the sea, then too long out of the sea, her body wasn't coping. The faster she moved the easier it was to breathe. Perhaps this was why her mother circled under the salt lake behind the hills, why she couldn't rest.

She reached the Elder camp and Meka couldn't believe her eyes. There was a huge shelf of reef that sat over the submerged camp, with three gaps where the three huts had been. Moonlight poured through the gaps and illuminated a sea floor beneath that was filled with colourful anemones, corals and seaweeds. Yellows, greens, reds, purples, oranges. The Erin camp looked nothing like this, only a few corals and anemones had moved in. The Elder camp looked like it had been in the sea for hundreds of years, and was filled with life. It was beautiful, but Meka's heart grew heavy in her chest. Where was her nana? Where were the Elders? Something silvery caught her eye and she looked closer under the reef shelf. Illuminated by moonlight was the stone from her mother's grave that she had placed next to her nana when she was sick. She lifted it out from within the coral and held it up. This stone hadn't saved her nana's life. Hadn't saved anything. Why had her mother shown it to her? Meka didn't understand. She put the stone in her pouch and continued up the slope into the old foothills.

Meka came to the spot where she had been swept away. She looked down and saw a dog-shaped stone half-buried in the sand. A sea urchin had found a sheltered spot next to Dwerda, and a starfish was spread across Dwerda's shoulder. Meka patted Dwerda's head, pulled her stone ears. Her dog had always watched the sea, and was still looking out even though the sea had now overtaken them all. She sat down next to her dog, her heart like a rock in her chest. She looked across at what used to be River Country. The trees were gone, the animals, the people. No birds flew through the water, no smoke from campfires drifted up. The sea had taken over River Country, this place that had taken her parents, her uncle, her nana, her dog, and now her whole community. Her cousin, her nieces and nephews. The Elders, the warriors, the mothers. The Erin, who crossed the endless saltwater territory of the shark only to drown here on dry land. Just like her father. Who sought green earth and got a salt grave. Just like her mother.

Meka turned and looked up the hill toward the Home Of Rain Up High. She could see that the peaks didn't look completely submerged. She walked up the hill to see if Fionn and the Albion were still up there, but as she approached her chest and head started to ache. Each step up was more painful than the last, and by the time she neared the surface she had almost lost all her sight and hearing. She crawled and crawled and could feel the granite of the peaks under her fingers with its new coating of sea lichen, however, when she reached the surface she couldn't lift her head out of the water, she couldn't breathe that close to the surface. She managed to lift her hand out of the water and touch the peak but had to retract it immediately. She crawled back down to deeper water and sat against an oyster-covered rock so she could catch her breath. Her heart was heavy in her chest and she could hear her blood pumping

in her ears. She couldn't leave the water like last time, something had changed her in the sea. She looked over herself, and saw dark lines forming along her ribs. She was changing, but not like the whales changed, whose nostrils moved to the tops of their heads so they could breathe air, she was changing into something that breathes through water. She might be changing in a way that she couldn't come back from.

She thought about her mother, circling in the ground behind the Home Of Rain Up High. She had seen that the tops of the hills weren't drowned, which meant that her mother's grave was probably still above the sea. Was she being protected by the Creator Serpent?

She suddenly tasted something sweet in the water. Freshwater. Sweetwater. Like she used to drink from the body of the Creator Serpent, the snake rivers. Her heart in her chest became heavy, impossibly heavy, and tears welled in her eyes, sweetwater tears in the salty ocean. More lost to the sea. Meka wanted to choke the part of her that grieved, kill it, turn it to stone. Let her turn to stone, like Dwerda, become reef, become the basis for life, be useful. But she found once again the shortness of breath. She had stopped moving and would soon suffocate. She got up and kept walking down the slope into deeper, cooler water.

She looked around and realised that she wasn't walking down an old path, it was a stream that ran down the hills and joined the river on the coastal plain. This was where the little brown mussels used to gather in groups on the rocks, living in the constant stream of cool water from the Serpent peaks. Rakali the water rat would have lived and hunted here, and therefore Fionn would probably know this place.

The mussels were all gone now, they were the freshwater variety, and would have died and been washed away in the surge of saltwater that had engulfed River Country. It must have left its sweetwater trace, and Meka grieved for River Country in that moment.

Meka felt vibrations under her feet, and she looked back at the semi-submerged peaks. She could make out the dark outline and a sky full of stars through the shifting skin of water. She lifted the milky stone out of her pocket and inspected it. She didn't know why her mother had shown her this. If anything, things had gotten worse since she picked it up.

Moon child

Meka looked around sharply.

“Who's there?” she said.

The Patient One Under The Waves

“What happened here?” Meka said. “Why did you flood everything?”

The Serpent attacked, I defended

Meka couldn't see the shark, could only sense it, and hear its voice.

And this time I won

Meka looked down at the dark lines that were forming against her pale ribs.

“Why have I survived this?” Meka said. “Why haven’t my family changed like I have?”

The ocean now carries the weight of your heavy heart

“This is not what I want,” she said. “I want to be with my family.”

You have something of mine

Meka looked reached into her pouch, the stone tooth was still there. Except it wasn’t stone anymore, it was a living tooth, white and smooth, with a serrated edge.

“You want this?” Meka asked.

No

She let the tooth fall from her hand, and she watched it drift down onto the drowned stream she stood in. She imagined it being the first of many to settle amongst this newly submerged land, like the thousands and thousands of other teeth sticking up from the sea floor.

“What do you want then,” she asked.

What your mother took from me

“My mother?” Meka said.

There was silence in the water around her. She glanced around and felt her eyes adjusting to the water. Light was filtering through, bouncing off little flecks in the water. A chorus of voices whispered to her.

WE ARE THE FIRST

WE WILL BE

THE LAST

She shook her head to escape the whispers.

“What did she take?” she asked.

You carry it with you

Meka looked down at the milky stone in her hand.

Give it to me

“What is it?” Meka asked.

It's a piece of me

“Why did she take it?” she said.

Give it to me

“It’s all I have of her,” Meka said, “it’s all I have of River Country now. it was on the ground. You could have got it if you wanted it that bad.”

She looked up the slope that led to the peak.

“Unless you can’t go close to the Serpent’s home?” Meka said. “You couldn’t drown the peak so the Serpent must still have some power.”

Meka thought about where she had found the stone in the first place.

“This stone was beyond the peak,” she said, “beyond your reach.”

Give it to me

“Wait, is this why you started talking to me?” she asked. “Did you send me there to get this back?”

Give it to me

Meka remembered the warning her mother painted on the granite wall to do with sharks and giant birds.

“What is this?” she said, looking down at the stone.

There was silence in the water.

“She was warning me about you,” Meka said. “Why?”

She rolled the stone between her hands and when it touched the cut on her palm the rock quivered and changed. It wasn't a rock anymore. It was flesh. She rolled it over and it rolled back. A great eye was sitting in her palm. The painting of the shark was missing an eye.

“This is your eye!” Meka exclaimed. “Why did she take your eye? How did she take your eye?”

Give it to me

Meka looked around at the drowned landscape of her ancestors.

“You have so much power without this,” she said, “and you haven't had this eye for twenty season cycles or more.”

She looked up at the peaks that still sat above the saltwater, stars shining beyond.

“You must want it because you want more power,” Meka said, “the power to drown the Creator Serpent for good.”

She put the eye in her pouch, and she felt it turn hard again, back into a rock.

“You don’t care about me,” Meka said. “You tricked me into bringing this back to you.”

Give it to me

“You made me mistrust everyone and now look where I am,” she said. “I’ve got no choice but to trust my mother and not you.”

Suit yourself

A huge surge of tide started moving around Meka. She was dragged off the foothills and down towards the drowned plains of River Country. She fought and kicked but was completely wrapped up in swirling, pulsing water. She saw glimpses of the stars, the old channel where the Serpent River wound past the Erin camps and wetlands and clay fields. She rolled over the old beaches, then the reef and seagrass meadows she had explored before. Over the ocean plain between the coast and the

islands, seeing the wrecks of ghost birds blur past her. She rolled over the top of the islands themselves, the coral reef there now probably too deep to survive, even sea creatures dying with the great invasion of saltwater created by the shark. She rolled and swirled beyond the island then she stopped. She was suspended in the water above the deep trench that she had stood at the edge of before. A trench edged with shark teeth that cut her feet as she approached. She heard choral voices around her.

WE ARE THE SUNLIGHT EATERS

NO SUNLIGHT

NO LIFE

She heard the shark's voice next.

I am the Patient One Under The Waves

Then the pressure around her changed, and she fell, dropping like a dead bird from the sky into the inky blackness below.

Part 3

The trench

Meka landed with a muffled thud on her side on a soft sea floor. She felt a cloud of silt rise around her as she sat up, and her hands sunk into sediment as she steadied herself. She looked around and froze. She couldn't see anything around her. No sea creatures, no flecks of light, nothing. She lifted her hand up and couldn't even see that. Just black in every direction, even up above her head. She must have fallen to the bottom of the deep canyon behind the islands. Her body hurt from being hurtled across River Country, and her eyes and ears hurt from the pressure of the water above. The shark must have trapped her down here to make her give up the stone. It was completely silent, with not even the whispers of the sunlight eaters. They mustn't be able to live down here, the sun mustn't have the power to pierce water this deep.

She reached into her pouch and pulled out the stone. She took care not to touch it with the cut on her palm, and held it in her other hand. She held the eye up to hers and got a shock. She could see lights around in her in the water. The rocky

floor was glowing, line and swirl patterns were coming to life. They looked like skeletons of giant creatures laying in the rock, and they were moving. After a few moments Meka saw them lift off the sea floor and started moving around, skeletons without flesh, glowing, and swimming around her. Some had long necks and bodies like a giant turtle. Some looked like a giant lizard with long jaws full of teeth. Others were strange sorts of giant squid. She dropped the eye down and it was dark again, she couldn't see anything. She lifted the eye and could see all the dead creatures swimming around.

She wondered if this was the power of the shark, that it could see what had happened in the past, see these creatures of the past. Meka had possessed this ability before she even touched the stone, she had seen the memories of Country, just like she was seeing the memories of long dead creatures down here. She needed to get out of the canyon, but when she tried to step she found shark teeth sticking up in every direction. She needed to go up, but didn't know how.

A sound reached her then, the only sound that she had heard down there. A whistling noise. This was followed by a deep moan, a muffled bellow that reverberated in her body. Meka lowered the eye and looked up into the darkness. Whales. There were whales somewhere above her.

“Hello?” she said.

She didn't know if her voice was carrying, but she had to try.

“The shark has trapped me,” she called out. “I don’t know what to do.”

Meka heard another whistle and then there was silence. She looked up, but it was black all around her. The only reason she knew it was up, was because her feet were on the silty sand.

“I’m Meka,” she called out, not even hearing herself. “I was born on Whale Country, I’m your kin.”

She heard some clicks, that at first sounded far away, but the sound bounced around her, then toward her, then then into her head. The clicks rattled around, adding to her aching head and ears, and she tried covering her ears to keep it out. The clicks were followed by whistles, very close, and Meka felt something whoosh past her in the water. She lifted the stone eye in front of her eye again and saw blinding lights in the water. She saw spots in front of her eyes for a few moments but then managed to focus on streaks of luminescence. Circling around her were what she at first thought were dolphins, but then saw that they were small whales. There were two of them, and they were talking to each other and perhaps to her. The clicking was intense, and Meka’s bones rattled every time the whales spoke to her.

“Can you help me?” Meka asked.

The two whales swam beside Meka and nudged her. She put the eye in her pouch and reached out to feel for the whales in the darkness. She held onto a fin from each and was lifted off the sea floor in a whoosh of silt. She hung on as they

travelled straight up, through blackness as dark as octopus ink, until blue light started to enter her vision. Then the ocean came back to life around her. Sounds started seeping into the strange blue sea she hung in, a heart beat, many heart beats, then a whistling whine that looped through the glittering flicks and made its way to her ears. Dark forms emerged from the underwater horizons around her and she realised there were more whales there, singing and clicking, calling out to each other. Four-chambers, that's what the shark had said. Four-chambered hearts, just like hers. In a sudden movement the beaked whales split off in separate directions and she started falling again, unable to float or swim at all. A black mass came up from beneath her and she landed on the back of one of the black and white whales that came to her great-grandmother's Country on the south coast.

She crouched on the back of the whale and looked around. More whales appeared and soon she was surrounded by a whole family. The whale started moving and Meka stretched out on her belly on its back, holding onto one of the calloused bumps on its back. The whale carried her toward the surface and as they approached it Meka's head started to pound.

"I can't," she told it, "I can't go near the surface."

The whale came to a stop and Meka lost her grip and floated up a bit. She floated in the water a few lengths below the surface, her body barely buoyant in the water, and came drifting back down to land on the whale's back again. The whales regarded her, and she saw that they were a small family group, with a mother, sisters,

sons and daughters. A daughter came and nudged Meka in the gills that were forming along her ribs, and Meka felt shame that she had taken on the shark's form.

“It got tough on land,” Meka told them. “My heart grew heavy, you and your family must understand that.”

Don't disappear

The whale nudged Meka again, this time toward the surface. Meka fought it, but couldn't stop the giant nose pushing her above the water. Meka tried to take a breath but there was nothing, she choked and couldn't breathe. The whale dropped her nose and Meka was back under the water. The whale lifted her again, and Meka struggled once more, choking, suffocating without the water. Under the water Meka lay on the whale's head, gripping the white callouses on the nose, struggling. Whether it was her weak lungs or her heavy heart, she didn't know. The whales seemed to sense her struggle, and they sang to each other in whistles and low moans, dropping lower in the water.

Meka got a few breaths in before the whale dove deeply, shaking her off. Meka had a moment of confusion as she hung in the water for a few seconds, and then pure panic as she started dropping again through the water. She tried swimming but she was just too heavy, she had no air in her body at all. She looked down and saw the dark chasm of the trench beneath her, and her blood ran cold at the thought of being trapped down there again. The darkness grew around her and she shut her eyes in defeat, awaiting the impact.

Something caught her though, and she opened her eyes. She was surrounded by bubbles, rings and rings of bubbles. The whales were below her, sending a wave of air underneath her, pushing her back towards the surface. The bubbles rolled all around and through her, and she could feel air in her body again, in her throat and lungs, breath moving across her nose and lips. Her body was pushed back to the surface of the water and she emerged under a rising sun, and felt a light breeze moving across the waves. The bubble column stopped and the bubbles evaporated around her but she was floating on the sea, her air had returned. Meka looked up and around. The sky, the beautiful sky, she had missed it so much. She saw a white form move over head.

woolwool

She sighed deeply; the world of air and breeze and warmth wasn't lost to her yet. She took some deep breaths as she floated on her back, silently thanking her whale relatives that had turned her back into a creature of freshwater and air. She felt pressure underneath her and she found herself sitting on the whale's back again, and she watched it take a deep breath in and out. She placed her palms flat on the whale's giant head.

“Thank you for the air,” she said.

She lay back against the thick black skin and looked up at the fingers of dawn stretching across the sky. Her eyes and ears felt clear, her skin seemed more

like human skin again, the dark lines on her ribs didn't disappear, but they were faded. She was relieved but then she sat up and looked around. There was nothing but ocean in every direction. Her heart became heavy, and she lay back down. She wondered what she was supposed to do now, with all her Country and its people, plants and spirits drowned.

WE ARE THE FIRST

WE WILL BE THE LAST

The whispers of the sunlight eaters drifted up from the surface of the water around her. She pulled out the stone, wondered at it a moment, then rolled it to her cut hand. The stone suddenly turned back into a flesh eye and it rolled over to look at her. She squeezed the fleshy eye in her hands in a shock reflex and the world exploded around her with bubbles and sound. The whale back beneath her disappeared and she started falling through the water, down, down into the canyon, spinning again in a churning mix of air and seawater. Then she hit freezing water and gasped, cold, so cold, and she breathed in a lungful of water. The water was different though, it was river water, sweetwater. She was caught in a quick-moving snake of water and she had a moment to see rocky banks off to one side. She was then flung into the air and continued falling. She hit rock and incredible pain shot through her, and she cried out, her cold body stiff and unresponsive. She lay there for a few moments with cold water hitting her face, before she rolled over to try and see where she was.

She sat up and saw that she was on a ledge next to a waterfall that thundered over the edge of a cliff. There was sea far below her, impossibly far, and there was mist rising up from where the water fell. She looked up and saw the top of the cliff just above her. She moved the shark's eye to her other hand, where it turned back to stone, and she placed it back in her pouch. Meka manoeuvred her sore body upright, wincing and cold, and then clambered up the wet rocks and stood on the top. Her eyes grew wide as she looked around and saw a wide plain stretching out in front of her, with a huge hill near the centre and off to her left. Then beyond that, taller hills rose up from the horizon. She turned left and right, trying to work out where she was. She looked over the cliff edge again and down at the ocean. She watched the water smash down, imagined the gouge it was making in the sea floor as it did. She crouched and ran her hand over the cliff's edge. It seemed familiar to her somehow, but she hadn't seen anything like this cliff before. She looked back at the plain and saw a strip of tuart trees that stretched from the distant hills, across the plain, and then up the slopes of the hill near her.

A freezing wind whipped across the plain, and whispering voices wrapped around her. Not the sunlight eaters, but her ancestors, whom she could hear for the first time in days.

Remember the Cold Times

She recalled the stories of the Cold Times when her ancestors travelled to the islands off the coast of River Country, how they walked under trees to reach ceremonial places up a high hill. Meka looked at the sea below the cliffs and realised

that she had stood here before, a few days ago, when she had walked along the sea floor out past the islands. However, she had been in water as deep as the tuart tree is high, and she looked up, remembering waves moving overhead as she looked into the ocean trench ringed with shark teeth. Also, the shark had flooded River Country, there should be even more water above her now. Meka crouched and dipped her fingers into the waterfall. The water and air were freezing, much colder than the cool seasons of River Country.

Remember the Cold Times

Meka felt her hand go numb in the water. She must be there somehow, in the Cold Times. She looked across the plains and her eyes picked up tendrils of smoke rising from various parts of the grassy plain and forests beyond. They must be the campfires of her Old People, those who passed down the stories of walking out to the islands when they were connected to River Country. The ancestors who watched the sea levels rise and warned their descendants how to care for land, community and spirit when changes like that come. But the sea levels hadn't risen yet there. Meka looked over the waterfall again. She understood then how the trench in the sea had been created by the Creator Serpent, why she sensed traces of freshwater there. During the Cold Times the river had dug the trench, and after, the shark pushed its ocean up and up and drowned the waterfall and drowned the plain. In Meka's time the hill here is an island. Then she remembered that in her time the shark had flooded all of River Country up to the granite peaks of the Home Of Rain Up High. Her heart grew heavy and her knees buckled at the weight of it, and she sat down on the damp rocks.

A shark has no bones but in the mouth

She looked down at the cut in her palm from the stone shark tooth on the beach. She dropped that hand into the water and felt it go numb from the cold. She had longed for the serpent waters to cool her blood and heart, and now she was in the coldest memory of River Country. But what role had the shark played in this? What role had the shark played for her mother?

The body propels the jaws

Meka lifted the stone out of her pouch with her other hand, and then placed it on her cut palm.

The heart follows teeth

It turned into the fleshy eye, which rolled to look at her.

“How am I in the Cold Times?” Meka asked it.

The eye rolled around, looking to see where Meka was, and she quickly moved it back into her other hand where it turned to stone again.

She looked over the cliff, seeing the deep trench dug by the Serpent River, a place she was trapped in shortly before. She didn't understand how it was that she

was standing on Country that was not only underwater since the shark flooded River Country yesterday, but had been underwater for many generations before that. She looked back across the plains at the hills in the distance, and Meka imagined the Creator Serpent sitting in the Home Of Rain Up High, long before the shark ever threatened River Country. This was a time before the River people knew that newcomers existed, long before the warrior in the red cloak washed ashore.

Meka realised that her ancestors here in the Cold Times would have no idea what was coming, the sea level rise or the newcomers. She stood up and started walking inland, intending to run toward the fires to let them know. She stopped though. Her people didn't need to do anything different. Her people didn't need to change. If her nana and her nana's nana believed that you don't kill starving and dying people for showing up unannounced, then nothing Meka could say to her ancestors would change that, those are their values. It's the values of the Albion that are the problem. She needed to help her people in her time but she didn't know how, the shark had flooded Country and all her people were gone.

Meka heard a rush of air and ran back to the cliff. She watched for a few moments and saw a spout of water spray from within the waves down below. Then another spray, from the blowhole of a dark body moving in the water. It was the whales, her kin, her spirit. Were these the whales of the Cold Times, or had the whales of her time followed her here?

She looked down at the shark stone gripped in her hand and she thought that perhaps she had not just swum through water but been dragged backwards through a

tide of time. Where was she before though? Did that shark flood happen in Meka's life, or did it happen in the past, or the future? Meka turned the stone over in her uncut hand. What power did this eye possess? What was she seeing?

“Did you even flood River Country in my time,” Meka asked the stone, “or did you take me somewhere else, just like you've brought me here?”

She thought of Fionn's comments about his sundial, how his tool for measuring time didn't work in River Country. She looked back at the whales at the bottom of the cliffs. The whales seemed to know how to help her, had transformed her back into a human when she was becoming something more like a shark. Maybe they could help her get home, to know if the shark really did flood River Country.

Meka climbed down the cliffs and leapt into the sea. Her whale kin joined her and she found herself on the back of the grandmother whale again.

“Do you know where home is?” Meka asked the whales.

Cold waves crashed around them and Meka felt vibrations in the whale's body as it tried to speak to her. She lay her palms on the whale's black skin.

“I don't know my way back,” she said.

She lay flat against the whale's back looked out toward the wild watery horizon.

“I don’t know my way back.”

In The Home Of Rain Up High The Serpent watches the tides of time pull in and out. Warm sea pushing across River Country, saltwater foaming against the peaks, sea sponges falling down to build sea floor. Then cool freshwater pushing the sea back far below the cliffs, glaciers and ice sheets forming on land, cold wind freezing the air before it can form rain. The Serpent has watched the push and pull of the Warm Times and the Cold Times since this world of rock and water formed in black space and commenced its roll through the stars.

The current tide is the Warm Times, but The Serpent sees both memory and future at the same time. The Serpent's eyes see the creatures past, present and future. It sees those that live now, as well as land creatures that lived in the drowned plain between the coast and the islands, as well as the sea creatures that will live below the granite peaks when The Shark pushes its ocean back as high as it can go. Sometimes it's hard to tell if the whispers of sea creatures it hears are from previous Warm Times, the future Warm Times, or something sinister creeping up when it shouldn't.

There are signs that these Warm Times are bringing a bigger shift. The Shark is coming for the Serpent territory beyond the peaks.

The Serpent is coming to understand how The Shark killed the islands that the newcomers hail from. Perhaps they were vulnerable already, cut off from the main mass of Serpent Territories on that side of the world, slowly becoming

surrounded by the saltwater that rose during the Warm Times. The serpents who made the Erin and Albion islands must have watched every green thing wither and die, every bird fall into dust and every mammal lay down and suffocate. They are connected, the hearts of the animals and the hearts of the serpents. Did those deaths break the hearts of the serpents of those places, hearts that cracked in two and eroded away, swallowed up by the sea? The Serpent thinks of its own vast territory, immeasurably bigger than the islands of the Erin and Albion, but still, in essence, an island surrounded by sea. Perhaps The Shark might corrupt its territory from the edges, and over time blacken it from the outside in.

The Patient One Under The Waves has taken one of the Serpent's own into its deep time territory, showing her nightmares of a drowned Country in order to break her spirit. The Shark's methods are to take everything she loves away, to corrupt a spirit in order to corrupt The Serpent, and send Serpent Territory crumbling into the dust and waves like the Erin and Albion. The Shark has interfered in the families of River Country. Taken parents away, taken never-born siblings away. Replacing River people with newcomers who slip and slide across Country, unable to connect, unable to care for the land and waters that would keep them alive. Attrition.

The girl's heart is the Serpent's heart. Does she know that she is connected to The Serpent and connected to all Country, all through time?

Time.

Every now and then there is an eddy in the tides that picks up something from River Country, spinning it round and depositing it somewhere else. Sometime else. The girl Meka is swirling around in the night waters of deep time. She must use her connection to the spirit of place to remember her way back home. If she drowns in the dark waters of The Shark then The Serpent may drown with her.

Time shallows

Meka lay on the whale's back looking across at the sun setting on the horizon.

"I've lost my home," she said aloud, "but I'm glad my Whale Country kin are here."

Meka felt the vibration of the whale's response and smiled, even though she didn't hear it above the water.

"Why leave freshwater Country?" Meka asked. "Why did you return to the sea?"

She felt the vibrations.

"Did you lose your home like me?" she asked.

The vibrations moved through her and she sensed the whales sing a song of joy of being in the water, of flying through the sea like a bird flies through the air. It was joyous, but Meka didn't feel that way. She wanted to stand on River Country again, the wind moving through her hair, the scent of campfire smoke, her fingers sunk into Dwerda's fur. It was when she cut her hand that the sea started moving in to take her Country, and now it had taken it completely. She was trapped then, even though she didn't feel the water, she was still trapped in it. She had been drowning without even knowing it. She looked up at the cliffs and thought about how she had

stood there only a couple of days ago with water far above her head. She lifted the stone out of her pouch, taking care to use to uncut hand, and looked through it up at the cliffs.

All around her glowing forms were swimming, whales she didn't recognise, sharks she didn't recognise. Swimming over the cliff like the water was there. She looked down at her cut hand and saw tiny shark teeth emerging from the wound, like the cut was a mouth. Meka clenched that hand into a fist, not feeling anything, but realising how the shark had injured her and changed her. The breath from the whales had helped her breathe again but had not severed the shark's hold on her.

She lowered the stone and looked around at River Country in the Cold Times.

"I think I'm in deep water," Meka told the whales. "I think I have been for a while, I just couldn't see it."

She lifted the stone to her eye again and looked around. Waves rolled high overhead, and schools of luminous fish darted around in the air around her. She even saw glowing seabirds high above, dipping down to waves crashing in the sky.

woolwool

"But I can see the water now," she said, "and I think I might be trapped."

She looked through the eye down at the whale she was sitting on. She could see through the whale, through its skin and muscles, and saw its skeleton and blood vessels lit up and glowing. She looked down at its heart and just like the shark said, it had four chambers like a human or a kangaroo, and beat hot blood around its body. This is what the shark could see, and it knew that other sharks only have two chambered hearts. The shark had said that four chambers made human and whale hearts heavy, and the Creator Serpent only had three, and had burdened its creations. However the shark had tricked her, had offered to give her what she wanted but had cut her off from her family, land and ancestors. Meka put the stone back into the pouch and looked around at the high cliffs of the Cold Time. She was in a deep water trap designed by the shark, and she needed to find a way to leap out. She lay her palms on the whale's back and spoke in the direction of its heart.

"I need to find some shallows," she said to it. "Shallow water and shallow time. I need to find somewhere where I can climb back onto dry land - real dry land, undrenched by the spirit of the sea."

She lay her cheek on the whale's back and listened to it breathing.

"Shallows," she said. "Shallows."

The whales turned south and Meka lay on the grandmother whale's back as they travelled across the cold ocean. She didn't know where they were going, but she watched the sky turn dark and the stars emerge as they moved across waves and tides. She fell asleep and dreamed of sleeping between her parents down on Whale

Country. When she woke up she was somewhere she didn't recognise. There were more cliffs but they faced south. It smelled different too, familiar, but she couldn't place it. She lifted the stone to her eye and looked around. She could see the luminous figures of sharks, schnapper and jellyfish floating around her, so she had a sense that she was still in the Cold Times. Then she saw something else. A luminous whale moved high overhead, in the direction of the cliffs. Meka could see through it, and saw a little whale inside the mother's body. The whale swam over the lip of the cliffs and disappeared. Meka put the stone back in the pouch and lay her palms on the whale's back.

“This is where you come to have your babies,” she said. “This is where I was born; its Whale Country!”

Meka looked up, imagining the sea level being higher and covering the cliffs. It was so strange to think that the shark pushing its ocean up and drowning all the cliffs around Serpent Territory would create a shallow warm place where mother whales could give birth and nurse their young. It seemed that the whales adapted to the great change brought upon them and made it work for their community. The whales entered the sea of their own will, and though the shark framed it as fixing their mistake, perhaps it wasn't like that at all. And now the whales brought her here, as well. The place must be powerful, but the shallows didn't exist in the Cold Times, and she didn't know how she was going to get back to her time.

A scent came to her and it was campfire smoke, burning with the wood of banksia tree from her childhood. She shut her eyes and was overcome with images of

tall flowering plants with stacked leaves, paths through low trees that glinted with quartz and eagles circling high overhead. She lay back against the whale's back, overwhelmed, but she didn't feel the bumps of the whale's thick skin, she felt something else. She felt crumbly rock under her shoulders and palms, and she saw herself as a child walking on Whale Country.

The huge granite cliffs towered above her, extraordinary grey giants shot through with bands of quartz. The sand squeaked under her feet, endless tiny stones rubbing against each other, the glittering veins of the granite bleeding out and pounded by the surf into sand. She scooped up a handful of sand and rubbed it between her fingers. Meka watched her childhood-self walk up to the dark green coastal plants covering the sand dunes, and she wondered if the creatures that lived in there when she was young were still alive. Did the Country know her still? Could it know her anymore, after all that had happened?

She walked toward the granite hills, and she felt its cool shadow fall over her. She stood on a grey ledge and looked back out to sea. The shallow bay was a brilliant blue, sparkling and bright. The water turned a deep, dark blue further out where the sea was deeper, and then the ocean outside the bay were those wild horizon seas, the waters above the sudden drop down, the old cliffs when the Creator Serpent had control during the Cold Times, before the shark took that territory. Through the eyes of her childhood self she thought of herself sitting at the bottom of those cliffs on the whale's back, there in the Cold Times, caught between time and memory.

Meka looked inland and saw smoke from the fires of her grandfather's family camp. They were gathered in the low green scrubland not far from a river that emptied into the sea nearby. A single mountain loomed up east of the camp, the only feature in the otherwise flat plains. Whale Country was so different to River Country, the ground was rock that was streaked orange and white, and the path was full of spikey crystals that crunched under her feet as she walked. Little glints of light reflected everywhere, the watery rocks that glinted in the sun. She walked amongst a grove of banksia that grew much taller than her as a child, were probably still taller than her, their yellow flowers turned gold by the sun.

She saw someone then. It was her great grandmother Ngoola, a matriarch of Whale Country, standing there next to a banksia tree, pulling Meka by the hand to stand by her. The child Meka watched quietly as Ngoola pulled a tiny honey possum out from within the tree, a brown furry climbing creature no bigger than an adult's thumb with a long, pointed nose.

"Strange sleep," Ngoola had said, holding the possum in her palm.

The possum was curled around on itself, breathing and alive, but very, very still.

"It sleeps when there's not a lot of food around," Ngoola said, "or when it gets cold."

She then gestured to the flowers.

“It’s cold now, and the banksia has dried out. Now the cockatoo will get a feed and the honey possum will sleep until the flowers return.”

Meka felt a cold wind chill to her and she opened her eyes on the whale’s back. She looked around and a storm had built and the sea was lashing the cliffs. The cliffs didn’t seem as high as before and she realised that the sea level had risen. Is this why the whales had brought her here? Was it memories bringing her back to her own time? Meka lay back again and found herself as a child standing with Ngoola by the banksia.

Ngoola placed the possum back in the banksia, and Meka had seen that the possum had been sleeping in a bird nest.

“These banksia trees are the honey possum’s whole world,” she said, taking Meka’s hand to walk back down the path to camp.

“But see how much bigger the world is for us,” Ngoola said, gesturing as they walked.

“Our world is many banksia groves, plus the river, plus the coast. And imagine how much bigger the whale’s world is compared to ours. The whale’s baby is thicker than a tuart tree, and their home is that huge ocean. An ocean so big that pale people lived on the other side of it and we never knew.”

Meka saw smoke from a fire of a neighbouring family was drifting up from the east.

“This is why we have to take care when burning the Country,” Ngoola said. “When we burn the land we never burn it all at once, and never with quick, damaging fire, because a hot damaging fire would burn the honey possum’s whole world down, and a quick fire would create a situation that the honey possums would not be able to escape. We cannot only think of ourselves in this land. That is our job as those who care for Country.”

Meka looked closely at dried flowers that were flaking off what would soon be the woody cone that holds the banksia seed. The honey possums would sleep, and the black cockatoos would come in and eat the seeds. Then Meka’s people would use the discarded cone, empty of seeds, to carry fire from camp to camp. The banksia gave Country everything, then would grow new flowers in a couple of moons to start the giving process again.

Meka the child was alone again she walked east along the scrubby coast, the sun high in the sky overhead, and it was hot now. Meka could feel the heat rising up in waves from the ground. It was quiet, a lot of the birds, insects, snakes and animals were likely taking shelter in their dens. To her right she saw some emus pop their heads out by some tall stacked hakea across the plain, watching her for a few moments before dropping down to return to what they were doing. The ground sloped ahead of her and she walked toward large spiky rocks sticking up from the ground, like a cockatoo crest made of stone, grey with orange streaks. The Whale

People warm season camp was west of her, protected on one side by a rocky hill, with a river running nearby. Meka thought the eagles must make their nests in the short trees around her, as there were no tall trees here to build their giant nests of sticks piled up on one another. How different then, this Whale County was, or in turn, how different the tree-nesting eagles of River Country were.

A chill moved through her and Meka found herself shivering on the back of the grandmother whale. The sea was nearly level with the cliffs now and huge waves were crashing against the rocky edge. The whales were circling around her, clicking and whistling. A wave crested over her and she wondered if she was going to drown out there, drown in the Cold Times.

Meka could hear Ngoola's voice in her mind again, and she was on the warm beach. She was with her great-grandmother on the beach watching the dolphins play in the waves. They were swimming and leaping, using the energy of the sea to leap high in the air then travel through the belly of the wave to emerge again. Ngoola was sad that day, sad that Meka and her parents were moving away to River Country.

"You'll need to listen to Noornangk, now that your great-grandmother Maya has passed on," Ngoola told her. "She was a good friend in my youth. Your mother Mayakawa is named after her, so I knew when the old girl died your mother would have to go back."

The dolphins had leapt at play whilst they stood there, Meka's hand around Ngoola's digging stick, playing with the possum skin and feathers tied around it.

“Mayakawa is Noornangk’s baby,” Ngoola said, “there is lineage there that only your family understand.”

Meka thought of the man with the red coat, the first newcomer to Serpent territory.

“Your nana and her sisters will be happy to have you two home” Ngoola said. “I’ve grown attached you my little moon, but you’re going to leave with your mother like the whale and her calf once they’ve finished suckling in the shallow bays over the rainy season. The calf grows fat while the mother grows thin, giving her all, but then must return to wherever they feed out in the ocean, maybe even in shallow bays of other coasts over the horizon for the warmer season, where other families just like us wonder where they go.”

woolwool

A call from a seabird overhead brought Meka back to her and the whales. She opened her eyes and saw an albatross fly above, its wings huge against the blue sky. She sat up and looked around. The storm was gone, the sea was calm, and she was near the shore. She stood and marvelled. The sea had come up over the cliffs, and the warm shallows of Whale Country were present. She thanked the whales and jumped off the grandmother whale and into the water. She was plunged into the peaceful sea, an explosion of bubbles emerging around her as she did. When she resurfaced she swam to the shore, pulling herself up onto the sand. This was it, this

was the Whale Country shoreline that she remembered, that she stood on with Ngoola as a child. She had found her way back to her time, even if she hadn't made it back to River Country, which was an eight day walk to the north east. She looked out at the water and saw the large dark heads of the whales out in the bay. She watched them turn to the deeper ocean and disappear under the waves.

Sundial mountain

Meka's excitement dropped when she realised that Dayin might be in one of the camps nearby. He and his family were heading down here for him to marry someone after all the meets in River Country. He would be here, possibly even married by now. She knew that his promised wife was from the Great Woodlands on the way to Desert Country. Meka has never seen it, but Noornangk had told her that the earth of Desert Country was a deep red, the blood of the people and the blood of the earth. No yellow sands of River Country or white sands of Whale Country, the land there reflected back what was on the inside. Maybe the pale sands attracted the pale people, those whose own sands over the seas turned black. Dayin's Eagle mob wanted that for him, to tie him back to blood Country. Meka had none of that, she had Whale, River and deadlands in her blood, and was not a desirable wife.

Her heart began to feel heavy and she walked along a path that led away from the camps. She was back where she started, heart burning because she had to marry a newcomer with no connection to Serpent territory. She thought of the whales, who are born in one place and travel over the sea to another, going backward and forwards between two territories. But how was that different to Meka and her parents moving between River Country and Whale Country? These Albion newcomers were a sign of something dreadful, that Meka did not want to be responsible for creating more of. What evil birds might grow in her belly, what darkness might she bring to her community?

She understood that far-away look in Fionn's eyes. His body was in River Country but his spirit was at his home, which had died. Where was she going to go, what was she going to do? The Albion were still in River Country, she couldn't marry the man that she should have if the newcomers never arrived. She sank to the ground and held her chest, salty tears running down her cheeks. Her nana had passed away, her uncle had killed her mother. Her whale family had brought her back to her time but she was lost again. She sat on the orange, reflective ground with her head in her hands. The shark had pushed her into its deep time home and it had taken all of her energy to escape it. What was it trying to do? Her mother knew it too, and somehow at the end Meka had wound up more alone than ever.

She felt something near her hand and lifted her head. It took a moment to see through the tears but she saw it and leapt up. A carpet shark was shaking a lobster near her, whipping its head back and forth, breaking the crustacean to pieces.

NOW WE SEED THE CLOUDS

AND BRING THE RAIN

Meka looked around sharply. The banksia tree near her had a cloud of brightly coloured fish around it, the flowers waving as if caught in a tide. A large jellyfish bounced past and a sea snake wound its black and white striped body around her legs on its way past. Meka looked into the banksia tree and felt around for honey possums. She retrieved three, all in the quiet, unmoving state that Ngoola

had spoken about, curled up in a deathlike sleep. She looked around for higher ground; she knew that the sea was coming back. She ran toward the single hill with the possums held against her chest, with the sunlight eater's whispering in her ear.

EVERYTHING CAME FROM THE SEA

EVERYTHING RETURNS TO

THE SEA

Something in the air changed and Meka looked up. The giant granite hill she was climbing suddenly looked like a sharp jagged tooth rising up from Whale Country. The sun moved impossibly fast across the sky and the shadow of the mountain tooth crept across the sand toward her. The shadow passed over her and stopped; she was plunged into darkness, her whole vision taken up with the dark mountain fringed by light. Then the sun moved around and the light returned.

Meka looked back at the coast and saw the sea swelling up on the horizon, she had no choice but to keep climbing. She continued running up the hill and the rocky ground turned from orange to black as she ran up toward the jagged peaks. She felt the honey possums stir and wrap their tails around her fingers. She glanced back and saw the sea washing over the beach, the scrubland, the camps and the banksia groves. She reached the peaks and the water swirled around her, and she found herself standing atop a lone spike of rock that emerged from the water. The water stopped rising and Meka found herself completely surrounded by the ocean.

She looked inland and saw other mountains but they were impossibly far away. She was trapped again, but not in the Cold Times, this was something else, something like what had happened in River Country. But was it real? She looked down at the honey possums and she saw that they had turned to seahorses in her hands, their long tailed wrapped around her fingers. She lowered her hands into the water and they drifted down out of her sight.

A tall, pale dorsal fin emerged from the sea in front of her.

Nowhere left to hide

The fin travelled in a slow circle around Meka on her narrow spike of rock.

“You waited all this time,” Meka said.

I am the Patient One Under The Waves

“Patiently waiting until you’ve ruined everything I love,” Meka said. “Why have you done this? Why did you lie to me?”

Your heart is The Serpent’s heart. To break one is to break the other

“Why do you want to hurt the Creator Serpent?” Meka asked.

Serpent land stands in the way

“Of what?” Meka asked.

I must make the world an ocean

Meka felt the stone in her pouch.

Give it to me

“I’m not giving it to you,” Meka said. “I was born here, I’ll find a way to push your sea back like I did before.”

My sea spirits have invaded your land, you’ll never be rid of them

Meka’s heart hurt to hear those words, her Country, her family, changed forever from the actions of the shark. She swallowed those words down, felt them crushing her heart. She couldn’t survive this. Not here, so far from her family, her home, her time. There on the last bit of rock above the shark’s invading ocean. Her heart was going to break, be crushed, be destroyed. She almost fell over into the ocean at the feeling of it, but a memory came to her. The flexible heart of a python, moving out of the way so its meals don’t crush it on the way down. Could she survive this, could she keep fighting? Meka looked around from the rock, and there were no similar rocks anywhere above the water. This hill really had been the only high point on the southern plain. She reached into her pouch and pulled the stone out with her uncut hand.

“Maybe I’ll use this myself,” she said, “and I’ll find a way to stop you and your spirits interfering with families on Serpent territory.”

The stone glowed in her hand and Meka felt a sudden pain in her mouth. Her tongue hit a sharp edge and she brought her fingers to her mouth, gingerly feeling around her gums to see what it was. A tooth dislodged and she pulled it, bringing the bloody bone up in front of her eyes. It didn’t look like one of her teeth. This one was triangular, serrated at the edges, sharp and nasty. She held it in her palm and it lay against a splatter of her own blood.

You see, my power transforms you, there is no going back

Meka shoved the stone back into her pouch and readjusted her footing on the rock. She looked around at the vast sea, her heart aching at all that was lost.

“You wanted this,” Meka said, “you wanted me to give up and leave my Country. Well, I refuse.”

The dorsal fin continued circling her as she stood on the rock.

“I don’t believe you that there’s not going back,” she said. “You’ve done this, but I can undo it.”

If I can’t drown you in the trench I’ll bury you in the sky

Meka felt the strangest sensation then, a lightness. She became buoyant, like she was in the sea. Her feet left the rock and she panicked, trying to reach down to anchor herself with her hands. She felt pressure around her ankles then, and found herself hovering just above the ground. The last remaining spirits in the ground were trying to anchor her.

The dorsal fin stopped in front of her.

Not enough spirits left to save you

Meka felt the stone vibrate in her pouch and the pressure around her ankles evaporated. She began to drift upwards and she reached down to the rocks below to anchor herself, but it was sharp, so sharp. The rock she was standing on had become a giant serrated tooth. She floated up and she gripped the rock but it was cutting her hands, every grasp left a cut and her hands became wet with blood. She raked her hands over the wet rock over and over but she couldn't grip, her legs were above her, and her hair was in her face and she tried to hang on, but the forces were too great and her hands slid off the serrated granite and spun like a flower in the wind and she descended up.

She wept salty tears as Whale Country grew smaller underneath her as she spun up into the clouds. She couldn't slow herself down, couldn't control her own movements. The shark had tricked her into leaving her family, had turned her own Country against her, and now it had killed her, sending her spirit up into the sky to

crash into the afterlife shameful and rejected. Would she be caught by her ancestors in the sky? Would they watch her pass by, pass into the blackness, and not catch to her sit by the spirit fires with them and watch over Country?

The vibrating stone dropped out of her pouch and she caught it as it fell. Her hands were slippery with her own blood though and the stone fell, and Meka shrieked in frustration as it fell down toward the sea.

woolwool

A rush of white passed under her, and she stopped spinning, and came to float in a stationery position. She took a few deep breaths and sniffed deeply, her face wet with tears, her hands streaked with blood. Looking around, she could see the coastal edges of Serpent Territory, the white south coast beaches, the green inland of short trees, the red deserts beyond that. The light blue shallow waters, the ring of darker reefs and sea grasses, the deep blue ocean that stretched from horizon to horizon to horizon. Meka couldn't believe how far the sea stretched from the coasts, how far Fionn and the Erin must have come, the effect of being out on endless saltwater that long, how their boats fell to pieces when they hit the reefs that fringed Serpent Country, unable to be rebuilt, one strong wave away from disintegration. A cool breeze swept across her face and the salt from her tears stung her skin. She spat another sharp jagged tooth out of her mouth, watched it spin as it fell back down to the sea.

woolwool

Meka looked to her right and saw a white albatross gliding on the breeze not far from her. It turned onto its side and it cut across her path, slicing through the air, its wings creating a perfect arc from tip to tip. It floated like a shimmering crescent moon against the afternoon sky. The albatross dipped away and went into a dive, rolling on the wind like the air were a wave, coming down fast to the skin of the water before wheeling up again. It looked powerful and peaceful, and at home in the sky. It came close and Meka saw that it had the stone grasped in its feet, tucked up as they were under the tail feathers, with a stripe of her blood across it.

“Thankyou for catching that,” Meka said. “I really didn’t want the shark to get it back.”

The albatross arched around her.

“Are you a friend?” she asked.

woolwool

It looked a little like the albatross Meka saw sleeping on the yam terraces, but this one had more grey feathers in its wings.

“I left my home unprotected,” she said. “If you are a friend, and perhaps even a person once, please help me.”

She looked down at her injured hands as she hovered on the breeze.

“I’ve got to use that stone somehow to get down and get home,” she said.

“Can you help me?”

woolwool

The stone in the seabird’s claws started to glow, and a shiver went through Meka’s body. The breeze brought voices that Meka thought couldn’t exist in the world of water below.

the weeping river gathers salt from the earth to embitter the sea

Meka touched her bloodied fingers to her tear-streaked cheeks.

“Does my sorrow fill the sea somehow?” she said aloud.

She shook blood and tears from her fingers into the water far below.

“Does how I feel change the destiny of Serpent territory?” she said.

woolwool

So much of this trouble had began when Meka thought marrying a newcomer would mean her children wouldn’t stick to Country. She had felt herself slipping

away and the shark kept pushing and pushing her until she really was unstuck from Country. Meka needed to feel connected in order to get back. The stone continued to glow in the seabird's claws and she shut her eyes and thought of coming to River Country for the first time.

Meka remembered arriving in River Country and not knowing what to make of it. The trees were enormous, bigger than anything she'd ever seen. There were pale cliffs on the coast that crumbled slightly at the touch, there were lots of pale people. There were long flat reefs close to shore, and deep green banks and cliffs by the river. The ground was half water, not the hard, crunchy orange ground of Whale Country, but a soft, marshy green ground filled with lakes and wetlands. Two things comforted Meka in River Country, one was walking up into the hills, the home of the Creator Serpent, and seeing grey granite peaks like she had seen in the first few years of her life. The second was meeting her nana Noornangk, and seeing that she had a digging stick of her own, just like Ngoola, that proved that she was the Eldest woman of that area. Her nana was sad because her mother Maya had passed, and the digging stick had been hers. But she was happy to meet Meka, and had enfolded Meka in her arms and filled her senses with the bush medicines of River Country. Meka had not left her side since.

Meka opened her eyes and saw that the sea had been pushed back and Whale Country was revealed again; its beaches, banksia woodlands, low trees, and grey hill. Meka hoped the little honey possums had found their way back to their bird nests and hollows. It seemed that Ngoola had showed her that the considering of the honey possum had a knock-on effect that helped care for the whole Country. Meka thought

again of River Country, and how she would one day be an Elder, and had a responsibility to care for that place and to teach young ones, no matter where they're from to do the same. Her heart felt heavy when she thought of her nana, and she dropped in the air a bit.

The heart follows teeth

Meka shook herself and looked over at the albatross, and the glowing stone. Her skin was tingling all over and she knew something was changing in her, she just had to push it in a direction that was going to help her help her Country. She shut her eyes again and thought of what was waiting for her back at River Country if she could get there. She thought of her nieces and nephews, her cousins, her nana's sisters. She thought of the tuart trees, the Serpent river, cockatoos flying in flocks that blacken the sky. She thought of Dwerda, who as a pup wandered over to Meka, latching onto her dress with tiny teeth and then trying to lick her to death. There were things about Country to love even when things seem hopeless and when Meka had lost nearly everyone. She even thought of Fionn, and the danger his spirit was in. Meka looked into her heart and didn't believe that all the newcomers were ghosts. But she had to get home to find out about the Albion. There were too many things the shark had done, and she suspected the Albion were part of that. She had to find a way to transform her anger and sadness into action, and into life, and into flight, and into feathers. She could feel the ghosts of feathers on her skin, touching her all over, and she held onto that.

woolwool

She opened her eyes and watched the albatross dive down and away. Meka shut her eyes momentarily, steadying her nerves, and then felt herself moving forward and she mentally let herself fall. She stretched her arms out, her body tucking in and becoming shaped for flight. Meka felt her arms change into great wings that stretched out either side of her. She was white all over with grey wings, and she thought for a moment how similar the colours were to the shark, but now she swam through air instead of water, was a spirit of air rather than the sea. The world and its dimensions: air, water, land. They were all interchangeable and traversable, she just needed connection to survive the rising and falling of sea levels, of changing bodies and minds, of adversaries and allies. Her connection to her Country and her ancestors could never be taken away, she knew that now, and the shark must have known that. It can only be given up willingly in the mind and Meka had almost been tricked into doing so.

She followed the albatross, turning when it turned, dipping when it dipped. They rolled up and down in a winding falling rising motion, she felt the wind holding her aloft when they drifting high, and she was a knife cutting through fat as they dove toward the sea. When they almost hit the water they angled slightly, catching the wind as it sped perpendicular, which sent them soaring up into the sky again. Meka had been so frightened and despairing to float off Country but realised no matter how tough her predicament the spirit cannot be severed, and now she even felt peaceful to be connected to this one creature that was connected to Country. Night fell and still they dipped and climbed, following the body of a great snake in the air, a winding road only the albatross could see. Under the glowing moon her

guide dropped down and followed in the wake of a great black and white whale who was hunting near the surface, its long black dorsal fin like a knife slicing through Saltwater Territory. The two white seabirds angled and ascended on an updraft back into the sky again, two crescent moons either side of the full moon.

Her guide suddenly wheeled away and Meka followed, not wanting to break what was between them, still afraid in some way that she would float up into the darkness never to be seen again. They flew directly west over the edge of Serpent Territory, still far south of River Country, into clouds forming over the sea. A cloud passed over the moon and everything went pitch black, and Meka panicked, she couldn't even see her own wings. Yet the other albatross glowed, luminescent even in the absence of moonlight.

woolwool

Meka followed it and then night turned to day, and they flew above white clouds over a vast blue ocean. Looking down, Meka saw a shocking sight.

Ghost birds.

Hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands of the great wooden ships of the newcomers covered the sea below. Sails stretched taut in the wind, white foaming wakes against the blue, all bearing down on Serpent Territory. Meka turned to fly east, back to River Country, to warn her people but the other albatross cut her off.

woolwool

Meka followed it and they dipped down toward the ships. The seemingly endless mass of ships did have an edge, and they drifted above flags of many colours and shapes. The wailing! The wailing was dreadful, a million human voices crying out at once. Meka felt tears leave her eyes, tears for her Country, already in a quiet chaos with the newcomers already there. Tears for the lost souls beneath her, the great suffering wrought upon people who become severed from their land, their home. Who built ships from the trees of their home and brought home with them. Pieces of home that disintegrated beneath their feet in the harsh salt of the sea.

Her guide led her to the rear of the sea of ships and Meka saw it.

The shark.

A great pale fin, enormous, was cutting through the ocean behind the ships. It was of an unbelievable size, larger than any whale, anything that Meka had even seen or imagined. She had never seen it fully, and it was chasing the ships toward Serpent Territory, ushering them, corralling them. Herding them like a dolphin pod herds bream. The albatross led her around the back of the great shark, and she saw its tail thrashing from side to side under the water. Its sundial fin cast a shadow down its own back. She followed the albatross around to the shark's head and Meka looked down into the great eye under the water. That eye rolled up in its socket and looked at her, and the mouth opened, bearing its jaws beyond its mouth. They drifted over to

the other side of its head, and through the water, where Meka saw the dark socket of where its eye used to be. She wondered how her mother got it, and she looked over at the stone tucked in the albatross' claws.

They dove on an updraft and were flung high up into the sky again. Night returned and Meka found herself drifting high above a peaceful sea, empty except for clouds and moonlight. The ships were gone, the shark was gone. Was that the past, the present, or the future, she wondered. She was relieved to see the beaches of Serpent Territory ahead of her. Was she early or too late?

woolwool

Meka looked sideways and found she was alone. Her guide was gone, no trace of those gleaming feathers, and Meka felt a great weight in her heart, a great sense of loss. She began to sink down toward the sea. She turned her body east toward her home coast but she sailed without wind, without breath. She was in an empty void, silent, still, dead. Her wings disappeared, her hands returned, covered in dark scars where she had bled.

She shut her eyes, and silently despairing she drifted down toward the dark sea, saltwater bleeding out from the edges of her eyes once again. She felt her connection to her country fraying, splitting, snapping, the knots on an Erin plate that has unravelled and fallen away. Who was she, an eater in the ocean, destined to live as a heart attached to teeth, or a hopeless drifter, doomed to float above Country,

never coming in to land? Caught between saltwater violence and the darkness
beyond the campfires in the night sky.

oooooooowwwoooooooooooo

A single noise cut through to the void and she opened her eyes. That sound. It
travelled through the air like a solid mass, she felt it passing by her.

oooooooowwwoooooooooooo

She reached out her scarred hands to that noise, and found that she could
grasp it. The wind returned and she was moving again, hand over hand, down toward
her Country, pulling herself on the rope of that voice and that song. She felt her
feathers return and she flew down, following that undulating song, rolling and diving
toward earth, across ocean, until she saw with her own eyes the source of her
lifeline. On a hill, above the dance grounds of River Country, all the dogs in camp
were looking out in her direction, howling, calling, singing. She drifted down to
them, pulled in by their spirit chorus, closer and closer. She could almost touch
them, and she reached forward with a wingtip that became a hand, and she brushed a
wet nose, and then grasped a fistful of grass. A salty squall came over the hill and
she tore off the grass she was holding, and was dislodged again. She had a moment
of panic before the dogs leapt onto her, covering her with their furry bodies,
weighing her down until she was flat on her back on the grass. Meka dug her hands
into the grass and took great lungfuls of breath, as more bodies joined and she was
buried by the dogs, trapped by their weight. Meka felt Dwerda's nose touch her

cheek and she smiled, seeing the dawn light stretching its fingers up on the horizon.

She took another deep breath and fell deep asleep under wriggling bodies.

Journey upriver

Meka awoke on the hill with Dwerda stretched out next to her. She went to sit up and found that Dwerda had her jaws clamped on her shirt. She pulled her dogs lips back and worked her jaws open, and for a moment considered the sharp teeth that filled Dwerda's mouth, all pointed and deadly. She also considered how gently Dwerda was clamping her, and whispered until her dog unlocked her jaws and let her shirt go. Meka patted Dwerda then got up gingerly. She found that she could stand, she felt none of the lightness from Whale Country, the sensation of losing grip on Country and floating away from nothingness. She felt all over her body, the only signs of her ordeal were dark scars on her hands, and looking down she had dark stripes on her ribs where she had taken lungfuls of saltwater. Her body was dry, she could breathe deeply. She was connected once again. She sat and pulled Dwerda in for a hug, held her close.

“Thank you, sister,” she told her.

Meka rubbed her vigorously and Dwerda fell and rolled and snuffled. Something caught Meka's eye, a white feather stuck in Dwerda's fur, and she grabbed it, holding it up to the morning light. She let it go and it spun away on the breeze. She looked out to sea for her albatross guide, scanning the morning clouds rolling across the water, but saw only silver gulls hovering there.

Meka turned her back to the sea and looked out from the hill. The coastal plains stretched out before her, the sandy banks of the serpent river, the low

peppermint trees that ring the reed-fringed wetlands, the banksia woodland that ran in an unbroken line from north to south, the high stands of white flowering marri trees and red flowering gum trees to the north, the giant tuarts near the coast to the south. The spots of yellow from wattle bushes, the high dark branches of the Moodjar. Beyond that the steep edge of the hills, and the tall jarrah that reached up high on the slopes. The granite mounds standing like guardians to the great wooded plateau beyond.

A whisper reached her.

A full moon carves paths in the night

Meka smiled at hearing her ancestors clearly again.

She walked down the hill, feeling the spirits of the little flowers asleep in the ground, resting beneath until their season to emerge and bloom. Dwerda trotted ahead of her, ducking in and around the grass trees. The spirits had been so angry with Meka, and she was convinced they were trying to kick her off Country forever, like they had done her mother and her father, perhaps even Noornangk, and she assumed with Fionn. But now she knew that the spirits were angry about the influence of the shark over her mother, herself, and perhaps even sent the red cloaked warrior to them in the first place, revealing where River Country was to the newcomers. The shark had set everyone against each other in its mission to destroy River Country.

Meka stopped for a moment. Did the shark have something to do with the death of the Erin and Albion homelands? She didn't know.

Meka thought that Fionn might be still up in the hills and keeping an eye on the Albion, but she didn't really know how long she had been gone. She skirted around the Erin camp and headed toward Fionn's small camp near the river. She and Dwerda made their way around the limestone hills that edged the river and walked toward the grove of peppermint trees that hid Fionn's camp from sight. She always knew when she was close because there was a little waterfall that murmured softly as it bubbled down the rocks. The murmuring grew louder and there under the trees was Fionn's hut, with a cleared area for his collection of things thrown up on the beaches and waters of River Country. She saw Fionn's sundial sitting on a rock near the hut, its fin raised in the air like a stone shark waiting within the limestone for its time to strike. Meka looked away and glanced around at the camp. It looked like he hadn't been there for a few days, the campfire was cold and damp and there were bandicoot droppings all around. Meka also saw tell-tale signs that Rakali the water rat had taken advantage of Fionn's absence, with mussel shells scattered under the spear grass.

Meka walked down to the river and saw Fionn's boat half in the water, half on the sand. A thick rope was hanging out the side and sitting in the river. She felt a pang of pain in her chest, the boat reminded her so much of Fionn, and how he was convinced that he was a ghost and not a real person. Meka had almost believed it herself. Meka had ancestors, her mum, her nana, Maya, Ngoola, Old Nana Dingo. She couldn't believe that her father Gray and Fionn were ghosts...but the power of

the shark had been incredible, she had seen it drown canyons and flood riverlands. She wondered if it could create ghosts that could make offspring.

Meka ran her hands over the boat and a thought occurred to her. This boat hadn't broken apart like all the others that arrived. This boat brought Gray and Fionn all the way onto the beaches of River Country without a leak or a broken board. She felt the surface, it was smooth and hard, with no pits from the salt or holes from worms boring in. She wondered what kind of tree had been cut down, split and shaped to make it, of where it had stood on the far away islands that the newcomers hail from. Was it an Erin tree? Was it Albion? Was it an ancestor tree of theirs? Which of the islands had such a strong being that it withstood the shark's ocean unscathed? Meka decided to do something she'd never done before. She needed to get up to the foothills in a hurry so she was going to take the boat to do it. She didn't have the stone anymore but didn't know if that meant the shark would leave her alone. If it flooded River Country again she wanted to keep the boat near. She pulled the rope up out of the water and as she did she saw that it was covered in little brown mussels. She carefully detached them and placed them on submerged rocks a little distance from the boat. She looked out across the river which went from golden brown near the shore to clear blue to deep blue.

"I know you guys like the shallows," she told them. "Believe me they're much safer than the depths."

Meka pushed the boat into the water, and cautiously, gingerly, stepped inside. Dwerda sat unmoving on the bank.

“What,” Meka said, “you’re not coming with me?”

Dwerda looked at her with honey-coloured eyes and sat still as a rock.

“I would feel better if you came with me,” Meka said.

Dwerda didn’t move and Meka sighed, lifting the oars and pushing off the bank. She settled in and when she looked back at Fionn’s camp Dwerda was gone. She rowed out, imitating the movements she had seen Fionn use many times, and started slowly moving upstream in the direction of the hills. She had always been wary of the boat, and never been out in it with Fionn, let alone by herself, the strange shield turned upside down and floated out on the water. Throughout her life she had witnessed giant ghost birds appearing on the horizon, the wooden watercraft being smashed to pieces on the reef. She had watched helpless as people thrashed weakly in the waves, breathing lungfuls of seawater as they sunk out of sight. Meka was also afraid of being taken out on the tide, taken over the horizon, to face the shark again, or as far as the deadlands of her father’s people, islands with no plants and animals, and possibly no Creator Serpent.

Meka rowed out through the main estuary of River Country, the widest part of the Serpent river. Rainclouds had formed overhead making the late morning darker, and a light rain sprinkled down as she rowed. The rain increased and the distant banks disappeared from sight and Meka was in a world of water as she moved across the surface of the river. She watched colours dance over the waters,

little rainbows appearing and disappearing as each raindrop hit with a tiny splash. It was almost like being under the sea, but it was freshwater, it smelt like home instead of smelling like blood. She stopped rowing for a moment and lifted her cut hand to the sky, letting rain fall there. The cut had resisted healing, and perhaps it was too full of salt. She started rowing again, making her way through the world of blue and grey. The estuary was fed by two branches of river, and Meka took the south one that led into the part of the hills that had the Serpent Peaks.

There the estuary narrowed down as she moved into the south river and the banks came back into view. If Meka kept rowing she would pass the Erin camp and emerge somewhere near the hill that led to the Elder camp. Rain continued to fall as she rowed up the river, and she looked at the banks as she travelled. She saw black swans grooming one another under the shelter of tall sedge, pink and gray galahs looking damp in a swamp sheoak, a pair of grebes diving for food. She heard the song of a reed warbler from somewhere within the hakea that grew along the banks, likely skipping around looking for drenched insects.

woolwool

Meka looked up and saw a white star moving across the underside of the clouds. She watched it as she rowed and it looped around behind her. It came back overhead, closer this time, and Meka saw that it was an albatross, perhaps the albatross that helped her, considering how far inland it was. Its wingspan was enormous, wider than she was tall, and it cut across the front of the boat, the arc of its wings shaped like a crescent moon. It was soaring in great circles, following her,

flying ahead, doubling back. It passed overhead and Meka saw something fall with a crack against the bottom of Fionn's boat. She stopped rowing and looked closely. It was the shark stone, and Meka looked up at the albatross.

"I wish I knew what to do with this," she called out. "I don't know if my mother having it was part of whatever killed her."

She picked the stone up with her uncut hand and put it in her lap. She lifted the oars to start rowing but hesitated. She lifted the stone to her eye and looked up through it, up at the clouds. The albatross flew past, but within its body Meka saw a luminous peregrine falcon. It had shorter wings and a stockier body, hooked claws instead of webbed feet. It was entirely white and grey like other ghosts Meka had seen, but the dark-capped head, white chest, and striped underside were distinctive. Meka dropped the eye and stared in disbelief at the albatross flying overhead. The memory of her father's skin drawing on his arm of the peregrine falcon was in her mind.

woolwool

Her mind was swirling with the possibilities of the power of the shark and the power of the spirits of River Country. Who else would have helped her, but her father? It occurred to her that the spirits of the drowned Albion may have turned to albatrosses, the one bird that might have the endurance to wander the seas looking for green earth to reside in. She thought that those spirits might have been captured by the shark and sent to River Country to interfere on the shark's behalf. But this

control by the shark was unnatural and corrupt, which is perhaps why they appeared to Meka as horrid, morbid birds.

Meka watched the albatross arc around and then disappear west, back out to sea. Perhaps her father's spirit needed the form of the albatross as well, to find his way to a final resting place, but at heart his spirit resembled the peregrine falcon, his totem from his homeland, a bird also found in River Country. So many plants, animals and insects were strange to the newcomers, they did not recognise the kangaroo, emu, grass tree, banksia, goanna, tuart tree, or white cockatoo. Some animals looked familiar though, like the ants, spiders, daisies, seals, grasses and wrens. The peregrine falcon was one of the animals that the newcomers called by a name, they knew this bird of prey, recognised it immediately. The different animal relations and shared animal relations between the dead islands of the newcomers and River Country suggested that creator serpents shared ideas, or otherwise that creatures found their way to or from River Country just like the newcomers had.

Meka put the stone in her pouch and kept rowing. She guessed that her father had her best interests at heart, and had given her the stone for a reason, perhaps even to stop the shark from getting it again.

Procession

The river narrowed again as she got deeper into River Country and the trees stretched out nearly touching one another from opposite banks. She drew the oars in to rest her arms for a moment, and stretched as best she could. She placed her cut hand on the edge of the boat and it vibrated under her palm. A noise reached her ears, a melodic song, a soft hum. It was like the voices of her ancestors on the wind, but different, stranger. Was it the tree the boat was made from, speaking to her? She retrieved the stone from her pouch, lifted it to her eye and looked around at the boat. There were glowing branches growing out of the wooden planks, long stems reaching toward the banks and the sky, capped with wide leaves and strange fruit. There were little animals running around the boat and its branches, with slender bodies like a bettong, tall ears like a dingo and long bushy tails like a possum. There were gleaming wren-like birds bouncing around, similar to the willy wagtails of River Country, and a larger bird with mottled feathers that Meka did not recognise was sitting on the oars. Shining insects were floating around her head. She marvelled as she looked through the eye, all this time this boat carried the spirit of the tree that it was made from, and the creatures that lost their home when the tree was cut down.

She put the stone in her lap and ran her cut hand over the edge of the boat again. She could still hear faint music and vibrations, the spirit of the tree was there even without the shark stone. She lifted her hand again but the music continued, and she listened to it as she rowed further up the river, which was turning into a stream. The waterway would be too narrow soon, and Meka would have to get out and walk. The green fringed branches of paperbarks and swamp gums hung overhead as she

floated along. She rowed as far as she could, listening to the song of the Erin or Albion boat, until the vessel nudged up against some rocks at a base of a hill where water moved down across the rocks in a steady stream.

Meka stepped out of the boat, and accidentally picked up the stone with her cut hand. Immediately the stone turned into an eye that rolled around, looking at her and looking at where she was. She quickly transferred it to her other hand where it turned back into a stone again. She lifted the stone to her eye and looked down at her cut hand. Her palm still had shark teeth emerging from the wound, and Meka sighed deeply. She lowered the eye and looked up the hill that led to the Elder burial place, beyond which was the Home Of Rain Up High.

She heard something and turned around. As she stood next to the low waterfall she looked out across the riverscape she arrived from. The boat was sitting still against the rocks, the rain was falling lightly on the water. There was no breeze and the trees only twitched as raindrops hit their leaves. Meka peered into the forest, then lifted the stone to her eye.

Ghostly forms were moving in between the trees. Large animals, bigger than Meka had even seen, were making their way west through the forest. Giant wombats, oversized kangaroos and echidnas, large striped cats, and tall, terrifying birds with the body of an emu but the head of a duck. A large head emerged from her right, one of the giant wombats, taller than she was. She threw up her arms against the predicted impact, removing the stone from her eye. The animals disappeared, she was alone in the forest again. She lifted the stone and saw the retreating form of the

giant wombat, moving westerly with the rest. All around her she saw lines of ghosts walking amongst the reeds and trunks. She wondered who these creatures were, and why she hadn't seen them before. She looked down at the boat and saw that the little luminous animals had left too, and just the gleaming branches remained. Meka felt sad to see the animals go, to see the boat without the creatures that it nourished when it was a tree. The other animals were translucent like the sea creatures that Meka had seen in the darkest part of the sea trench, the ones that were skeletons in the rock and came to float and dance when she lifted the stone. They were creatures of the past, ones long dead whose essence remains in the memory of the land. Meka could see them through the shark's eye, and perhaps this is what the shark saw as it moved through its saltwater territory.

Meka saw the figure of a woman emerge from between the procession of long dead spirits and kept the stone to her eye. The woman walked across the river then up toward the boat. Meka backed up against a tree, and the woman walked past her and up in the direction of the Elder burial place. It was Mayakawa, her mother, and Meka lowered the eye in shock. The animals disappeared but her mother didn't, she remained luminous against the jarrah trees as she climbed the path that Meka had been about to. Meka put the stone in her pouch and followed her mother up the hill. Mayakawa stopped at a ghost gum and Meka stopped too. Her vision was filled with white for a moment and she was looking at the back of a man, the ghost must have walked straight through her. Mayakawa gestured angrily to the man who held his hands up entreatingly. Mayakawa kept walking and the man turned to walk back down the hill. Meka recognised him, it was Gray, her father, and she could make out

the skin drawing of the peregrine falcon on his gleaming arm as he walked back past her. She got out the way this time and saw him disappear down near the river.

Meka looked back and saw the glowing form of her mother walking further ahead. She climbed the hill after her and Mayakawa lost her ghost-like form and looked real like she had in other memories Meka had fallen into. She could see that Mayakawa had the cuts on her calf she had seen before up at the granite wall with the painted history. She followed her mother around a granite boulder and when she emerged on the other side she found Mayakawa sitting in a clearing next to a campfire. On the other side of the campfire sat Gray. Her mother looked unhappy. Meka couldn't hear anything but she could tell that Mayakawa was talking to Gray about something that had upset her. She was gesturing to the ground and the sky, pointing to the trees. Gray had a newcomer's knife which he was sharpening with some stones he had arranged around him. Mayakawa went still and was looking gloomily around. Gray got up and sheathed the knife in a leather slip and presented it to Mayakawa. She looked sceptical, and Gray said a few words, gave the sheathed knife a few flicks, demonstrating perhaps how to use it. Mayakawa stared at him for a few moments, then took the knife. Gray sat back down and Mayakawa looked thoughtfully at him, and inspected the blade.

Meka still had the stone clutched in her hand and she lifted it to look at the scene in front of her. Mayakawa had luminous sea creatures all around her, an octopus on her shoulder, jellyfish bobbing around as she looked down at the newcomer knife, seahorses in her hair, anemones attached to the rocks around her. Meka looked at her mother's calf and saw the cuts there had teeth. She looked down

at her own palm through the eye and saw her own teeth in that wound that wouldn't heal. Her mother had cut herself on stone shark teeth at the beach too, it was all connected. They had let the shark into their blood and it had changed them, pushing them into the shark's saltwater realm. She lowered the eye and looked around, her mother and father were gone. Meka turned around on the spot but she was alone. She kept walking up the path, hoping she might see her parents again.

She couldn't see anything, the forest was completely still. Even the rain had stopped, and there was no sound, the surrounding trees seemed empty even of birds and insects. She lifted the stone to her eye and looked around. There were more strange creatures walking past, ghostly forms making their way across River Country. Then Meka saw two human figures amongst them. She carefully walked back down the hill where Mayakawa and Gray were standing facing each other. Mayakawa held up a lambent hand and presented Gray with a rock. Gray took the rock and Meka could see that it was the same shape and size of the shark stone. Gray then offered his free hand to Mayakawa, and after a few moments of consideration, Mayakawa took it, and they walked together with the rest of the long dead creatures, out of Meka's sight to places unknown.

The Serpent watches River Country from high up in the hills. It sees the Country in all its manifestations, sees it being carved by its watery river body, sees it inundated by the sea. Sees every generation of cockatoo at once, sees banksia flowers exploding across its vision as they bloom over thousands and thousands of season cycles. It sees the creatures long gone from this Country that couldn't adapt to change, and now exist only as outlines in the rocks. The Serpent loves these creatures, they are as strong and important as any other.

The coming and going of creatures, it is the natural way. Some events simply cannot be survived. Terrible fires that lick across The Serpent's body. The invasion of saltwater on account of The Shark. Cold Times baring down on soft flowers used to the sun. Some of The Serpent's creations adapt, some don't. The great eucalypts that grow on The Serpent's body leads the way through catastrophe. They laugh in the face of fire, partner with it, use it. The black fire that attacked the Serpent Hills burned brightly but the eucalypts were ready. Their hearts are in their seeds, and in times of crisis they bury their hearts under the ash, ready to emerge again when the heat has passed.

Not all creatures can lock their hearts away like this. The Serpent works hard to build a Country that supports the hearts of the soft, the gentle, the hospitable. It is very hard for The Serpent to build something like River Country that cares for all manner of creatures, plants and spirits. It is a fragile system, reliant on a lightness,

a breeziness, a compassion. The balance is crucial. It is a complex order that is hard to build, but too easy to tear down. The many hearts of River Country beat together.

The Shark has come for those hearts. The great project of the soft edges of The Serpent's hard heart is teetering on the edge of destruction.

The Serpent sighs deep in the hills, sending rain across the coastal plain. Its ancient stone heart aches. It can feel the spirits of beautiful plant and animal creations that have passed on forever. The Serpent knows that this soft River Country can end. Survival is simple though. Each creation must leave something of itself behind. Otherwise in a blink of The Serpent's eye, they disappear.

The Home Of Rain Up High

Meka walked around the Elder camp, which was empty, and she wondered where her nana had been laid to rest. She spotted some short spears near the hut and picked them up, she had felt naked without hers. She walked higher up the hill into the forest with Dwerda softly padding along behind her. Out the corner of her eye she saw a soft glow, and she walked toward it.

the fallen gum blossom is carried by the river to the sea

Meka saw a giant tuart with freshly dug earth at its base. There were two torches burning, one at the head, and one at the feet. There her nan lay in the ground, her spirit warming itself by the little fire before it travelled up to be with the ancestors in the sky.

“I’m sorry nan,” Meka said. “I was so caught up in having a marriage that connected me better to Country that I forgot about caring for Country. The shark changed me with its salt and I think it made you sick. I just wanted to care for babies like the whales care for their babies. I know now not to let anyone or anything interfere in looking after my heart and the heart of this land.”

Meka looked around, imagining the terrible fire that burned through after the red cloaked newcomer oozed a black blood that made everything burn and burn.

“I know now that we don’t marry the newcomers because we fear the darkness in them” she said. “We take them in so we can transform that darkness into something that isn’t a threat to family, land and spirit.”

She looked up into the branches of the tuart. She considered its position as a protector tree in River Country, how other trees and plants liked to live near it, and lots of animals made their homes in its hollows, branches, and bark, or ate its leaves, nuts, flowers or sap. The tuart also grew in limey soil, the bodies of the sea creatures that turned to stone and sung to Meka. The tuart grew big and strong in a part of the hills that were devastated by the terrible fire that poured out from the red cloaked newcomer. Its tree ancestor was burnt to death but the seeds cracked open and this tuart as a seedling emerged, growing huge like its ancestors before it to care for the creatures, plants and spirits of River Country. The tuart was a protector that Meka could aspire to be like, an enduring spirit that could recover and thrive after catastrophe.

Meka looked up the hill toward the Home Of Rain Up High. The Albion. They are something twisted by the shark, just like she had been, but they may be full of darkness that could spill out and hurt River Country.

Meka scrambled up a steep path that ran up the side of the hill. The tiny holes of trapdoor spiders dotted the moist bank that comprised the hill, and Meka sensed the many eyes watching her from within safe burrows. The fires caused by the red cloaked newcomer must have caused great suffering to all the little things of River Country. The same little things that she needed to care for, all the things outside of

herself. She thought of her great-grandmother Ngoola's story of the honey possums, and how Meka came to realise that caring for the little things of Country was a way of caring for herself.

There were extrusions of granite every few steps which made the hill easier to climb. Meka reached a flat path that ran up to the Serpent Peaks. She didn't know if Fionn would be there, and she didn't know where the Albion were, but that was the first place to look. She walked under the tall jarrah and tried to think of what she was going to do. If the Albion really did drown at sea twenty season cycles ago then she needed to find a way to send them away. She had to do so without hurting them in case they spilled darkness onto the hills. As she walked she heard something up in the canopy of the forest. She could see the white-tailed black cockatoos up in the branches but they were unusually quiet. She thought she heard something moving in the trees, something bigger than an eagle or a cockatoo. She couldn't see anything, and kept moving.

Further down the path Meka saw a wallaby slumped on its side and shivering under an acacia bush. She leant over and saw that it had a large wound on its side, round and savage, far too severe to survive. She watched it breathe raggedly before the shivering stopped and the animal went still. Meka looked around and saw a dead kangaroo not far from the path, spread out under a bottlebrush, its neck severed and front paws lifted over its eyes. She crossed back over the path and looked on the other side, and saw more mutilated animals; an emu slumped in some spear grass, a possum laying in the crook of a honey bush, its fur dark with blood. She heard something overhead again and she became very still. After a few tense moments the

black cockatoos exploded out of the canopy and flew in a black cloud away from the peaks, to the north, their whistling cry filling the forest. Meka was looking up, and then had to jump to the side as something came falling down toward her. It landed with a dull slap and she saw a dugite, almost severed in two, lying on the path. This snake was her totem and she spoke a few words to the spirits to apologise for whatever was happening up there in the sacred home of the Creator Serpent. She knew what might be up in the trees, and she moved quickly toward the Home Of Rain Up High.

Meka reached the ring of tall granite boulders that encircled the peak. She was about to walk somewhere she never had before, somewhere not meant for her, not yet. She hadn't had any children, hadn't been in training with Elders, hadn't been a leader. She didn't know how she was going to be what she needed to be, without her mother or her nana, but Ngoola was there in her memories, and her mother and nana were in Meka's memories, and the memories of the River people, so perhaps she could defend and care for River Country one day. The granite blocks were three times her height, and hid the peak itself from view. Meka took a deep breath, then walked around a towering grey rock and stepped in, and found herself on a slab of granite that was smooth and dotted with moss. She was surrounded by stone blocks that sat like guardians at this highest point in the hills. Just off centre was a dark patch in the stone floor, something there had burned so hot it had permanently blackened the granite. She looked closely and saw that some of the standing stone blocks were hollowed out in places, as if the stones were waves breaking on the peak. Meka walked over to one that was like a perfect, smooth cave and she ran her fingers along the inside.

“Hello niece.”

Meka turned and saw Fionn sitting on the ground against a curved cave in the stone. There was the sound of fluttering feathers and Meka looked up and around at the granite boulders.

“We’re not alone,” he said, looking up himself.

“I know,” Meka said.

“All these years I longed to see my family again,” Fionn said. “I was so happy to see them.”

“I know,” Meka said.

“You said that you’d been talking to a shark?” Fionn said.

“Not anymore,” Meka said.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” Fionn said. “Having the Albion here has made me disorientated.”

“What does that mean?” Meka asked, not knowing the word.

“Disorientated means dizzy, or lightheaded,” he replied. “Like you’re lost but standing still.”

Meka shook her head, still not understanding.

“When I was a boy,” Fionn said, “I lived on a farm on Erin Country, a place where we grew our food all in one spot, and we penned the animals we eat all together.”

“The Erin people were servants on the farm, people we made do the work in place of us, and we took the plants and meat for ourselves, and only gave them a little bit back. All my Albion people believed that the Erin were not as good as us, that they didn’t know how to use their land properly so we forced them to do it our way.”

“There are many things that I would have done differently if I had known what was coming. I would have stopped the land clearing. I would have let the Erin live their way on their land.”

“One day I heard that an Erin boy had died, he was around my age. I was sent away before I could see his body. It was a hot day as I was told to go swimming with the other Albion children in the lake nearby, up in the hills. The lakes are different there, they don’t have reeds and rushes around them, its rock and sod all the way to the edges.”

“I waded out and floated on my back looking up at the sky and that’s when I felt it. Disorientation. Like I was a ghost, or a spirit, that I lived there in Erin Country but I wasn’t a living being, that I was haunting it.”

He looked at Meka.

“I feel that way now,” he said, “like I’m back at that lake, floating with my eyes on the sky, because someone died on their own Country doing work that we forced them to do.”

“That feeling has come here,” Fionn said. “It’s travelled over the ocean and found me.”

“Nana told me about the red cloaked newcomer,” Meka said. “The first one.”

Fionn laughed humourlessly.

“Oh, so you know now,” he said. “You know that it’s not pure hospitality, but survival with a wide streak of fear.”

“The forests recovered,” Meka said. “I’ve lost mum, dad and nan, but I’ll recover.”

She pulled the stone out of her pouch.

“And I understand the shark, I think,” she said.

Fionn looked horrified.

“Oh Meka,” he said, “if you knew what that could do you wouldn’t touch it.”

“I know what it can do,” Meka said, “but I also know my own power. The shark severs your connection to your land,” she said. “It tried to do that to my mother, and it tried to do that to me. It wants to destroy the power of the Creator Serpent and it can do that through humans. It said that our hearts were connected to the Creator Serpent’s heart, to break one is to break the other.”

She held the stone up.

“This stone allows you to see the past, the present and the future all at once,” she said, “but I could already do that through my memories and the stories of my ancestors. The stone twists those memories, makes you think you’ve lost everything so you give up. I thought my whole world was flooded and everything was lost,” she said. The shark trapped me in a deep place and I was turning into a creature of the sea. My whale kin rescued me, gave me my breath back and helped me find the shallows so I could get back here. I’m not going to give up. I am not disoreentj. You can come back from that. I saw my father’s spirit out there, flying on perfect wings, so I’m not giving up on my Country and I’m not giving up on these Albion.”

“They’re monsters, Meka,” Fionn whispered. “The dead who have come back to life.”

“They’re just spirits,” Meka said. “My dad was an albatross, his spirit is out there wandering, searching. These Albion are no different, they’re so far from home and have no home for their spirits to rest in. I think I can help them. The power of the shark brought them here to interfere with us. They are under the shark’s influence. We need to break that influence.”

Gliding over the plain

Meka lifted the stone to her eye and looked up at the granite blocks. Crowding all along the tops were morbid birds looking down at her and Fionn, preening, shifting, pecking at each other. These were the true ghost birds, corrupted spirits of people sent on haggard wings to interfere in the affairs of River Country.

“Do you have my dad’s knife?” Meka asked.

Fionn frowned, then pulled a newcomer knife from his belt.

“How did you know this was Gray’s?” Fionn asked.

“I know mum used it to take the shark’s eye,” Meka said. “I think that’s why mum married Gray, because he listened to her and he trusted her when no one else did.”

Meka lay the stone on a rock and lifted the knife.

“Wait!” Fionn said.

Meka glanced over at him.

“You can’t break the stone,” Fionn said. “We tried.”

“I have a way,” Meka said, and she held up her cut hand.

“I know how to turn it back into an eye,” she said. “When I touch it to the cut I got on the stone shark teeth, the eye looks at me.”

“So this is really it then?” Fionn said.

“We need to break the hold the shark has,” she said. “I don’t know how else to do it.”

“I just...” Fionn said, before trailing off.

He had a strange look on his face and he wrapped his arms around himself.

“Do you still think you’re a ghost?” Meka said.

“There’s no way of knowing,” Fionn said. “If the shark’s power is severed then I might lose my connection here and wander endlessly like Gray does.”

“This is what the shark does,” Meka said, “it makes you think you don’t belong.”

“The shark stone has terrible powers,” Fionn said, “it showed Mayakawa dreadful images of the darkness taking over and killing our islands. It drove her to

set fire to that ship with the Albion flag. Seeing such terrible things made her afraid and the fear made her violent.”

“I understand,” Meka said, “and I think the shark did it on purpose. It’s so easy to hate something but so hard to care for it.”

She held the stone to her lips.

“I will not be like the Albion, who invade territory, destroy land and sever family connections,” she said. “I will build, care for, connect and teach.”

She went to move the shark’s eye into her cut hand but then stopped. She remembered how the shark couldn’t flood the peaks even at the height of its power. The peaks were dry land in all versions of River Country that she had seen, the deep past, the present and the deep future.

“I need to go lower ground,” Meka said. “I’m not spilling shark blood up here, not after what the red cloaked newcomer did.”

Meka walked down and Fionn got up to follow her.

“No, you need to stay up here,” Meka said. “If the stone raises the sea again then you need to be up here on dry land.”

“Ok,” Fionn said.

He choked up a little.

“Goodbye niece,” he added.

Meka shook her head but in the back of her mind she couldn't be sure if Fionn was real or not.

The sun was setting as she walked down from the granite peaks and came to stand on a ledge below. Meka could hear the ghost birds going from tree to tree above her as she walked, perhaps attracted to the power of the stone she carried, perhaps they could hear the voice of their master. Perhaps that was what the shark had taught the Albion, that some people could be the master of others, because that's what the shark called itself, the Master of the Ocean. No creatures of River Country should be subject to masters, that attitude had poisoned so much already.

She held the stone in her palm as she looked down at the coastal plain. The body of the Creator Serpent was embedded in the land, snaking through River Country and emptying into the sea. They were connected, freshwater and saltwater, and Meka herself was caught at the confluence, growing up next to the estuary where the waters mixed. But the shark had pushed its salt so far, her mother's spirit was trapped in it, Meka had almost drowned in it. Everything else in the sea seemed at peace, but there was something deeply wrong with the Patient One Under The Waves.

Meka opened her cut palm and looked down at it through the eye. The shark teeth gleamed within the wound in the pink and orange rays of the sun. She knew she couldn't control the shark, and didn't even know if destroying the eye would harm it. But she knew that it wanted its eye back, and it might even have manipulated Meka into digging into her own past which led to her mother's grave to find it. The stone had been out in the taboo place the whole time, and perhaps it took Meka cutting her hand on the stone teeth at the beach cliffs to see its power, or even to see what it sees: the whole of time at once, the tides of time flowing in and out, the Cold Times and the Warm Times all at once.

The other thing she knew was that the Home Of Rain Up High is out of reach for the shark. She had to use these two pieces of information to free the Albion from their corrupted forms. Spirits deserve to rest, and the shark had disrespected the people who drowned in its ocean by making them believe that they were alive again. She shivered at the thought that she was supposed to marry one of them.

Meka figured that it was a combination of the cut and the stone being in River Country that gave her the shark's vision of the sea being in River Country. Perhaps it was the shark stone and not her mother's spirit which created the salt lake in the taboo place. Meka needed to go to that deep vision place to lure the shark to her over the shallowest part of Country she knew; the Serpent Peaks, which have never been drowned. She moved the shark stone into her cut hand and the stone turned to a great eye which rolled around, and then rolled up to look at her. She flipped it to her other hand where it turned back into a rock.

She waited a few moments and then she heard it. Waves lapping at a beach. She crouched and looked down and looked around under the ledge she was on. In the orange rays of the sunset she could see pink anemones growing in clumps against the granite, a sea turtle coming up for air amongst some woody banksia cones, a strip of seagrass growing in the paths that led to the peaks. Far below her she imagined Fionn's boat at the base of the waterfall making a nice home for rock lobsters and sea horses. The ledge that Meka was on was just above the deep time sea, and she thought this must be the power of the Creator Serpent and its unbreakable heart. She heard something and turned, and Dwerda came running up the submerged path and leapt onto the ledge. She had sea urchins caught in her fur and Meka pulled them out and dropped them gently over the ledge.

“Good girl Dwerda,” Meka said, giving her a pat.

Dwerda wasn't wet but seemed very aware of the deep time sea lapping against the ledge.

“I'm glad you're here,” Meka added.

Meka stood and looked back across River Country. Then, she saw it. A large shadow moving across the coastal plain. It was over the wetlands and making its way toward the peak. As it moved higher along the slope of the foothill Meka saw its pale colouration and its spear shaped head. She wondered what her community would see if it looked up at that moment: the white underbelly of a shark swimming through the air, huge, as big as a whale on the south coast and as pale as the moon in the sky. Its

gills billowing as it gulped air and water, its tail swaying from left to right as it moved its way through the deep time sea. Meka couldn't see it yet but she imagined a dark socket where the shark stone use to sit as its eye. The shark started rising toward her with the sloping ground and she saw that it had companions too, a group of albatross were travelling along with it, like the cleaner fish she had seen on sharks in the sea. They glided along in a cloud around the great bulk of the shark, souls entranced by its power. How many souls had chosen to follow the shark into self-destruction? Meka knew that power, had lost her mother to it, had almost been lost herself.

The shark was searching for her, in this place they were both occupying, either in the deep past or deep future, when the ocean covered this land. Above and behind her was the hard heart of the Creator Serpent, the shark could go no further, but sought to crack that heart with its salt, her mother buried behind there and poisoning the ground. Meka felt her short spears at her belt and knew what she had to do. She placed the stone in her cut hand again, and the eye rolled and rolled until it fixed its lidless gaze onto her. She saw the shark thrash its tail and move toward the ledge and at it did she stabbed the fleshy eye in her hand with Gray's knife. The shark opened its mouth and roared silently, and the albatross scattered in all directions. There was movement behind Meka and the giant morbid birds shrieked and flapped around her. She sliced the eye up in her hand and let the pieces fall onto the ledge, where they landed as shattered pieces of stone. The shark thrashed in front of her and she felt beaks pecking her from behind, tearing the flesh of her back, arms and shoulders. She pulled a short spear from her belt and brandished it around herself, trying to keep the sharp beaks and talons away. The shark was ahead of her

and she launched her short spear into its remaining eye. The shark whipped its head back and forth but couldn't dislodge the spear. The birds shrieked behind her and she glanced around to see their feathers boiling and moving across their skin.

Meka leapt forward off the ledge and grabbed the spear, hanging on and twisting the spear deeper, then tearing the shark's eye out of its socket. She fell into a banksia tree below, disturbing a school of herring that scattered in all directions. She lay bleeding in the branches and then pulled the eye off the spear. She looked up at the belly of the shark as she carved it up, cutting it to pieces, slicing her fingers in the process. Above her the shark became translucent, and Meka could see spears of light from the setting sun shooting through its belly.

"I don't know how to beat you yet," Meka said, "but I know you need your eyes to see through your oceans of deep time."

The shark thrashed about, biting at the air, becoming more transparent.

"My mother knew this too, she took your first eye," she said, "and I've finished the hunt by taking your second."

Meka considered the shark in its current form; an eyeless set of jaws flailing about, attached to a body built for swimming through cold nightwaters of time, a sightless eater looking for something to grip and shred and macerate.

"We will survive you, Eater of Worlds," Meka said. "I will survive you."

The shark became still. She heard a faint voice in her mind.

I will find your trace in the sea, follow the blood back to your time

“You can send your whispers into the void,” Meka said. “By the time you find us again we will be ready for you.”

A group of albatross flew out from the Serpent peaks, glowing white in the twilight, heading west. Meka’s heart sank for a moment, wondering if one of them was Fionn. She saw the outline of a great wave crash against the ledge above and then the sea was gone. The shark was gone, the albatross were gone. The sun dropped beneath the horizon and the sky glowed orange and red. The normal evening sounds returned to River Country, the croaking songs of the frogs, the chirping of the beetles. The light footsteps of the quenda, the soft hoot of the owl. The crunch of the possum walking along dry eucalypt branches, the soft *pat pat pat* of bats chasing moths.

Meka shifted painfully in the banksia tree, her back shredded from the attacks from the morbid birds. A golden face appeared over the ledge and Meka smiled up at Dwerda.

“Hi girl,” Meka said.

Then another face appeared at the ledge, and Meka saw Fionn peering down at her. He had lost that haunted look in his eye.

“Real after all,” she said.

Fionn nodded and patted Dwerda’s head, then shook his own head perhaps in disbelief.

Meka placed a hand over her chest, and felt her aching, heavy heart. She had lost her nana, her parents, and her first husband. She looked back up at Fionn.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Uncle,” she said. “You’re my family and you’re important.”

“It’s hard knowing that what I’ve been through is real, and not just a bad dream,” Fionn said. “It’s hard reconciling what the Albion did to our own lands, and the lands of the Erin. And their people. It’s all real and it all hurts.”

“You’re standing on the sacred peaks of the Creator Serpent,” Meka said. “The safest place in all the world.”

“I’ll aspire to be worthy of that,” Fionn said.

No bones but in the mouth

The stars were appearing one by one as Meka walked east from the Serpent Peaks. Dwerda padded along behind her, darting in and out between the trees. Meka walked until she reached the taboo place, and she found it as she had before, cold salt filling the valley, glittering like a pool of stars itself. A cool breeze moved through the hills and the Ancestor Trees whispered.

A shark has no bones but in the mouth

Meka looked around at the salty shimmering lake at her feet. Her family buried her mother out here to try lessen the sea's control over her, but burying the stone with her had brought the sea inland to the heart of the Creator Serpent. Her family had inadvertently done the shark's work for it, to help it crack the hard heart of the Creator Serpent, and to kill River Country like the once green isles over the sea.

The body propels the jaws

Dwerda stayed amongst the trees, she didn't seem keen to walk on the salt. Meka walked down toward her mother's grave at the bottom of the valley and noticed there was no rumbling under feet, no sign that Mayakawa's spirit was trapped here anymore. It was completely still. Meka had hoped that with the shark disorientated and blinded that Mayakawa's spirit might have been able to escape this salty place, leaping from this valley like a bream from a fish trap. She reached the

grave next to the tall stack of rocks, and looked down at the shark jaws that still jutted out of the sand. The salty spring that has previously pushed the bones up to the surface had stopped, and the jaws looked dry. Perhaps with Serpent rain this valley might recover now that the stone was gone. Meka started a little fire and lit a piece of reed to place at the top of the grave. She didn't know where her mother's spirit was, but if it lingered here then it would have a flame to warm itself on before it journeyed up to the ancestors. Meka looked down at the bones and thought that it was a shame that this piece of her mother was so far from the coastal plain. She pushed the jaws back underground and covered them in salty soil..

The heart follows teeth

Meka walked up the side of the valley and back into the elevated jarrah forest of the Creator Serpent, under the Home Of Rain Up High. She walked past a tuart tree, that protector giant that grows in soil made from sea creatures long past. She stopped in front of it and placed her palms on its bark.

“You understand the sea better than most,” Meka said. “The sea took your family when it filled the plain between River Country and the islands, and you grow from the rocky soil left behind by the last incursion from the shark.”

She looked up at the branches shot through with starlight.

“You're a protector of River Country,” she said. “I'll aspire to be like you.”

She lifted her hand off the rough bark and as she did she noticed that the wound on her hand was healing over.

Meka walked back around the hill and started the long walk back to the coast. Dwerda had run on ahead, and she walked alone under the tall jarrah trees. She caught a glimpse of something moving amongst the trunks, and she could see the animals of the past journey through the forest. The giant wombats with long snouts, the tall kangaroos, the echidnas shuffling through that were bigger than a dog. Short skinny dogs with thick black stripes across their backs, giant ducks that walked on emu legs. The spirits of creatures that had moved on, that had lived in the past but now only their spirit remained. Meka saw a woman walking amongst them, alone; her mother. Mayakawa looked up and smiled, and Meka followed her gaze and saw a ghostly peregrine falcon looking down from the branches of a marri tree. Meka smiled too and her parents were then lost among the many. The spirits faded and Meka was alone again. She wondered if it would always be like this, the constant loss and change, and that she would spend her life losing people, animals, plants and land that was important to her. Would she lose Fionn, or Karla? Her nieces and nephews?

Meka sensed something behind her and she turned. Dwerda was bounding energetically down the path, coming toward her fast.

“What’s up with you girl?” Meka asked, but her dog took no notice.

Then Meka saw luminescent forms appear around Dwerda, and she saw hundreds of glowing dogs running alongside her. Dwerda ran straight past and the ghost dogs moved through and around Meka and kept running down the hill. As Meka watched them disappear among the trees she saw that some were taking on solid form, with fur, eyes, tongues and ears. Meka watched in wonderment as they became real. It stunned Meka, that as some animals left River Country forever for reasons she didn't understand, other animals were arriving and becoming part of River Country. There weren't just human newcomers but animal newcomers, who had spirits that needed caring for just like herself.

It was dawn by the time Meka got back to the coast, and she found Dwerda sitting with Fionn who was pulling his boat ashore. Meka smiled and wondered if he knew that the spirit of the Erin homelands was alive in that vessel. She went and sat on the hill that overlooked the fish traps, looking down at the bream circling in the weirs, trapped by the tides in the shallows. She felt a pain in her gum and brought her fingers to her mouth. She felt around and pulled out a loose tooth. It was triangular, serrated down one side, shaped like a shark's fin. Meka took a deep breath and flicked the tooth away, watching it tumble down and settle in the sand below. She patted her dog's head then lay next to her, her head on the grass, shutting her eyes to rest. Dwerda sat straight on the hill, looking out to sea, watching for spirits on the breeze.

The Serpent lays its watery body across the length of the coastal plain. Its tail in the mountains, its body winding through the rock and swampland, its head forming the river mouth. It watches the sea, the territory of The Shark that has caused so much havoc for the people of River Country.

It brought the ghosts.

The Serpent sensed the ghosts walking on its territory. Cold feet on the sand, grass, rock and water. Icy palms caressing a banksia flower, frozen fingers sinking into the fur of a kangaroo, struck down, and in its last moments of life. Cold lips pressed against the cheek of a baby newly born in the shade of a paperbark tree. The Serpent is sensitive to cold in this Warm Cycle where the sea levels are high and Serpent territory is small. The ghosts come from the deadlands across the sea, the place that The Shark, Eater Whose Teeth Cut Through Time, used its powers of entropy and destruction to destroy all terrestrial life that lived there. No plant, mammal, bird, insect, person, reptile, fungi, or amphibian survives there. The shark unleashed a flowing black death that consumed everything on those green islands, leaving dead soil incapable of supporting life.

Almost here. Almost.

The Serpent considers the world at large, its separate continents drifting on hot magma, the oceans filling the gaps. The Serpent remembers using the heat

underground to split a landmass from its western edge, in order to build the soft edge of its hard heart that it longed for in the long, hard ages of the world. Not long ago all the continents in the world were connected in a supercontinent created by thousands of serpents, which was surrounded by one enormous ocean. Then the serpents began jostling, vibrating, cracking, and splitting. They pushed each other's territories away, wanted their own space, made their own space. Soon the single continent was many, all the pieces sent out into the ocean. The Serpent created its soft coastal edges, grew an abundance of life, celebrated the abundance, knowing it might be ephemeral, but enjoying the softness.

But The Shark was watching.

After eons of continents separating and joining, The Patient One Under The Waves has worked out how to attack these continents as they drift alone in salty water. The Shark tried for eternity to break the heart of Serpent Territory with its salt, but failed. Salt alone cannot destroy rock. But as the continents drifted separate in this cycle, a new creature appeared on the continents of the world, the human. Through the human the shark has found a way to rot Country from the inside out.

The continents now drift, vulnerable. They are the furthest apart they can get, the apogee of their spatial relationship. The green isles are dead, its serpent turned to dust. The Serpent can feel the shivers go through the world. Time for the continents to come together again. When the continents come together the serpents will bring forth volcanoes to bring nutrients up from deep in the ground, and cover the black isles so that life might grow there again. Time to freeze the world, suck the

ocean up into glaciers and ice sheets, and rob The Shark of its territory. A hard price for the creatures of the world to pay, but the power of The Shark must be contained.

The Serpent's heart rumbles. What to do when facing off with a force like The Eater.

The Serpent senses movement near the edge of its heart. The girl, Meka, whom The Serpent feared was unstuck from Country, is walking with solid steps in the jarrah forest in the home of rain up high. She has released corrupted spirits and freed them to return to their true essences, spiritual forms that cannot harm the bodies, lands and spirits of River Country. Where The Shark succeeded in the green isles across the sea, it has failed here. The girl struck out The Shark's eyes and the ghosts lost their grip. Cold feet have turned back into cold claws and have returned to the great oceans. The Shark for now, is gone.

The Serpent raises its eyes and looks into the night sky. It looks past the tree tops, the bats flapping their thin wings, the wind moving through the Ancestor trees. Past the clouds, past the cluster of electric magnetism that dances in the thin air beyond. It looks past the ancestors sitting around their campfires, looking down at their living descendants as they sleep. The Serpent looks deep into the blackness between the starry campfires, and sees cloudy clusters beyond, stripes of haziness against the darkness. It sees that they are huge clouds of ancestors, out on their own journey in space. Those clouds of light are simply drops in a giant river of light twisting its way through the universe, a great luminous snake that draws all the

lights together, pulling them out of the darkness. The blackness of the universe is an ocean, and the lights seek the watery body of Serpent.

The Serpent returns its gaze to its own Country. The girl, Meka, has settled into sleep, curled up with her dog, that creature that was a ghost once, then settled in and connected to Country, became real. The Serpent looks further, across the whole of its territory, from sandy coast to wooded forest, to swampy wetland and seagrass meadow, to open heath and mountainous scrub, and desert woodland. Some ghosts remain, as they always do. The ghosts of those lost in the world, following the light, seeking the warmth. But Serpent Land is alive, its animals, people, plants and spirits all thrive together on its body, celebrating their shared love of freshwater.

The Serpent might still lose its soft edges. It might become absorbed again in the great mass of continent, fusing and crushing until only the hardest hearts remain. The Serpent's heart has survived many joinings and separations. It aches but will never break.

**Korangan: Deep Time and Deep Transformation in
Noongar Country**

Introduction



Figure 1. Devil's Lair field trip photo. From 'Western Australian Museum', by Xavier Leenders, n.d. (<http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/articles/museum-field-trips-devils-lair>). Copyright n.d. by Xavier Leenders, Western Australian Museum.

Near Margaret River in Wardandi Boodja¹ (Figure 1), a limestone cave called Devil's Lair has stone artefacts dated at 48,000 years old (Turney et al., 2001, p. 11). Nearly fifty millenia is a long time to be in one place, and the Noongar people possess a sophisticated connection to Country, as they have observed their boodja, or homeland, through all its cycles and they know its plants, animals and weather patterns intimately. Like all Indigenous people around Australia and its islands, Aboriginal storytelling is layered with meaning and information about how to live a good life on their respective homelands. The lessons in cultural

¹ Noongar language word for land/earth/Country

stories are based on observable things in the environment and lessons learned from the past.

This research has been conducted on Whadjuk Country, and features Whadjuk cultural heritage. One of the main research sources, the Ngalak Paper, is the research of an Elder, Whadjuk Noongar and Yinjibarndi man Noel Nannup. If I have clarity on this topic it is because Noongar people know this place, and have retained information about previous climates within oral storytelling. I acknowledge those Elders, and their sovereign position as land custodians of this land and water, I acknowledge their ancestors, those old people of Whadjuk Boodja, who not only passed down these deep-time climate stories, but passed down all the other knowledge that is required for us to live a good life on Noongar Country, good for land, family and spirit. More broadly I acknowledge those who have worked in Noongar language revitalisation, as learning my ancestral language has been informative for this research and good for my spirit. Waangkan baal bwora nganyang koort nyininy.

Plot

No Bones but in the Mouth (hereon *No Bones...*) is the story of Meka, a woman born at a time of great change in her homeland of River Country, which is part of the territory of The Serpent. She is the youngest in a long line of women who care for River Country, a coastal landscape on the southwest edge of a large continent. Fifty years before Meka was born, climate refugees from an island cluster on the far side of the world arrived on the beaches of Serpent territory seeking shelter. The people of River Country took them in and integrated the refugees into the existing marriage

and kinship system. Meka is the child of a River Country mother and a climate refugee father, and grew up in this new social world. When a group of new refugees arrive, buried tensions in the community rise to the surface, and Meka senses that not everyone was happy to accept the refugees in the first place. Meka is instructed to marry one of the new refugees, in order to maintain the kinship system. Meka feels that something is deeply wrong with this marriage, and seeks distance from both her River Country and refugee family. She spends time alone and falls under the influence of The Shark, a spirit in the sea that befriends her and fuels Meka's distrust toward the decision makers in her community. The Serpent watches in dismay as The Shark's influence causes Meka to become unstuck from River Country. She travels backwards and forwards through time, unable to return to her home. Meka makes her way back to her own time and Country through the help of The Serpent and her own memories, and on her return rids River Country of The Shark and its agents.

No Bones... is a creative work set in an alternative version of the southwest, where European-like people arrive in ships at the coastal territory of Noongar-like people. These pale newcomers are starving and traumatised, and have fled a climate disaster in their homeland on the other side of the world. The novel is an exploration of an arrival/invasion story of Noongar Country where the perfidious and militaristic value system naturalised by Eurocentric modes of aggressive capitalist, nationalist expansion doesn't exist. In *No Bones...* the status quo is Indigenous law and culture, not European law and order, and the novel is a creative space to explore what this society might look like. *No Bones...* is a statement on how colonisation was not 'inevitable', that Europeans had a choice whether or not to oppress Indigenous people. In *No Bones...* the European-like people have created a climate disaster in

their homeland, so the strong belief Europeans had of their superiority to darker skinned people doesn't exist in the novel, as they arrive on the shores of a people that haven't wrecked their environment. Knocking European-like people off their pedestal makes space to honour the hospitality, spirit and sustainability of Indigenous cultures, aspects ignored by the colonisers who settled Australia.

No Bones... attempts to present an alternative vision of ethical and rich culture based on reciprocity, responsibility and empathy, yet not without the complexities and difficulties involved in traditional cultures, with set patterns of kinship and marriage. Change is a major theme of the novel, and that change is written onto the landscape. Land, body and spirit are connected in Australian Indigenous cultures, so the changes that can be read in the land are changes that are possible in the body and in the spirit. Meka slips out of time and starts to see the land from a deep-time perspective, and this zoomed-out view shows her that change is a constant. This highlights that while things change, the actions of individuals can impact what level of suffering those changes bring. Meka herself changes, transforming first into a shark and then into an albatross, reflecting how the boundaries between human, land, animal and spirit are entangled in Indigenous ways of thinking.

Time is another theme of the novel, the shark's dorsal fin is shaped like the gnomon of a sundial, a time-telling apparatus that often carries grim warnings about time. Where Indigenous time is often expressed in terms of circles, patterns and cycles, the shark introduces a destructive, linear time to Meka and to River Country, time that has entropy and eschatology associated with Western culture and

modernity. The shark, a consumptive eater who gaslights Meka, is the spectre of colonisation haunting the story. Through Meka, The Shark tries to destroy the human's connection to Country, so that it might erode the power of The Serpent and flood River Country with its ocean. The Serpent has all of the plants, animals, people and waters of Serpent Territory to look after, and is vulnerable to attack from The Shark who has no concerns outside of its own self-interest. Their adversarial relationship reveals that it is easy to destroy Country, but very hard to keep Country healthy.

The political dimensions of *No Bones...* speaks to origin and creation stories. The 'discovery' narrative of the British arrival in Noongar Country erases Noongar sovereignty and land custodianship. With the European-like climate refugees washing ashore without the weight and power of the colonial imperialist machine behind them, I explore what the possibilities are for integration and spirit in a Noongar Country without colonialism. The Erin people resemble the Irish, so the novel brings out the legacy of British colonialism, and the lengths they went to delude themselves into thinking they were superior and entitled to other people's land and to interfere in their families.

Scholarship

This project draws on research from geology and geomorphology, postcolonial theory, Indigenous story, and traditional Noongar knowledge. The blending of these is inspired by the paper 'Ngalak koora koora djinang (Looking back together): a Nyoongar and scientific collaborative history of ancient Nyoongar boodja' (Robertson et al., 2016), hereon 'the Ngalak paper', one of the key pieces of research in Chapter 1. Robertson et al. explore Western-centred scientific evidence alongside

Western Australian Indigenous story and traditional knowledge. The Ngalak paper was written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, and describes the geological and climatological history of Noongar Country, alongside the Noongar oral storytelling history of Noongar Country. Climate occurrences in Noongar memory are lined up with a climatological description of ice ages and sea-level rises readable in the rock in Noongar Country. The Ngalak paper doesn't set out to 'prove' Noongar stories are eyewitness accounts, instead it simply points out correlations to show how when it comes to talking about Country, climate scientists and Noongar people can 'look back together' and combine research. The Nunn and Reid paper (2015) informs the research where Aboriginal oral storytelling *is* compared with the Western-scientific reading of the history of the land with the view to suggest that coastal stories about rising sea levels are eyewitness accounts of the sea-level rise that followed the last ice age. This PhD project leans into this space, where research into Western-scientific and Aboriginal perceptions of climate change are drawn upon to write fiction about change. The two approaches blend and adapt alongside each other to provide a rich and nuanced context for the world-building creative project of *No Bones*....

Chapter 2 comprises original research, where bilingual Noongar stories are surveyed and assessed for themes around 'korangan', the Noongar word for 'transformation' or 'metamorphosis'. Postcolonial theory informs Chapter 3, where research on settler colonialism, race science and ecology are utilised to explore the inferior morality of British colonisers who invaded and stole Country from the Noongar people, and their incompetence when placing themselves as masters of the Noongar people and Noongar land. Chapter 4 explores how the scholarship of

Chapters 1–3 inform characterisation in *No Bones...* and describes my own invented methodology of writing fiction based in two worlds. The world-building of the novel is indebted to local southwest geologists such as Peter Lane whose book *Geology of Western Australia's National Parks* (2017) was an essential entry point into the geology under and around Noongar Country.

Discipline

The exegesis explores the multiple disciplines drawn upon to write *No Bones but in the Mouth*. The disciplines of geology, biology and climatology offer a semi-objective base from which to consider Country, where observable phenomena is organised into a vast library knowledge system accessible by anyone with the capacity to read. These science disciplines are reliant on print books, maps, charts and internet libraries to build on and reference information. The vast amounts of information retained by science disciplines is the reason the scientific sources can inform the world-building in *No Bones...* because they literally describe the building of the land of Noongar Country. The minutiae of chemical processes, wind erosion, tectonic plates shifting, glaciers creeping, soil fossilising and plant and animal matter decomposing is all brought together in the scientific disciplines to generate large complex narratives of how the land came to be, on a scale ranging from the growing of microbes to the exploding of volcanoes. This detail contains narratives of change that exist in the land like nesting dolls: the mountain tells the story of uplift, the strata layers in the mountain tell stories of sediment falling on ocean floors, a strata layer could contain the fossils of extinct organisms, those extinct organisms could have DNA evidence that tell a story connecting them to extant species today.

Oral storytelling from Aboriginal Australia records knowledge in another way. Where the scientific disciplines hypothesise previous climates from minutiae, stories in the Noongar community that reference climate change are eyewitness accounts of that climate event that have then been passed down through oral storytelling. They are both observational styles, but the Noongar community saw the climate event, whereas the scientific disciplines ‘read’ the story of climate change in the geological strata. The scientific disciplines cannot ‘remember’ these events, and Noongar oral storytelling does not provide a minutiae view of land formation, yet both tell a story about land formation. *No Bones...* posits a world where The Serpent created the land with knowledge of this minutiae detail, who builds the land layer by layer, as described in geomorphology. The project is inherently and necessarily cross-disciplinary and draws on the scientific and Noongar understanding of time and place to tell a story about land that is informed by both. The scientific minutiae nature of The Serpent in its creating is inspired by the Nunn and Reid (2015) research that concludes that Aboriginal stories are encoded with climate and biological information.

While knowledge gleaned from scientific disciplines is necessary for this world-building creative project, this project is attendant on Noongar knowledge, which has been kept alive through robust people and traditions. *No Bones...* has political dimensions, it is a world where Aboriginal concepts around land formation are the dominant view. The oral storytelling of the Noongar people has endured in the face of cultural erasure carried out as part of the genocidal project of the last 200 or so years of colonisation. *No Bones...* honours Aboriginal storytelling traditions

that have not been respected as knowledge, and casts them in a light that reflects their power to recall past climates.

The convergence of scientific and Aboriginal cultural ideas has probably come about from the interest in looking into past climates to come to terms with human-made climate change since the world industrialised. This ‘looking back’ into the deep, non-human past makes ideas around ‘deep time’ useful to this project, and Chapter 4 explores the way deep time goes some way to bridge the gap between the scientific and Aboriginal approaches to storytelling about land and sea formation.

The creative disciplines have been an influence on the project. Noongar writer Kim Scott goes back to origins to explore ‘what might have been’ in *That Deadman Dance* (2010), in a story that highlights the intelligent curiosity of the Noongar people during the ‘friendly frontier’ on the south coast that through time turned into an ‘unfriendly’ colony. *No Bones...* shares this spirit of return to the origins, telling that story of the ships arriving but turning the colonisers to refugees to see what happens. Waanyi writer Alexis Wright employs the voice of the Rainbow Serpent in *Carpentaria* (2006) to let Country speak, as The Serpent does in *No Bones...*, speaking to the reader from within deep time to describe the blood and bones of Country. *No Bones...* is a slipstream version of our world just like Wright’s *Swan Book* (2013), where the spirit of the land is a dominant element in the story. Land and land transformation is the central concern of Mununjali Yugambeh writer Ellen Van Neerven’s story ‘Water’ in *Heat and Light* (2014), where ancestral islands are being filled in to create larger landmasses, and the protagonist keenly feels that erasure of her people’s sovereignty and history. That protagonist digs her heels in

and refuses to bow to social pressure, and Meka shares that sentiment, another young Indigenous woman questioning her Elders. Noongar writer Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2017) tells of an invasion of colonisers who wind up being humanoids from the stars. These aliens are affected by the strange climate on Earth much like the British were when settling Australia, and the humans suffer the same miserable oppression that the Noongar people did. The novel shows that colonisation is, in real life and in science fiction, a mundane and violent exercise that affects everyone involved. *Terra Nullius* creates a scenario where all people, not just Aboriginal people, are colonised, to tell a story about colonisation that non-Indigenous readers might connect with. *No Bones...* shares this spirit, of telling an origin story in an imaginative way, in order to bypass the apathy around reconciling invasion.

Aboriginal writers, especially in the southwest, tell stories about the past and the time of colonisation because that era is poorly understood by mainstream Australia, and the narratives that circulate in Australia tend to silence and diminish Aboriginal perspectives on invasion. *No Bones...* is another one of these stories, looking for a new way to talk about colonisation in the hope that readers might finally understand how the injustices of that time ripple out in contemporary Australia.

Methodology

The creative writing of *No Bones but in the Mouth* combines scientific and Noongar ideas of land formation to create a slipstream creation story for the southwest. The geological history of Western Australia has evidence of all four eras of Earth's formation: Hadean, Archean, Proterozoic and Phanerozoic. I posit that because

Western Australia has all of Earth's history present in its fossil record, then Western Australia possesses an uninterrupted 'deep memory' of the Earth from it accreting from colliding planetesimals around the newly formed sun to now. The Serpent is the mouthpiece of this research in *No Bones...*, it talks about how it has an ancient 'hard heart' that has newer soft edges, that it remembers when rocks hit the Earth from space killing billions, and extreme cold times when the Earth was completely frozen for hundreds of millions of years. From an Aboriginal cultural perspective, serpents made Australia, and *No Bones...* posits The Serpent as the one who did this creating over the 4.5 billion year history of the Earth. The Serpent's 'hard heart' is a poetic version of the Archean-era Yilgarn Craton that comprises most of Noongar Country, and the 'soft edges' are the Proterozoic and Phanerozoic coastlines that have only formed recently around the Yilgarn Craton, a result of the continents grouping together and pulling apart in the formation of supercontinents. The rock The Serpent saw hit the Earth from space was the asteroid that caused the Triassic–Jurassic extinction event, and the long cold times were the Hurion Glaciation of 2.1 billion years ago.

The Shark is inspired by the fossil record and evolutionary history of living and extinct sharks. Sharks appear in the fossil record earlier than trees on land do, so The Shark is another character that can be constructed as a reservoir of deep memory, and an observer of deep time. Sharks existed before the Swan Coastal Plain, the landscape that River Country is based on, and The Shark desires to see River Country flooded with ocean once again. Photosynthesising bacteria is also a character, and their two-billion-year existence put them in a position to give The Shark an even older history that it itself possesses.

Chapter 1 of this exegesis explores the geological history of Western Australia, particularly that pertinent to the southwest. This research was essential to write fiction that combines scientific and Aboriginal ideas of land formation and land transformation. This research was also essential to understand the science in the two key papers of this research, the Nunn and Reid paper (2015) and the Ngalak paper (2016). The exegesis and novel mirror one another in this way, the research method for the exegesis generates the material that is essential for the writing of the novel.

Original research was required to explore ideas around 'korangan', presented in Chapter 2, as there was no scholarship on ideas around transformation in Noongar stories, or any specific Australian Indigenous oral storytelling tradition. I've avoided any kind of framing from other literary forms and investigated the stories purely for occurrences of transformation and themes as to why those transformations took place. Researching the three sets of published Noongar stories reveals aspects of the storytelling tradition of Noongar oral culture, and gives insight into how sea-level rise stories have recorded change.

The colonial research in Chapter 3 is essential to telling a story about the southwest, as the arrival of colonisers in Noongar Country has had a huge impact, not unlike the impact of the last ice age or the rise in sea level that followed it. In fact the novel makes the comparison of the invasion of saltwater with the invasion of Europeans. The Shark is responsible for the European proxies arriving in River

Country creating a double invasion, one of Erin and Albion people, and one of the invading ocean.

Chapter 4 lays out the way in which *No Bones...* is a creative experiment where research into local geology and climatology, along with Aboriginal memory of ice ages and sea-level rise, informs a novel about change that puts those knowledges into a new hierarchical system. *No Bones...* has its foundation in science and Noongar ideas, which are revealed in Chapter 1 to possess correlations beyond metaphor. Writing *No Bones...* has been both intellectually and spiritually nourishing. This is an experimental approach to fiction writing, and this methodology of researching geology to understand Noongar stories suggests further research beyond this PhD around ideas of how looking at geology and evolutionary history can be a bridge for Aboriginal people today disconnected from Country to return to knowledge of Country.

Chapter 1 – Noongar Memory of Deep-time Climate Events

1. Introduction
2. Geological Eras of the Earth
3. How Geomorphic Forces Influence the Climate
4. Geology of Noongar Boodja
5. Coastlines Changed by the Holocene Warming
6. Aboriginal Memory of Deep-time Climate Events
7. Noongar Deep Memory – The Ngalak Paper
8. A Note on Time
9. Nyitting – the Cold Times
10. Waardanak Boodja – the Flood

Introduction

Deep time is geologic time, or earth time. It is periods of time measured in thousands and millions, even billions of years. It is the timescale used to describe natural processes such as tectonic plates moving, caves forming, glaciers cutting tracks through mountain ranges, and rivers digging canyons through rock. Deep time is also a lens through which to understand our changing world and our place in it. This chapter discusses the deep-time history of the Earth, the geology of the southwest², and the scientific and Noongar histories about the formation and transformation of Noongar Country.

² The southwest portion of the Australian landmass

No Bones but in the Mouth has a deep engagement with deep time, through characters who experience it and creator beings who exist in it. The novel blurs the boundaries between the scientific and the cultural, bridging the gap between traditional place-based disciplines like geography with Aboriginal ideas about landscape as inseparable from body, family and spirit. The main themes of the novel are *change* and *time*, and the changes that the landscape has gone through in deep time – tectonic plates grouping together and splitting, sea levels rising and falling, ice caps forming and melting – are mirrored with changes in River Country, where the Erin and Albion people bring different changes that are linguistic, technological and culinary from their homelands, as well as bringing dangerous ideas that are colonial and consumptive (discussed in Chapter 4).

This chapter contains an exploration of geomorphology and climatology because scientific details of place serve as inspirations for fiction writing: the sea creatures who make up the eroded limestone around The Serpent's hills are conscious and dreaming in the novel; creatures long extinct in the strata listen to the activity on the surface; the folded, layered bedrock is the brain of The Serpent, a rocky cerebrum full of memory. The novel is a creative space where scientific ideas are projected into a cultural, spiritual realm. The Western scientific perspective of the southwest has no spiritual dimension, no engagement with place beyond taxonomy. Science by its nature is replicable hypothesis; the discipline values knowledge sets that conform across all geological phenomena and generate narratives that posit a predictable, empirically organised world. These concepts influenced Enlightenment thinking, where the world is imagined to be ultimately

scrutable through the application of research. Noongar knowledges are only relevant to Noongar Country, and cannot be inferred from observable phenomena. Noongar knowledge sets can only be learnt from Noongar people, which is a different approach from science as to what constitutes knowledge and what knowledge is for. Noongar people embody a scale of 'inhabitation' that exists outside and beyond post-Enlightenment ways of thinking, and *No Bones...* honours and celebrates that by constructing a scenario where Aboriginal knowledges are the mainstream view, with science being a complimentary view.

The bridging of the scientific and Noongar knowledge sets is pre-empted by the two main research papers referenced here: Nunn and Reid's 'Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago' (2015) and Robertson et al.'s 'Ngalak koorra koorra djinang (Looking back together): a Nyoongar and scientific collaborative history of ancient Nyoongar boodja' (2016), also known as, the 'Ngalak' paper. It is crucial to the novel and the exegesis to have an understanding of the science of land formation and climate change, in order to grasp the substance of these papers. The two papers point to Noongar stories being encoded with information about previous climates and sea levels, the result of meticulous research first done by Nunn and Reid (2015) to compare Aboriginal flood stories with sea-level data, climate data and ocean-depth data. Nunn and Reid (2015) employ a critical place-specific engagement with geomorphology and climatology to generate their research, and in order to engage critically with their research to write fiction, it was essential to create the geological and climatological narrative written in this chapter. The 'Ngalak' paper is mostly concerned with the writing of a timeline that aligns Noongar historical events with

occurrences readable in the geological history. This narrative is about writing origin and history stories: of the rocks of the southwest, of the Noongar people, and the River people of *No Bones*.... If one accepts that Noongar stories of ‘cold times’ and floods are eyewitness accounts of the last ice age and the sea-level rise that followed its melting, then it is critical to understand previous climates in order to create the world in *No Bones*... and for it to bear a truthful likeness to a Noongar world view.



Figure 2. Eranondoo Hill in the Jack Hills belt. From ‘A time transect through the Hadean to Neoproterozoic geology of the western Yilgarn Craton – a field guide’, by M. Van Kranendonk, T. Ivanic, S. Wyche, S. Wilde, and I. Zibra, 2010, Perth, WA: Geological Survey of Western Australia, p. 11.

Geological Eras of the Earth

The continent of Australia is a significant place in terms of deep time, because it is an ancient landmass with a wide variety of geological eras represented in the surface rock. Hadean zircon crystals found in the Narryer Gneiss Complex in the Jack Hills

of Western Australia are ‘the oldest terrestrial minerals found to date’ (Maas, Kinny, Williams, Froude, & Compston, 1992, p. 1281) and have been dated to around 4300mya³ (1992, p. 1281). The crystals are a billion years older than the surrounding rock of the Jack Hills, which are 3300mya themselves (Maas et al.,1992, p. 1282). They are called ‘Hadean’ zircons in reference to the ‘eons’ of Earth’s timescale, of which there are four:

Hadean: 4600mya–4000mya

Archean: 4000mya–2500mya

Proterozoic: 2500–541mya

Phanerozoic: 541–0mya

The Hadean eon is a period covering the formation of the Earth approximately 4550mya to the proposed formation of the solid crust 4000mya. It takes its name from the Greek underworld, in reference to the Hadean eon being imagined as an ‘uninhabitable, hellish world’ (Harrison, 2009, p. 479), where the earth was a glowing hot planetoid formed by colliding planetesimals in the debris disc that surrounded the Sun after it formed at 4600mya. The Moon is proposed to be a piece of the newly formed Earth that was dislodged when a Mars-sized object struck the Earth around 4500mya (Harrison, 2009, p. 480). There is no surface rock yet discovered on Earth that is from the Hadean eon, due to the movement of tectonic plates which continually recycle the material of the Earth’s crust. These extremely tough flecks of Hadean zircon are the only material evidence of the

³ Million years ago. 4300mya can also be said as 4.3 billion years ago.

Hadean eon in surface rock, and they formed only two hundred million years after the Earth accreted in 4550mya (Harrison, 2009, p. 480).

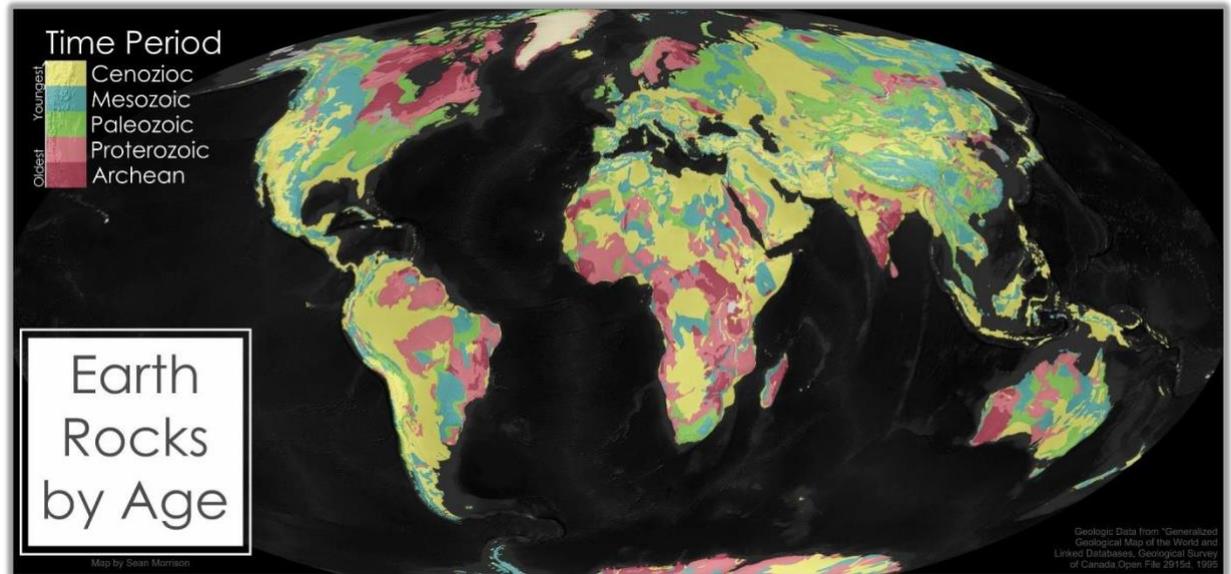


Figure 3. Earth Rocks by Age: Geologic Data. From 'Generalized Geological Map of the World and Linked Databases, Geological Survey of Canada Open File 2915d, 1995'.

Figure 3 is a map of the geological age of surface rock all over the world. The maroon red is Archean era rock which spans from 4000mya to 2500mya. Archean means 'origin/beginning'⁴, and rocks from this era are the oldest surface rocks in existence. Earliest life appears in the Archean, an example of which are the 3430mya stromatolite fossils in the Strelly Pool Chert near Marble Bar in Western Australia (Allwood, Walter, Kamber, Marshall, & Burch, 2006, pp. 717–718). The Archean is theorised as lacking free oxygen, which wouldn't appear until the cyanobacteria built up in number.

⁴ 'Late 19th century from Greek *arkhaios* "ancient" + *-an*', <https://www.lexico.com/definition/archaeon>

The salmon-pink rock of Figure 3 is from the Proterozoic era, which spans from 2500mya to 541mya. Proterozoic means ‘before life’⁵, which refers to the time period before the Cambrian explosion, an event in the fossil record when multicellular life appears in abundance. The Proterozoic tells a much more continuous geological history than the Archean, due to the stratified nature of the rock that has not been heavily metamorphosed like Archean rock, which has been subject to longer periods of heat and wear. The Proterozoic eon is typified by supercontinent cycles, where continents group together then tear apart, and the oxygenation of the Earth’s atmosphere due to the appearance of photosynthesising bacteria, which led to the first glaciation events.

The current eon is the Phanerozoic, which spans from 541mya to the present⁶ day. Phanerozoic means ‘visible life’⁷ referring to the Cambrian explosion. The geological timeline is often divided into two groups:

1. Precambrian: encompassing the three eons prior to the Cambrian explosion, the Hadean, Archean and Proterozoic. The Precambrian is a supereon that accounts for nearly 90 per cent of Earth’s history.
2. Cambrian: encompassing the Phanerozoic eon, the current eon typified by multicellular life.

⁵ ‘Late 19th century from Greek proteros “former” + zōē “life”, zōos “living” + -ic’, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/proterozoic>

⁶ In geology ‘Present day’ is taken as 1950

⁷ ‘Late 19th century from Greek phaneros “visible, evident” + zōion “animal” + -ic’, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/phanerozoic>

Cambrian and Precambrian get their names from 'Cambria', a romantic name for Wales, where geologists found the earliest fossil record of abundant shell life. Hard shelled molluscs are visual metonyms of the Cambrian explosion because shelled animals readily fossilise, whereas soft bodied animals don't readily fossilise and usually decompose before being preserved in rock.

How Geomorphic Forces Influence the Climate

Figure 3 shows that the Earth's continents are comprised of a patchwork of different eras of surface rock. There are two major reasons for this. Firstly, the Earth is constantly forming new rock due to either molten rock rising from under the crust and solidifying on the surface, or chemical processes on the surface forming or eroding rock that is already in existence. The second reason is that the crust itself floats on a layer of molten rock, the mantle, and is made up of a series of tectonic plates. These plates are less dense than the mantle they sit on, and the convection currents in the mantle move the tectonic plates, which smash and bash against each other. The movement of plates moves surface rock around the world, and fuses it with rock from different time periods.

In Figure 3 the east side of India has the same ancient Archean-era rock as Western Australia. This Archean-era rock is not a solid homogenous mass but an amalgam, or orogeny, of old pieces of rock that fused together. These fusions of ancient rock are called shields, and have proved to be resistant to breaking down during the tectonic activity of the last two billion years. India was once part of the supercontinent Gondwana which formed around 550 million years ago, and broke up 180 million years ago. During that time the east coast of India was fused to the west coast of Australia, an accretion of rock of similar age. Then tectonic forces split the

Indian craton and the West Australian craton, and India began to move north up toward Asia. It then began a process called subduction, where the Indian plate began pushing down under the Asian plate, pushing the Asian plate higher and forming the Himalayas (Lane, 2017, p. 65).

The movement of the continents on tectonic plates is largely behind the great changes in climate that the Earth experiences. For example, the top layer of the Himalayas are comprised of limestone and

[l]imestone is calcium carbonate, CaCO_3 . This massive amount of carbon-bearing rocks was exposed and weathered (oxidised) to produce CO_2 . It has been estimated that this increased CO_2 content of the atmosphere was enough to promote glacial and ice-cap melting and consequently a rise in sea levels. (Lane, 2017, p. 65)

Beck, Burbank, Sercombe, Olson, & Khan also conclude that the creation of the Himalayas released a huge amount of carbon into the atmosphere, which likely contributed to global warming during the late Paleocene/early Eocene (1995, p. 387). The Eocene (56mya –34mya) was a time of climate extremes, with rapid warming due to extra methane present at this time and then rapid cooling with the separating of Antarctica and the formation of the Antarctic Ice Sheet.

The grouping and spreading of the continental masses also plays a role in cooling and warming climates. During the early Eocene, Antarctica was still connected to Australia and kept warm by currents travelling down from the equator

that hugged the edges of the supercontinents (Lane, 2017, p. 65). When Antarctica split away in the late Eocene, about 40mya, Antarctica was an island travelling toward the south pole, and a cold ring of ocean formed around it called the Circum-Polar Current. Now

[w]arm water gets no further south than about 45 degrees, and the Circum-Polar Current keeps the large, mountainous Antarctic continent cool...The shifting of the continents resulted in profound change in ocean currents, allowing a massive ice cap to be formed in Antarctica. This lowered sea levels and brought about global climate change. (Lane, 2017, p. 65)

The Antarctic ice sheet contains 80 per cent of the world's freshwater, about 29 million cubic kilometres, and if it were all to melt the sea level would rise by nearly 60 metres (Australian Antarctic Division, n.d.). Only 3 million years ago, during the warm Pliocene (5.33mya–2.58mya) Antarctica thawed slightly and cold temperature rainforests grew near the south pole in West Antarctica (Australian Antarctic Division, n.d.).

The spreading of continents and the sea floor made some oceans lower, which contributed to their warming. Volcanoes also contributed to climate change, such as the eruption of Mount Toba 75,000 years ago on Sumatra, where '800 cubic kilometres of ash were blown into the atmosphere, enough to cause a mini-ice age that lasted for about 1,000 years' (Lane, 2017, p. 65).

The evolution of photosynthesising bacteria changed the biology of the world:

Without the cyanobacteria that built the thrombolites and stromatolites, it is doubtful we would be here, for they have made the Earth a “living planet”. Through photosynthesis they extracted hydrogen from water, in the process releasing oxygen as a by-product, and this resulted in an atmosphere able to support oxygen-dependant life. As oxygen reached the upper atmosphere the atoms were dissociated by sunlight to form ozone (O₃). When this layer of ozone became sufficiently thick it prevented harmful solar radiation from reaching the surface of the planet enabling life on Earth to become established. (Lane, 2017, p. 13)

The appearance of oxygen-producing organisms are theorised to have driven mass glaciation and mass extinction events. The ‘Great Oxygenation Event’ during the Paleoproterozoic (2500mya–1600mya) killed all the anaerobic organisms that had thrived in early Earth, and made way for the new oxygen-dependant organisms to fill their ecological niches. The proliferation of oxygen in the atmosphere ‘destroyed the greenhouse gas methane that was then abundant in the atmosphere, throwing the global climate completely out of kilter’ (Tindol, 2005), causing the Huronian Glaciation, or ‘snowball earth’ of 2300mya.

Deep Time in Noongar Boodja

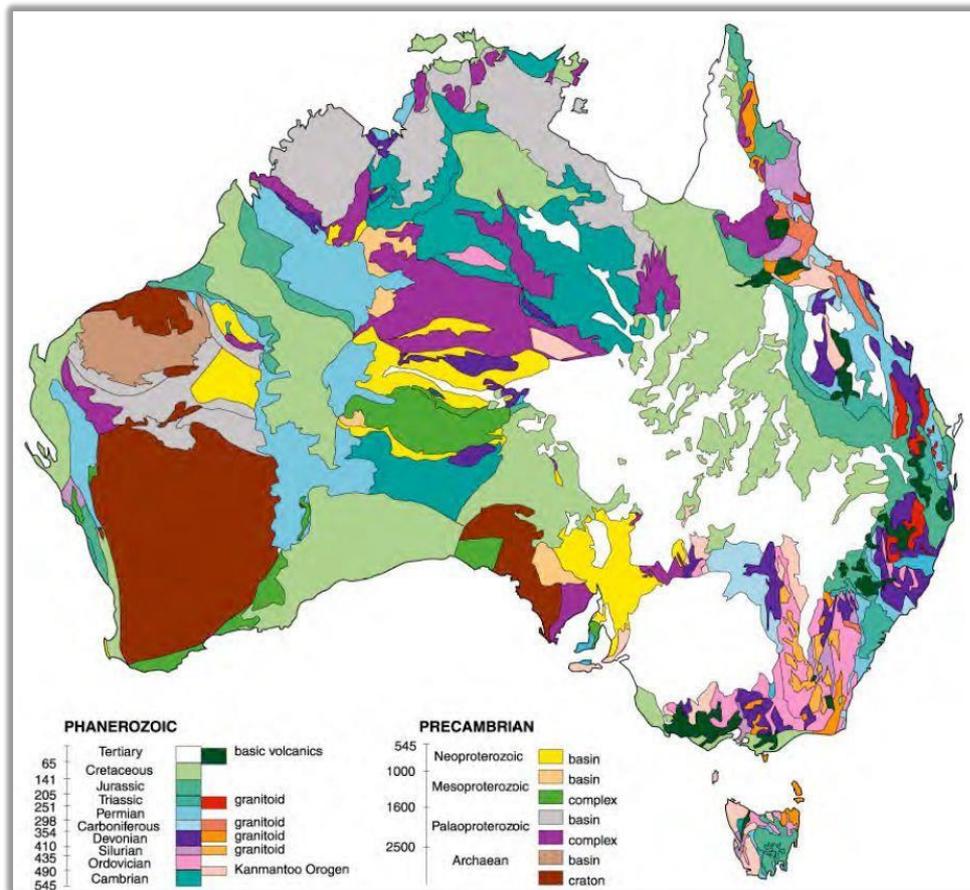


Figure 4. Basic geological regions of Australia, by age. From 'Geology of Australia' by Wikipedia. Retrieved 2 February 2020. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geology_of_Australia)

There are only a couple of Archean-era rock formations in Figure 3, and the largest by far is in the west of Australia. In Figure 4 the dark-maroon-red area that occupies a large portion of Western Australia is the Yilgarn Craton, a stable shield of Archean-era rock that was molten once, then cooled and solidified around 2940mya–2630mya, with the majority of the rock being 2800mya. A craton is essentially old crust on the Earth's surface that has resisted being crushed and separated as the tectonic plates have pulled and pushed against each other since the crust formed in the Hadean. Present in the Yilgarn Craton are older pieces of rock, or terranes (broken pieces of other continents) that have melted in, which are 3700mya–2800mya.

A large portion of Noongar Country sits on top of the Yilgarn Craton. The presence of ancient surface rock has an impact on the ecology and lived experience of the area in a variety of ways. The craton has been above sea level for a long time, and has not been covered in glaciers during recent global glaciation events. The craton has not been pierced by volcanos since it formed 3000mya, and its flat topography has made weathering long and slow. The regolith, or soil/dust covering, of the Yilgarn Craton is amongst the oldest on Earth, with some of the soil covering being essentially fossilised. The water table is hypersaline, or saturated with salt, due to long periods of salt soaking in over time, so the craton is dotted with salt lakes. Figure 5 shows how the Yilgarn Craton is typified by local aquifers of generally poor productivity compared to the Swan Coastal Plain/Perth Basin. The fossilised soil and high salty water table creates conditions of low animal and plant mass with a high biodiversity to survive in dry and salty conditions.

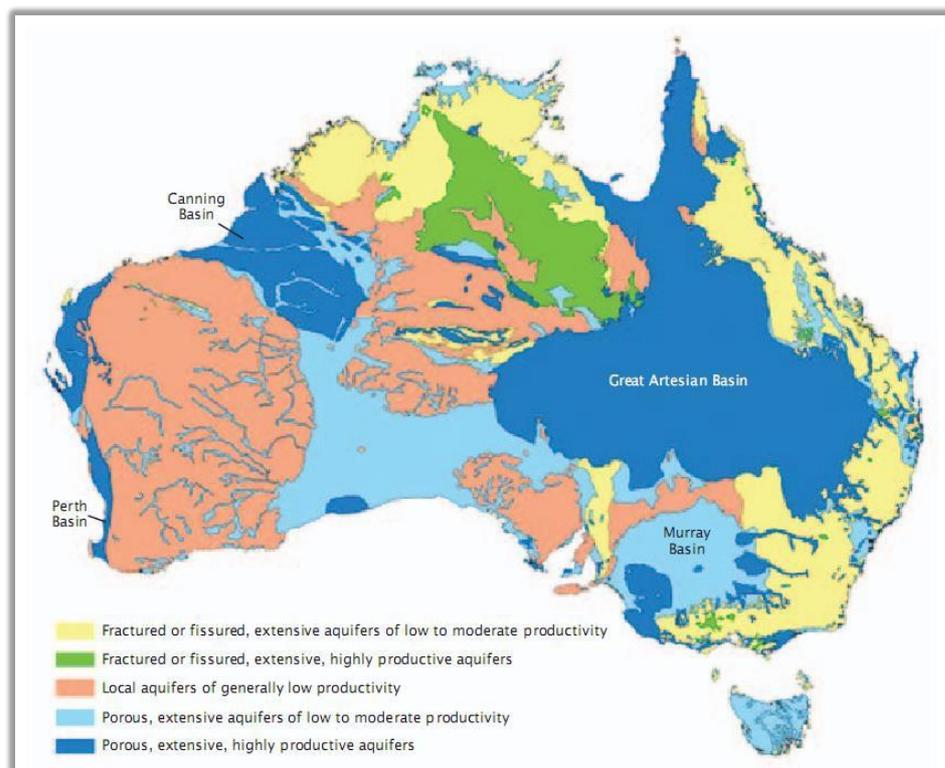


Figure 5. The variety of aquifer types and their productivity across Australia. From 'Groundwater' by A. Herzeg, in I. Prosser (Ed.), *Science and Solutions for Australia* (p. 48), 2011, Collingwood, VIC: CSIRO. Copyright by CSIRO.

In contrast to the shield of ancient rock that forms the heart of Noongar Country, the Yilgarn Craton has soft edges of younger rock that has formed at the coastal edges. These are the Swan Coastal Plain, the Southwest Cape and the Southern Coast. These soft edges are sedimentary basins that filled with material washed off the Yilgarn Craton when tectonic plates have come and gone.

The Swan Coastal Plain

The Swan Coastal Plain formed in the basin that was left when the Indian Tectonic Plate split off from the west coast of Australia. The Swan Coastal Plain is comprised of Jurassic (201mya–145mya) and Cretaceous (145mya–66mya) era rock, which are shaded light green and teal green on Figure 4. The Swan Coastal Plain is several

billion years younger than the Yilgarn Craton. On the surface the plain is a series of Pleistocene era (2.58mya –11,700 years ago) sand dunes that increase in age from west to east, and chains of wetlands that are oriented north to south. The Darling Scarp forms the eastern boundary and separates the Swan Coastal Plain from the Yilgarn Craton. The Darling Scarp is the surface expression of the Darling Fault, a record of the tearing away of the Indian Plate (Lane, 2013, p. 3). The Darling Fault runs for 1500km from Albany in the south to Shark Bay in the north, and the Darling Scarp is what is left of the rock that was pushed up during the friction with the Indian Tectonic Plate.

The Swan Coastal Plain is a riverland separated from the ancient Yilgarn Craton by the Darling Scarp. In a flat landscape like Australia, the scarp creates topographic rain that nurtures the tuart and jarrah forests that grow up its slopes. To Whadjuk Noongar people, this chain of worn-down mountains is said to be the body of the Wagyl that lay down after creating all the waterways of Noongar Country⁸. The Darling Scarp also acts as a barrier between the freshwater aquifers of the Swan Coastal Plain and the hypersaline groundwaters of the Yilgarn Craton.

The Southwest Cape

The Southwest Cape is the ancestral Country of the Wardandi Noongar people. It is comprised of the same Cretaceous rock as the southern part of the Swan Coastal Plain, but it has a western edging of Neoproterozoic rock, coloured yellow in Figure 4. This is older rock leftover from the breaking up of the supercontinent Rodinia (formed 1100mya–900mya ago, broke up 750mya–633mya). The Neoproterozoic

⁸ 'The Darling Scarp represents the body of the Wagyl, which created the curves and contours of the hills and gullies' (Kaartdijin Noongar, 2020).

era (1000mya–541mya) is a transitional period where Precambrian becomes Cambrian, with the appearance of complex life in rocks from this period. Wardandi Noongar Country has many caves, one of which is Devil’s Lair (see Figure 1), an important site for establishing how long Noongar people have been in the southwest of Australia.

The South Coast

On the south coast of Noongar Country, Koreng, Wudjari and Ngudju Country, is rock formed in the basin when Antarctica split from the south of Australia. These areas are shaded in rich green in Figure 4, and are comprised of rock of the Mesoproterozoic era (1600mya–1000mya), which precedes the Neoproterozoic era. Compared to the thin edge of Neoproterozoic rock that borders the cape of Wardandi Noongar Country, the south coast is dominated by rock of the Mesoproterozoic era. During the Mesoproterozoic era the supercontinent Columbia broke up and the supercontinent Rodinia formed at the equator. While the rock of south coast Noongar Country was forming, the Swan Coastal Plain wasn’t to form for another billion years after that. Sexual reproduction appears in this period; early life here is typified by the Stromatolites, which are rock-like colonies formed by layer upon layer of single-celled Cyanobacteria, a photosynthesising bacterium whose development led to the oxygenation of the Earth⁹.

These younger edges of Noongar Country, compared to the ancient Yilgarn heart, represent a liminal part of the ancestral land, a place where change occurs rapidly and transformation is more dramatic. There is narrative in the geology of the

⁹ Cyanobacteria will be discussed in relation to the novel in Chapter 4.

rock that Noongar Country sits on, and this research informs new stories that can be written with a geological understanding of Noongar Country. Geological time is interesting in the southwest due to the huge range of fossil memory, and the variations of ages of the rock of Noongar Country suggests narratives about how different temporalities can coexist in a story set in such a place.

Coastlines Changed by the Holocene Warming

The current era of human history is the warmest and wettest in our 300,000 year existence. We live in a drowned world compared to when homo sapiens first emerged during the Middle Paleolithic: we spread across the globe via land bridges that have since been inundated by rising seas (Nunn, 2004, p. 47). Noongar Country itself is a drowned landscape compared to when the first humans arrived here approximately 50,000 years ago. The Pleistocene is a time of repeating glaciations and warmings, and humans arrived in the southwest as the Earth's climate was slowly cooling. Sea levels were falling; glaciers, icecaps and ice sheets were growing. Everything was heading toward the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) 'when land ice was at its maximum extent and temperatures were at a minimum' (Nunn, 2004, p. 47). At the LGM sea levels were 120m–130m lower than present day (p. 47), a result of water being locked up in epic ice sheets on land, like the Laurentide Ice Sheet in North America which was more than 3 kilometres thick. Figure 6 shows sea-level change over the past 150,000 years, illustrating the 'interglacial' climate humans experienced when first occupying Australia, and how that got colder and colder until a rapid drop into the LGM, a period lasting 4,000 years from 22,000 years ago to 18,000 years ago.

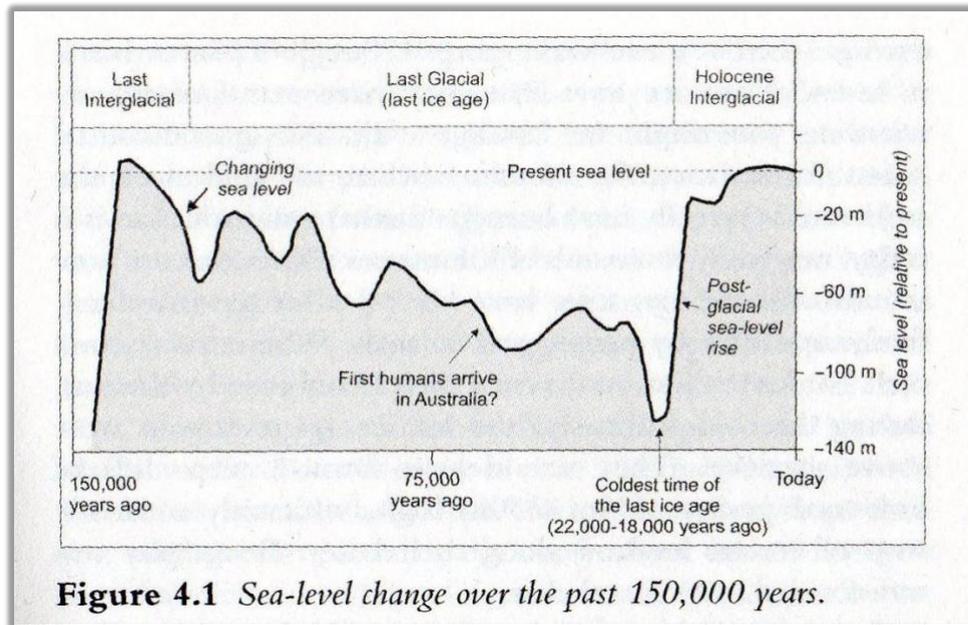


Figure 6. Sea-level change over the past 150,000 years. From *The Edge of Memory* (p. 111), by P. Nunn, 2018,

UK: Bloomsbury. Copyright 2018 by Bloomsbury. Reproduced with permission.

The rapid warming that followed the LGM marked the end of the Pleistocene and the beginning of our current era, the Holocene. The appearance of cyanobacteria in the Paleoproterozoic shocked the atmosphere and created the 300 million year-long snowball earth, but that doesn't explain the much briefer interglacial periods of the Pleistocene. Why the Earth currently experiences climate fluctuations of ice ages and warm periods is complex, but a large factor is that the Earth's orbit around the Sun isn't uniformly circular all the time. It goes through Milankovitch Cycles, where Earth's circular orbit periodically becomes slightly elliptical without shortening the length of the solar year (Villanueva, 2009). The gravitational fields of Jupiter and Saturn stretch the orbit of Earth for periods of tens of thousands of years at a time, and during a more elliptical orbit the Earth passes closer to the sun (see Figure 7). Elliptical cycles have more extreme seasons for that year, where summer is hotter and winter is colder.

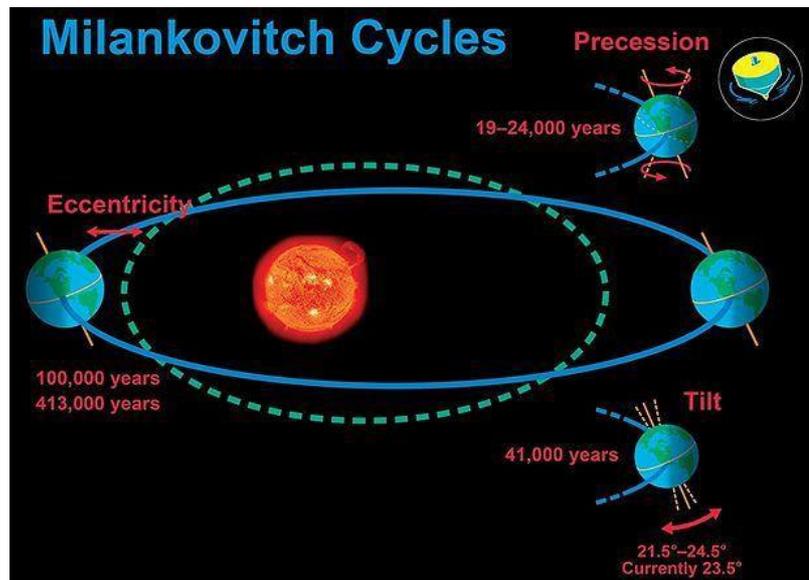


Figure 7. Milankovitch Cycle. From 'Milankovitch Cycle' by J.C. Villanueva, 2009

(<https://www.universetoday.com/39012/milankovitch-cycle/>). Copyright 2009 by Universe Today.

This effects climate both in terms of extra or less heat from solar radiation, but that heat fluctuation also triggers the release or sequestering of carbon dioxide in the oceans:

as these cycles moved the planet into warmer stages the oceans expelled CO₂. This initiated and then drove atmospheric warming. Conversely, glacial periods were triggered by the Milankovitch Cycles entering a cooling phase, leading to increased CO₂ being dissolved into the oceans, further atmospheric and oceanic cooling, and eventually glaciation on an almost global scale.

(Lane, 2017, p. 63)

It took over 100,000 years for the climate to cool from the Last Thermal Maximum down to the Last Glacial Maximum. Figure 6 shows that while the

cooling process is slow, the warming process is rapid. It took only 9,000 years for sea levels to rise approximately 120m (Nunn, 2004, p. 47), between 15,000 years ago and 6,000 years ago, which is when sea levels stabilised (Nunn & Reid, 2016, p. 41). This rise in sea level drowned major features of Perth's coastline, as reflected in the Perth Canyon, a submerged canyon 22 kilometres west of Wadjemup/Rottnest Island. Perth Canyon is 'an extension of the Swan River system, [and] was formed over tens of millions of years' (Pattiaratchi & McCulloch, 2015). At the LGM, the coastline of Perth terminated in cliffs, and the Swan River thundered through these cliffs and dug the deeper parts of the Perth Canyon. The Perth Canyon is twice the depth of the Grand Canyon: 'a huge valley – the maximum water depth recorded in the canyon was 4,376m' (Pattiaratchi & McCulloch, 2015).

Figure 8 and Figure 9 show the extent of coastline submerged in the southwest by the Holocene warming after the LGM. Figure 8 is a wide view of the southwest, clearly illustrating the continental shelf, which is the coastline at the LGM. Figure 9 shows a zoomed in view, which reveals the scale of the Perth Canyon.

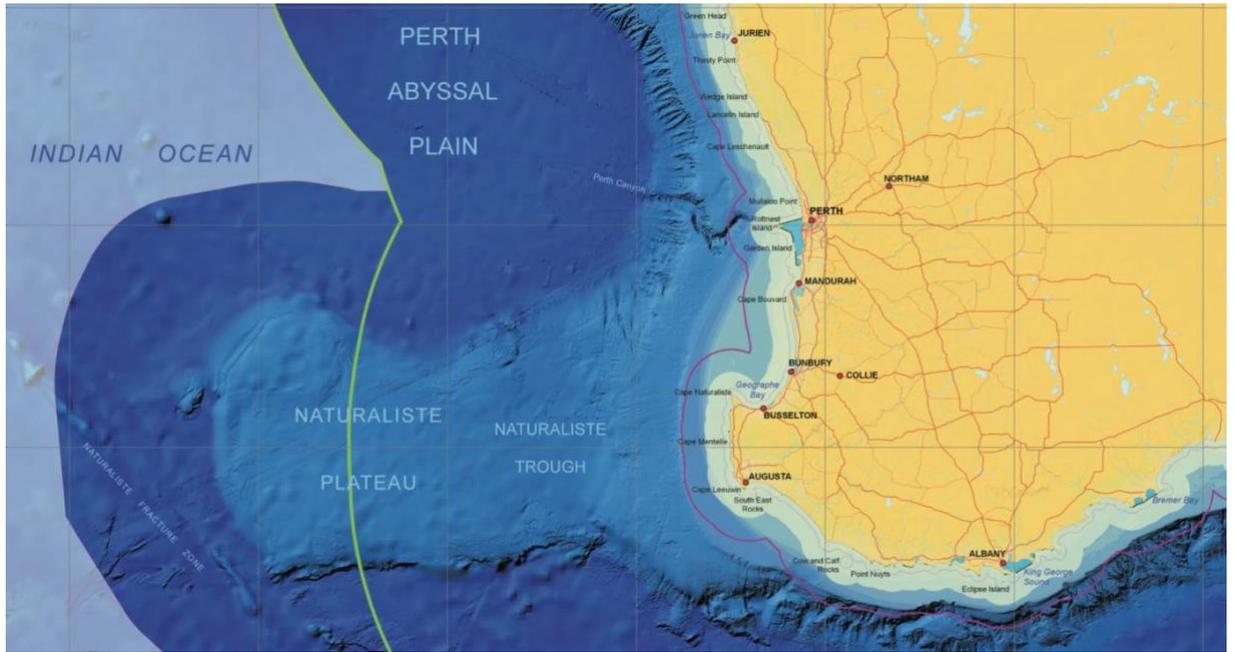


Figure 8. Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia: Detail 1. Adapted from 'Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia', by A. Hatfield, C.J. French and M.B. Alcock, 2010 (<https://ecat.ga.gov.au/geonetwork/srv/eng/catalog.search#/metadata/69507>). Copyright 2010 by Commonwealth of Australia (Geoscience Australia).

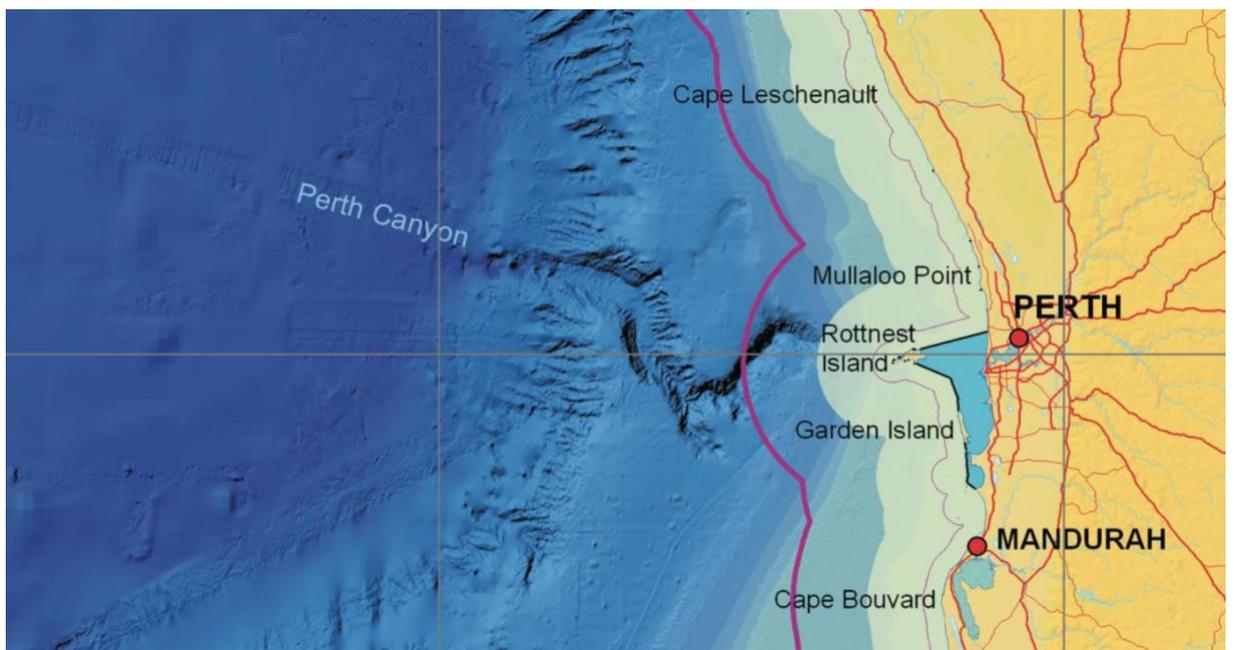


Figure 9. Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia: Detail 2. Adapted from 'Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia', by A. Hatfield, C.J. French and M.B.

Humans had been in the southwest for over 30,000 years when the sea levels started to rise. Humans witnessed the Perth Canyon being submerged, Wadjemup/Rottnest becoming an island, and cliffs turning to beaches. This transformation in the land is recorded in Noongar stories.

Aboriginal Memory of Deep-time Climate Events

Research has emerged in the last few years that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander quoted are in fact eyewitness accounts of the Last Glacial Maximum and the rise in sea level that followed when the world warmed.

Patrick Nunn is the pre-eminent scholar on Indigenous memory of deep-time climate events in Australia. His article with Reid called ‘Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago’ (2015) collects 21 Indigenous stories that feature memory of sea-level rise on the Australian continent and its islands. Where human memory of events worldwide was believed to be generally restricted to 500–800 years (Nunn & Reid, 2015, p. 11), Nunn and Reid found an ‘extraordinary uniformity of theme in stories from the entire fringe of Australia’ (p. 14). Stories of sea levels rising, and crucially, never receding, derive from ‘almost every part of the Australian coast...and say essentially the same thing’ (p. 13). Nunn and Reid propose that these stories are an eyewitness recording of the Holocene warming event that have been passed down through intergenerational storytelling for more than 7000 years (p. 12). Figure 10 is Nunn and Reid’s map of

where the 21 stories originate from around the Australian coast, showing the widespread nature of the stories, separated by thousands of kilometres.



Figure 10. Map of Australia showing the 21 coastal locations from which Aboriginal stories about coastal inundation are described in this paper. From 'Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago', by P.D. Nunn and N.J. Reid, 2015, *Australian Geographer*, 47(1), p. 14.

Copyright 2015 by P.D. Nunn & N.J. Reid. Reproduced with permission.

Nunn and Reid suggest three reasons why Aboriginal people in Australia would carry these stories for such a long time: Aboriginal people often express that stories need to be told the right way by the right person, that this authority to tell a story is embedded in cultural life, and because of the 'particular intimate way in which Aboriginal people relate to country' (p. 40), where

lands talk to people and people to land; where totemism makes people consubstantial with species and places; where people are known to country and where country's health is dependent on people's actions; where people's lives are formed and their well-being sustained through knowing country; and where belonging arises through knowing to the extent that people feel like strangers off-country – all these epistemological threads make intimate knowledge of landscapes and seascapes central to Aboriginal cosmology, and this too may be a key factor in facilitating transmission of very old stories about changes to that country. (p. 41)

The rapid rise in sea level over only a few thousand years would have required a great movement of people inland. Such a huge change in coastline has likely created a long legacy that has been imprinted on Aboriginal stories as clans lost access to hunting, living and ceremony grounds. Nunn and Reid state that '[w]ithin 12 000 years, greater Australia lost 23 per cent of its landmass, about 85.5 per cent of which might have been occupied' (p. 41). Connection to Country in Indigenous culture requires an individual to know and care for Country to survive bodily and spiritually. Some groups have even retained information about islands that have been submerged for 10,000 years (p. 25), which Nunn and Reid attribute to the idea that 'cultures with strong land attachments often invest in complex land-naming and land-relating processes' (p. 41) as a means to establish one's right to live on that country, and to know every part of it, even those parts lost under the waves.

The 'convergence of accounts of natural phenomena, such as glaciations, meteorites and sea level rises, in Aboriginal culture and Western science is very

recent' (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 40) for a variety of reasons. Dreaming stories are falsely understood by the Australian public to be purely moralistic tales, in line with fairy tales from Europe or the fables of Aesop. Dreaming stories are more accurately described as narratives that carry multiple layers of meaning of how to conduct oneself in a particular location. Information about food and water sources, burial sites, ceremony sites, family places, and history are encoded into Dreaming stories, and this is poorly understood outside of the Aboriginal community. Non-Indigenous ethnographers and writers have contributed to this, as the European myth and fairy tale tradition is often projected on Aboriginal cultural heritage (Palmer, 2016, p. 72). Where fairy tales are rich in European cultural symbolism, Dreaming stories are rich in information about a specific place on a specific part of Country.

Indigenous people have also been reluctant to share the detail of Dreaming stories, because some are family, gender or age specific, and therefore not suitable to be shared with ethnographers and anthropologists who will share them widely. There is also a general reluctance to hand over valuable cultural heritage to a colonising majority who have taken so much in terms of land, water and animals, and family members, already.

Nunn and Reid also expound on the implications and caveats of this research. They state that the stories in their paper cannot be proven to be eyewitness accounts of sea-level rise during the last 12,000 years (2015, p. 41). They do however speculate that stories of sea-level rise in other places around the world should exist, but they have likely been lost or poorly documented. They surmise that cross-pollination of flood stories shared between different cultures has changed them to

suit contemporary concerns. The biblical story of Noah's flood, which when examined from a comparative religion point of view could be said to have been inherited from the ancient Mesopotamian epic 'Gilgamesh' (written circa 1800BCE). Nunn and Reid point out that it is crucial to note that Noah's flood is one that came and then receded, 'restoring the Earth to the condition it was in before' (p. 38).

Research in this area is very current. Even though Nunn has published many papers on sea-level change through the Pleistocene and Holocene epochs, it was the 2015 paper 'Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago' that brought Aboriginal memory of sea-level rise to wider academic attention. This paper was the most viewed paper in the *Australian Geographer* database, which contains 119 years of papers. The opening editorial for the *Australian Geographer* the following year specifically mentions Nunn and Reid's 2015 paper, and says that 'Looking to the future—one that will be characterised by climate and societal volatility—it seems apt that we begin this next phase of the journal's life by revisiting Australia's long-term environmental history, and the custodians of country whose ancestors lived through, and adapted to, profound change' (Gibson, 2016, p. 1). Nunn's book *The Edge of Memory* (2018) is his first 'popular science' book written for the commercial market, perhaps inspired by the interest generated by the 2015 article.

This interest in Aboriginal memory of deep-time climate events has converged with a change in attitudes in regard to Aboriginal knowledges brought on by the maturing Australian colony and the emergence of climate change as a threat to the Australian way of life. Australia will see the effects of climate change earlier

than other parts of the world, and it has already been seen through droughts, floods and catastrophic fires. This has led to the increased interest in Indigenous land use and Indigenous memory of previous climates. The existence of 21 similar accounts of sea-level change suggest there are more to be recorded. The vehicle by which Aboriginal people carry deep memory of 12,000-plus years ago is oral storytelling, and how those stories have survived for thousands of years has been speculated by Nunn and others, but the mechanism of that is the current research of the 'Rediscovering the deep human past: global networks, future opportunities' project at the Australian National University (ANU).

Noongar Deep Memory – The Ngalak Paper

Nunn's work contextualises the research of the 'Synergies of Meaning Research Project', which explores correlations between geological evidence of floods and ice ages in the southwest of Western Australia and Noongar stories that speak about the 'Cold Times' and the floods that followed it. This research was conducted at ECU's Indigenous department 'Kurongkurl Katitjin' and was a collaboration between Noongar man Glen Stasiuk – a lecturer at Murdoch University, Birdiya Noel Nannup – a Noongar Elder, Stephen D Hopper – a Professor from the University of Western Australia (UWA), and Francesca Robertson – a senior research fellow at ECU. Their project contributes to a small field of research investigating Indigenous memory of ice ages, floods, volcanos, astronomical events and tsunamis globally.

This project utilises a pre-existing methodology called 'koodjal jinnung/looking both ways' which seeks to bring together 'Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural context' to create research generated from a 'shared learning journey' (Robertson et

al., 2016, p. 41). The purpose of the research is ‘not an attempt to use science to verify Nyoongar spirituality’ (2016, p. 50) nor does it suggest that cultural stories are ‘metaphorical versions of science’ (p. 50). The project is not out to ‘prove’ that Noongar stories are ‘factual’ or ‘true’, but to report on the similarities between scientific and Noongar accounts of the deep past. There is a spirit of collaboration and shared learning in the project that speaks to reconciling the marginalisation of Aboriginal knowledges in the European colonial enterprise. Noongar Country is not Europe; the plants, animals, seasons, climate and fire cycles are alien to European knowledges. Professor Stephen Hopper is a Professor of Biology whose research explores the biodiversity hotspots in the southwest and south coast of WA, and makes accounts of its degradation in the face of European agricultural and mining practices. It doesn’t surprise me that Hopper would be interested in ideas about Caring for Country held by Noongar Elder Noel Nannup, who is not only a knowledge resource about plants and animals that the West is only just coming to notice, but is the descendant of a culture whose practices are coeval with healthy land, water and animals. Far from this being a project that ‘assesses’ similarities between deep-time knowledges for interest sake, the research seeks ‘to make sense of the world and create new ways of looking at things’ (p. 42).

The ‘Synergies of Meaning Research Project’ finds common ground between the seemingly disparate epistemologies of Noongar oral storytelling and the scientific method of observation, experimentation and hypothesis. Robertson et al. draw attention to the rapid changes in theories about the formation of the Earth in the last two hundred years, for example how ‘the theory of plate tectonics was accepted by the scientific community as recently as 1965’ (p. 41) and conclude that ‘scientific

narratives contain speculation and interpretation, elements shared with mythology’ (p. 42). In order to ‘establish a point of sustainable contact between the knowledge sets’ (p. 42) the research identifies ‘narrative’ as common ground to ‘look both ways’.

Narrative is as important in oral storytelling as it is in science, and ‘within Nyoongar culture, narrative is the main means and source of creating or transforming meaning’ (p. 42) and ‘[s]tory, for Nyoongar people, is the most significant transmitter of cultural knowledge’ (p. 42). The power of this research is the willingness of the researchers to position science as speculative, rather than as factual and concrete, which makes space for Noongar oral culture to move from the margins of accepted knowledges to the shared epistemological centre.

The ‘Synergies of Meaning Research Project’ has produced the following:

1. A 30-minute documentary film called ‘Djena koorliny danjoo boodjar-ang, Synergies: Walking Together, Belonging to Country’ (2015);
2. A research paper called ‘Ngalak koora koora djinang (Looking back together): a Nyoongar and scientific collaborative history of ancient Nyoongar boodja’ (2016); and
3. A booklet called ‘Nyoongar Boodja – Koomba Bardip Kooratan / Nyoongar Land – Long Story Short’ (2017).

The ‘Ngalak paper’ (Robertson et al., 2016) presents two narrative parts: a plain English narrative of the formation of Noongar land from a geomorphology and

climatology perspective (Science Narrative), and an oral storytelling account of the formation of Noongar land, provided by Noongar Elder Noel Nannup (Noongar Narrative). Nannup is the inheritor of the cultural memory of sea-level change through his uncle Thomas (2016, p. 42). The Science Narrative lays out a history of the southwest from the icy beginnings of the Permian (298mya–251mya), to the Triassic and the Jurassic, to the Cretaceous and Tertiary, to the Pleistocene, to the Holocene. The Ngalak paper aligns these periods with descriptions in the Noongar Narrative history of the southwest, from the Nyitting, to the Spirit Woman, Coming of the Colours, to Lore of the Land, to Becoming Noongar, to Keeping the Home Fires Burning, to the Flood. The Science Narrative matches the Permian ice age of 300mya with the Nyitting, but this is not representational of the eyewitness nature of that story as proposed by Nunn and Reid (2015). The Ngalak paper is a narrative exercise aligning a ‘Science Narrative’ with a ‘Noongar Narrative’. It is useful because it contains a lot of information about Noongar climate memory. It also inspired the narrative approach in this chapter. The descriptions of crustal formation, plate tectonics, climate changes and biological evolution is research required to understand and develop my own Science Narrative of the southwest in order to write fiction about it. The understanding of the Science Narrative of the southwest was crucial to understanding the research of Nunn and Reid (2015).

This research takes Nunn and Reid’s (2015) approach of aligning the Nyitting as an eyewitness account of the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) 22,000 years ago, and aligning the Waardanak Boodja/Flood with the Holocene warming event that followed the thawing of the LGM.

A Note on Time

Western science presents ‘time’ as linear, with consistent and measurable periods, from supereons, eons, millenia, centuries, years, days, hours, seconds and quantum fractions of seconds. Time is not necessarily conceived of or experienced as linear in pre-colonial Noongar culture:

[r]ather than being measured, the passing of time is experienced in traditional Nyoongar life by the passage of the sun and the moon, the tides and the six seasons. (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 43)

There are elements of linear time in Noongar oral storytelling where ‘most traditional Nyoongar stories have an opening line that locates the story in a particular time such as the Nyetting, or the flood, or before there were clans, or in our time’ (2016, p. 43). This positioning of a story within a particular time is contextualised by Nunn and Reid (2015) who propose that deep-time climate events mentioned in Aboriginal storytelling across Australia coincide and correlate with events described in the sciences of climatology and geology. ‘Nyitting’ and ‘Waardanak Boodja’ are given as two examples of this.

Nyitting – the Cold Times

The Noongar time of creation, known in some instances as The Dreaming, is referred to by Noongar Elders as ‘Nyetting’ or ‘Nyitting’. That word Nyitting means ‘The Long-Ago Cold Times’. Noongar Elder Noel Nannup describes the Nyitting as:

The freezing cold, near darkness time, long, long ago when there was nothing on the earth, it was flat and featureless. (Robertson et al., 2015, p. 43)

Noongar creation stories vary slightly across the Noongar Nation, but many mention this ‘cold time’ where there were no landforms or creatures. The South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC), the native title body for the Noongar Nation, has a culture website with collected testimony and stories from all over Noongar Country. They summarise:

The Nyitting or Dreaming means ‘cold’, ‘cold time’ or ‘ancestral times.’ Noongar people know it as the Creation time. It is the time before time when spirits rose from the earth and descended from the sky to create the land forms and all living things. Nyitting stories laid down the lore for social and moral order and established cultural patterns and customs. (SWALSC, 2020)

There are a few written examples of stories being set in or before the Nyitting. In the teaching information pack ‘Exploring Woodlands With Nyoongars’ (1998), an inclusion called Resource Sheet (3) has a story told by J. Morrison, M. Penny, R. Storey, S. Ugle and B. Colbung which starts:

Long before the nyitting (cold times) there lived a giant charnock (evil spirit) woman, who went from kallep (camp fire) to kallep stealing koolongurs (children). She had very long white hair and was taller than the karri and jarrah trees. She used her hair as a kind of net to store and keep the spirit children in, as this kept her hands free to gather more spirit children. She stole the spirit children to feed her “man” who dwelled in “Bates Cave” near Wave Rock. (Wallace & Huston, 1998, unpaginated)

Theresa Walley's Dreaming story 'Yok Waakarl wer Yondok/Rainbow Serpent and Crocodile' in *Mardang Waakarl-ak* (2013) situates itself as occurring before a cold period:

A long time ago before the ice and snow covered all the earth there were many animals all over this land... (p. 23)

'Legend of the Spirit Fire' collected by Ethel Hassell in the 1880s down on the south coast of Noongar Country near Jerramungup doesn't use the word 'nyitting', but it refers to a period of time that was very cold and very wet and the community lost the ability to make carl/fire. One night the women refuse to make an extra fire for the jannock/spirits to warm themselves on, so the jannock take their fire for good:

The weather had been very wet and cold for some time. Everything was damp and disagreeable and the natives had great difficulty in keeping their *carls* alight. A good many of the women grumbled at having to dry the sticks before putting them on the *carl*, and finally decided that they would not make the *jannock carls*, they did not care if they did come to their *carls*...the next morning when they awoke all of the *carls* were out...and they did not know what to do to get the *carls* back. (Hassell, 1975, pp. 141–142)

Robertson et al. (2017) state that they found two types of stories about the Nyitting, or Cold Times, which are 'those epic stories about the creation of Nyoonga (sic) boodja and stories about what seem to be real people struggling with nyidiny

(cold)' (2017, p. 25). Robertson et al. state that '[b]efore the LGM the prevention of catastrophic fire had been a survival tool. During the LGM the concern was keeping the fire going' (p. 25). The Hassell story above is one of many Noongar stories about keeping fire burning, or about the losing and finding of fire.

There is also an etymological suggestion that 'coldness' is associated with the Noongar time of spirits and creation. In LOTE Noongar, the word for ancient is 'nediny' and the word for cold is 'nyidiny' (Gregory, 2020, pp. 24, 26). They're phonically similar, these words for coldness and oldness. Early settler George Fletcher Moore has the following entry which denotes Noongar ancestors as 'netingar':

Netingar, s – A term used by the natives to designate their ancestors or forefathers, of whom they do not appear to have any distinct tradition, except that they were very large men. Some suppose that they came over the sea, others suppose that they came from interior, from the north and north-east. Their general belief is that the spirits of the dead go westward over the sea to the island of souls, which they connect with the home of their fathers.

(Moore, 1978, p. 60)

Here 'netingar' means 'ancestor', a variation on 'nediny', and Moore lists 'nyiddin' as 'cold' (1978, p. 63). I suggest that these words are similar, 'nediny' and 'nyidiny', because there is a connection between them, of something long ago and something cold.

When European settlers first arrived some Noongar people called them ‘nyidiyang’ (Collard, Bracknell & Palmer, 2017, p. 1), a word denoting Europeans (also Douglas, 1996, p. 18). If you break the word down you get ‘nyidiny’ which means cold and ‘-ang’ which is a suffix denoting ownership or possession. So nyidiyang can be understood as meaning ‘belonging to the cold’.

Noongar Elder Doolan Leisha Eatts shares a story her grandmother told of her fear at seeing horses for the first time:

And so they ran back to their mum and dad, you know, they said “Kaman djinang nidja, **nyidiyang** maam barang djinaniny waam ngarniny nguluk”.

What they were sayin’ is “Come and have a look at these things, we think these white men brought these things out ‘ere to eat us”. (SWALC, 2020, my emphasis)

Europeans were called nyidiyang because the Noongar people initially thought the pale-skinned people were ancestral spirits from an afterlife place under the sea (Kurranup) and had returned to Country to live among them (Stasiuk, 2015, p. 38). Europeans are interchangeably called ‘nyidiyang’ and ‘djanga’ (‘the dead’) in the archives. Francis Armstrong, an interpreter in the 1830s states:

The obstinacy with which they persist in this conviction, that the whites are all incarnations of the spirits of departed ancestors or friends, is so great, that notwithstanding the great confidence they usually place in the Interpreter, he has never been able to persuade them to the contrary...The name which they

invariably apply to the whites, when talking of the latter amongst themselves, is “Djanga” or “the dead”... They attribute the change of complexion, in the whites, to their ghosts having passed through so much water in their posthumous trip through the ocean. (Armstrong, 1836, quoted in Green, 1979, pp.187–188)

The pale skin of Europeans goes a long way toward this perception of coloniser as ghosts or spirits. The water and the salt that the spirits must travel through to get to Kurranup is attributed to a bleaching process that would produce white ghosts or white people:

This is djand ga...the spirit of a man from gora – of our tribe long ago. When the spirit goes across the mammart to nygurganup¹⁰ the skin is made more wilban by the salt. (Unnamed Noongar Elder recorded by Richards and Richards, 1994, quoted in Stasiuk, 2015, p. 39)

Kurranup, this afterlife place, is a kind of Heaven or resting place (Stasiuk, 2015, p. 40). Daisy Bates spent time with the Noongar people and recorded this from Noongar man Joobaitch, who mentions the Nyitting as the long-ago cold times, and this idea of Europeans as ‘jang-ga’:

No! I must die on my own ground, and not in a jang-ga house. When I die I shall go through the sea to Kurannup where all my moortutung (relations) will be waiting on the shore for me, waiting with meat and drink for me, my

¹⁰ Variation on ‘Kurannup’.

mother and my woman, my fathers and my brothers, all my dead people and I must go to them, and my kaan-ya must be free to rest on the kaan-ya tree (Nuytsia Floribunda) before it journeys through the sea. Since Nyitting (cold) times (long time ago) all Bibbulmun kaan-ya have rested on this tree on their way to Kurannup; and I have never broken a branch or flower, or sat under the shade of the tree because it is the kaan-ya tree only winnaitch (forbidden, sacred). (Bates, quoted in Stasiuk, 2015, p. 39)

This review suggests that etymologically, oldness and coldness are associated, through the similarity of the words nyitting (cold times), nyiding (cold), nediny (old), and netingar (ancestor). Then the designation of Europeans as ghosts who belong to the cold times, nyidiyang, also speaks to a culture that believes their ancestors who created the world long ago did so in a cold time.

The Ngalak paper states that during the LGM ‘Nyoongar *boodja* was not covered in ice but it was cold and endured a 10,000-year drought, making life tough’ (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 48). The Last Glacial Maximum is the middle of human settlement in the southwest, the Noongar people had been there 20,000 years by this point. It was such a hard thing to live through that Noongar culture never forgot it, and it’s likely that this ‘cold time’ of Noongar Dreaming stories is a result of the ice age being permanently imprinted on the collective memory. This is cultural memory in the scale of deep history or deep time.

Waardanak Boodja – The Flood

Noongar stories have not only recorded the Last Glacial Maximum, they also recorded the rapid rise in sea-level that followed it. The second account of Noongar

memory of deep-time climate events explored in the Ngalak paper (2016) is the flooding of the channel between Walyalup/Fremantle and Wadjemup/Rottnest Island. Stocker, Collard and Rooney (2016) share this flood story provided by a traditional owner of the Cockburn Sound area, in their paper on Aboriginal ideas about coastal sustainability:

TO1¹¹ (personal communication, 2013) tells a Nyitting yarn about the creation of Derbal Nara (Cockburn Sound): The Walyalup (Fremantle) Dreaming story tells of Yondock, an ancestral crocodile that travelled down from the north, causing floods and disturbances, creating Wadjemup (Rottnest Island), Ngooloomayaup (Carnac Island), Derbal Nara (Cockburn Sound), and flooding the Derbal Yaragan (Swan River) with salt water. The Waagle or Rainbow Serpent, guardian of the fresh water, smells the salt and travels down Derbal Yaragan to see what's happening. With advice from Woorriji (a lizard) in a cave in North Fremantle and strength gained from a freshwater spring at the East Street Jetty, the Waagle fights the crocodile, bites off his tail and places the tail across the mouth of the river to prevent salt water coming up stream. The tail is secured with hair from the armpits of the Waagle on the southern side of the river, and with toenails from the crocodile on the north side of the river. The rest of the crocodile's body remains as Meeandip (or Garden Island ...) and dingoes watch from Cantonment Hill to make sure the spirit of the crocodile is not reunited with its tail. (Stocker, Collard & Rooney, 2016, pp.857–858)

¹¹ TO1 = Traditional Owner 1. For privacy and intellectual property reasons Aboriginal informants are often unnamed in government or council reports.

Similar versions of this story where a crocodile makes the channel between Fremantle and Rottnest Island flood with water are also reflected in Robertson et al. (2016) and Walley (2013).

Another version of this story involves dingoes fighting the crocodile in place of the Wagyl:

local elders have recently described the story of the seven dogs who guarded the mouth of the river. In this story a crocodile, travelling from the north attacked the dogs. One of the dogs bit off the tail of the crocodile. The crocodile sank to the mouth of the river forming the rocky bar at the river mouth. (Hughes-Hallett, 2010, p. 25)

Hughes-Hallett also states that the ‘Cantonment Hill area has been identified by Collard et al (1996) and Gibbs (1988) as Dwerdaweelardinup, meaning “the hill where the spirit dogs guard the river entrance” or the “place of dingo spirit” (Hughes-Hallett, 2010, p. 25), information important to Chapter 4.

There is another story of how the channel between Fremantle and Rottnest Island was flooded:

Local traditional owners described Rocky Bay as being a place of significant mythological and ceremonial importance. A large cave on the west side of the bay is called Garungup (from which the bay gets its traditional name) and

is associated with the story of the Rainbow Serpent. The cave is believed to be “the place where the Rainbow Serpent slept after the great flood flooded all the land between Wadjimup (Rottnest Island) and the coast. (K. Colbung quoted in Cooper, 2012, pp. 22–23)

‘Garungup’ means ‘place of anger’ (Hughes-Hollett, 2010, p. 25) and the area was ‘a place to be avoided’ (p. 25). This could mean that either the Wagyl caused the flood because it was angry with the Noongar people or other ancestral spirits, or it was angry with another entity for causing the flood. Figure 11 is Wagyl Mia, which means ‘Home of the Creator Serpent’, the limestone cave mentioned above. The cave mouth has a limestone formation that looks like snake fangs, and is an example of cultural stories being ‘read’ in the landscape.

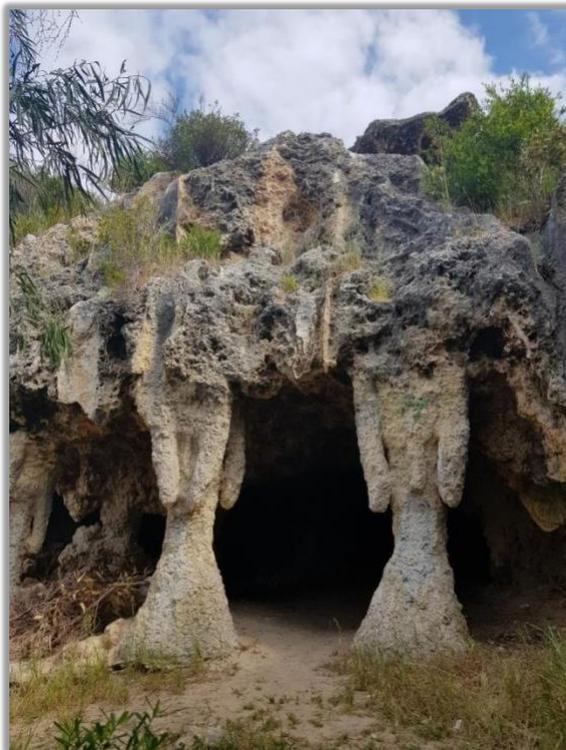


Figure 11. The limestone cave Wagyl Mia at Garungup. East Fremantle, WA. 2018. Copyright 2020 by Cassie Lynch.

There is a passing mention of the flooding of the channel from Francis Armstrong again, the interpreter in 1830s Perth, which posits the Wagyl as the flooder of the channel:

They state, as a fact handed down to them from their ancestors, that Garden Island was formerly united to the main, and that the separation was caused, in some preternatural manner, by the waugal. (quoted in Green, 1979, p. 191)

Moore records a different account of the flooding in the 1830s, one not involving the Wagyl, Yondock or the dingoes:

Rottnest, Carnac and Garden Island, once formed part of the mainland, and that the intervening ground was thickly covered with trees; which took fire in some unaccountable way, and burned with such intensity that the ground split asunder with a great noise, and the sea rushed in between, cutting off these islands from the mainland. (Moore, 1978, p. 8)

Noongar community members have also shared stories of ancestors who walked out to Rottnest Island when it was connected to Fremantle. Stocker, Collard and Rooney (2016) share two stories:

The late Mrs Dorothy Winmar, a Whadjuk Nyungar Boordier Yok, remembered (personal communication, 2002): My grandmother used to live along the river [Derbyl Yaragan/Swan River] right down there and she reckon they [ancients] used to walk right out to Rottnest Island; that it was all

sandbanks, way back. They used to walk across there and because Rottnest is a hill and it stood out when there was no water there. They stayed for a time and then walked back. (2016, p. 856)

and this one by Fred Collard:

Rottnest is Wadjemup, you know ... Earlier, Uncle Felix and them used to say kura kura, Nyungars used to walk across there, that was a long time ago, he said. Kura means a long time ago. Nyungars jenna koorliny, means walk. So someone had handed it down to him. If he was alive today, he would be around 150 and you see a lot of older people handed it down to him. (p. 856)

Wardanak Boodja is situated in the Ngalak paper as the period of sea-level rise from 17,000 to 7,000 years ago. Nunn and Reid place the flooding of the Rottnest channel in the region of 7,450–9,140 years BP¹² (2015, p. 40). These two accounts of ancestors walking out to Rottnest are at least that old.

Robertson et al. (2017) state sea levels didn't rise uniformly during this warming time from 17,000 years to 7,000 years ago when the sea level levelled off. 'Warming was not consistent' and '[t]here were several sudden massive sea rises' (p. 29). This was due to the melting of giant glaciers and ice sheets that were trapped in the middle of continental masses. The melting of the Laurentide Ice Sheet, formed over Canada and north America during the Last Glacial Maximum, formed a lake theorised to be as much as 440,000 square kilometres in size. Eventually that lake

¹² BP = Before Present. In geography 'present' is 1950.

broke whatever rocky barrier or natural dam that was holding it in, and thousands of years of meltwater was dumped into the sea at once. Flooding events like this had impact on coastlines around the world, where the loss of land would have caused death and conflict (Robertson et al., 2017, p. 29). The loss of land would have been observable to humans in a single person's lifetime.

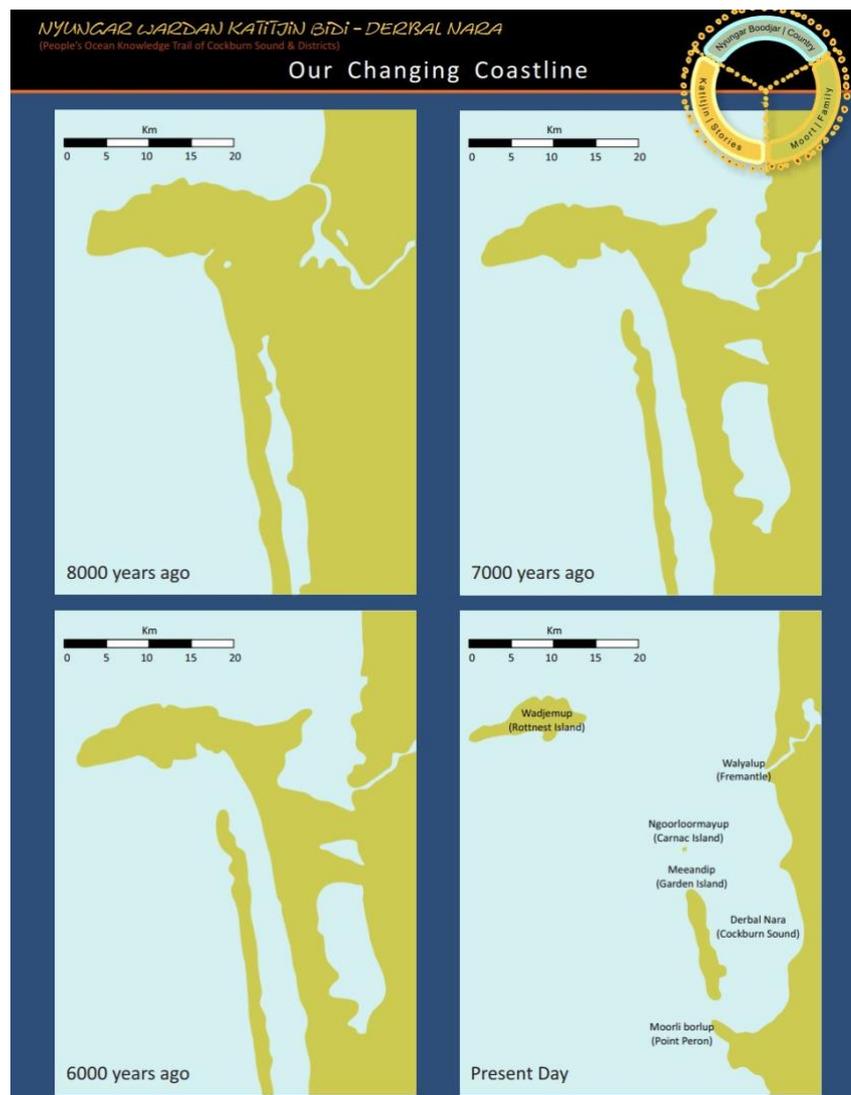


Figure 12. *Our Changing Coastline*. From 'A Changing Coastline' by Derbal Nara, 2020, (<https://www.derbalnara.org.au/changingcoastlinecomposite.pdf>). Copyright 2020 by Derbal Nara.

The story of Waardanak Boodja is reflected in Figure 12, which is a map of the Fremantle area, with the rising sea level over a 2,000 year period. The ice age of 22,000–18,000 years ago got imprinted on Noongar cultural memory as Nyitting, and this rapid flooding of 7,000 years ago got imprinted as Waardanak Boodja. The Whadjuk Noongar people lost a lot of hunting, camping and ceremonial ground, the loss of which was retained in these two stories discussed. Wagyl Mia is a significant site in Perth, because in Noongar stories the Wagyl or creator serpent either created this flooding itself in anger or stopped the crocodile from making the flooding any worse.

There are flood stories from other parts of Noongar Country. This story comes from Albany on the south coast:

In 1830, Captain C Barker recorded a mythic story of a great flood, in which the sea rose and covered all the land about Albany and far inland, and Mt. Manypeaks and Mt. Lindsay became tiny islands where all the animals and people took refuge from the great flood. (Goode et al, 2007, p. 8)

This could be an account of when the Holocene warming created conditions where sea levels were briefly nine metres higher than current, before they stabilised.

The oldest story recorded amongst Nunn and Reid's 21-story study is the Cape Chatham story of White-topped Rocks island that lies off southwest Noongar Country near Broke Inlet. The story states that:

in those olden days there was a large plain extending from the main land out to the White-topped Rocks, about nine miles out [14.5km west] from Cape Chatham. On one occasion two women went far out on the plain digging roots...After a while they looked up, and saw sea rushing toward them over the great plain. (Mathews, 1909, quoted in Nunn & Reid, 2015, p. 30)

Due to the depth of the sea floor between the coast at the island Nunn and Reid judge the story to be in the region of 11,730–13,070 years BP.

Another account from the Albany area is the flood story of Merrtych/Oyster Bay, where a woman dies on the dry plain, turning into Green Island, and a dog smells her body and digs all around her, creating great hollows that the sea rushes in and fills (Nunn & Reid, 2015, p. 32).

Floods and ice ages really tested mob in the past, but it reassures the Aboriginal community who came after that because they have survived ice ages and flooded country in the past, so they could survive it in the future.

Chapter 2 – Korangan: Transformation and Metamorphosis in Noongar Storytelling

“Baal ngaawily yey / he groper now”¹³

1. Introduction
2. The Noongar Language
3. Etymology of Korangan
4. Noongar Story Sources
5. Korangan in Noongar Stories
6. Thematic Discussion of 15 Noongar Stories Featuring Transformation

Introduction

Like many cultures around the world, the Noongar people tell stories that feature elements of bodily transformation: people turning into animals, people turning into landscape features, and people turning into spirits. This chapter investigates fifteen Noongar stories from three sources that feature this transformation. It is original research to inform the sequences of *No Bones but in the Mouth* that feature bodily transformation, and to contextualise the novel within the broader tradition of published Noongar stories. The prevalence and variety of transformation in these fifteen stories points to ideas around Noongar people being inseparable from place, and at ‘risk’ of turning into an element of Country at any point. The story *Ngaawily Nop* exemplifies this notion: the uncle does not recognise the boy as family, a great

¹³ *Ngaawily Nop*, p. 24

taboo, and the boy transforms into a groper in the very seas that the uncle is fishing in. Connection to your rightful Country cannot be denied.

Noongar stories are full of transformation, and so is *No Bones*....The following fifteen stories serve as background and inspiration for plot in the novel: Meka transforms into a shark-like creature and an albatross; the Albion spirits turn into albatrosses; Gray turns into an albatross; Dwerda transforms into a stone; and Mayakawa turns into a shark spirit. The land of Serpent Territory transforms: from a riverland in Meka's 'shallow' time, into a coral reef in the 'deep' time of The Shark, and into a larger riverland plain in the Cold Times. This notion of transformation is also reflected in the setting and world-building: Meka lives in a world where rapid change has occurred, both culturally and bodily. Meka's world is typified by 'korangan', or transformation: The Serpent and The Shark describe the changes in the land and sea, the sunlight eaters/cyanobacteria change the climate, and the newcomers change the culture and families of River Country. The themes that emerge from the survey in this chapter provide a base for the variety of transformation in *No Bones*...: Meka transforms because she loses connection to her own Country and is vulnerable to the influence of The Shark; the Albion spirits transform through the 'magic' of The Shark, Dwerda transforms because she is connected to Country, and Gray transforms because of his connection to family.

This chapter explores the provenance of the Noongar word and title of this PhD, 'korangan', plus the context of using Noongar language in research today. The three Noongar story sources are bilingual in different ways, and because this research is new I'm compelled to provide a background to the Noongar language to

go along with these Noongar language stories. The Noongar language has been under threat since colonisation, and the following discussion around the language meetings at Marribank (known earlier as Carrolup Native Settlement) is not readily available in academic literature elsewhere. *No Bones...* opens with haikus written by me in Noongar that sum up the themes of the novel, and the River Country characters also have Noongar names. Learning and speaking Noongar language through the course of this research has also given me insight into the climate stories in the archives, as expressed in the etymological research in Chapter 1. The use of Noongar language by me is not neutral in the way people might use Greek or Roman language when studying classical texts. This Noongar language story research needs to be accompanied by an overview of the efforts to revitalise Noongar language. It is vital context for me to articulate when this research might be read outside of the Noongar community.

The Noongar Language

There were approximately 250 languages spoken in Australia and its islands when Britain invaded in the late 1700s. The ‘Second National Indigenous Languages Survey’ (2014) states that of those 250 languages, 120 are still spoken, with only 13 of those 120 considered ‘strong’, meaning ‘still spoken by all age groups and being passed on to children’ (Marmion, Obata & Troy, 2014, p. xii). The remainder, including the Noongar language, are classed as endangered to some degree (2014, p. xii).

Crucially, it has been the presence of British colonisers in Noongar Country that has placed the Noongar language under pressure. It has been the wish, policy and prerogative of previous State governments to eradicate Indigenous languages in

order to ‘assimilate’ the Noongar people. The speaking of English was considered synergetic with effective assimilation, and mission schools attempted to empty people of their Indigenous culture and fill them with British culture. Settler teachers in schools and missions took it upon themselves to police the speaking of language, with Noongar Elders telling stories of being assaulted by teachers for speaking their ‘filthy devil language’. The derogatory language used by missionaries and teachers goes to show how shame was used to discourage the speaking and sharing of the Noongar language.

In the Noongar community, the ability to speak language ‘ranges from a handful of people who speak fluently through to many thousands of people who speak phrases, words or greetings’ (Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation (NBLCAC), 2020a). There are 14 known dialects of the Noongar language (Figure 13), with many shared words, some similar words but pronounced differently, and some words that are unique to a dialect altogether. Originally an oral language, Noongar waangkan/talking has been recorded phonetically by Europeans in writing since 1829, in the first years of colonisation in the southwest (NBLCAC, 2020b). Some European settlers made extensive wordlists such as British settler and Aboriginal advocate Robert Menli Lyon (b.1789, d.1874), Irish settler George Fletcher Moore (b.1798, d.1886), British government official and early ‘Protector of Aborigines’ Charles Symmons (b.1804, d.1887), colonial administrator George Grey (b.1812, d.1898), and journalist Daisy Bates (b.1859, d.1951), to name a few. These wordlists have been useful to language revitalisation projects.

The Noongar language is in recovery. In the mid 1980s and late 1990s Noongar community members came together to consolidate language at cultural meetings held at Marribank (1985), Wellington Mills (1990), Narrogin (1991), Dryandra Noongar Language Festival (1992) and Marribank again (1997) (NBLCAC, 2020a). Over ten years ‘[h]undreds of Noongar Elders took part in these meetings and language festivals to discuss the Noongar language situation, document language and work towards developing a Noongar language course and dictionary’ (NBLCAC, 2020a). These meetings resulted in the Marribank orthography (spelling system) that would be used at the first ever Noongar language centre in Bunbury, the Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation (NBLCAC), which has since moved to Perth. LOTE Noongar is taught in the Marribank orthography.

While having a history of oppression, the Noongar language is everywhere in the southwest. Many place names retain a version of their original Noongar name, such as Karrinyup (kar-iny-up/place where spiders live), Boyup (boya-up/place of rocks) and Katanning (kaat-ang-iny/place of Mulka’s head). In some places the historical Noongar name has started being used alongside the settler name, such as Boorloo/Perth City, Wadjemup/Rottnest and Walyalup/Fremantle. Not all place names carry a single meaning to the Noongar community, and some have multiple meanings. Walyalup/Fremantle means place of walya/lungs (breathing in and out/sea breeze), place of the woylie/brush-tailed bettong, place of waliny/tears, and place of the waalitj/eagle. Knowledge of what Noongar place names represent and Noongar language in general is not widely known outside the Noongar community.

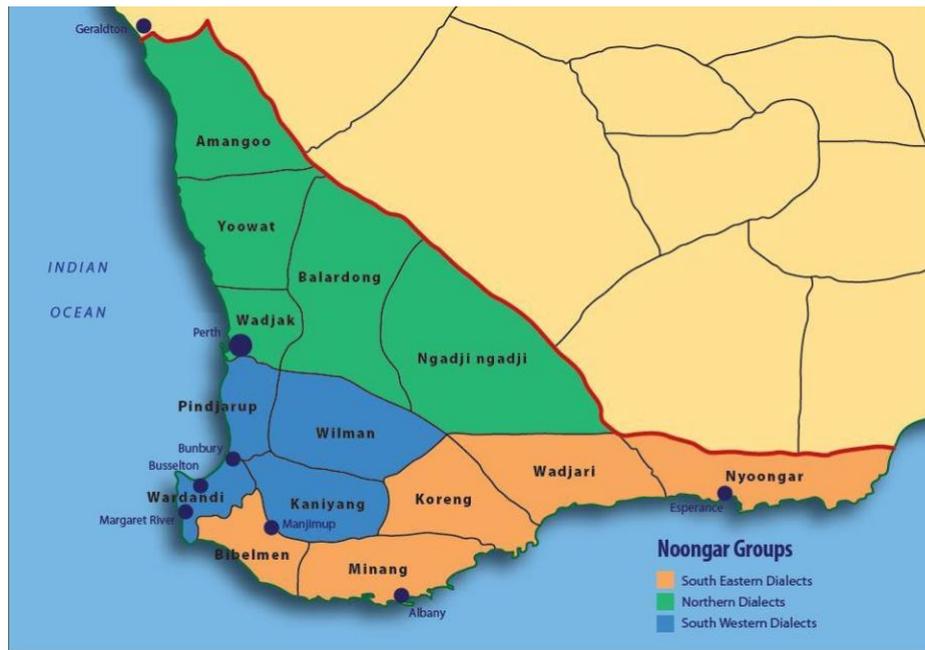


Figure 13. Dialect Map of Noongar Country. From 'Noongar Dialects' by NBLCAC, 2020 (<https://noongarboodjar.com.au/noongar-dialects/>). Copyright 2020 by NBLCAC.

The previous exegetical chapter revealed how information of previous climates is stored in the Noongar language. This goes to show how disastrously ignorant the bad masters of the Swan River Colony were to interfere in Noongar affairs and attempt to eradicate Noongar people, culture and language. Language is also critical to personal wellbeing, identity and connection to culture (Marmion, Obata & Troy, 2014, p. xii). Noongar maaman and writer Kim Scott states that the Noongar language is 'characteristically onomatopoeic and, unlike the amalgamation of languages that constitutes English, directly related to a specific place in manifold ways' (2007, p. 123). The Noongar language is an invaluable resource to humans living in the southwest, an encyclopedia of knowledge, wisdom and history compiled by the Noongar people to help every person live a good life on Noongar Country.

Etymology of Korangan

The title of this exegesis is ‘Korangan: Deep Time and Deep Transformation in Noongar Country’. ‘Korangan’ is the Noongar word for transform/change and comes from research into Noongar stories that have an element of transformation in them, of a person turning into animal, animal turning into landscape or person turning into landscape. The words ‘korangan’, ‘goranganan’ and ‘korang’ repeat in these stories:

goranganan yok djin-djin wer djiba-djobal maamoogart-ak/she turned into a mermaid/spirit and had to swim out to sea. (from 'Woganap' in *Minang Waangkaniny*, my emphasis)

Ngangarkoort kwadja-**korangan** kardern-ak/Ngangakoot turned into a groper. (from ‘Woodidjap’ in *Dordenap Boodja Wongki*, my emphasis)

The word ‘korang’ has a few meanings listed in archival sources, such as turn/twirl:

gorang – to spin; to turn around (Moore, 1978, p. 29)

korang – turn/twist (Whitehurst, 1992, p. 14)

and change:

korangan – change (Gregory, 2018, p. 21)

Transformation is the crux of this chapter and this PhD, and investigating the provenance of ‘korang’ or ‘korangan’ as meaning ‘transform’ has been important. I didn’t want to name the PhD ‘korangan’ without investigating whether ‘korangan’

was used in the context of ancestral beings transforming in Noongar stories. I communicated with the author of the Noongar Dictionary (2018) which is the only written source of 'korangan' listed as meaning 'change'. The author and Noongar language teacher Sharon Gregory directed me to the linguist who sourced that word. The linguist confirmed that Noongar Elders used 'korang' as 'changed/transformed' in regards to spirits turning into animals, people turning into animals and people turning into rocks/landscape features. This linguist said:

The use of the word '**korang**' depends on the context. It has definitely been recorded as turn, turn around, wriggling etc, [Moore] but the Elders, including Rose Whitehurst used the word '**korang**' as to mean change in the context of 'life cycles'...I also transcribed some Dreaming stories where the word '**korang**' was used as changed/transformed and the use of the word was done in consultation with the Elders, 2002. (L. Spehn-Jackson, personal communication, 18 March 2020, my emphasis)

Spehn-Jackson's language source is copyrighted and cannot be referenced here. Many language resources are copyrighted and only available to immediate descendants and family members to access. Spehn-Jackson is the linguist who translated the Batchelor Press books in the next section, and is well-placed to speak on the provenance of 'korang' as 'transform' in the 'Dreaming' sense. I bring this discussion into the exegesis as it was difficult to verify this bit of language, and my own practice is to only use Indigenous words to name books/parks/projects/animals after investigating provenance and being transparent about where the words come from.

Noongar Story Sources

The two main sources chosen are publicly available books that were produced as an outcome of language-based research projects: the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project books and the Dandjoo Moordiyap Dabakarn books.

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project records and publishes Noongar stories connected to the south coast of Western Australia, an area from Albany to Esperance. In 1931 the American linguist Gerhardt Laves transcribed stories shared in the Noongar language by Bob Roberts and Fred Winner. These transcriptions, in the International Phonetic Alphabet, were unknown to the Noongar community until the 1980s, when Laves' family sent them to Australia where they were placed under the guardianship of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS; Scott, 2011, p. 29). Kim Scott brought together the descendants of Bob Roberts and Fred Winner, plus their family and other community members, to process the stories as a community group and consider how to share them in an appropriate way. The stories were eventually published in a picture book-type format. In the essay at the end of *Mamang* (2011), Scott describes the process of producing the books as 'an attempt to share with an ever widening circle of readers some of the stories emanating from the people who first formed human society – ice ages ago – in our part of the world, the south coast of Western Australia' (Scott, 2011, p. 29).

Dandjoo Moordiyap Dabakarn was a Noongar language project run by the Batchelor Institute in Darwin, NT. Noongar community members shared stories that were then translated into Noongar by a Noongar language linguist. The project

identified three regional dialects, northern, south western and south eastern, and used the dialect of the storyteller's home Country. The project ran for eight years and produced seventy Noongar language picture books and language resources (Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics, 2020).

The books utilise language in different ways. The Wirlomin books are stories that were originally in Noongar, and translated to English, and the Dandjoo Moordiyap Dabakarn books were recorded from community members in English, and then translated into Noongar by linguists. A third source, *Dreamtime* (2011), is a single self-published book by Theresa Walley, a Noongar storyteller also in the Dandjoo Moordiyap Dabakarn project. The story is told in a mix of English and Noongar and has been included because it is told in the voice of the storyteller.

I have retained the Noongar language of the sources for reasons of perpetuity. This research is not necessarily a language study, but as a Noongar researcher I know that incidental language mentions in research have been crucial to language revitalisation. This exegesis may last longer than the books it references. I have also included photos alongside stories where the transformation is connected to a specific place. Traditionally these stories would have been told on Country where you can see the landmarks referenced. Combining the text and image is a connection back to the way these stories are supposed to function. This also serves as a backup to the books, which do not include photographs of the places where those stories are set. Most of the stories in the selection do not contain information about where the story is set.

Korangan in Noongar Stories

The following is a report on accounts of transformation and metamorphosis in Noongar stories in print, and the cause and effect that precipitates the transformation.

In *Ngaawily Nop* (2017), a young boy misses his uncle, who has not been to visit for a couple of mookoroo/winter seasons. The boy travels to the coast, and when he finds his uncle he gets a cold reception. The boy says ‘Ngan Maam, ngan Ngaank waangkiny ngalak Moort/my father my mother saying we family’ (Scott, Cockles & Winmar, 2017, p. 16). The uncle responds by saying ‘Yoowart. Kaanya. Djoo/(not/no) shame shame’ (p. 16). The boy leaves the man he thought was his uncle and the uncle goes back to smashing up crabs on the rocks. The uncle then sees a glorious ngaawily/groper swim toward him, which he wants to spear. The groper dives down and away but the uncle grabs his spear anyway, in case it comes back. When the uncle turns back to the sea with his spear, the boy is there, and the lower half of him is a groper tail:

Baal ngaawily yey / he groper now. (p. 24)

The uncle exclaims that the boy is his family, that they should camp together. But the boy said ‘Yoowart. Nyoondok waangkiny, “Kaanya! Wort Koorl!” Nidja kaarlak yey/No you saying “Shame! Away go!” This home now’ (p. 26). The boy was told to go away but that beach was his real home all along. He swims away leaving only bindjil/bubbles (p. 30).

In *Dwoort Baal Kaat* (2013), a man was hunting for tucker/food. He had his dogs, as well as his brother’s dogs, so he thought he’d have plenty of tucker in no

time. However each time he went hunting, the dogs took down the animal they were hunting and ate it all themselves. The man grew very hungry and angry, so he took fire from the camp and set the dogs alight to punish them. They ran burning into the sea, where their ears burned off and their legs burned off. The dogs swam across the water to the man's brother, in the east. He saw them coming and wondered what they were. They barked like dogs and had heads like dogs, but were some kind of ocean dogs:

Dwoort maya waangkiny/Dog sound speaking. Dwoort mambakoort/Dog ocean/seawater. Dwoort baal kaat/Dog his head. Dwoortbaalkaat/seal. (Scott & Nelly, 2013, p. 28)

The Wirlomin Noongar word for seal is 'dwoortbaalkaat', which is literally 'dog his head'.

The book *Mirnang Waangkaniny* (2011) by Mirnang Elder and storyteller Lynette Knapp features stories from Mirnang Noongar Country on the south coast of Western Australia, in the Albany region. 'Djimaalap' is the story of young lovers from the same tribe who are forbidden to marry. Djimaalap was a young man in love with Yirdiyan, a girl promised to marry someone else. Yirdiyan was set to marry a warrior from the central desert area, whose tribe would be arriving soon to trade ochre, stone and shells, and conduct marriages. Djimaalap asks his best friend Boyikaatap to help him steal his sweetheart Yirdiyan away before the central desert mob arrive. Boyikaatap reluctantly agrees, and goes and stands guard on a hill while Djimaalap goes to meet Yirdiyan. He falls asleep though, and doesn't hear the Elders

when they come looking for the missing lovers. The Elders are furious that he was helping Djimaalap run away with Yirdiyan, so

baalap goranganan baalany nidjak goomba boya-k/they turned him into a great stone. (Knapp, 2011, pp. 8–9)

See Figure 14 for the rock formation Boyikaatap at Little Beach in Mirnang Country. Djimaalap was caught too, and the Elders

goranganan baalany dima waangkin nyit djerap-ak/turned him into the noisy scrub fowl. (p. 10)

The story finishes with the little scrub fowl (Noongar language name: Djimaalap) still living in that area today, calling out for his friend to wake up and for his lost girlfriend to come back.



Figure 14. *Boyikaatap* (granite hill at centre) at Little Beach. Two Peoples Bay National Park, WA. 2015.

Copyright 2020 by Cassie Lynch.

The second story in *Mirnang Waangkaniny* that has an element of transformation is ‘Margit wer Barmba’, which translates as ‘Shark and Stingray’. It’s the story of two brothers of Mirnang Country who were fighting over the affections of a girl. The Elders sent them to stand on opposite sides of Boyadar/The Gap (Figure 15), a granite cliff rising 40 metres above the ocean, to separate them. The warriors continued to fight, and the first brother threw his boomerang and the second brother threw his spear. Then ‘moolyak ngooni baal baam gitj-al; wama ngooni baal baam boogarl-ak garli-l/the first brother was struck by the spear, the other brother was struck in the back by the boomerang’ (Knapp, 2011, p. 21). Both warriors fell into the sea and

[n]gooni ali baam boogarl-ak garli-l goranganan margitabiny. Yirila ali margit-ak baalany garli. Ngooni ali baam gitj-al goranganan bambabiny. Baalang woori ngirnda namboor-al ngardak, baalny gitj/[t]he brother who

was struck in the back by the boomerang turned into a shark. The fin on the shark is the boomerang. The brother who was hit by the spear turned into a stingray. (p. 22)



Figure 15. View of the Albany Gap, Western Australia. From 'Torndirrup National Park' by Wikipedia, accessed 15/2/ 2020 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torndirrup_National_Park). Copyright 2020 by Wikipedia.

The third story in *Mirnang Waangkaniny* that has an element of transformation or metamorphosis is 'Woganap', the Mirnang Noongar name for the rainbow trout. This story is connected to Kalkanap (Kalgan River, Figure 16) near Kinjarliny (Albany), which is freshwater upstream and saltwater downstream where it empties into Meritj (Oyster Harbour). The rainbow trout live in the freshwater upstream and the black bream live in the saltwater downstream. There is a rocky

outcrop which separates the freshwater from the saltwater. The story goes that a little woganap yok (trout girl) lives in the gabidjikap (freshwater) upstream, and is curious about what life is like in the moorn maamoogart (black saltwater) further downstream. Her parents tell her that if she ever crosses the rocks into the saltwater, then she will never return. The woganap yok doesn't heed their warnings, and wriggles through the rocks to get to the saltwater part of the river. As she wriggles she throws her coloured scales up into the sky, making a rainbow, which she thinks will lead her back to her family. When she swam into the saltwater

goranganan yok djin-djin wer djiba-djobal maamoogart-ak/she turned into a mermaid/spirit and had to swim out to sea. (p. 45)

She couldn't find her way home because a woganap/rainbow has no beginning or end (p. 45).



Figure 16. Kalgan River. Kalgan, WA. 2016. Copyright 2020 by Cassie Lynch.

The book *Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan/Four Sisters: The Legend of the Southern Cross* (2007) by Minang/Gnudja Elder Carol Pettersen, starts with the observation that a lot of stars move across the sky each night, but the Southern Cross stays close to the horizon (pp. 5–6). Pettersen then tells the story of four sisters who become four stars. The story goes that four sisters were travelling with their moort/family group, and they set up camp away from the river. The birdiya/Elders told them to fetch water from the bilya/river, but forbade them from going near the sacred kep-djit/waterhole, which was forbidden to women. The young women were curious about the kep-djit, so they went there anyway, playing there and forgetting about their thirsty maawit/babies back at the camp. It moorn-abiny/got dark and the bworan/old men went looking for the women. When the bworan/old men found the women at the kep-djit they were very angry and started chasing the women back toward the camp. The young women were kwey kwey/frightened and ran away. As the young women were running, ‘koomba wirli-wirli baalabiny bilang yira worl-ak/a big whirlwind came and lifted them into the sky’ (Pettersen, 2007, pp. 13–14). The bworan were angry and threw their kitj/spears after the women, but the women spread out in the sky to avoid them. The sisters became the constellation Crux, and

[k]edelak-ngat, yira worl-ak nyoondool djinang Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan. Nidja baal kaadatj ‘Southern Cross’/[w]hen you look up into the night sky you will see the Four Sisters. They are known as the “Southern Cross”. (pp. 15–16)

The sisters want to be close to their family but are still frightened of the bworan/old men and their kitj/spears. This is why the Southern Cross sits near the horizon.

Dordenap Boodja Wongki: Stories from Bibulmun and Wardandi Country (2013) contains stories from the southwest cape of Noongar Country. 'Booleaninda' is the story of young Booleaninda the wonderful dancer, and the jealous Waakarl who wanted to bring him down. During a corroboree Booleaninda was dancing and 'baarlang djener kwadja-doondak bi yiyararer boodjara-k/his feet hardly touched the ground' (Klesch, 2013, p. 15). Waakarl crawled along the ground, spear in hand, about to throw his spear, but he was spotted by the malkar-kadak/medicine man who saw what Waakarl was up to. The malkar-kadak/medicine man threw a magic stone at him and Waakarl fell to the ground,

kwitj koranganiny nooner morakoot-kardikil/immediately turning into a black snake man. (p. 15)

This is how the first carpet snake came to be, and his name is Waakarl. Booleaninda remained a favourite dancer and when he died he

'kwadja-korangan djidi-djidi-kardikil/turned into the Willy Wagtail' (p. 15)

the little bird that everyone loves who dances on the grass.

There are many stories of Woodidji, a man with a magic stick who made the Woodidjap/Margaret River. Many of the stories see Woodidji either romancing or stealing wives, using his magic stick to make rivers, and spearing people.

‘Woodidjap’ is a version of the story where Woodidji fell in love with a woman, Milyan, who was promised to Woodidji’s elder brother as his wife. Milyan’s father Ngangarkoot found out that Woodidji is in love with Milyan and became angry that Woodidji would try take his brother’s promised wife. Woodidji used his malkar-boona/magic stick to make Ngangarkoot fall into a temporary sleep, and snuck away with Milyan. When Ngangarkoot woke up with Milyan missing he was enraged and pursued them. Woodidji used his malkar-boona again to create a swift running river with him and Milyan on one bank and Ngangarkoot on the other. They ran toward the sea, on opposite banks, with Ngangarkoot becoming angrier and angrier. Ngangarkoot pulled up huge trees by the roots, trying to make a bridge across, but the current in the river is too strong.

Eventually they reach the sea and Woodidji, thinking he’s safe, goes off to spear groper on the reef. The river current slowed down and Ngangarkoot managed to cross the river and reach Milyan. Woodidji returned in time and struck Ngangarkoot with his malkar-boona, and

Ngangarkoort kwadja-korangan kardern-ak/Ngangakoot turned into a groper.

(p. 23)

The groper then disappears under the water. Woodidji later spears a groper for dinner and Milyan is unhappy, thinking it is her father. Woodidji feels remorse,

and wishes that the groper he caught would turn into Ngangarkoot. Through the power of his wishing

Woodidji-ak karo kwadja-korangan kardern Ngangarkoot/Woodidji did turn the groper back into Ngangarkoot. (p. 24)

Ngangarkoot accepts that Woodidji and Milyan should be together and joins them to live in a new home.

‘Boowaara Wayini-k/Pool of Death’ is the story of Old Bulgareat of the Dordenap clan, who was a murderer and hated by everyone. Balit was his promised wife, a beautiful young girl whom everyone liked. Balit fell in love with a young man called Imyungeat and tried to run away with him. Old Bulgareat found them and brutally killed Imyungeat, Balit and Balit’s father Woorangoot. He butchered them with his axe and then burned their bodies. Old Bulgareat returns to camp with his bloody weapons, and boasted that he killed the three that conspired against him. The men of the camp were sick of Old Bulgareat’s murderous ways and they speared him to death, leaving his body to be eaten by crows and dingos.

Balarl wongki ali Bulgareadaang koonger barl kwadja-korangan boranga nooner-ak kidji kwadja-ward baarlang bidi boordakan Scott River/They say that Bulgareat’s body turned into an enormous black snake and made its way to the Scott River. (p. 54)

There Bulgareat ate all the other snakes and will drag anyone under who tries to swim across the river.

Woodidji is back in 'Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang/Old Man Rock', a story about the creation of Sugarloaf Rock on Cape Naturaliste. He has two beautiful daughters, Mittan and Meta, who were in love with warrior brothers that they were forbidden to marry. Everyone was afraid of Woodidji because of his fury and his magic, so Mittan waited until night, when Woodidji was asleep. She stole his magic stick while he snored and the four lovers snuck away. When Woodidji awoke to find his stick missing, he 'roared with fury' (p. 72) and set off after Mittan and Meta. He caught up with them and uprooted a huge karri tree, throwing it at them, but he missed and the four lovers ran to the sea. At the water's edge Woodidji almost caught them again, and this time Mittan flung the magic stick at Woodidji, struck him, and

barl kwadja-korangan boyang-ak/he turned into a rock. (p. 73)

Sugarloaf Rock (Figure 17) is named 'Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang'/'Old Man Rock' (p. 73).



Figure 17. Sugarloaf Rock. Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, WA. 2014. Copyright 2020 by Cassie Lynch.

Ngalang Wongi Ngalang Boodja (2011) by Wudjari and Ngatju woman Gail Yorkshire-Selby shares stories of the south-east coast of Noongar Country, from Bremer Bay in the west to Israelite Bay in the east. ‘Waalitj Mandaboornap-ak/The eagles at Mandaboornap’ shares the story of the creation of Mandaboornap, also known as Frenchman’s Peak, in Cape Le Grand National Park near Esperance. There were two giant wedge-tailed eagles who had a nest at the top of the big hill at Mandaboornap. They lived in harmony with the Koril/Shell people who hunted and fished along the coast. The Shell Elders warned the children not to go near the eagle’s eggs or chicks because ‘waalitj baalap wort-koorl baalabiny nedingar/the eagles came from their ancestors’ (Yorkshire-Selby, 2011, p. 20).

Two boys disobeyed their Elders and snuck up the hill to steal two of the eagle’s eggs. They ran off with them, but when the eagles realised their eggs were

missing they started shrieking with anger and it frightened the boys, who dropped and smashed the eggs. When the father eagle saw this he picked the boys up in his claws and dropped them into the sea. They swam back to shore and he grabbed them again and dropped them into the sea. Father eagle kept doing this until the boys became exhausted and sunk into the sea where

baalap koranganan koodjal nanook-ngat bardook ngobar-ak/they were transformed into two little islands just off the coast. (p. 28)

The Shell people dispersed from the area, which was now a place of tragedy and wild, angry eagles. The boys' families stayed though, looking down at the islands from high up on two hills, crying for their boys:

Koodjal moort baalap koranganan boya-k wer yeyi baalap kalyakoorl nyininy, djinaniny baalabiny ngooni-k/The two families were transformed into rocks and are still sitting there today, watching for their boys. (p. 30)

There are also tears running down the sides of Mandaboornap/Frenchmen's Peak (Figure 18) as the eagles 'waliny, waliny baalabiny woonbangboot koolangka-k/cry for their lost children'. (p. 31)



Figure 18. Mandaboornap/Frenchman's Peak. Cape Le Grand National Park, WA. 2017. Copyright 2020 by Cassie Lynch.

In 'Kwilena Koondarminy/Dolphin Dreaming', two young lovers from the Shell people were forbidden to marry, so they ran off together and hid in the sea. They liked it so much there that they decided to stay, and they

koranganan kwilena-k ali baalap kalyakoorl dandjoo-nyin kamook-
ngat/changed into dolphins so that they could live together in the sea forever.
(pp. 76–77)

The dolphin lovers still cared for their families, so during salmon season the dolphins worked with the Shell people to drive fish to shore for the people to spear and eat (pp. 80–81).

Mardang Waakarl-ak (2013), which I translate roughly as ‘romance of the creator serpent’, contains stories shared by Theresa Walley about Whadjuk Noongar Country/Perth area. In ‘Koodjal Nop/Two Boys’, the men of the family group go off for men’s business, but leave two boys behind who have been disobedient. The boys are told to stay but when the men leave, the boys disobey and go on their own journey deep into the bush. They come across a waterhole and decide to swim, but tragically drown. When the men return to camp and find the boys missing, they follow the boys’ footprints to the waterhole, which they proclaim is actually sacred. They see the boys’ spears and boomerangs, but no boys. They see two turtles on rocks by the waterhole, and the Elders say:

nop baalap wort-koorl, yaka baalabiny djin djin nyinow. Koodjal booyi boordan kany kep bardaa/the boys are gone, only their spirits remain. The two turtles will keep the water clean. (Walley, 2013, p. 11)

‘Danakat/The Seven Sisters’ is a sad story of seven sisters: Kooba (Red Robin/Scarlet Robin), Djidi Djidi (Willy Wagtail), Djilaboort (Mudlark), Kadjinak ([Grey] Fantail), Djakal-Ngakal (Galah), Wetj (Emu) and Waalitj (Eagle). Their father goes looking for a son, and when he doesn’t return for a long time, the sisters go looking for him. They search and search, going beyond the local area where they knew how to get food, into the desert where food and water were hard to come by. They never find their father, and weak and starved, they lay down and perish by a dry waterhole. Then ‘[b]aalabiny djin-djin yira bardang Yirriyakarn-ak, worl-ak/[t]heir spirits flew up to Yirriyakarn, the heavens’ (Walley, 2013, p. 19).

The father, in the meantime, has found a boy wandering alone, and decides to bring him home as his son. The father comes across the bodies of his seven daughters by the dry waterhole, and his tears of grief fill the dry waterhole up. He buries his daughters and sets off home with the little boy, to tell his wife the sad news. Then, '[k]edelak-ngat, baal djinang yira worl-ak wer djinang Danakat. Baal kaaditj ali Danakat baalang kwerat wer ali baalabiny djin-djin karoyooliny kaalak-ngat/[a]s night fell, he looked up to the sky and saw seven stars. He knew the stars were his daughters and that their spirits were coming home' (p. 20).

The wife missed her daughters, and when she saw the seven stars in the night sky she dreamed about them. Then

[k]eny-ak keney baalap karoyool baalany-ak djin kwobidak djerap: Kooba, Djidi Djidi, Dilaboort (sic), Koodjinak, Djakal-Ngakal, Wetj wer Waalitj/[o]ne by one they came back to her as beautiful birds: Red Robin, Willy Wagtail, Mudlark, Fantail, Galah, Emu and Eagle. (p. 20)

The mother's name was Koolbardi/Magpie, the bird that takes care of other birds (p. 20).

There are many Noongar stories that reference a time of creation called The Dreaming (sometimes known as The Dreamtime) where ancestral beings roamed the earth. These spiritual beings had human shapes and characteristics, and were named for the animals that they would eventually turn into. In *Dreamtime* (2011) by Theresa Walley, 'Djarin Djarin' tells the story of a time when 'many tribes of

ancestral beings...roamed the vast land searching for food' (Walley, 2011, p. 34).

The Djarin Dowerin/Parrot people lived among the Waitch/Emu people, the Yongar/Kangaroo people and the Marlie/Black Swan people. The men and women of the Djarin Dowerin (Australian Ringneck, or Twenty-eight parrot) people were so stunningly beautiful, that Elders from all the other tribes would travel long distances just to make marriage matches with their young people. The Djarin Dowerin, however, were very fussy, and refused all offers, and '[n]o outsider would be promised any of their children' (p. 34).

The Elders of the other tribes were insulted and angry, so they all got together and decided that they were going to steal the beautiful young people of the Djarin Dowerin tribe away. They marched on the Djarin Dowerin camp only to find all the young people missing, for the Djarin Dowerin had hidden their young ones in the trees. The other tribes camped around the trees for days singing chants and curses, until finally the young ones, completely exhausted fell from the branches, and as they fell

they developed wings and before they hit the ground they turned into beautiful parrots and flew to the top of the trees so the other tribes could not get them. (p. 35)

Thematic Discussion of 15 Noongar Stories Featuring Transformation

Table 1 represents the fifteen stories (A–O) against type of transformation (1–4).

There are four types of transformations represented by the sample of fifteen stories: person into animal, person into non-living feature, animal into animal, and animal into spirit.

	1	2	3	4
A) Ngaawily Nop / Groper Boy	x	x		
B) Dwoort Baal Kaat / Dog His Head			x	
C) Djimaalap / Noisy Scrub Bird	x			
D) Margit wer Barmba / Shark and Stingray	x			
E) Woganap / Trout Girl				x
F) Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan / Four Sisters		x		
G) Boolaninda / The Dancer	x			
H) Woodidjap / Margaret River	x			
I) Boowaara Wayini-k / Pool of Death	x			
J) Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang / Old Man Rock		x		
K) Waalitj Mandaboornap-ak / Eagles at Mandaboornap		x		
L) Kwilena Koondarminy / Dolphin Dreaming	x			
M) Koodjal Nop / Two Boys	x			
N) Danakat / Seven Sisters	x			
O) Djarin Djarin / Parrot People	x			

Table 1. Fifteen stories (A–O) against type of transformation (1–4).

Results as list:

1. Person into animal – Ngaawily Nop, Djimaalap, Margit wer Barmba, Boolaninda, Woodidjap, Boowaara Wayini-k, Kwilena Koondarminy, Koodjal Nop, Danakat, Djarin Djarin
2. Person into non-living feature – Djimaalap, Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan, Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang, Waalitj Mandaboornap-ak
3. Animal into animal – Dwoort Baal Kaat
4. Animal into spirit – Woganap

The majority of the stories feature a person turning into an animal (10/15) or a non-living feature such as rocks and stars (4/15). Only one of the stories features an animal turning into another animal, which is *Dwoort Baal Kaat*, where the dogs turn into seals. Also only one story features an animal turning into a spirit, which is the Trout Girl in ‘Woganap’ turning into a spirit/mermaid. The reasons why people or animals transform is considered in the next sampling:

Table 2 represents the fifteen stories (A–O) against themes of transformation (1–10).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	x	x								
B				x		x				
C				x		x	x	x	x	
D						x			x	
E							x		x	
F							x		x	
G			x	x		x				
H					x					
I			x							
J					x		x			
K				x			x		x	
L						x		x		x
M						x			x	
N					x	x	x			
O						x				x

Table 2. Fifteen stories (A–O) against themes of transformation (1–10).

Table Key:

A) Ngaawily Nop B) Dwoort Baal Kaat C) Djimaalap D) Margit wer Barmba
 E) Woganap F) Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan G) Boolaninda H) Woodidjap I)
 Boowaara Wayini-k J) Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang K) Waalitj
 Mandaboornap-ak L) Kwilena Koondarminy M) Koodjal Nop N) Danakat O)
 Djarin Djarin

Results as list:

1. Transformation as connection to Country – Ngaawily Nop, Kwilena Koondarminy
2. Transformation shows connection to family – Ngaawily Nop
3. Transformation reflects character – Boolaninda, Boowaara Wayini-k
4. Transformation as punishment – Dwoort Baal Kaat, Djimaalap, Boolaninda, Waalitj Mandaboornap-ak
5. Victim of transformation – Woodidjap, Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang, Danakat
6. Transformation explains animal – Dwoort Baal Kaat, Djimaalap, Margit wer Barmba, Boolaninda, Kwilena, Dowerin, Koodjal Nop, Danakat
7. Transformation explains non-living feature – Djimaalap, Woganap, Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan, Eagles, Danakat, Milkibaa Morakoot Boyang
8. Running off with a lover – Djimaalap, Kwilena
9. Disobeying Elders – Djimaalap, Margit wer Barmba, Woganap, Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan, Waalitj Mandaboornap-ak, Koodjal Nop
10. Escaping Law – Kwilena Koondarminy, Dowerin

The top three reasons for transformation are:

1. Transformation explains animal – 8/15 stories
2. Transformation explains non-living feature – 6/15 stories
3. Transformation occurs from disobeying Elders – 6/15 stories

The transformation explaining an animal is the most prevalent theme of the fifteen stories. This reflects the function of oral culture which is to inform the next generation as to how the world came to be. Table 2 reflects that stories contain more

than one theme of transformation, for example ‘Djimaalap/Noisy Scrub Bird’ has five themes: ‘transformation explains animal’, ‘transformation explains non-living feature’, ‘transformation as punishment’, ‘running off with a lover’ and ‘disobeying Elders’. This is an example of how traditional stories are multilayered and dense with information. A listener learns not only how the Noisy Scrub Bird came to be and how the coastal rock formation Boyikaatap was formed, they also learn that running off with a lover is against the law, and disobeying Elders will land you in trouble and lead to punishment for you and your family.

‘Boolaninda’ has three themes: ‘transformation reflects character’, ‘transformation as punishment’, and ‘transformation explains animal’. Waakarl is jealous and violent, and is transformed into a venomous snake as punishment for his murderous intentions, and the snake reflects his dangerous character. Booleaninda is transformed into the djidi-djidi/willy wagtail which is a bird that jumps instead of walking, and moves with a light dancer’s step. The origin story of both animals is explained alongside a message of social conduct that frowns upon frivolous murder.

‘Kwilena Koondarminy’ and ‘Djarin Djarin’ are the only stories where transformation occurs to escape law, in both cases marriage law. Classical-era Noongar culture forbade people marrying the ‘wrong’ person in terms of the kinship and moiety system. Each child was born into either Wardong/Crow or Manatj/White Cockatoo moiety and keeping track of this kept the bloodlines separate and healthy. The lovers of ‘Kwilena Koondarminy’ turn into dolphins to be together and the Djarin Djarin people turn into ringneck parrots to escape the practice of marrying into other tribes. These two tales are interesting in context of the other stories where

transformation of person into animal is often a punishment (4/8 person/animal transformations) or a result of a sad death such as the drowned boys in ‘Koodjal Nop’ or the seven sisters who die of thirst in ‘Danakat’. The boys in ‘Koodjal Nop’ disobey Elders and drown, but it is unclear whether their turning into the turtles that clean the sacred waterhole is a punishment or not.

Ngaawily Nop stands alone as a story where the transformation shows connection to Country and connection to family. It’s a story about how just because some people in your kinship network might refuse to recognise you out of ignorance or spite, Country knows you, regardless. The uncle doesn’t recognise the boy and brushes him off, but the ocean knew the boy, and the boy transformed into a groper which shows that he is part of Country and Country is part of him. Of the two Wirlomin books that feature transformation (there are four Wirlomin books that do not and aren’t discussed here), *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is a classic punishment tale when considered alongside the fifteen stories in this sample. The dogs are set on fire for being disobedient, and they run into the sea looking for their owner, turning into seals in the process. *Ngaawily Nop* captures a different kind of story to any of the fifteen in the sample, of how the barriers between human and animal are not solid, that at a moment’s notice one can transform into a groper and live in the sea forever. It’s a story about how Country knows who you are, and sees itself in you. That if you aren’t knowledgeable of family and kinship that you lose out on your family, like the uncle who finally recognised the boy but by then only bindjel/bubbles remained.

This survey of fifteen Noongar stories reveal a variety of reasons as to why a person, animal or spirit transforms. The previous chapter explored the way important

information about previous climates and sea-level rises were encoded into story, language and culture. This chapter builds on that to explore how Noongar stories carry important information but how other elements in the story also provide cultural context.

Chapter 3 – Colonial Transformation in Noongar Country

1. Introduction
2. Geography and Circumstance
3. Recognising and Naming the Colonial Experiment
4. Definition of Settler Colonialism
5. Colonial Narratives that Serve the Settler State
 - a. Discovery/Extinction
 - b. Empty Land
6. Case study 1: New Norcia Mission
7. Case study 2: The Wheatbelt
8. Postcolonial Amnesia

Introduction

In the last few hundred years Indigenous people in Australia, New Zealand, The United States of America and Canada have suffered the invasion of and occupation by British colonisers and their descendants. Upon arriving on the shores of Noongar Country, the British colonial administration set up a colony with no consideration for the people who already lived there. There is no indication that there was ever any consideration for the British to cohabit or co-govern with the Noongar people, there was no discussion about compensating the Noongar people for their land, or any indication for the desire to create a treaty with the Noongar people. British law and order was projected over the southwest, and every Noongar person was subject to that law and order. The Noongar people knew nothing of British law and order, and the British knew nothing of Noongar law and order. The British could take with violence, but the Noongar people could not defend with violence. Everything the

Noongar people previously controlled was now controlled by the invaders; not only was the flour and sugar only for the British, but the kangaroos, emus, water, whales, seals and possums was also for the British. The guns were only for the British, and the Aboriginal men were not permitted to carry spears. The Aboriginal women could be taken by the British men, but the Aboriginal men couldn't marry British women. Noongar people couldn't raise their own children, but the British could raise Noongar children in missions. Noongar people couldn't mix freely with other Noongar people, but British people could have Noongar domestic servants in their homes. This was all enforced with great violence, including massacres, murders, poisonings and torture.

No Bones but in the Mouth gives an alternate version of the meeting of Europeans and Indigenous people. This chapter gives an account of the crimes and incompetence of the British colonisers in Australia and Ireland, to contrast with the world of *No Bones...* where these colonial methods are largely absent. In the absence of colonial crimes, *No Bones...* presents a world where Indigenous ideas about land and family custodianship are taken seriously and are successful because Indigenous people know their land and how to live sustainably. In order to create a world where Indigenous laws might be respected and taken up by European arrivals, I had to create a scenario where the British colonial system has been completely destroyed by an environmental disaster on a huge scale. The newcomers of River Country are mostly Erin, a people inspired by the Irish of the 1600s. They are people who were colonised by the Albion, a people inspired by the English, but haven't absorbed the entirety of Albion colonising ways before the environmental disaster hit. Fionn is the only Albion person in River Country, and was an active coloniser in the past. His

sense of superiority to dark-skinned people has been obliterated by the destruction of Albia and Erina, and he has been knocked off his ideological pedestal. This forces him to integrate into River Country, rather than dominate it. The Erin barely tolerate Fionn, and have adjusted much better than Fionn has to family and land-centred life again.

Postcolonial studies doesn't focus much on colonial incompetence, particularly the undervaluing of Indigenous knowledge and the efficiency of land management practices. This incompetence is the substance of this chapter, how the colonial administration decimated the land, animals and waters of Noongar Country, and traumatised and disrespected the Noongar people. Through the 'turn of the kaleidoscope' methodology discussed in Chapter 4, the human-made climate change in our world that has been exacerbated by the global capitalism machine born from colonial exploitation has been delivered unto the Albion and Erin people before they even know River Country and wider Serpent Territory exists. *No Bones...* presents a world where the people who care for Country are the ones who still have somewhere healthy and green to live. The destructive tendencies of British colonialism in the following case studies' reveal that system's great inability to care for Country, something essential in the face of human-made climate change.

Geography and Circumstance

Geography and circumstance have played a large part in recent Noongar history. The Aboriginal communities of Australia lived in isolation from the rapid development of Europe that occurred over the last 6,000 years.

Homo sapiens emerged approximately 200,000 years ago (Harari, 2015, p. ix). Homo sapiens have resided in Australia for over 60,000 years, compared to the 40,000 years they have resided in Europe (Griffiths, 2018, p. 2). Europe has nutrient rich soils which supported a population explosion that enabled various social and technological revolutions that led to sea-faring societies that began exploring the world. In the 16th century new crops were introduced to Europe from South America, such as the potato, which greatly improved agricultural yield which increased births and reduced mortality. Trade was established with communities further and further away, spreading technology and competition for resources to a larger part of the world.

The rapid development of Europe gave Europeans technologies, strategies and resources that were advantageous when dealing with other nations. When sailing around the world, Europeans found that they didn't have to trade as relative equals with African and South American nations, as they would have with their neighbours. They could conquer them and rob them of resources. Europeans began to create empires that extended beyond their continent. When the European countries became colonising nations ideologies around race began to emerge. The morality of colonising and slavery had to be justified, and ideas around Caucasian superiority began to circulate and appear in literature and law. Ideas about black-skinned people being an inferior form of human began to appear, and in the scientific revolution this notion was further justified with 'evidence' gathered by early scientists. Ideas that women were biologically inferior to men also were enshrined in early scientific literature. Science would continue to be used to justify Caucasian male control of resources until the 20th century.

British society leading up to the 1700s had been a stratified class-based society, and this transformed into a capitalist society, which is complex and stratified. In 1700s Britain, the upper socio-economic strata tended to be populated by Caucasian people only, and dark-skinned people occupied only the lower socio-economic strata. Where class might have been signalled via dress, accent and company, race-based discrimination of value and gender-based discrimination of value couldn't be easily circumvented. Thus it was harder for dark-skinned people to have upward mobility through the socio-economic strata, which in turn made them visible as inferior in terms of class. Race-based ideologies around white superiority and black inferiority started as justification for building wealth, then enshrined itself in Western culture as 'the natural way of things'.

On the other side of the planet, Australia is an ancient continent that has some of the oldest and poorest soils in the world (Kanowski & McKenzie, 2011). The population of Australia would have grown and shrunk through the climate changes of the last 60,000 years, but Australian Aboriginal people did not have the influences that Europe experienced that caused the population to steadily rise – mainly the soils that produced an abundance of food. In terms of trade, the people of northern Australia enjoyed a trade relationship with Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, and there are some influences in art and agriculture evident in those northern cultures today. However, those relationships did not spur the kind of technological advances associated with European capitalist expansion.

Noongar Country is thousands of kilometres south of Asia and it is likely that Noongar people only traded with the Aboriginal nations around them. This relative isolation over time sent Noongar culture on a different trajectory to Europe. In the last 6,000 years, European cultures changed and developed with all the new influences and ideas pouring in. In that same time period, Noongar people were in recovery from the last Ice Age and spent those 6,000 years continuing and fine-tuning their intimate relationship with the land. Noongar Country is a relative land of plenty compared with northern and central Australia, with a wider variety of food sources, a pleasant climate and large, gentle river systems. But the poor soils and absence of easily domesticable animals and plants meant that food sourcing didn't change rapidly (Harari, 2015, p. 88). Noongar people became sophisticated land custodians, and developed an environmental spirituality based on land custodianship. In his book *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Bill Gammage states '[t]here was no wilderness. The Law – an ecological philosophy enforced by religious sanction – compelled people to care for all their country' (2011, p. 2).

Gammage proposes that over time Aboriginal people poured innovative energy into transforming the Australian landscape into a comfortable 'estate' (2011, p.1) Controlled burns facilitated green shoots which drew animals where they wanted them, the forest understoreys were burned back so game could be funnelled, they planted huge fields for bulbs and had fish and eel traps. Aboriginal people arrived in Australia 20,000 years before humans would arrive in Europe, where its only in the last few thousand years that the technological changes diversified human societies.

The Australian landmass was the last populated continent to be encountered by European explorers, and it is likely that Europeans were the first non-Aboriginal people that Noongar people had significant encounters with. When encountering Noongar people, the British settlers could not fathom the entirety of Noongar culture by looking at them. What they had with them was a toolkit of ideas, survival techniques and philosophies that enabled them to succeed in European life. This raft of colonial and imperial ideologies that emerged during the colonial times of Europe had a huge impact on the people of Noongar Country.

The sophisticated culture and practical lifestyle that the Noongar people lived was not recognised by the British settlers. It didn't occur to the British to consider Noongar people as a distinct people to start afresh with. Noongar people appeared in general to the British to be sub-human. The British saw themselves as a superior form of human and that the Noongar lacked what the British had. Noongar people wore little clothing, didn't build stone houses to live in, and had non-mechanical weaponry. They didn't use the land to its full potential from a European point of view. The British had laws about taking land from sovereign peoples, but the British settlers got around this by proclaiming that the Noongar people (and all Australian Aboriginal people) were not human and therefore not owners of land (AIATSIS, 2020). This attitude at first contact led to the dispossession of Aboriginal communities all over the continent.

Recognising and Naming the Colonial Experiment

Postcolonial studies, postcolonial theory and the ideas around postcoloniality emerged in academic institutions in the mid-20th century as theorists in colonised

nations began to question the legitimacy and morality of colonisation, identifying ideologies circulating in culture that benefit the colonising culture, and the destructive effect of assimilation on indigene cultures. It is ‘a questioning of inherited, colonial-influenced historical narratives’ (Featherstone, 2005, p. 7) and ‘is committed to tasks of questioning and challenging embedded assumptions of colonialism in the economic, social and intellectual practices of the First World, and of understanding emergent cultural formations’ (2005, p. 133).

Colonial narratives and counter-narratives can be read across all aspects of culture, from overt forms such as media, non-fiction books, academic papers, public signage and monuments, to creative works such as literature, music, film, art, architecture and performance. All these mediums can be read through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, and postcolonial readings inform new narratives about the culture that produces those mediums. Postcolonial theory also concerns itself with ‘who does it speak to, where does it speak from, and whose interests does it represent?’ (Featherstone, 2005, p. 10) and ‘its value must be judged in terms of its adequacy to conceptualise the complex condition which attends the aftermath of colonial occupation’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4).

Definition of Settler Colonialism

Johnston & Lawson state that ‘not all postcolonial cultures are postcolonial in the same way’ (2000, p. 368) and identify five types of colonial endeavours: plantation, surrogate, internal, exploitation and settler colonialisms. Exploitation colonialism covers the presence of Europeans in African nations where local communities are taken over and controlled through military force, and their resources are funnelled out. An example is the red rubber trade in the Congo Basin, run by the King of

Belgium, Leopold II. Plantation colonialism refers to setting up a colony or base in a desirable climate for growing a product, such as the French plantation colony on Saint-Domingue, where slaves from the African continent were transported to the Caribbean island as a work force. Surrogate colonialism is when a foreign power supports a non-native group to control a nation occupied by indigenous peoples. The term was popularised in discussions around the British orchestrated creation of the State of Israel. Internal colonialism refers to inequalities within a nation, with uneven development and political control, where minority groups are marginalised. An example is Sri Lanka where the government wanted to extend farming land and irrigated the dry north, and they moved thousands of southern Sinhalese (Buddhist) farmers into the northern Tamil (Islamic) lands, providing the Sinhalese with land, money and security to grow food. These state-sponsored colonisation schemes were one of the contributors to the Sri Lankan Civil War.

Settler colonialism is when a group of people migrate to a nation and displace the indigenous occupiers living there, through violence and assimilation, and set up a replica of the culture that they come from. This is the kind of colonialism that doesn't 'end' and transforms the ethnic makeup of a location. Settler colonialism encapsulates the status of Noongar Country, as well as wider Australia, with similarities to New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Canada.

The endeavour of settler colonialism is largely concerned with procuring land for agriculture, mining and long-term occupation.

Settler colonies, therefore, don't have an obvious moment of decolonisation, because of the presence of long-term, majority European racial communities, where indigenous peoples have been outnumbered and removed by colonial policies and practices (Johnston & Lawson, 2000, p. 361). To date none of the British settler colonies, such as Australia, New Zealand, United States and Canada, have expelled their colonial invaders, and instead descendants of indigenous peoples live among the descendants of the British and migrants. In Australia the descendants of Aboriginal people suffer inequality in terms of economics, health and education, and are disproportionately incarcerated compared to the average population. The descendants of Aboriginal people suffer misrepresentation to the settler public, who have a set of ideologies about Aboriginal people they inherited from 'bad masters' who had an agenda of land theft. The inherited ideologies downplay Aboriginal sovereignty, achievement and resistance, and continue to circulate in Australian culture because the factual account that Australia was taken by force and colonised by invaders is deeply unpalatable to the descendants of settlers. The next part of the exegesis identifies ideologies that have been 'disproven' but continue to plague Aboriginal people in their quest for self-actualisation.

Colonial narratives that serve the settler state

Discovery/Extinction

One of the key narratives circulating in postcolonial nations colonised by Europeans such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada is the 'discovery narrative'. 'Discovery' is a political term deployed by the British to legitimise their claim of Australian land. The British claimed Australia in the 1770s, within the same ten-year span that they lost control of America with the War of Independence. There was a rush among the

European colonising nations to take up all the uncontrolled places left in the world. The discovery narrative represents the British as scientifically and technologically advanced, and so their claiming of Australia is in line with their taxonomy of the world. The legal fiction 'terra nullius' (literally no-one's land) was declared to legitimise the claim, and the Aboriginal people were described as animals who couldn't be considered as sovereign people.

Other sophistry was employed to justify land theft. The British said that Aboriginal people were like wandering children and didn't have any concept of land ownership. Until 1950 it was believed that Aboriginal people came down from Asia in the last 1,000 years where their culture stagnated and they were on the verge of dying out when the British arrived (Griffiths, 2018, p. 2).

Another piece of colonial ideology that benefits to comfort the descendants of settlers is the notion that Aboriginal people are an inferior form of human being. Russell McGregor has written extensively on 'doomed race theory' and about how the emergent field of evolutionary biology reinforced existing preconceptions that 19th century 'scientists' had about Aboriginal people. McGregor states that '[a]ccording to the evolutionists, Aborigines ranked as one of the most primitive of human races: living fossils which had survived, through seclusion, in this remote part of the world' (1993, p. 14). Europeans believed themselves superior to Aboriginal people because European weaponry, communication and transport were advantageous when dealing with black-skinned people, and Europeans assumed that meant they were culturally superior, but evolutionary theory implied that they were perhaps biologically superior as well.

The strangeness of the Australian continent also played into evolutionary theory of the time, as '[n]ot only its human inhabitants, but the entire flora and fauna of Australia was thought to have fossilised at a primitive stage' (1993, p. 15). Evolutionary biology was understood to mean 'survival of the fittest' so egg-laying mammals such as the platypus were 'proof' that Australia was a place of evolutionary dead ends. Charles Darwin had proposed that humans evolved from apes, so the finger was pointed at Aboriginal people as being a missing link in that formation from apes to human. The notion of Aboriginal biological inferiority suited the narrative of European superiority, and '[l]ocked into an evolutionary paradigm, anthropology did not seek to investigate whether Aborigines *were* primeval forms of humanity. That was already known' (my emphasis, 1993, p. 16). Settlers believed that Aboriginal people were a 'doomed race', an animal-like missing link fated to 'die out' and be replaced with a higher form of human.

'Aboriginal extinction was a corollary of their primitivity' (1993, p. 16), and terms like 'extinction' and phrases such as 'dying out' project an animality onto Aboriginal people. The term 'extinction' means the disappearance of a species. The terms 'extinction' and 'dying out' however don't apply, as Europeans and Noongar people are the same extant human species, homo sapien, the only human species on the planet. All humans are 99.9 per cent genetically identical (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2020), so it's not the natural-sounding extinction to blame if Aboriginal people should disappear, but the morally abhorrent genocide.

But Aboriginal people didn't 'die out'. McGregor states that '[w]hile the doomed race concept had firm theoretical foundations in contemporary science, its empirical supports were remarkably tenuous' (p. 16). Beyond the popular erroneous cranial studies of race scientists at the time, '[n]o accurate demographic data was available and no detailed demographic studies were conducted' (p. 16). The mechanics of how exactly Aboriginal people were to 'die out' in the presence of Europeans was not confidently reported or written about. Disease impacted populations, for example, killing as much as 50 per cent of Noongar people in the first ten years of the Swan River Colony.

There was anecdotal data on the 'disappearance' of Aboriginal people from certain areas, which may have appeared like population decline, '[b]ut from that to inevitable extinction required a long imaginative leap, with no detailed empirical evidence to bridge the gap' (p. 17). Despite no real data to back-up the theory that Aboriginal people would die out or even an idea of how a people die out from just having mixed with Europeans, the notions of doomed race theory had a long impact on Aboriginal people. McGregor states that 'European attitudes and actions toward Aborigines, including legislation, administration, employment, even to some extent missionary efforts, can be understood only in the context of a firm conviction that they had not long to live' (p. 18).

Tellingly, Darwin's theory of evolution didn't line up with the notion of Aboriginal people being a missing link people, even at the time. His theories told of randomly occurring variations in populations, not an evolutionary totem pole of people with Europeans at the top. Scientists describing Aboriginal people saw a

moral dimension to evolution, of whom its highest achievement was Western civilisation. In their zeal to make nature meaningful ‘[t]he law of evolution was conflated with the idea of progress’ (p. 18), and Aboriginal people suffered under policy, legislation, missions, reserves and policing that reflected this.

It’s clear that Europeans didn’t have genetic superiority, as all humans on the Earth are 99.9 per cent identical. What they possessed were cultural advantages that produced technological advantages. The decrease in the populations of Aboriginal people wasn’t the feeble forms of man making way for a higher form, it was one group of people wiping out and replacing another.

The likelihood of which narratives were adopted and circulated and which were not was dependent on whether the ideology of the narrative reinforced the beliefs or fears of the majority. The perceived sub-humanness of Aboriginal people helped legitimise the British occupation of Australia, which was criticised back in England. In the face of that criticism, the narratives of Aboriginal people being ‘doomed’ were championed and circulated because they placed the blame for the conquer and subjugation of Aboriginal people on the shoulders of Aboriginal people themselves, erasing invasion as the cause of their suffering. Supporting this, Johnston and Lawson state that ‘[t]he indigenized settler is the figure who is ready to step in when the native “dies out”. The native must make way for the settler because there was a legal and moral prohibition against “invasion”’ (2000, p. 364). It was more palatable for settlers to imagine that Aboriginal people would simply disappear in the mere presence of Western culture, erasing the violence that accompanies invasion. Johnston and Lawson call this ‘a strategic disavowal of the colonizing act’

(p. 365), and go on to comment on the use of the word ‘settler’ itself as a political move, calling it ‘part of the process of invasion; it was literally a textual imposition on history’ (p. 366).

Empty Land

An important piece of colonial ideology that connects with this and functions to legitimise European settlement is the emphasis on the ‘emptiness’ of the Australian landscape. ‘Land – its description, control and exploitation – was both the material and the ideological base of colonialism’ (Featherstone, 2005, p. 201), and the British colonial enterprise sought to acquire as much land as they could, to own for profit, but also to appear legitimate as a world power. British settlers came to Australia to make something of their lives with less competition. Johnston and Lawson state:

Vast and empty lands, insistently recorded in both texts and visual images, called out, obviously, to the European imagination to be filled, and they were filled by, successively, people, crops, and herds, but also by the stories and histories that, like the economically-productive crops, legitimated the settlement (p. 364).

Ross Gibson states that ‘the English were faced with...an enormous tract of space which seemed to them to be invested with no significance’ (1992, p. 8), and the psychological response to a void like this is to categorise it as something. The land at first was processed as an enemy to be overcome and conquered, in a way that they couldn’t talk about the Aboriginal people, for whom sympathies had arisen in England. Secondly the landscape was processed as a symbol of unknowable ineffability, a place of preternatural origin and essence which could never be a place

for humans. This is in stark contrast to the Aboriginal people of Australia who see the landscape as nurturing mother, storyteller, and home that they care for, and in turn gives Aboriginal people all they need.

In light of the perceived ‘dying out’ of Aboriginal people, assimilation policies such as the *Aborigines Act 1905* were enacted to control miscegenation and Aboriginal mobility. Assimilation policies in Australia wound up being a terrible idea with miserable outcomes and a miserable legacy. Instead of integrating people it marginalised them, instead of preparing people for Western society it inflicted intergenerational trauma which makes it near impossible to cope with and compete in Western society, and the policies smashed the kinship system by which people find the strength and support they need to thrive. It failed even its overtly racist mandate, to breed out the colour. The assumed superiority of European intellectualism and the perceived infallibility of science meant that assimilation policies were implemented by people that we would not consider qualified to do so. Europeans took control of the Noongar people, installed themselves as their leaders, and traumatised them.

In other research I am developing the notion of the ‘Bad Master’, a term I use to describe these unqualified colonial administrators and institutions whose incompetency, ignorance, intellectual dishonesty and zealous white supremacy has injured land, body, family and spirit in the Aboriginal nations of Australia. The following is two case studies that embody the Bad Master of culture and the Bad Master of land.

Case Study 1. New Norcia Mission

The Benedictine Monastery at New Norcia was established on 1st March 1846 by Spanish monks Rosendo Salvado and Joseph Serra. Salvado believed it was his spiritual mission to convert Aboriginal people to Catholicism, and he created New Norcia to install Aboriginal people into monastic life. The mostly Noongar community there lived as families, and had days filled with prayer, music lessons, labour and schooling. Aboriginal ritual, ceremony and language were banned, though anecdotal information from Anna Haebich's 2018 book *Dancing in Shadows* speaks about Aboriginal men stealing away from the mission to conduct initiation ceremonies in private (2018, p.152). It was a tightly controlled environment, perhaps perceived by the monks to be an ideal Catholic utopia, where people were kept busy all day with mass, chores, farming, music lessons and schooling. It was a place of assimilation and brainwashing for Noongar people, but it was one of the few European institutions where Noongar families could live together. 'Salvado's promise to the people of a permanent community of small family farms and the evidence of this being achieved were important incentives for mission residents' (p.125-126), and the encroaching colonial presence in Noongar Country meant that there were fewer and fewer places for Noongar people to flee. New Norcia prior to 1900 was a strange place of relative safety due to the strict monastic leadership of Salvado. Haebich comments that 'New Norcia was a microcosm of the uneasy tensions generated by colonisation: dominance and absence; benevolence and destruction; change and resilience; and light and shadow' (2018, p.119).

Salvado was a Bad Master of the Noongar people who lived at New Norcia prior to 1900. He couldn't see the value of the Noongar land care, family kinship,

and connection to Country. His monastic model made no space for collaboration with the Noongar families of how a ‘two-cultures’ community should be run. Salvado’s New Norcia was a microcosm of the colonial enterprise, as Salvado believed his own religious ideas and way of life to be superior to the Noongar people’s with no meaningful investigation or inquiry on his part. He was either oblivious or uncaring of the violent colonial enterprise happening all around the southwest that created families looking for shelter. I find it useful to consider missions and monasteries in Australia to be open-ended experiments rather than ‘history’, or as ‘something that happened in the past’. The Bad Master experiments with people and place, and Salvado’s experiment continued to unfold long after he died.

Though envisioned to be self-sufficient, Salvado was constantly fundraising to keep the community functioning, often instructing Noongar children and teens trained in music to perform to paying patrons. In 1900 Salvado died and control of the monastery went to a new abbot, Fulgentius Antonio Torres. Not long after, the *Aborigines Act 1905* was enacted – the legislature of the Stolen Generations – where all Aboriginal people in WA became wards of the state, under the control of the Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville. Here is where Salvado’s unethical experiment with brainwashing and controlling an Indigenous population showed its rancid fruit. New Norcia was Salvado’s experiment that he designed and maintained, and he embodied its values. He put himself out there to fundraise for its continuance. When he died, the lead scientist was replaced, and the experiment changed. More Noongar children were sent there as a result of the 1905 Act, filling the monastery with displaced children without parents to supervise and protect them, and throwing the

balance of adults and children out. The cost of running the mission, already unsustainable, went up, as so many of its citizens were now children who couldn't 'work' efficiently. Food became of poorer quality, money became even more dire. These circumstances created a nightmare scenario, where nuns and brothers, who have no training in caring for institutionalised children, became frustrated and worn out, and turned that frustration against the children in their care, neglecting them, overworking them, denying them emotional nurturing, which as a result traumatised them.

Salvado and his successors didn't have the training, the funding or the evidence-based knowledge to raise children better than their parents could. The running of such an institution could never be ethical, because the children were removed from their parents for unethical reasons, namely the colour of their skin. Those children raised at New Norcia would have been better off in the Noongar family unit, where they had lots of family members looking after them out of love and kinship, rather than the more abstract concept of religious compulsion. A weeping child would likely be consoled in a family situation, where in an institutional situation they were likely to be ignored, treated with contempt, subjected to violence, or set upon by bullies.

The Benedictine Monks were allowed to set up their religious monastery because the Christian religion was perceived to be a high form of spirituality, and Europe was influenced heavily by it at all levels of government and family. In contrast, the poorly understood Noongar culture was considered uncivilised and a lower form of spirituality. Noongar language was consistently called 'devil

language’, feeding into the idea that Noongar people were devil-worshippers with souls in need of salvation. The perceived pre-eminence of Christian religion was helped by the wealth of the Church, and the power they held with government and local community. Sex in particular is connected to the morality of a person in the Christian religions, and the Church’s teachings were often the basis for people shaming each other on account of sex and sexuality, particularly sexuality out of wedlock. This has a hidden effect, where people who suffer sexual abuse don’t report it, having been tarred by the brush of non-sanctioned sexuality, fearing for their moral health or reputation. Children in institutions don’t report abuse for a variety of reasons, including fear of revenge, the perceived shame of abuse, and not knowing systems to report abuse.

New Norcia had three times the national average of sexual abusers in the period investigated by the Royal Commission:

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse released data in February this year that confirmed what we already knew. The report found that 7 per cent of priests from all Catholic Church authorities who ministered from 1950 to 2010 across Australia were accused of child sexual abuse, but for the Benedictine Community of New Norcia, the amount was more than triple that at 21.5 per cent. (commission report February 2017)

The nightmare of New Norcia reveals itself through time as ‘good intentions’ turned itself to dark cruelty – from naïve utopia to grim dystopia for the Noongar children removed through the *Aborigines Act 1905*. The damaging and unethical

assimilation legislation hits the rampant sexual abuse endemic to religious institutions head on, traumatising three generations of Noongar people in the 20th century. The Bad Masters of government combines with the Bad Masters of religion, revealing that Bad Masters operate in cooperation with other Bad Masters, maintaining their power and also compounding atrocities against the vulnerable, revealing their ineptitude and self-deception as morally and intellectually superior. This identification of Bad Masters is about highlighting this ineptitude and the self-deception that conceals it. The concept interrogates the past and puts the onus onto the Bad Master to discuss why it deserved to be in control, possibly then to prove why, if they have inherited power from previous Bad Masters, they should be in control today.

Case Study 2: The Wheatbelt

The environmental effects of European control of Noongar Country has been apparent from the 1970s, when George Seddon published his seminal 1972 book, *Sense of Place*, extolling the struggles of the southwest landscape in the face of European agricultural practice. The title popularised the concept of 'sense of place', previously referred to as *genus loci*, where a landscape's history and character are considered as important and informative for living a good life. The book was released in the context of the global environmental movement which focused on conservation of the Amazon rainforest, CFCs eroding the ozone layer, global warming, whaling and anti-nuclear sentiments. Illustrating a greater awareness around the long-term effects of human activity and growing populations, *Sense of Place* speaks about appreciating the southwest for its strangeness and beauty, and not rushing to cover it in European plants, animals, and agriculture. Seddon took a

particular interest in the Swan Coastal Plain, describing its landforms, rivers, plants, animals and climate, elevating this poorly understood landscape from one of inconvenience to eminence. It's a landmark publication for recognition of place in Australia, and opened the door to architects and environmentalists to start interpreting from Country for wisdom on land use, rather than starting from land management theories developed overseas.

In a short amount of time the environment of Noongar Country has rapidly declined. Up until 1910, 90 per cent of the southwest was native vegetation, but by the year 2000 only 20 per cent of native vegetation in the southwest remained (Andrich & Imberger, 2013, p.551). Inland Noongar Country, especially Ballardong Country, was largely cleared of native vegetation and replaced with approximately 150,000 square kilometres of European agriculture, mostly wheat, giving the region its European nickname, the Wheatbelt. Western Australia also exported billions of dollars' worth of karri, jarrah, york gum and wandoo timber from Wardandi Noongar Country in the far southwest. Anecdotally, the government wanted to clear 'a million acres a year', and the Wheatbelt became an area so large that it has affected the area's rainfall. Research from Andrich and Imberger (2013) reveals a variety of factors and effects of the clearing of inland Noongar Country, and in accumulation they have made the rainfall drop by 40 per cent in the Wheatbelt. One factor is that wheat crops have a lower transpiration rate than natural vegetation, meaning that there is less moisture in the air to seed rain. The wheat fields also have a higher albedo rate, meaning that more light and heat is reflected back into the sky, making it hotter and drier over the Wheatbelt. Another factor is that cleared, flat lands have stronger winds which take moisture out of the air. Trees also act as biotic

pumps, pumping water up from the water table, so clearing them breaks that cycle, removing a source of moisture that would be respired into the air.

The removal of trees also affected the water table, bringing saline groundwater to the surface, resulting in dryland salinity and waterlogging. This has affected the freshwater available for human consumption, exacerbating the reliance on rainfall and other aquifers. The Wellington Dam in particular has become unusable due to salinity.

The Wheatbelt is an alien landscape in Noongar Country, a terraformed landscape redolent of the Martian red weed that spreads across England in H.G. Wells' 1898 invasion novel *The War of the Worlds*:

At any rate, the seeds which the Martians (intentionally or accidentally) brought with them gave rise in all cases to red-coloured growths...the red weed grew with astonishing vigour and luxuriance. (Wells, 2007, p.104-5)

This red weed chokes the landscape displacing all terran plants, animals and humans in its path. European agricultural landscapes, the purpose of which is to feed the settlers who have amassed large populations on Aboriginal lands around the Australian continent, have similarly displaced the people, animals and plants.

The black cockatoos of Noongar Country, Karak (*Calyptorhynchus banksia*, Red-tailed Black Cockatoo), Ngoolyak (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*, Carnaby's Cockatoo) and Ngoolyanak (*Calyptorhynchus baudinii*, Baudin's Cockatoo) are all

listed as critically endangered from clearing practices in Noongar Country. They are threatened by loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation, illegal poaching and shooting, and competing for food and nest hollows with invasive species. A salmon gum or wandoo takes over 150 years from seedling to the mature tree that has developed hollows suitable for cockatoos to nest in, and the removal of thousands of trees to make way for wheat fields, plus the perception that the hollowed trees are ‘dead’, and can be justifiably cut down for firewood, has exacerbated the situation. Salmon gums and wandoo also require a certain amount of rainfall to thrive, and the decreased rainfall created by the clearing and the wheat fields has problematised that.

Noongar workers, particularly from Ballardong Country, were employed to clear the land to make way for European agriculture (Gaynor, 2015). The grandchildren of those land clearers are Elders today, and speak of how hard that labour was, but it was some of the only work that Aboriginal people were allowed to do. A lot of those Noongar land clearers had passed away by the 1970s, which was when the dryland salinity and waterlogging became really apparent. I heard an Elder wonder what their grandparent would have made of the Wheatbelt once its environmentally catastrophic nature became apparent. It’s a certain sort of melancholy and grief to be complicit in the destruction of one’s own boodja (Country).

Postcolonial Amnesia

‘Postcolonial amnesia’ is a term that encapsulates the deliberate ‘remembering’ or repeated circulation of narratives that benefit the cultural hegemony and the

deliberate ‘forgetting’ or silencing of narratives that challenge the legitimacy of the cultural hegemony. Leela Gandhi states:

Principally, postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start – to erase painful memories of colonial subordination...newly emergent postcolonial nation-states are often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance. The mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter (1998, p. 4).

Postcolonial theory ‘is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and crucially, interrogating the colonial past’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4) so that white superiority can be identified as intellectual dishonesty and so that nation-making can be generated from a history more accurate than one championed by the hegemony.

Chapter 4 – Constructing the World of *No Bones but in the Mouth*

Introduction

Part 1 – The Characters

The Shark – Patient One Under the Waves

Sharks in Noongar Stories

Sharks in the Fossil Record

No Bones but in the Mouth

The Serpent – Rivermaster and Rainlord

Meka – Unstuck from Time

Perfidious Albion

Erin from the Land of Ire

Part 2 – Explicit Process

The Turn of the Kaleidoscope

Deep Time Stories

Colonial vs Indigenous Metaphor

Referencing Noongar Cultural Heritage

Introduction

The research of the previous three chapters informs the characters, setting, themes and plot of *No Bones but in the Mouth*. The novel is an alternate version of the

European arrival story in Noongar Country, and it explores how Western and Aboriginal societies might integrate if the colonial relationship was absent. In *No Bones...*, newcomers on wooden ships arrive as refugees fleeing environmental disaster and integrate into an Aboriginal society. The River Country characters have a deep connection to place and for Meka, this connection transforms into an ability to perceive deep time. Through interference from The Shark, Meka falls into deep time and her journey to escape it reflects what she needs to come to terms with how rapidly her society is changing and has to decide whether she wants to be part of that change. *No Bones...* explores through fiction how multicultural integration might be difficult even in the absence of the colonial relationship.

The character of The Shark is a synthesis of the previous three chapters and is inspired by deep time, Noongar cultural stories, and colonial history. The Shark's characterisation as obstinate, cunning and consumptive is inspired by taking a deep-time view of shark biology and evolution: sharks appear hundreds of millions of years before mammals, and they are a chronospecies that has become more sophisticated through time. This combined with research into shark physiology, of their structurally simple hearts and the fact that they produce thousands of teeth in a single lifetime, contributes to thematic suggestions that The Shark is a spectre of violent colonialism haunting the novel. The Shark is partly inspired by south coast Noongar stories, where there are references to fearsome sharks, river dwellers and shore-flooders called Kwilar, Keilar, Madjit, Maadjit and Marget. The Shark's attitude is suggestive of Western individualism and scientific rationalism, and is represented in the novel as an adversary to The Serpent, who represents Indigenous concepts of land custodianship and interconnectedness of plant, animal, mineral,

human and weather. Their adversarial relationship is largely one-sided, and The Serpent suffers from the Shark's pointed attacks to defeat it.

This chapter also goes into the writing process and the major themes of the novel. It introduces the writing methodology of 'the turn of the kaleidoscope', a metaphor used to explain the alternate world of *No Bones...* that defies traditional genre boundaries typically found in fiction. This writing process is combined with the doubled methodology of exegesis and fiction writing mentioned previously, in a discussion of how *No Bones but in the Mouth* creates a space for a new way to connect to Country, pre-empted by ideas raised in the Ngalak paper. This chapter also discusses how *No Bones...* is not representative of any specific Aboriginal culture, although my heritage is Noongar, and instead is built on pan-Aboriginal imagery.

Part 1 – The Characters

The Shark – Patient One Under the Waves

The Shark is a giant being/spirit of ancient heritage who lives in the sea. The Shark is the antagonist of *No Bones...* and this antagonism is represented in and affects the novel in a variety of ways. The Shark is the master of Saltwater Country, and is the enemy of The Serpent, the master of Freshwater Country. Throughout the deep time history of this fictional world, The Shark has sought to flood Serpent Territory with the saltwater of the sea. Through the shifting cycles of glaciation and warming explored in Chapter 1, The Shark is constructed in *No Bones...* to be a powerful force in the Warm Times, and a comparatively weak force in the Cold Times. Against this background of sea levels rising and falling, the timeline of *No Bones...*

is set during the Warm Times, and The Shark interferes with and influences people and spirits on Serpent Country in order to undermine and erode the power of The Serpent. The Shark is the embodiment of a kind of Nietzschean self-interest, an entity who is fiercely individualistic, with a 'might is right' attitude. This characterisation is constructed in opposition to The Serpent, who is concerned primarily with caring for the healthy survival of all, great and small, on its territory. These opposing motivations plays on the cultural differences between the European imperial colonial enterprise, motivated by power, profits and self-interest, and the environmental religion and beliefs of Australian Aboriginal people, whose cultures are concerned primarily with the good of people, animals, plants and spirits as an interconnected community. The character of The Shark is also informed by the evolutionary stories 'told' by sharks in the fossil record, and Noongar stories about sharks and monsters on the south coast.

Sharks in Noongar Stories

The character of The Shark takes part of its inspiration from stories of a foreign entity coming to an Indigenous territory and causing floods. One of the published Noongar stories discussed in Chapter 1 posits that an outsider, Yondok the crocodile, travels down from warmer Country in the North, causing floods as it swims. Wagyl/Creator Serpent smells saltwater in the river and swims out to stop Yondok before the crocodile enters the bilya/river. Wagyl fights Yondok and wins, and the crocodile's body turns into the islands off Walyalap/Fremantle. The Shark has a similar role in *No Bones...*, it is trying to take The Serpent's territory, and it does so by raising sea levels.

I chose to characterise the antagonist of *No Bones...* as a shark, rather than a crocodile, or some other sea monster, for three main reasons.

Firstly, the story of Yondok is a famous one, even to non-Indigenous people in Whadjuk Country. It is not culturally appropriate for a non-Whadjuk Noongar person to reimagine or reinvent that particular story. *No Bones...* is set in a world that is strikingly similar to Whadjuk Noongar Boodja, and to have a crocodile as the antagonist would run the risk of replacing or altering that oral story in the public imagination. Concurrently, *No Bones...* would have been overwhelmed with the inclusion of such a famous cultural reference. The Shark is a totally invented character, and has a lot more freedom in its representation because of that. It is not an entity of Noongar Country.

Secondly, the novel requires the antagonist to be the spirit of the sea, a true alien outsider to those who live on land. The antagonist needed to be a fish, and sharks breathe water, where a crocodile breathes air and is a reptile like The Serpent. The shark is a logical choice as the spirit of the ocean and the antagonist in the novel.

Thirdly, as a south coast Noongar person, stories of sharks and whales are more familiar to me than crocodiles. Part of Meka's struggle in *No Bones...* connects back to her birthplace on the south coast, so her antagonist is inspired by shark stories of the south coast ilk. As discussed in Chapter 1, flood stories are prevalent in Noongar Country, and rising sea levels has been imprinted onto Aboriginal oral culture because Aboriginal people lost a lot of hunting and ceremonial ground, so a compelling antagonist for the River People of *No Bones...* would be a fearsome creature that controls this sea-level rise.

There are references to antagonistic sharks and water spirits named Madjit, Marget and Maadjit in cultural and ethnographic sources from my home Country on the mid-south coast of Western Australia. In the south coast Noongar story ‘Chitter Chitter and Pinny Pinch’ recorded by Ethel Hassell in the 1880s near Jerramungup, ‘Marget’ is a water spirit who lives up the end of a lake near the sea. When the chitter chitter/willy wagtails want to drive away humans who had come to live near their lake, they entreat Marget to help them:

Marget responded to their call and the sea bubbled and roared through the hole in the lake made by the long sticks thrust in by the *chitter chitter*, and many of the *nunghars* were drowned. (Hassell, 1975, p. 216, italics in text)

Here Marget is presented as an entity who is in control of floods and flooding, a spirit disinterested in the affairs of animals and people. When pushed it is more inclined to help birds than humans:

At last the natives were having a great corroboree, and they made such a noise that they annoyed *marget*, who was constantly pestered by the *chitter chitter* to rise up and drive them away. So *marget* made the hole bigger in the lake and the sea roared in harder than ever, making the lake overflow. Then the *nunghars* rushed away in terror. (1975, p. 216)

In Hassell's other writings, Marget is referred to as a dweller of rivers who will drown those who swim near its home. She states that a series of bubbles coming up from the river denote that Marget is about, and also mounds of wet mud on the banks show where Marget had walked on land. This is one of her descriptions:

Then there is *marghet*, an inland water spirit. He is very long and round, with short feet, an immense head, mouth, and lots of teeth. He lives in deep lakes and pools and travels by night, is often heard but rarely seen. If a *nunghar* goes into a pool where *marghet* is lurking, he softly seizes his legs and pulls him under the water and he is never seen again. Sometimes on some of the larger lakes, the water in the centre boils and bubbles and big rings appear just as though a large animal was on the point of rising up, but nothing appears and after a time the boiling and bubbling cease, and all is still, that is *marghet* in the water, where he can't be seen by mortal eye. (p. 61)

Here 'marget' is a humanoid water spirit, but the name of 'margit' as meaning shark appears in Lynette Knapp's story 'Margit wer Barmba', discussed previously in Chapter 2. The story is a morality tale set at Boyadar/The Gap in Torndirrup, where two boys refuse to stop squabbling and are ultimately transformed into a shark (margit) and a stingray (barmba).

The wordlists also refer to Marget/Madjit/Maadjit as a shark, and George Grey lists it as meaning a fearsome shark:

Maadjit – a species of shark much dreaded by the natives (Grey, 1841, p. 76)

The stone that Meka inherits from her mother's grave, and winds up being
The Shark's eye takes inspiration from George Fletcher Moore's listing:

Madjit-til, s. – (K.G.S.¹⁴) The magic stone of the shark. These are pieces of
crystal supposed to possess supernatural powers; some of them are much
more celebrated than others: none but the native sorcerers will touch them.
(Moore, 1884, p. 47)

In west coast Whadjuk Noongar Country sharks commonly called Kwila or
Keilar (Gregory, 2020, p. 54), whereas on the south coast of Noongar Country sharks
can also be called Madjit. Some Noongar community members refer to a creator
serpent as Madjit, as well as Wagyl. Perth in fact has many different creator serpents,
male and female, who had actions and roles all throughout the creation and defence
of Noongar Country. When writing the Noongar language haiku in the opening of
the novel, I chose the word 'madjit' for shark instead of the other dialect options
because this is a south coast word for shark, and also because the name is associated
with magic and fearsomeness which speaks to the spirit of the haiku.

Sharks in the Fossil Record

The character and physiology of The Shark is partly inspired by sharks in general,
living and extinct, in particular the large, apex predator species. It takes its colour
and ferocity from the contemporary great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*), its

¹⁴ K.G.S. = King George Sound in Albany, locating the language source area.

capacity to swim in estuarine waters from a bull shark (*Carcharhinus leucas*), and its huge size from the extinct shark *Megalodon* (*Carcharocles megalodon*).

The ancient evolutionary history of sharks, having emerged over 420 million years ago, is crucial to the creation of a character who has been around long enough to observe significant rising and falling sea levels, and world glaciation events. The ancestors of contemporary sharks are theorised to appear in the Ordovician Period (485.4mya–443.8mya) due to shark-like scales recovered from this time, with more complete skeletons appearing in the Silurian Period (443.8mya–419.2mya) of the fossil record.

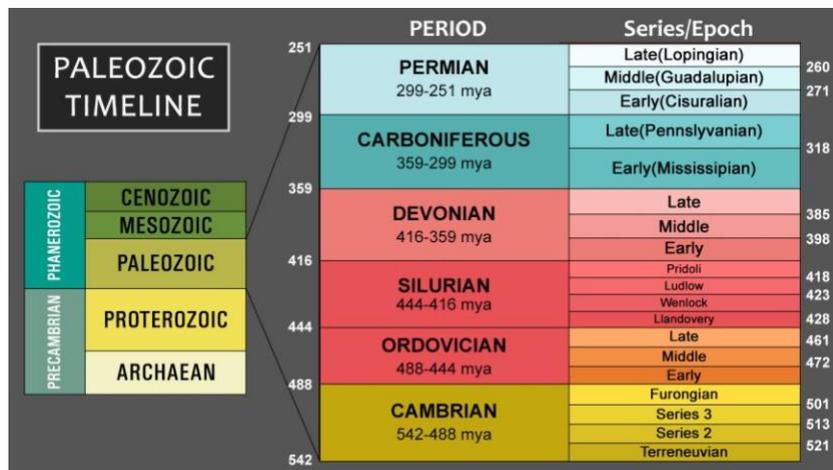


Figure 19. Paleozoic Timeline. From 'Paleozoic Era: Major Events and Important Facts', by Science Struck, 2020 (<https://sciencestruck.com/paleozoic-era-major-events-important-facts>). Copyright 2020 by Science Struck.

The Ordovician and Silurian are periods in the Paleozoic Era (541mya–251.9mya), a time of great change in terms of climate and biodiversity. The first period of the Paleozoic is the Cambrian (541mya–488mya) (see Figure 19) that famous period typified by the 'Cambrian Explosion', when the simple life forms already existing in the ocean diversified suddenly over a period of 13–25 million

years into all the variety of plants and animals present today. The Ordovician and Silurian periods are typified by average temperatures 2 or 3 degrees warmer than the 20th century, and sea levels averaging 180 metres higher than the 20th century.

The ancientness of *The Shark* is inspired by the appearance of sharks so early in the history of complex life. This inspires the characterisation of *The Shark* as an observer of the changes in the earth. In the last 420 million years the shark as a species has been present for the Ordovician/Silurian extinction event(s)(the first mass extinction event), the breaking up of the supercontinent Gondwana, the largest and most severe mass extinction event in Earth's history (the Permian-Triassic Extinction Event of 252 million years ago), and the meteorite that killed the dinosaurs (end Cretaceous, 66mya). Sharks were present in the ocean before trees appeared on land, and were concurrent with animals long extinct. While the sharks of today are not the sharks of 420 million years ago, they are a chronospecies, meaning they are derived from a 'sequential development pattern' of ancestors constantly evolving through the eons¹⁵.

An important event that sharks were 'present' for was the evolution of whales. Whales appear in the fossil record around 40 million years ago, and descend from an animal that lived on land. Mammals appear in the fossil record around 300 million years ago, and true mammals appear 99 million years ago. The whale is a descendant of hoofed animals who returned to shallow water around 49 million years ago, and became fully aquatic 5–10 million years after that. They are related

¹⁵ 'According to one view of evolution (phyletic gradualism), a group of organisms that is derived from its ancestor by a process of slow, steady, evolutionary change and is not regarded as a member of the same species as its ancestor'. Retrieved from Oxfordreference.com

through this hoofed mammal ancestor to hippopotamuses, deer, camels, giraffes, sheep, pigs and cows. The whale represents something negative to The Shark, who believes that the whales should never have left the sea, and that the whales must greatly regret leaving the sea. The physiology between sharks and whales is incredibly different: whales breathe air through lungs, suckle calves with milk, have voice boxes to communicate, and have tails oriented horizontally because they evolved from legs.

Whales are a foil for The Shark in *No Bones...* when trying to lure Meka into the ocean. The Shark makes the point that physiologically whales are similar to humans, and The Shark watched the ancestors of the whales leave the ocean, dislike life on land, and then re-enter the ocean. The Shark tells Meka that life on land is a mistake, and she needs to come back to the sea like the whales did. The internal physiology of sharks, whales, snakes and humans also informs The Shark's persuasion of Meka. Sharks have a simple two-chambered heart, snakes have three chambers, and humans and whales have four-chambered hearts. The Shark says to Meka that her four-chambered heart is too heavy for life on land, and that The Serpent doesn't understand, because its heart has only three chambers. The theme of hearts carries through *No Bones...* because when Meka works out that The Shark was manipulating her, it's too late, she has already taken on shark form with a simplified heart. She has to use her memories to 'grow out' her four-chambered heart again to become human.

The Shark's simpler heart, inspired by the ancient physiology of sharks, constructs its uncaring, manipulative character.

The whale also represents a dramatic transformation that reflects the theme of ‘korangan’ in the *No Bones...*, of huge changes that can be wrought in an individual species over millions of years. In the novel these dramatic changes are represented as being able to happen instantly through misfortune, interference or through sheer will. The Shark watches the ancestors of the whales walk from land into the sea, and the threat of transformation is real for Country, people and animals in Serpent territory.

No Bones but in the Mouth

The Shark inspires the title of the book, *No Bones but in the Mouth*, a quote from the haikus written by me in the preface to the novel, also echoed by the voices of Meka’s ancestors in prose:

Madjit baal barang kwetj djel bwora daa / baalang koonger bilang baalang
daa-djoorla-k / baalang koort dalang baalang ngorlak

*A shark has no bones but in the mouth / the body propels the jaws / the heart
follows teeth*

‘No bones but in the mouth’ is a reference to the fossil legacy left behind by sharks, who, being comprised mostly of cartilage, leave only teeth behind as a record that they ever lived. Shark teeth are made of dentin - calcified tissue similar to bone that fossilises readily - whereas the rest of a shark is made of cartilage, flesh and organs, all of which decompose too quickly to be preserved. This toothed legacy informs the character of The Shark, who is constructed as having biology primarily geared toward biting, cutting, tearing, hunting and eating. The teeth survive long

after the shark is gone, a fearsome shadow in the fossil record left by sharks. The tooth becomes the metonym for the shark, and the tooth speaks of violence.

This connects back to the comparison between shark, whale, human and snake. Whales, humans and snakes leave a complete skeleton when they die, preserving their basic form and outline, suggesting that their spirit or heart is attached to a whole creature, and the essence of that creature is preserved after it dies. The idea of a shark's fossil legacy being only its teeth suggests ideas that The Shark's essence is biting/tearing/eating.

There is an element of poetic licence here, as a tiny handful of prehistoric shark bodies have been found preserved in conditions where they've been buried in silt with no oxygen:

The fossilized *Phoebodus* remains were found in a layer estimated to be about 360 to 370 million years old, in what used to be a shallow sea basin. When the sharks died there, the limited water circulation and low oxygen levels created an environment in which their bodies were largely left alone by bacteria, scavengers, and currents, preserving them for posterity.

(Vernimmen, 2019)

This ancient shark ancestor *Phoebodus* gives scientists better information about possible behaviour and modern evolutionary links. Usually, scientists have to imagine what the shark was like just from their teeth. Figure 20 is a 4.5-million-year-

old partial fossilised jaw of an ancestor of the Great White Shark, with 222 teeth and 45 vertebrae, discovered in Peru in 1988:

The specimen came from an area known as the Pisco Formation, famous for its rich fossil beds dating from the late Miocene to Pleistocene, about 1 million to 9 million years ago. The region was once a sheltered, shallow marine environment ideal for preserving skeletons. The formation has produced articulated broad-toothed mako shark skeletons as well as fossils of whales, aquatic sloths and sea turtles. (Bill Kanapaux, Florida Museum, 2009)



Figure 20. 4.5-million-year-old great white shark fossil at Gordon Hubbell's private gallery in Gainesville, FL.

From 'New ancient shark species gives insight into origin of great white', by D. Torrent, 2012. Copyright 2012

by Jeff Gage.

The construction of The Shark as bloodthirsty and predatory is also informed by the fact that sharks go through tens of thousands of teeth in their lifetimes, constantly shedding and growing. Shark teeth are one of the most abundant fossils found on the Earth's surface, due to the volume of teeth sharks shed in a lifetime and the ease at which shark teeth fossilise.

The ocean floor is littered with billions of shark teeth. The ocean floor recycles itself every 200 million years as the tectonic plates drift and crash, and as sharks have been around for more than 400 million years, the first 200 million years of teeth have been plunged deep into the Earth. The Serpent speaks about the Earth's crust as being a rocky cerebrum where memory is stored, and this memory is cut through by shark teeth.

The Shark has suggestions of being associated with time, and exists in the deep-time realm alongside The Serpent, who calls The Shark the 'Eater Whose Teeth Cut Through Time'. This nomenclature takes inspiration from 'the universal devourer' mentioned in Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*:

Time, the universal devourer, and spiteful decay,
there is nothing you cannot destroy. You close your
envenomed jaws

and little by little consume all things in a lingering death! (Ovid, 2004, p. 605)

The Metamorphoses is referenced in *No Bones...* in Fionn's sundial, which bears the inscription 'tempus edax rerum' or 'time is the devourer of all things'.

Meka notices that the gnomon of the sundial looks like a shark fin, and that scene serves as a foreshadowing of Meka's involvement with The Shark and its ability to move through time. Segal (2001) talks about the above passage in *The Metamorphoses* which is right at the end, in Book 15, where Pythagoras is talking about the virtues of vegetarianism. Through the voice of Pythagoras, Ovid is referencing Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* and his 'teeth of destruction' and changes them in his poem to 'teeth of time'. 'Tempus edax rerum' from Lucretius is on Fionn's fin-shaped sundial, and references this idea in *The Metamorphoses* that '[c]arnivorous habits get their come-uppance...when time «devours» us as we (literally) devour other creatures' (Segal, 2001, p. 92). The Shark is both carnivorous time and a carnivore that gets a kind of comeuppance when Meka destroys its eyes.

The Shark is characterised as an ancient, unchanging, uncaring carnivore connected to entropy, consumption and a legacy of violence. This characterisation suggests that The Shark also functions as a spectre of colonialism in *No Bones....* The Shark causes the invasion of pale newcomers, destroys land, manipulates Meka into turning against her Country and Elders, and causes climate warming. It is not interested in environmental balance or community, it wants to flood the world and destroy all the creator serpents. River Country doesn't have communities or land damaged by colonisation, but the threat is there, swimming offshore, waiting for its opportunity to strike. When the thinking, talking humans evolved in *No Bones....*, The Shark saw an opportunity to attack the creator serpent territories around the world. The Shark saw something of itself in humans, it saw saltwater in them, and it worked out that if it poisons the people then that will in turn poison the land, because humans are part of interconnected Country. The Shark influenced the Albion to

become colonisers, which poisoned their spirits, which in turn poisoned the islands of Albion and Erin. Fionn conveys this in *No Bones...*, where he remembers clearing trees to grow crops for profit, while the Erin people starved. A colonisation-type society destroys land through severing connection to Country, and in this way The Shark is the ever-present threat of colonial ideas in the novel. This characterisation suggests that colonial ideology and colonial impulses are in the mind of a people, and minds can be changed.

The Serpent – Rivermaster and Rainlord

In *No Bones...* The Serpent is a creator being who made the land, water, plants, animals, people and spirits of River Country. It lives outside of the everyday experience of those who live on River Country, and cares for all its creatures and plants by providing warmth, water, life and spirit. Its presence can be sensed by people through Country – if they know how to look – and this presence can be rain falling, wind moving, rumbles in the ground, or disturbances in the water. In *No Bones...* The Serpent scenes are soliloquies from the deep-time realm as it observes what's going on. The Serpent sees the landscape as something that it has built layer by layer, and reads its own history as if the ground were its memory. The Serpent character is constructed from a combination of the ubiquitous 'rainbow serpent' or 'creator serpent' that is common across Indigenous Australian cultures (called Wagyl or sometimes Madjit in Noongar culture, with various spellings and depictions), and the geological narrative of the southwest as described in Chapter 1. The Serpent is the incarnation of geomorphic forces, a creator being whose will created the land that River Country sits on over billions of years. In its soliloquies it muses about the nature of change, caring for Country, previous and future climates, and how best to use its power.

The Serpent's musings turn to what it calls its 'hard heart' which contributes to themes around hearts in *No Bones but in the Mouth*. This hard heart is a version of the Yilgarn Craton, that ancient shield of rock discussed in Chapter 1 that comprises most of inland Noongar Country. The Serpent talks about having hardened its heart to survive the bashing and crashing of tectonic plates, or other serpent territories, throughout the ages of the world. It speaks as though its whole body is this heart, and that it longs for softer edges, to not be so hard all the time. It remedied this by building the coastal edges in the west where River Country is, and south where Whale Country is. These soft edges are an experiment for The Serpent, where it spoils the plants and creatures there with cool rivers, tall forests and undulating plains. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Swan Coastal Plain in the west and the Granite Coast on the south are geologically much younger than the Yilgarn Craton, by billions of years. The Serpent occupies a creative space something like a geological fable, where the formation of the River Country landscape is posited to be made by The Serpent, just as the Swan Coastal Plain itself formed billions of years after the Yilgarn Craton. The positioning and body of The Serpent changes and isn't fixed. The waterways are sometimes its blood and sometimes its body, the inland its body but also its heart, and the ground is its brain but sometimes it is the rivers underground.

These 'soft edges' are where change occurs for the River People, and The Serpent wonders if it made itself vulnerable by taking this chance. It notices that the newcomers prefer the coastal areas, and senses that the River People are struggling in their spirits upon the arrival of the newcomers. The Serpent also comes to realise

that the newcomers are here because of The Shark. One of the three haikus that open the novel are reflected in the sentiments of The Serpent:

Wagyl warn moonboorli-wardan-boodja unna? / baalap kaadatj / windji
baalabang moort koorl?

*Did serpents make the lands of Britain? / do they wonder / where their
people went?*

The Serpent wonders about the creator serpents who must have created the Albion and Erin islands, and comes to realise by the end of *No Bones...* that those serpents must be dead, killed by the machinations of The Shark. The emergence of the sharks 400 million years ago has filled The Serpent's 'mind' with teeth, in the way that the fallen teeth of sharks have been folded into the Earth's crust as the crust recycles itself. The teeth are evidence of a new kind of violence that has entered the world, constructed as the spectre of colonialism in the novel. The Serpent is deeply concerned that The Shark destroyed the islands of the Erin and Albion and might be coming for its territory next.

The Serpent doesn't communicate with Meka directly in *No Bones...* as The Serpent's focus is much broader than one person. It is responsible for everything on River Country, and its focus is spread out. The Shark employs a much more pointed attack, and goes directly for Meka. The Shark is able to do this because it is a character who cares only about itself and its aims. It zeroes in on Meka as the heir to River Country and tries to sever her connection to her Country. The Serpent on the

other hand has all of River Country to care for. To weaken any part of River Country is to weaken it all, because it is all connected and has a shared destiny. The Serpent can't focus properly on Meka but throughout the novel it is aware that something dangerous is going on there.

Meka – Unstuck from Time

Meka is a young character living in a time of great change in River Country. Fifty years before the events of the novel, shiploads of Erin people started arriving up and down the coast of Serpent Territory, starving and traumatised, and were welcomed by the various clans. The River People, along with the other clans, decide to integrate the Erin into their kinship system, the alternative being to kill them as they land. Meka experiences unexplained timeslips, where she sees her great grandmothers speaking about this dilemma of what to do with the newcomers.

Meka is concerned by her timeslips, and doesn't understand what they are. Meka's ancestors speak to her on the breeze, giving her oblique warnings about the Cold Times, the tides, and teeth. The spirits in the ground reach for her and trip her up, and the people in community gossip about her dead parents, and her Erin husband who died. She thinks there's something wrong, and looks to the newcomers as the cause. When she finds out that she was supposed to marry a warrior from the desert inland, she develops an attachment to him and the idea of having children tied inland, far from the sea, where the newcomers come from. She muses whether The Serpent killed her first husband in a flood for a reason, and wonders if her community did the right thing by accepting the newcomers in the first place.

Meka's journey in the novel is associated with images of chronology and time. 'Meka' is the Whadjuk Noongar word for 'moon', which reflects Meka's paler skin, her tendency to come and go as she pleases, and her sensitivity toward time. All around the world and through human history, the phases of the moon have been observed to track the passage of time. Meka's timeslips reflects her sensitivity to time, something she shares with her mother Mayakawa. The timeslips and deep time visions of the ocean taking over River Country start happening when Meka cuts her hand on a fossilised shark tooth. She is punctured by shark 'magic', which opens the door to deep time for Meka, and allows The Shark to speak to her. The connection between Meka's timeslips and The Shark is foreshadowed by the sundial Fionn made, the gnomon of which resembles The Shark's dorsal fin. Fionn mentions that time seems to move differently in River Country, as his sundial moves backwards in the southern hemisphere.

Meka's gradual exposure to deep time over the course of the novel also connects her to events in River Country's past. Throughout the novel this connection to deep time is The Shark's method to erode Meka's connection to her Country and family, and eventually she loses her grip on her present and The Shark pushes her into the abyss of deep time, which she finds very difficult to escape. Through her journey to escape deep time Meka sees River Country during the Cold Times and the Warm Times, in various stages of sea level. Meka distinguishes between the deep time of The Shark and the 'shallow time' of humans, and manages to climb back into her time through the 'time shallows' where the whales have their young.

Meka is part of two worlds: the land and the sea; the Erin and the River people. The Shark tells Meka that she is full of saltwater, that tears and blood are salty, which speaks to ideas of the water cycle. The ocean is salty because salty mineral and sediment wash into it from land. The ocean's volume of salt grows all the time, because when rain evaporates it leaves the salt behind and rains only freshwater down on land. The Shark also points out that it watched the ancestors of land animals emerge from the sea, and tells her that she was a saltwater creature once, and that's why her blood and tears are salty. It uses the example of the whales, who transformed themselves back into sea creatures to live their true life in the sea. The Shark is manipulating Meka into leaving River Country unprotected, but this also ties back to one of the three haiku in the opening of the novel:

Waaliny bilya / wedjan djalarn boodj-ool / warn wardan nyorn ngibart-abiny
The weeping river / gathers salt from the earth / to embitter the sea

The haiku reflects on the interconnectedness between land and sea, that the divisions between freshwater and saltwater Country aren't hard and fast. The Serpent, The Shark and Meka are a triangle of freshwater, saltwater and time, where the rise and fall of sea levels is a great clock against which all life must live.

Perfidious Albion

The 'Albion' are inspired by the English of the 1700s, a community with the greatest navy the world had seen to date, and a tendency to colonise nations around them.

The name 'Albion' is a traditional name for England, from a romantic past. In his

book *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*, scholar and author Peter Ackroyd¹⁶ states:

Albion is an ancient word for England, *Albio* in Celtic and *Alba* in Gaelic; it is mentioned in the Latin of Pliny and in the Greek of Ptolemy. It may mean “the white land,” related to the whiteness of the cliffs greeting travellers and suggesting pristine purity or blankness. But the cliffs are also guardians and Albion was the name of the primaeval giant who made his home upon the island of Britain. He is the “elemental and emblematic giant” whom G. K. Chesterton observed in his study of Chaucer, “with our native hills for his bones and our native forests for his beard...a single figure outlined against the sea and a great face staring at the sky.” His traces can be seen in the huge white horses which populated the primitive landscape, inscribed in the chalk of the hills. Today, like those fading memorials, Albion is not so much of a name as an echo of a name. (Ackroyd, 2004, p. xxviii)

The name ‘Albion’ has a pleasing shared phonology with ‘albatross’, the sea bird that the Albion transform into. The albatross, known as ‘woolwool’ in the Noongar language, is a wandering sea bird who spends most of its life hovering over the sea, sometimes for months on end, returning to land only to breed. Their landless nature speaks to the characterisations of the Albion, of having no land, no territory, and because they float above Country, not connected to it. Being a sea bird, they also

¹⁶ Peter Ackroyd is an award-winning author and scholar who writes extensively on British history, British literature and British culture.

fall under the influence of The Shark, the powerful master of the sea. The albatross in *No Bones*... make the noise *woolwool* when flying overhead.

Albatross also have associations for English sailors as the souls of those lost at sea, due to their penchant for following sailing ships. Killing an albatross is considered bad luck for this reason, as experienced by the doomed protagonist of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 epic poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. In the poem, the eponymous Mariner is stuck in the ice of Antarctica when an albatross appears. The sailors feed it and talk to it, then it appears to crack the ice and lead them to safety. Then the mariner, in an impulsive act of fear and paranoia, shoots the albatross once they are sailing free on the ocean once more and the mariner and the crew find themselves becalmed near the equator. At this point it becomes the Mariner's opinion that shooting the albatross has doomed him and his crew. A skeleton-like Death visits them, and wins the souls of the other sailors, and a female 'Life-in-death' wins the soul of the Mariner, who is now doomed to wander the earth telling this tale of his dreadful crime against God and nature.

The agony of having done the wrong thing by nature or by your fellow man and being cursed forever informs the characterisation of Fionn. Fionn reveals that the Albion are responsible in part for the black death that spreads over their lands, through their colonial and exploitative ways, and his characterisation shares the spirit of the Ancient Mariner's horror of being responsible for it. Fionn and Gray are the sole survivors of a shipload of Albion people trying to flee to green earth, and Fionn always wondered what happened to those people. He assumed that their deaths were a suitable punishment due to the colonising ways of the Albion that may have led to

the death of the islands of Erina and Albia. The Albion shipmates show up twenty years later with false memories of living on Serpent Territory and not having aged. It is revealed that those Albion drowned and their spirits turned into albatrosses. These ghost albatross were wandering the ocean for twenty years until The Shark used its power to give them human form again and new memories to try interfere in River Country. This 'ghost albatross' characterisation ties in with the notion of 'ghost birds' in the novel, where the River People recount first seeing the ships on the horizon and thinking they were giant ghost birds coming in toward land. This is a reference to one of the Aboriginal impressions of the tall ships of the Europeans, that the billowing sails resembled giant birds. This combined with the initial early perception of Europeans as ghosts gives a 'turn of the kaleidoscope' interpretation of the history of Noongar Country, one haunted by ghost birds who decided to stay.

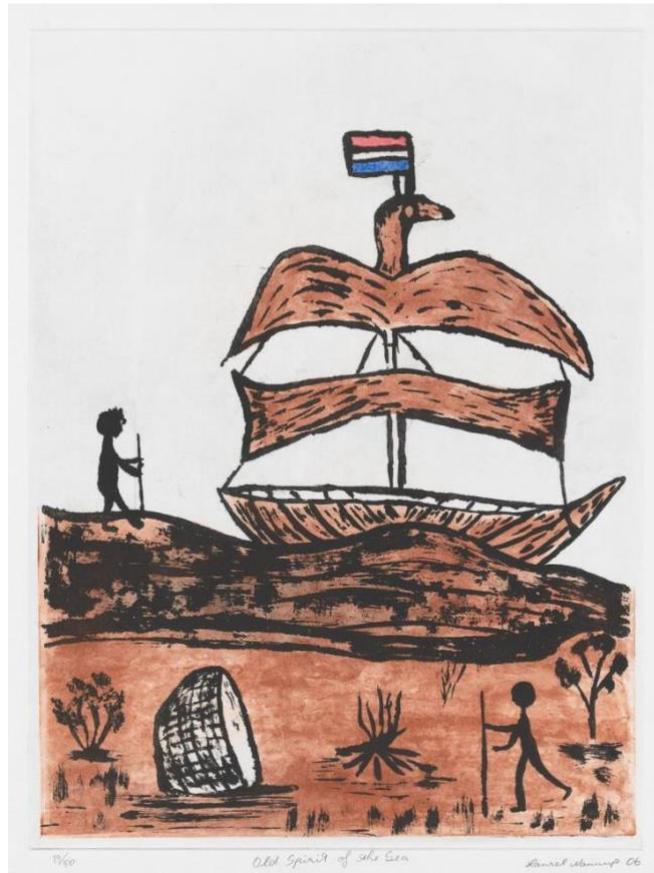


Figure 21. Laurel Nannup. 2006. *Old Spirit of the Sea*. Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

In connection to the artwork of Figure 21, Noongar artist and printmaker Laurel Nannup states:

The Duyfken in 1606 was the first ship to sail to what is now called Australia. Commander Willem Janszoon sailed down south of the west coast of Cape York for 200 miles. The sailors' first encounter with the Aboriginal people was not friendly, the crew was attacked and being short of supplies Janszoon decided to turn back. One could only guess what the Aboriginals thought when they saw the big white sails of the Duyfken; the sails would have looked like a big white bird, and the sailors, being white, would have

made the Aboriginal people think it was their ancestors' spirits coming back from the dead. (Nannup, Seattle Art Museum)

The Shark uses its power to direct the albatross to Serpent Territory in order to undermine and destabilise the human society of River Country. Meka is directed to marry one of the Albion, which is at first unsatisfying because she wants to marry Dayin. When she works out that the Albion are ghosts she fears that Fionn and Gray died at sea too, and arrived in River Country as ghosts themselves. The thought that she is an offspring of a ghost and not a real person injures Meka's heart and spirit, causing her to become 'unstuck' and lose her connection to River Country. The Shark seizes the opportunity and washes her down into the deep time trench.

Erin from the Land of Ire

The 'Erin' are inspired by the Irish of the 1600s, a community who existed under the colonial control of the English anglo-peoples for 700 years from 1200CE to 1922, with a history of being racially vilified by the English. 'Erin' is a poetic name for Ireland, based on the Irish language word for Ireland, Eire, where 'Erin' is 'of Eire'. 'Ireland' is the English language name for the island. 'Erin' is derived from Ériu, one of the goddesses of pre-Christian Ireland. She gives Eire/Ireland its name and is often depicted as the personification of Ireland.

The island of Ireland and its people were invaded by the English around 1200CE, and there was a vast difference in conquering and military technology between the two:

The twelfth-century English chronicler William of Newburgh, in his *Historia Rerum Anglicanum*, says that Ireland at the time of the invasion was like Britain in times of old. (Johnson, 2005, p. 13)

These are some contemporary impressions of Ireland from the British point of view as collected in Paul Johnson's *Ireland : A History from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*:

1560s

English statesmen were baffled by the failure of Ireland to yield any revenue. It was, said Sir William Cecil, 'a strange example and not to be found again in any place'. Sir Nicholas Wotton considered it 'a great shame to us, that the crown of England having been conquerors in Ireland these four hundred years well near, could not all this while bring that realm to a good civility and obedience, nor take some honest commodity or profit of that country so good and so fruitful'. (2005, p. 31)

1560s

Ireland, it was agreed, had to be held for reasons of national security. The Earl of Sussex, Elizabeth's first Deputy, wrote in 1560: 'I am forced by duty to give advice ... not so much for the care I have of Ireland, which I have often wished to be sunk in the sea, as if the French should set fast therein, they should not only have such an entry into Scotland as her Majesty could not resist: .. but should take utterly from England all kind of peaceable traffic by sea.' (pp. 31–32)

1590s

Edmund Spenser, who knew Ireland well and wrote a book about it in 1596, compared Ireland to Britain in the Dark Ages. He found something mysterious and baffling about the failure to solve the Irish problem:

Marry, so there have been divers good plots devised, and wise counsels cast already about reformation of that realm; but they say, it is the fatal destiny of that land, that no purposes, whatsoever are meant for her good, will prosper or take effect which, whether it proceed from the very genius of the soil or influence of the stars, or that Almighty God hath not yet appointed the time of her reformation, or that he reserveth her in this unquiet state still for some secret scourge, which shall by her come into England, it is hard to be known, yet much to be feared. (p. 33)

1609

Most English people knew nothing of Ireland. Even the people of Dublin knew little of the interior. As late as 1609 Sir John Davies admitted that Ulster was 'heretofore as unknown to the English here as the most inland part of Virginia as yet unknown to our English colony there'. Ireland, wrote Francis Bacon, was 'the last of the daughters of Europe', waiting 'to be reclaimed from desolation and a desert (in many parts) to population and plantation; and from savage and barbarous customs to humanity and civility'. (p. 32)

These impressions create a picture of entitlement to Irish land and a disdain for the Irish in general. Many of these things compare to how the British and their settler descendants described Noongar people and Aboriginal people in general: that they did not make ‘use’ of the land, that their customs were backwards, that the Irish were a primitive version of the British, that the Irish landscape was a desert and desolate, and especially that line about British development of Ireland being for their own good. This echoes the rhetoric of the Stolen Generations in the Noongar Country, that children were taken from their parents to be raised by the State, ‘for their own good’.

The Noongar people and the Irish people share a history of being colonised and controlled by British invaders, and *No Bones...* is an inspired idea that the Noongar and Irish can be framed as more similar to each other prior to British invasion than to the British who invaded them. The imagery of the environmental disaster that befalls the island homes of the Albion and Erin is inspired by a combination of the Irish Famine, bubonic plague, Great Fire of London and the industrial revolution. The disaster isn’t described in detail and left to the imagination of the reader, but is black, poisonous and hot, taking inspiration from as if the worst parts of the industrial revolution caught fire and spread. The Irish Famine killed a million people and sent another million out to seek somewhere else to live, and *No Bones...* presents a version of this, of starving, traumatised people fleeing a collapsed food and water situation.

The Erin are characterised as more likely to integrate into Serpent Territory life and customs than Fionn and the Albion because they are constructed as more similar to the River people than the Albion. Fionn is the only Albion person in River Country, and is the only one who really knows how the Albion treated the Erin, and he carries that guilt, as referenced before in the transformation of the Albion into albatross. The Erin are peaceful, and have created new songs and customs that blend Erin culture with River Country culture. They are sorrowful for the Country they lost, and have a cold attitude toward Fionn whom they blame for their displacement. The Erin are a thought experiment of what integration could look like in the southwest in the absence of a colonial relationship. It's important that the Erin are inspired by the Irish of the 1600s, because as the above quotes show the Irish of that time were not industrialised or globalised. When the Irish came to Australia in the 1800s they joined in the colonial project with the British, they took land and displaced Indigenous people. The colonised became colonisers themselves, having learned the violent ways of colonisation through their own oppression.

Part 2 – Explicit Process

The Turn of the Kaleidoscope

The novel *No Bones but in the Mouth* is not a realistic history of the southwest, and is not written to be. However it's also not strictly allegory, science fiction, magical realism or fantasy. It is not written with any genre or audience in mind. *No Bones...* is simply a creative space that I've employed to tell a story that foregrounds Country and spirit, so that I might imagine a world where the colonial relationship between an Indigenous society and migrant or settler community does not exist. I use the

metaphor of the kaleidoscope to describe my experimental writing approach, which is inspired by the general theme of ‘korangan’ or transformation/change in the exegesis and novel. I imagine the history of the southwest as an image through a kaleidoscope that is made up of ‘historical event tiles’. In our world these tiles lined up in the kaleidoscope as we know them: Aboriginal people living here since the time of creation, arrival of people in tall ships, colonial violence, Indigenous kinship system changing, assimilation, ensuing stratified society, environmental damage, rising and falling sea levels, spiritual loss, and the threat of climate change on the horizon.

No Bones... represents a world where the kaleidoscope has been rotated. Those same tiles that make up this place have fallen into slightly different positions and create a different picture. In *No Bones...* the new arrangement shows an alternate world where a version of the climate disaster of our near future has already happened in the far off lands of the Albion and Erin, restricted to the northern hemisphere, a result of the colonising ways of the Albion, who are revealed to be corrupted in their spirit by The Shark. The ‘arrival in tall ships’ occurs after the climate disaster, so the new arrivals are looking for green earth for survival, not to colonise. An Indigenous kinship system is challenged and changed, not because colonisation has smashed the kinship circles, but because the River People decide to take the Erin and Albion in. The societies must learn to cohabit, and the novel explores how relationships can still be strained by cultures meeting, even without a colonial power structure present.

Through the kaleidoscope methodology I’m exploring the history of the southwest in a way that employs familiar events and characters in unfamiliar ways.

The colonial condition is so overwhelming in the southwest that it is difficult to talk about what it means for cultures to integrate without the trauma and injustice of forced assimilation, land theft, child removal and massacre. *No Bones...* is less an alternate history than ‘the southwest through the looking glass’, where I present an unusual world where deep time and spirits meet, to disorient a reader enough to pull them out of postcolonial Australia and draw them into a version of the southwest where Indigenous people are in charge of the integration process.

Another element of the ‘turn of the kaleidoscope’ is Meka’s journey of discovery where she learns that while change is a constant, as she observes the rising and falling of sea levels in deep time, she also discovers that the actions of individuals go a long way toward the degree of suffering that those changes bring. She observes with sadness the departure of the megafauna due to climate change, and the departure of her parents. But she also discovers that the actions of individuals have an impact. Meka’s focus on getting the marriage she desires distracts her from her duty to care for Country, something she realises too late. She has to reconnect to Country so that she can drive The Shark away to protect River Country from abnormal sea-level rise. Fionn’s actions in the Erin homeland, where he saves people rather than oppresses them, also speaks to personal agency. The narrative suggests that just because in our world Europeans arrived here as a result of changes in their history, it doesn’t excuse that they chose to dispossess, murder, enslave and traumatise Indigenous people. Change is a constant, but it’s up to individuals in any social system to make sure that these changes don’t create unequal and unjust societies.

This kaleidoscope writing approach also serves to highlight some of the incompetences and colonial lies discussed in Chapter 3. Indigenous people in Australian novels are often depicted as spectral or ghostly, a presence that haunts the landscape, often pointing to gothic themes around absences and buried histories. *No Bones...* inverts this, the people of River Country are very much vibrant and alive, and it is the Albion arrivals who wind up being ghosts haunting the living. The Albion destroy their own Country long before they ever arrive in River Country, highlighting that it's not just that European colonisers don't understand the food and water systems of Australia, they in fact don't understand long-term sustainability in their own homeland. In *No Bones...* family and kinship is foregrounded, and the Erin people are integrated into the River Country kinship system. This is the opposite to the British colonisers, who broke up Aboriginal families in an effort to eliminate all traces of Aboriginal people and their culture.

This writing approach is an experiment in changing the narrative, a transformation of the southwest, or korangan. Whether it is successful in its aims is hard for me to tell, but it has been therapeutic to write about a version of Indigenous culture in the southwest that hasn't been infected with the kind of thinking extolled by the colonial ideologies in the previous chapter. It could also be radical for readers of *No Bones but in the Mouth* to read a story about life in the southwest where the colonial relationship does not exist.

Deep-time Stories

The 'turn of the kaleidoscope' is just one aspect of the creative writing approach. *No Bones but in the Mouth* has a creative engagement with geology, climatology and deep time to tell a story about change, memory and personal responsibility.

Firstly, The Serpent is constructed as the manifestation or incarnation of geomorphological forces to tell a story about change and openness to change. As mentioned earlier The Serpent in *No Bones...* considers River Country to be its experiment in softness and change. In geological terms the southwest is comprised of the Yilgarn Craton, a great shield of rock 3 billion years old that has survived the bashing and splitting of supercontinents, with relatively young coastal edges, like the Swan Coastal Plain which is less than 130 million years old. The characterisation of The Serpent is inspired by this, which contributes to themes in the novel around integration and the changes to a community it might bring, where the River people had to choose whether to be open to taking in the refugees or not. This echoes The Serpent who decided to create its soft edges even though it knew they would be vulnerable to destruction by The Shark. From a deep-time geological perspective, the Swan Coastal Plain is ephemeral: it formed yesterday and will be gone tomorrow. The Serpent couldn't have jarrah and tuart forests unless it made River Country, and it took that risk, even though River Country is far more fragile than its ancient, uncrackable inland area. Meka comes to see herself as ephemeral, it helps her aching heart to see herself as something bigger than her own desires and wants, and consider that there needs to be the next generation of people to care for the land and its spirits so the world doesn't turn to dust and be swallowed by the sea. Meka's struggle around accepting another Erin husband is that she believes that her children will not be able to connect to Country. It's when she sees the Erin taking care of Country, and the fact that Fionn isn't a ghost like the other Albion, that she realises that her children will belong to River Country, no matter who their father is, because her own father is Erin and she belongs.

Geology also contributes to constructions and characterisations in the novel to do with time and memory. Meka slips backwards and forwards through time, as well as into deep time. The southwest is an ancient, layered landscape, where rising and falling sea levels, erupting volcanoes, rivers washing sediment, and decomposing plant matter have created layer upon layer that harden and fossilise into geological strata. The layers are chronological, and can be ‘read’ as a history of climate and geomorphic events of this part of the continent. This contributes to the theme of ‘korangan’ or change, as she sees the land transform through time, and sees that although the arrival of the Erin and Albion make it seem like her stable world has been altered dramatically, change is in fact a constant in the formation of the place she calls home. Meka discovers that from a deep-time perspective her world has no homeostasis, that it’s locked into an eons-long battle between freshwater and saltwater, sea levels rising and falling, personified by The Serpent and The Shark. She longs for permanency and clarity, but for better or worse the world is in a constant state of transformation. Plants, animals, people, spirits and landforms can’t escape rising and falling sea levels, and perhaps Meka can’t expect her culture to remain the same forever and needs to lean into change in order to survive it.

The idea that there are different ‘times’ or temporalities in River Country is inspired by the limestone of the Swan Coastal Plain. Limestone is one of the youngest rocks on the timescale, and this difference in age, from young limestone to the ancient gneiss of the Yilgarn Craton and the ancientness of the ocean contributes to the idea that both are ancient reservoirs of deep-time memory. The coastal plain of River Country is then a kind of ‘time shallows’ where Meka lives, a liminal zone not

only between land and sea but between the human experience of time and deep time. The characters that occupy these time shallows are the River people and the climate refugees who have come to live among them, and the two characters that occupy deep time are The Serpent and The Shark. The research of Chapter 1 discusses the long memory of the Noongar people, at least 7,000 years to remember the Holocene warming, and perhaps 20,000 years if the Nyitting/cold times are an eyewitness account of the last ice age. *No Bones but in the Mouth* leans into this idea of Aboriginal deep memory, and constructs deep memory as something a person on River Country can access, or in Meka's case, fall into.

Fiction combining Aboriginal and scientific ideas in one approach has precedence in the Ngalak paper, where the researchers make the connection that the creation or Dreaming period of Noongar culture has a timeline of events in it, and parts of this timeline correlate with the last ice age and the sea-level rise that followed it. My fiction methodology builds on that, and because those deep-time stories are to do with surviving change, *No Bones but in the Mouth* has those themes too.

Colonial vs Indigenous Metaphor

As discussed, the 'turn of the kaleidoscope' methodology rearranges historical events to create a scenario where a Western and an Indigenous community integrates on Indigenous land without a colonial relationship. However the world of *No Bones...* is not free of the threat of colonialism, which is manifested through the character of The Shark. In *No Bones...* The Shark has been locked in a zero-sum game with the creator serpents of the world for hundreds of millions of years, gaining territory through the rising of sea levels during the Warm Times and losing territory

through the falling of sea levels of the Cold Times. The Shark is mentored by photosynthesising bacteria, the sunlight eaters, who The Shark remembers whispering in the water when it itself was evolving. The bacteria are obsessive consumers of sunlight, and their Dreaming stories reference the 100-million-year-long ice age they caused in the deep past. The bacteria taught The Shark a ‘might is right’ attitude, and The Shark is characterised as being totally self-interested and individualistic. The Shark wants the whole world to be ocean, and desires to kill all the creator serpents and their landmasses to do this. In the previous few hundred years prior to the events of *No Bones...*, The Shark works out that it can erode the power of the creator serpents through their land-dwelling creatures, in particular the human. By the end of *No Bones...* it is revealed that The Shark is responsible for corrupting the Albion, who colonised the Erin and set off an environmental disaster that killed the creator serpent that created the Albion and Erin islands.

The Shark’s presence in River Country has the same goal: it wishes to destroy River Country to get to The Serpent’s heart and kill it. The Shark’s character plays on what I consider the largely unacknowledged dark side of Western individualism and scientific rationalism, an attitude that personal development, advancement and mastery is admired, with no concern that one is part of a system of interconnected people and resources. As a result of its desire to make the whole world an ocean, The Shark is in an adversarial relationship to The Serpent, whose characterisation reflects Indigenous concepts of land custodianship and interconnectedness of plant, animal, mineral, human and weather. Their adversarial relationship is mostly one-sided, and The Serpent suffers from The Shark’s pointed attacks. The Shark’s characterisation embodies the spirit of the colonial enterprise, of self-

interest, environmental destruction, and even a strange kind of terraforming, where it wants the whole world to be comfortable for itself.

The reason colonialism is a factor in *No Bones...* is because it is a system that people breathe life into every day. It is not a natural system, it needs to be believed in, and it manufactures its own ideologies that it is the most progressive system, and every other system is inferior or primitive. The colonial narratives that circulate in Australia discussed in Chapter 3 serve to justify a capitalist nation built on violence and land theft, and even though it requires exploitation, inequality and consumption to prevail, its ideologies dominate Australia to the point where people fear that if capitalism fails then Australia will collapse. Meka's story is about being fearful and discontent in a time of change, and how *The Shark* takes advantage of that and manipulates her by promising that she can get everything she wants. Meka is tempted, and it takes her being lost in deep time to realise that she's part of a kinship system with people, plants, animals, land and water, and caring exclusively about her own wants can destroy it all. It's important to the story to have this brush with colonialism, because it's a truthful part of southwest history, and it's a tile in the kaleidoscope image of the southwest. It's important to know where environmental destruction comes from, and what has generated human-made climate change.

Colonialism is also the reason that Noongar deep-time stories aren't better known, because the colonial machine operated to destroy Noongar culture, a great irony when global capitalism is the cause of climate change that might end human society. *No Bones...* separates colonialism out from integration, makes it one character, *The Shark*, so that it can be considered as the violent, selfish, toothed

tempter that it is. Separating the colonial factor out from arrival/integration creates space in the novel to explore ideas of individual responsibility in the oppression of people and Country in the name of progress or personal liberty. Colonial ideology, as outlined in Chapter 3, continues to be a great threat to living a good life in Noongar Country. I want to live a life that is good for Country, community and spirit, but colonial ideas and structures get in the way of that. These ideas and structures are pervasive in Noongar Country, they have influenced everything from language, relationships, law, agriculture, story, to education. Meka faces The Shark and so does the reader, we face this violent entity that has no bones but in the mouth, no legacy other than violence, a heart that is attached to teeth. It sends humans to do its dirty work, and humans have to say no to it. The novel is named for The Shark and its eternal teeth because The Shark interferes in the people's capacity to care for their Country and each other, and is a meditation on the end result of colonial endeavours, which is violence and consumption.

Looking at the history of the Earth, sea-level rise and fall is a constant. Noongar oral storytelling records these changes in sea level, and I conclude that it's important for mob to know that catastrophic things can happen, so these are our beliefs and values to get through it. Invading sea water and invading Europeans are similar in this way, I propose that the Noongar community's climate memory of the ice age shows how survival is written into our culture, so perhaps the answers to surviving colonialism are in our culture too.

I was already interested in deep time and geology, as they explain climate change. Human-made climate change is created by global capitalism and

industrialisation, two things exacerbated by colonialism, things that cannot be solved by creating more and industrialising more.

Referencing Noongar Cultural Heritage

I acknowledge that as a writer with a background in cultural studies and creative arts I am looking into the disciplines of geology, geomorphology and climatology as an untrained outsider. I read the ‘narratives’ implied in geology rather than study the science of it. In the same way I also acknowledge that as a Noongar person, I am the descendant of the minority that survived colonisation here in the south west. The Noongar community has been subject to history and processes that are arguably intent to destroy Noongar culture. This has resulted in Noongar community members that may suffer intergenerational trauma, making participation in family and culture difficult. At the same time Noongar culture and language itself has become fragmented and diminished in information; as discussed oral culture uses narratives to pass down packets of essential information from generation to generation, and not every essential narrative has been retained by the Elders or recorded in the archives.

I am learning about and connecting with a culture that was actively oppressed by colonial administrators, and is currently in the process of revitalisation. I am a proud Noongar woman and I want to create works and publish writing that increases interest and support for this revitalisation, which is a slow and meticulous process. To work with fragments of surviving culture is to risk reductionism and stereotyping, so I hope to contribute to revitalisation through reconceptualising in order to not exploit or distort Noongar culture. In the case of *No Bones...* I reconceptualise colonisation in order to create a thought experiment that has distance from the

Noongar research material where I highlight the significance and importance of Aboriginal ideas without teaching Aboriginal ideas.

Climate change and Noongar culture were separate in my life before I took on this research. I learned about the Nyitting/Cold Times from Noongar Elders, and I learned about ice ages and sea-level rise in the classroom. It is the research in the Ngalak paper (2016), contributed to by a Noongar Elder, that blends science and culture, and proposes correlations between scientific descriptions of place and Noongar culture's perception of Country. Research collaborations between scientists and Aboriginal Elders are emerging around Australia and bringing Aboriginal climate change stories into the public domain. I want to add to this awakening interest in Aboriginal climate knowledge in this era of catastrophic climate change.

There is conflict with referencing Noongar cultural heritage in fiction, which stems from questions of who has the right to share culture beyond the Noongar community, and the desire to not get in the way of cultural revitalisation. In researching the language components of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 it is apparent how fragmented available archival and academic material is on Noongar culture, and that there is not a solid, safe and public foundation to refer to for critics to consider my novel in the context of Noongar culture. Consider the comparison of fiction that features ancient Greek or Roman historical characters or mythological characters: no piece of fiction could ever overwhelm the historical sources or replace those sources as the dominant perception of ancient Greek or Roman culture. Noongar culture is not the same, our culture is mostly retained in our people, with only a tiny fraction of it available in writing. If this novel were to have overt references to these archival

fragments in them, such as the Wagyl/Madjit creator serpent or the Noongar stories about the water spirit/shark Marget/Maadjit, then the novel runs the risk of warping those fragments inappropriately and overwhelming those sources and replacing them in the public mind. The novel has no overt Noongar cultural references in it, and relies on a pan-Aboriginal setting and cultural inspiration, of common elements shared between Aboriginal communities all over Australia. These include the idea of a creator serpent, smoking ceremonies, kinship systems, totemic system, Elders, arranged marriage and sea-level-rise stories.

There is also a conflict with referencing Noongar stories when unlike ancient Greek and Roman culture, the Noongar people are a contemporary people, and creator beings like the Noongar creator serpent are a big part of our religion. This is a difficult space to write in, as the creator serpent of Noongar Country is a sacred being to the Noongar people, and is perhaps not appropriate to be in an imaginative retelling of the southwest. The conflict has been to decide whether to have a general creator serpent as the creator being of River Country, or to have a different creator being like a creator kangaroo or creator eagle or creator human in *No Bones but in the Mouth*.

The problem arises that there are creator kangaroos, creator eagles and creator humans in Noongar culture, as well as other Aboriginal cultures. It seems that to include anything Aboriginal is to face this risk of appropriation or distortion. I considered utilising a completely invented mythology and setting for this novel, with invented societies that are mixes of world and alien cultures. That would have avoided any possible disrespect to Noongar or Aboriginal culture to have the creator

or rainbow serpent be imagined in a ‘science fiction/fantasy’ mode. This approach might avoid offence and hurt in some ways, but perhaps would create offence or disappointment in other ways. To avoid depicting Aboriginal culture and ideas in any way creates a scenario where the creative work would lose connection to the land and people that it is writing about. I believe these stories are important, our culture and history is important, so I’ve needed to find a way to write the world of *No Bones...* as an Indigenous one, in the most respectful way. I’ve kept the names of the two deep-time beings as The Shark and The Serpent in order to signal that they are not attached to any culture or community.

The process of researching this PhD has brought deep sadness at the scale of materials available on English and Irish cultural heritage in the academic archives, and how little exists on Noongar culture. Our libraries are our Elders, yet so many people are missing from the Noongar community because due to massacre and violence they were never born, or they’ve died prematurely, or been severed from culture and missed out on the oral transmission of culture. I’ve sought ways to help promote and reframe Noongar ideas, knowing that in traditional society it would be Elders sharing this information, not someone in their thirties learning from academic articles like me.

I want my fiction to be hopeful and celebratory of what we know about who we were before colonisation and who we are now. Indigenous writing tends largely toward historical fiction and memoir, and incorporates personal views and experiences. *No Bones but in the Mouth* is not like that, it’s an intellectual exercise in telling a new story about invasion and integration, and it’s also a spiritual

exercise, of getting to know Noongar Country through its geology and researching the climate history.

The novel is research, it is an experiment in combining Noongar and scientific ideas about land to tell a story about invasion and integration. I use fiction writing in this PhD to reconceptualise colonisation in the southwest as the arrival of climate refugees, rather than conquerors, to make colonisation strange to my reader, and to draw out ideas that the colonisation of the southwest was not inevitable, but a result of circumstance and opportunity. *No Bones...* deconstructs the arrival/discovery narrative so cultural power can be inverted and the Aboriginal characters can be in charge of what integration looks like. The novel is also therapeutic for myself and I would hope my readers, to imagine a version of the southwest where Indigenous culture is strong and its people and land unhurt by colonial forces. It's difficult to strike this balance, and further research of a different nature might answer questions around how and if the nature and content of Indigenous imaginative works written by Indigenous people might help or hinder worldwide culture revitalisation projects.

I am accountable to my community, and the research of Noongar deep-time memory in Chapter 1 has made me even more proud of my culture. Noongar ideas will help Australia in this time of climate change. Western culture as an entity is too recent to have any cultural memory of climate change, it has no narrative or experience of it. Aboriginal people in Australia have. There is research in the Ngalak paper (2016) that points to stories that show Noongar spirit ancestors nginyarn (echidna) and kaarda (goanna) proactively preparing for climate change and giving

other spirit ancestors jobs in caring for the spirits in the ground that would be impacted by the rising waters:

Djenark (sea gull) offered to fly out and sit on the ocean above where anyone had been buried, to connect with their spirit, then come back to land, bathe in fresh sweet water and release the spirit. (Robertson et al, 2016, p. 49, emphasis in text)

Robertson et al. state that '[t]he notable element about this story is its proactive nature. *Nginyarn* and *kaarda* knew that the sea would rise and they prepared for it' (2016, p. 49, emphasis in text). *No Bones...* has retained its southwest setting and pan-Aboriginal themes to keep the story connected to the real world and the postcolonial situation of Australia. I take the confidence to experiment with fiction of this kind from the involvement of a Noongar Elder in the Ngalak paper (2016), where they state that the research seeks 'to make sense of the world and create new ways of looking at things' (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 42). *No Bones but in the Mouth* is a new way of looking at the southwest, and celebrates and draws attention to how Indigenous people in Australia and their stories are in a position to contribute to the conversations around climate change, and that the postcolonial condition of Australia and its violent, oppressive reality will get in the way of these stories.

There is another part of the Ngalak paper (2016) that stands out to me, and gives precedence to how studying geology and climate history might be a useful space for Indigenous people to explore. As previously discussed the Ngalak paper

lays out a timeline of events in the Noongar Dreaming period, and lines these up with events in climate history. The paper suggests that the selected suite of stories about previous climates points to a culture very knowledgeable and aware of climate and suggests that recognising this might help Noongar people understand how our stories work:

For Nyoongar people, many of whom have been disconnected from oral tradition, the placing of Nyoongar history in the timeline does not replace a song line but it does provide a historical map and a framework for memorialising social and climate patterns of the past. (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 51)

No Bones... takes this up, and explores a creative space that combines land, climate and spirit from a scientific and Noongar perspective, to perhaps add to the suite of Noongar perspectives on land and climate.

Conclusion

The research question asked at the beginning of this project was ‘how can writing in the scale of deep time be employed to explore colonial pasts, the contested present and radical futures?’. The novel *No Bones but in the Mouth* answers this in how it engages with deep-time temporalities to explore a version of the southwest which is a critique on this one, an Australia that doesn’t acknowledge the trauma of colonialism, and destroys Country rather than cares for it. *No Bones...* presents a different version of integration to show that present day southwest is on a trajectory from its violent, colonial interruption, and is a continuation of colonial attitudes. The radical future is posited in the mind of the readers, who might believe that there is no alternative to the colonial capitalist system currently in place, who might see new paths and possibilities in reading something where Western superiority is knocked off its pedestal.

The challenge of this research has been to sufficiently articulate three disparate disciplinary areas – Noongar stories, the colonial context, and the mechanics of deep-time climate change – to do justice to all three and generate fiction that goes some way to articulate new ways of knowing the southwest and ourselves. My creative methodology is to recognise narratives, patterns and stories reflected in what science tells us about geological history and combine it with ideas around connection to Country. Science itself is a series of hypotheses and the quantification of observable phenomena. The theory of plate tectonics is the best scientific hypothesis for observable phenomena such as earthquakes, seafloor spreading, volcanic islands, distribution of fauna and flora, and variance in types of rocks, but it’s just a hypothesis. I have proceeded as a Noongar story scientist,

writing fiction about Country embedded with geomorphic knowledge read in the sciences informing our view of deep time.

Noongar culture's deep memory of past climate events is the paradigm shift in thinking that Australia needs, as it thunders toward a world heavily impacted by a warming climate. Resilience and survival is linked to knowing yourself in times of great change, and the Noongar community have been survivors twice over, having battled through a four-thousand-year ice age followed by thousands of years of pulsing sea-level rise, with a continuing culture, and then surviving colonisation by a large, technologically advanced, morally abhorrent imperial force. The Aboriginal religious feature of putting land and family as the focus of culture is likely a result of learning how to survive testing climate situations and dealing with a loss in coastal territory. I hope the reader of *No Bones...* considers changes they could make in their minds, about whether Western culture has the answers to tackle climate change, and whether space should be made for Indigenous perspectives. The Noongar people likely changed their culture in order to survive climate change in the past, and that could be a lesson for Australia, that survival requires cultural change. Resilience and survival is linked to knowing yourself and your Country in times of great change – in *No Bones...* it's Meka's kinship connection that saves her from floating away.

The concept of korangan/transformation has come up again and again in the research: change in landscape, change in climate, change in culture, change in setting and history, and change in attitudes. In *No Bones...* Meka transforms both bodily and emotionally, from a woman to something like a shark to an albatross and back into a woman again, arriving at the same conclusion as her Elders that change is constant,

and you can't lose the values the ancestors have taught you when faced with a crisis. The Noongar stories investigated that feature korangan suggest a tradition of telling stories about change, and that the decisions of individuals can change them forever, transforming them into a landscape feature, an animal or a spirit. Colonisation wasn't a cloud that settled over Noongar Country, it was a process of the individual decisions of thousands of Europeans to marginalise, kill, enslave and control Noongar people.

There has been an experimental element to this research. The writing of *No Bones...* is an experiment; it is an unusual narrative in that it refuses to depict Indigenous oppression to tell a story about Indigenous oppression. In *No Bones...* the blended society of River people and Erin people is an experiment by the Elders of River Country; they didn't know if it was going to work, but they trusted in the values handed down by their ancestors to guide them. River Country itself is an experiment of The Serpent; it longed to develop soft edges even though it made itself vulnerable to The Shark. Blending deep time and Noongar ideas in fiction is deeply experimental, but *No Bones...* highlights the deep roots of Aboriginal cultures in Australia. Meka's community can 'see' further back in time than the Erin and Albion, whose own deep memory had been interrupted in their homelands by industrialisation and colonisation. The shallow memory of the Albion essentially means that they had lost the memory that they need to care for Country to survive long term in one place, and that leads to the self-created destruction of their own green earth.

There is a spirit of ‘coming together’ in *No Bones...* that is a reflection of the attitudes that I hear from Elders in the Noongar community, of great dismay at the destruction of land in the southwest, and a desire to convince the settler majority that caring for Country, family and culture are all the same thing. A quote keeps returning to me from Munyari Ralph Winmar which speaks to this wish for peace and togetherness:

You know, sometimes you look at the juurnt (stars), they are like the campfires. Some of those old people are out there. When you’re camping you see other family’s campfires in the darkness, makes you feel safe and good. Like the stars. We are all together. (Winmar, 1996, p.18)

The generosity of Noongar Elders to keep sharing even in the face of colonisation is a testament to the generosity of Noongar culture, but we are also a culture with an urgent message. The West has taken almost everything from Aboriginal people in Australia, except connection to Country, and the paradox is that the West needs to let the Aboriginal community give them that too for us all to survive in a warming world.

Bibliography

- Allwood, A., Walter, M., Kamber, B., Marshall, C., & Burch, I. (2006). Stromatolite reef from the Early Archaean era of Australia. *Nature*. 441. 714-718.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/nature04764>.
- Andrich, M.A., & Imberger, J. (2013). The effect of land clearing on rainfall and fresh water resources in Western Australia: A multi-functional sustainability analysis. *The International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology* 20(6).1-15.
- Australian Antarctic Division. (2020). Ice Sheets. Australian Government. Retrieved from <http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/environment/sea-ice/ice-sheet>
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2020). Mabo case. Retrieved from <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/mabo-case>
- Beck, R., Burbank, D., Sercombe, W., Olson, T., & Khan, A. (1995). Organic carbon exhumation and global warming during the early Himalayan collision. *Geology*, 23(5), 387-390. Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1130/0091-7613\(1995\)023<0387:OCEAGW>2.3.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1130/0091-7613(1995)023<0387:OCEAGW>2.3.CO;2)
- Bindon, P., & Chadwick, R. (2011). *A Nyoongar Wordlist: From The South-West of Western Australia*. Welshpool, WA: Western Australian Museum.

Bradley, J. (2019, Spring) *Unearthed: Last Days of the Anthropocene. Meanjin Quarterly*, 78 (3), 44-56. Melbourne, VIC: Melbourne University Publishing.

Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics. (2020). Dandjoo Moordiyap Dabakarn – Noongar Language Project. Retrieved from <https://call.batchelor.edu.au/call-project/dandjoo-moordiyap-dabakarn-noongar-language-project/>

Choi, C. Q. (18 May 2010). Ancient Nursery of Giant, Extinct Sharks Found. Retrieved from <https://www.livescience.com/6458-ancient-nursery-giant-extinct-sharks.html>

Coleman, C.G. (2017). *Terra Nullius*. Sydney, NSW: Hachette.

Collard, L., Bracknell, C., & Palmer, D. (2017). Nyungar of Southwestern Australia and Flinders: A Dialogue on Using Nyungar Intelligence to Better Understand Coastal Exploration. *Ab-Original*, 1(1), 1-16.
doi:10.5325/aboriginal.1.1.0001

Cooper, D. (2012). *A Study of the Riverine and Underwater Archaeological Landscapes of Rocky Bay, North Fremantle, Western Australia* (Master's thesis, Flinders University South Australia). Retrieved from http://museum.wa.gov.au/maritime-archaeology-db/sites/default/files/no.032_rocky_bay_fremantle_0.pdf

- Derbal Nara. (2020). Our Changing Coastline [figure]. Retrieved from <https://www.derbalnara.org.au/changingcoastlinecomposite.pdf>
- Douglas, W. (1996). *Illustrated Dictionary of the South-West Aboriginal Language*. Claremont, WA: Edith Cowan University. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7885&context=ecuworks>
- Featherstone, S. (2005). *Postcolonial cultures*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Gage, J. (2012). 4.5-million-year-old great white shark fossil at Gordon Hubbell's private gallery in Gainesville, FL. Retrieved from <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/science/new-ancient-shark-species-gives-insight-into-origin-of-great-white/>
- Gaynor, A. (2015). How to eat a wilderness. Retrieved from <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/eat-wilderness/>
- Gammage, B. (2011). *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Gibson, C. (2016). Editorial. *Australian Geographer*, 47(1), 1. Retrieved from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2015.1116119>

- Gibson, R. (1992). *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Goode, B., Irvine, C., & Greenfield, P. (2007). *An Aboriginal Heritage Survey For The Proposed Sub-Division Of Bayonet Head Albany Western Australia*. Retrieved from http://www.epa.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/PER_documentation/A1758_R1447_SEA_Tech_App_K_Aboriginal%20Heritage%20Survey%20-%20Bayonet%20Head.pdf
- Green, N. (1979). *Nyungar – The People: Aboriginal customs in the southwest of Australia*. North Perth, WA: Creative Research.
- Gregory, S. (2018). *Noongar Language Dictionary*. Fremantle, WA: Koort-kadak Consultancy.
- Grey, G. (1841). *A vocabulary of the dialects of south Western Australia* (2nd edition). London, UK: T. & W. Boone. Retrieved from <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1167122556/view?partId=nla.obj-1167149042#page/n103/mode/1up>
- Griffiths, B. (2018). *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*. Carlton, VIC: Black Inc.

- Haebich, A. (2018). *Dancing in Shadows: History of Nyungar Performance*.
Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London, UK: Vintage.
- Harrison, M. (2009). The Hadean Crust: Evidence from >4 Ga Zircons. *Annual Review of Earth and Planetary Sciences*. 37(1). 479-505. Retrieved from <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.earth.031208.100151>
- Hassell, E. (1975). *My Dusky Friends*. East Fremantle, WA: C.W. Hassell.
- Hatfield, A., French, C.J., & Alcock, M.B. (2010). *Australia's Maritime Jurisdiction off Southwestern Western Australia*. Retrieved from <http://pid.geoscience.gov.au/dataset/ga/69507>
- Herzeg, A. (2011). Groundwater. In I. Prosser (Ed.), *Science and Solutions for Australia* (pp.47-60). Retrieved from https://www.publish.csiro.au/ebook/chapter/9780643103283_Chapter_4
- Hughes-Hallett, D. (2010). *Indigenous History of the Swan and Canning Rivers*. Perth, WA: Swan River Trust. Retrieved from <https://parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/downloads/parks/Indigenous%20history%20of%20the%20Swan%20and%20Canning%20rivers.pdf>

Irvine, R. (2014). Deep time: an anthropological problem. *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale*, 22(2), 157-172. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1111/1469-8676.12067>

Johnson, P. (2005). *Ireland : A History from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=1824484>

Johnston, A., & Lawson, A. (2000). *Settler Colonies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Kanapaux, B. (2009, August 1). Preserved shark fossil adds evidence to great white's origins. Retrieved from <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/science/preserved-shark-fossil-adds-evidence-to-great-whites-origins/>

Kanowski, P., & McKenzie, N. (2011). Land: Soil. *Australia state of the environment 2011, Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy*. Retrieved from <https://soe.environment.gov.au/science/soe/2011-report/5-land/1-introduction/1-1-soil>

Klesch, M. (2013). *Dordenap Boodja Wongki: Stories from Bibulmun and Wardandi Country*. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor Press.

- Knapp, L. (2011). *Mirnang Waangkaniny*. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor Press.
- Lane, P. (2013). *Geology of Western Australia's National Parks 3rd Edition*. Perth, WA: Peter Lane.
- Lane, P. (2017). *Geology of Western Australia's National Parks 4th Edition*. Margaret River, WA: Peter Lane.
- Maas, R., Kinny, P., Williams, I., Froude, D., & Compston, W. (1992). The Earth's oldest known crust: A geochronological and geochemical study of 3900–4200 Ma old detrital zircons from Mt. Narryer and Jack Hills, Western Australia. *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta*. 56(3), 1281-1300. Retrieved from <https://www-sciencedirect-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/science/article/pii/001670379290062N>
- Marmion, D., Obata, K., & Troy, J. (2014). Community, identity, wellbeing: the report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey. Retrieved from https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/products/report_research_outputs/2014-report-of-the-2nd-national-indigenous-languages-survey.pdf
- McGregor, R. (1993). The Doomed Race: A Scientific Axiom of the Late Nineteenth Century. *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 39(1), 14-22. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-8497.1993.tb00047.x>

Moore, G. F. (1978). *Diary of Ten Years: Eventful Life of an Early Settler in Western Australia and also A Descriptive Vocabulary of the Language of the Aborigines*. Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press. (Original work published 1884).

Nannup, L. (2006). *Old Spirit of the Sea* [print]. Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Retrieved from <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/85698/>

Nannup, L. (2020). *Old Spirit of the Sea*. Retrieved from <http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/34716/old-spirit-of-the-sea;jsessionid=95CC0402B3C99B517AEF980B97E26BA2?ctx=58c660b4-e2a6-4f3a-9138-1dc058a87f68&idx=3272>

Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation. (2020a). *Language*. Retrieved from <https://noongarboodjar.com.au/history/>

Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation. (2020b). *Noongar Dialects*. Retrieved from <https://noongarboodjar.com.au/noongar-dialects/>

Nunn, P. (2018). *The Edge of Memory: Ancient Stories, Oral Tradition and the Post-Glacial World*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Nunn, P. D. (2004). Understanding and adapting to sea-level change. In F. Harris (Ed.), *Global Environmental Issues* (pp. 45-64). Retrieved from

<http://marno.lecture.ub.ac.id/files/2012/06/ISU-ISU-LINGKUNGAN-GLOBAL.pdf#page=58>

Nunn, P. D., & Reid, N. J. (2015). Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago. *Australian Geographer*, 47(1), 11-47. Retrieved from [https://www.tandfonline-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539](https://www.tandfonline.com/dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539)

Owen, J. (2014, March 15). Did St. Patrick Really Drive Snakes Out of Ireland?

National Geographic. Retrieved from

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/3/140315-saint-patricks-day-2014-snakes-ireland-nation/>

Palmer, K. (2016). *Noongar people, Noongar land: the resilience of Aboriginal culture in the south west of Western Australia*. Canberra, ACT: AIATSIS.

Pattiaratchi, C., & McCulloch, M. (2015). We are finally learning the Perth

Canyon's deep-sea secrets. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from

<https://theconversation.com/we-are-finally-learning-the-perth-canyons-deep-sea-secrets-38377>

Pettersen, C. (2007). *Koodjal-Koodjal Djookan/Four Sisters: The Legend of the Southern Cross*. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor Press.

- Rademaker, L. (2019, January 18). Voices silenced: What happened to our Indigenous languages? *SBS*. Retrieved from <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/voices-silenced-what-happened-to-our-indigenous-languages>
- Reddit. (2 June 2017). Earth Rocks by Age. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/6euz6f/earth_rocks_by_age_4_127x1948_oc/
- Robertson, F., Stasiuk, G., Nannup, N., & Hopper, S. (2016). Ngalak koora koora djinang (Looking back together): a Nyoongar and scientific collaborative history of ancient Nyoongar boodja. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*. 2016(1), 40-54. Retrieved from [https://search-informit-com-au.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/fullText;dn=220817786606525;res=IELAPA](https://search.informit-com-au.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/fullText;dn=220817786606525;res=IELAPA)
- Robertson, F., Stasiuk, G., Nannup, N., & Hopper, S. (2017). *Nyoongar Boodja Koomba Bardip Kooratan : Nyoongar Land Long Story Short*. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor Press.
- Schmidt Ocean Institute. (2015). Exploring The Unknown – Just 50 Km (30 Miles) Away From Western Australia’s Capital City. Retrieved from <https://schmidtocean.org/cruise-log-post/exploring-the-unknown-just-50-km-30-miles-away-from-western-australias-capital-city/>

Scott, K. (2007). Covered Up with Sand. *Meanjin*, 66(2), 120-124. Retrieved from <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=235676488277868;res=IELLCC>

Scott, K. (2010). *That Deadman Dance*. Tuggerah, NSW: Picador Australia.

Scott, K., Cockles, J., & Winmar, R. (2017). *Ngaawily Nop*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.

Scott, K., & Nelly, R. (2013). *Dwoort Baal Kaat*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.

Scott, K., & Woods, I. (2011). *Mamang*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.

Science Struck. (2020). Paleozoic Timeline. Retrieved from <https://sciencestruck.com/paleozoic-era-major-events-important-facts>

Seddon, G. (1972). *Sense of Place*. Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press.

South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council. (2020). Elder Doolann Leisha Eatts talks about her Grandmother's story of contact with the Europeans. *Kaartdijin Noongar – Noongar Knowledge*. Retrieved from <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/spirituality/>

South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council. (2020). Spirituality. *Kaartdijin*

Noongar – Noongar Knowledge. Retrieved from

<https://www.noongarculture.org.au/spirituality/>

Stasiuk, G. (2015). *Wadjemup: Rottnest Island as Black Prison and White Playground* (Doctoral thesis, Murdoch University). Research Repository Murdoch University. Retrieved from https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/25193/1/Wadjemup_PhD_final_%5Bdigital%5D.pdf

Stocker, L., Collard, L., & Rooney, A. (2016). Aboriginal world views and colonisation: implications for coastal sustainability. *Local Environment*. 21(7), 844-865. Retrieved from <https://www-tandfonline-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2015.1036414>

Tindol, R. (2005, August 1). Evolutionary Accident Probably Caused The Worst Snowball Earth Episode, Study Shows. *Caltech*. Retrieved from <https://www.caltech.edu/about/news/evolutionary-accident-probably-caused-worst-snowball-earth-episode-study-shows-1026>

Turney, C., Bird, M., Fifield, L., Roberts, R., Smith, M., ... Cresswell, R. (2001). Early Human Occupation at Devil's Lair, Southwestern Australia 50,000 Years Ago. *Quaternary Research*, 55, 3-13. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/quaternary-research/article/early-human-occupation-at-devils-lair-southwestern-australia-50000-years-ago/F27F3628F0F59042FF19C3A39B8CD471>

Van Kranendonk, M., Ivanic, T., Wyche, S., Wilde, S., & Zibra, I. (2010). *A time transect through the Hadean to Neoproterozoic geology of the western Yilgarn Craton — a field guide*. Perth, WA: Geological Survey of Western Australia. Retrieved from http://geoconferences.org.au/wp-content/uploads/gsdrec_2010_19.pdf

Van Neerven, E. (2014). *Heat and Light*. St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press.

Vernimmen, T. (2019, October 1). Amazing fossil shark skeleton is the first of its kind. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/10/amazing-fossil-shark-skeleton-first-of-its-kind-phoebodus-morocco/#close>

Villanueva, J. C. (2009, September 5). Milankovitch Cycle. *Universe Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.universetoday.com/39012/milankovitch-cycle/>

Wallace K., & Huston, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Exploring Woodlands with Nyoongars*. Como, WA: Department of Conservation and Land Management. Retrieved from <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/images/documents/get-involved/n2n/schools/excursions/Exploring%20Woodlands%20With%20Nyoongars.pdf>

Walley, T. (2011). *Dreamtime*. Fremantle, WA: Matilda Publishing.

- Walley, T. (2013). *Mardang Waakarl-ak*. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor Press.
- Wells, H.G. (2007). *The War of the Worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=5442748>
- Western Australian Museum. (n.d.). Devil's Lair Field Trip Photo. Retrieved from <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/articles/museum-field-trips-devils-lair>
- Western Australian Museum. (2020). The Yilgarn. Retrieved from <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/wa-goldfields/ancient-land/yilgarn>
- Whitehurst, R. (1992). *Noongar Dictionary*. Bunbury, WA: Noongar Language and Culture Centre (Aboriginal Corporation).
- Wikipedia. (2020). Geology of Australia [figure]. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geology_of_Australia
- Wikipedia. (2020). View of the Albany Gap, Western Australia [photograph]. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torndirrup_National_Park
- Winmar, R. (1996). *Walwalinj The Hill that Cries: Nyungar Language and Culture*. Manning, WA: Dorothy Winmar.

Wright, A. (2006). *Carpentaria*. Artarman, NSW: Giramondo Publishing.

Wright, A. (2013). *The Swan Book*. Artarman, NSW: Giramondo Publishing.

Yorkshire-Selby, G. (2011). *Ngalang Wongi Ngalang Boodja*. Batchelor, NT:
Batchelor Press.

Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

Appendix

Permission for Figure 6 and Figure 10

PERMISSION TO USE COPYRIGHT MATERIAL AS SPECIFIED BELOW:

1. Map of Australia showing the 21 coastal locations from which Aboriginal stories about coastal inundation are described in this paper
2. Sea-level change over the past 150,000 years

I hereby give permission for **Cassie Lynch** to include the abovementioned material(s) in his/her higher degree thesis for Curtin University, and to communicate this material via the espace institutional repository. This permission is granted on a non-exclusive basis and for an indefinite period.

I confirm that I am the copyright owner of the specified material.

Signed:

Name: Patrick Nunn

Position: Professor of Geography, University of the Sunshine Coast

Date: 27.7.20