

SAND

ROBERT DREWE
JOHN KINSELLA

SAND features new and collected writing from two of Australia's most renowned authors: novelist and literary non-fiction writer Robert Drewe, and internationally acclaimed poet John Kinsella.

In memoir, stories and poems, Drewe and Kinsella celebrate the all-pervasive Western Australian geological element of sand, and the shifting foundations on which memory, myth and meaning are built.

The two writers explore a landscape both cultural and personal as they consider the intimate, geographical and historical importance of coastal and inland sand, and reveal its influences on their writing.

About the authors

Robert Drewe grew up on the West Australian coast. His novels, short stories and non-fiction, including his best-selling memoir *The Shark Net*, have been widely translated, won many national and international prizes, and been adapted for film, television, radio and the theatre. He has also written plays, screenplays, journalism and film criticism, and edited four anthologies of stories.

John Kinsella's many volumes of poetry include the prize-winning collections *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems* and *The New Arcadia*. He published a collection of lectures on landscape and language, *Contrary Rhetoric* (Fremantle Press in conjunction with Edith Cowan University), and *Wheatlands* with Dorothy Hewett in 2000. He is an Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University, and a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. John Kinsella lives on a property near Toodyay, Western Australia, with his family.

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For Nelson and Julie Mews - RD

For Tracy - JK

CONTENTS

7	The Sand People
12	The Dream Of
18	Buffalo Sunday
24	Como Beach Jetty
25	Daphne Walking Past
28	The River I
32	Perth Poem
50	Paleface and the Panther
64	Learning to Swim
67	The Manageress and the Mirage
72	These Inner Suburbs were Outer Suburbs Once
74	Hibiscus
79	Zoo Visits
81	The River II
83	The Midnight Ferry
86	River, Bird, City ... Inland
102	Sand Tale
105	Lake Ninan
107	Signature at Ludlow
128	Felix Locke in the Goldfields
133	The Sands of Dyarlgaroo
136	Skippy Rock, Augusta: Warning, the Undertow
139	Stones Like Hearts
144	Reclamation
150	The Water Person and the Tree Person
158	Gero Deros
160	Fight
164	The Diver Meets the Billionaire's Wife
167	Geraldton
179	The Last Explorer
189	Notes
191	Acknowledgements

The Sand People

When I was a child new to Perth, everyone I knew lived in the dunes. Some people lived in the loose white limestone sand near the ocean. I thought of them as the Sand People. Every afternoon the fierce sea wind, which they dismissed as The Breeze, blew their sand into the air and scalloped and corrugated their properties.

Sun and wind had rearranged the appearance of the Sand People as well – tanned, freckled, scabbed and bleached them. With their darker skins, red eyes, raw noses and permanent deep cracks in their bottom lips, they looked nothing like Melbourne people.

Some were as eroded as the cliffs, their noses and ears worn and peeled away, so that grown men had the snubbed features of boys. Around their edges – noses, ear tips, cheeks, shoulders – they were pink and fraying. Shreds of skin poked up from their general outline and fluttered in the sea breeze. Boys bled if they smiled too fast.

From a distance, most of the adults seemed stained a smooth reddish-brown, like my paint-box burnt sienna, but close up at the beach, walking behind them down the wooden ramp to the sand, you saw they were stippled like people in newspaper photographs, spotted with hundreds of jammed-together freckles and moles – brown and black on a pink background.

The women had chests and backs like leopards. The men and boys all looked tough but relaxed, even sleepy. They were slow smilers, and I could see it was because they were being careful of their split bottom lips.

I wanted desperately to be like the Sand Children. I envied the confidence with which they peeled sheets of skin from their shoulders and passed them around for comparison at the Saturday afternoon pictures. The aim was to peel off a perfect unbroken strip of skin from shoulder to shoulder. I was filled with wonder that in this delicate parchment you could see every pore.

Some boys ate themselves. Their scabs of course – even Melbourne boys ate those – but also nose skin, cheek skin, forehead skin and especially shoulder skin. By now I was impressed, but not all surprised, by boys who ate their own flesh. Sometimes washed down with Fanta.

In the world of sand, life generally seemed strange and risky. In a place smelling of coconut oil, hot human skin, drying kelp and fried onions, I thought anything could happen. Where else but the white sand could there be such prospects for pleasure and danger?

Unfortunately I had to make do with being a denizen of the less exciting yellow sand. Our yellow-sand quarter-acre was about five kilometres inland from the white ocean sand.

My father had swapped houses with an old Perth couple, the Seftons, who had urgently needed to move to Melbourne at the same time as he was transferred to Western Australia. He thought the house swap was a neat arrangement. My mother hated it. She especially hated the gloomy interior of this old bungalow with its dusty homemade bric-a-brac left behind by old Mrs Sefton.

The knitted doilies and toilet-roll covers, the dried flower arrangements and ornaments of papier-mâché, the prissy lamps and vases made of jars and milk bottles covered with finicky little pieces of glued-on coloured paper, depressed her to tears.

Mrs France next door cheerfully told us that Mrs Sefton had been a patient at the Claremont Mental Hospital because of her obsessive sexual propositioning of tradesmen (in her sixties) and her desire to polish the front fence and path in her bra and bloomers.

This news gave my mother further pause. Now she understood why the baker and the Watkins man, with his van of cochineal and vanilla essence and thimbles and knitting needles, eyed her so warily. While she gathered up all traces of old Mrs Sefton's occupational therapy and packed them out of sight, she worried what Mrs Sefton was getting up to in her house.

The bungalow was at 30 Leon Road, Dalkeith, on the corner of Robert Street, near the top of a dune which rose from the river three blocks back. If you dug a hole in our yard the sand was pale grey for the first few inches, then it turned yellow and stayed yellow as deep as you could dig.

As the neighbourhood boys showed me, the yellow sand was favoured for one of the two popular local customs – digging tunnels. The other craze was for urinating on moss. Whenever a boy saw moss growing anywhere – on a wall, rock, path or tree – he felt bound to piss on it.

It was second nature. Perhaps growing up in the dry heat among the cardboard-coloured vegetation and pale dunes had given them an aversion to anything lush and green.

The chief exponent of moss-pissing was my new friend Nick Howell. He was pleased to have us move into the neighbourhood. He'd already killed all the moss along the lee side of his own house and the Ivemey's house at No. 34. He'd nearly finished Miss Thomas's side fence at No. 35, and the three France girls at No. 32 wouldn't let him anywhere near their walls. He was grateful to have moss access at No. 30.

When we moved in, all the boys were absorbed in some stage of the sand-tunnelling process: digging a winding trench, roofing it with tin, cardboard or three-ply, heaping it with camouflaging sand, then vanishing down inside the burrow.

In the hot sand they worked with the strange urgency and optimistic flurry of ants, pausing only to gulp water from the garden hose and piss on any available moss.

Tunnel collapses were frequent. The walls and roofs simply caved in, or the boys forgot where the tunnels were, and stepped on them. Gasping bruised boys crawled out from under the rubble, spitting dirt and shaking their heads as if to say, 'How did that happen?'

Our house rested on foundations of limestone. Limestone is only compressed sand, after all. It was easy to carve your initials in the foundations with a stick. Indeed, their bland facade and lemony softness begged to be scratched and scraped, especially the main supporting stones in the front of the house.

My new cronies Nick Howell, Ian Hodge and Neil Liddell had all dug their initials in their foundations. But their initials were arrangements of straight lines. When I carved mine with a screwdriver something strange and fascinating happened.

The D crumbled instantly and gently into a powdery cave, which engulfed the earlier R. As I watched, almost hypnotised, the cave quickly grew. Out of its mouth dribbled a pale lemon stream and then such a frightening rivulet of sand that I envisaged the whole house pouring into the street in an avalanche.

The foundation stone seemed to be melting. Soon it was more crust than stone. It was behaving like a big hourglass, with a neat heap of fine-grained sand piling up at its base. At the same time, a thin plume of dust rose into the air like a tiny signal of disaster

and softly blew away.

In fright, I looked around for a rock or some solid object to plug the hole. The only things in sight were two of my brother's Dinky toys: a Ford Customline and a red London bus, and my cricket ball.

I pushed the Ford Customline in first. It disappeared entirely inside the cave. Then the double-decker bus. It vanished, too. I tossed in the screwdriver but still the trickling continued. Desperately I even offered up my six-stitcher. The cave swallowed it, and sand still trickled merrily onto the ground.

As a last resort, I unscrewed the sprinkler from the garden hose and jammed it in, vertically. The sprinkler was about eight inches square. The pace of the trickle seemed to slow. It hesitated and as I held my breath, it stopped.

Now I had to put back the lost sand. I tried to scoop up the mound but it was so fine it fell through my fingers. I needed to wet it. The hose was nearby, but by now logic was beyond me.

Addled by destruction and panic, my brain told me to urinate on the pile of sand. (Of course, that's how they did things around here!) Then I packed the mud into the cave, jammed it tight over the Ford, the London bus, the cricket ball and the screwdriver, packed it around the sprinkler, threw more mud over everything, patted it down, and waited. The entombed offerings held fast. The plug stuck.

Our foundations were made of sand, and they rested on sand. My mother made a rule that children weren't allowed to run around the house. Overactive children made cracks appear in the walls. So did big trucks rumbling past. For a long time I lived in fear, not so much that we'd all be buried under a limestone avalanche – that seemed inevitable – but that the house, agitated by some racing boy or delivery van, or my father's temper, would one day pop its cork and spit out the evidence of my evildoing.

The Dream Of

Why that is an avioun,
And this a revelacioun,
Why this a dreem, why that a sweven,
And nat to every man liche even
– Geoffrey Chaucer¹

I woke believing I'd been living
someone else's life. A shadowing.
I dreamt that you drove me around
the story of your childhood
that was *my* childhood. I recall
every act in my wakeful
state enacted as yours, described
with such exactness, such refined
legitimacy of feeling.
The river snakes through a string
of sandy suburbs and vanishes
into swamps and tidal flats.
A dead end becomes a creek
that sources water out of paperbarks,
the roots of marris and banksias
remembered only as street names.
In the dream you showed me jetties
and glimpses of white sandy beaches,
built-out now, or lipped by grassy
banks with cycle paths for the wealthy.
It's all 'lifestyle' these days, you said,
and showed a place where the wicked

hid among infestations of bamboo
to drink, smoke, and sniff glue,
where smaller kids played ‘smugglers’ cove’,
and errant couples swore their love.
Nearby, state housing met private
brick-and-tiles on quarter-acre plots,
and neighbours clashed over haves
and have-nots, and some crimes
were put down to ‘lack of discipline!’
and others formed educations
that took pupils to corporate
futures. All feared the ‘melting pot’,
but never called it that. You wandered
the streets, and more than once were chased
by a faceless man in a non-
descript car. He said, ‘Hey, son ...’,
and always ‘knew’ your mother
and was ‘best friends’ with your father,
calling and calling through the wound-
down passenger window – a weird sound.
Never take a lift from strangers.
Never take a lift from strangers.
I know you in ways you can’t
know yourself, he’d call, he’d cant.
And that block of flats – *Wongabena* –
where the blind lady with her
guide dog lived. And the storm drain
in the shire park where the stain
of torture flourished, small boys
tormenting frogs and birds and toys.
The park – hunters on bikes encircling,
where Paul Rigby, red hair flaming,

beat you up. Beat *us* up. Seems
no safety came in numbers, in dreams.
And that's where you held off the 'Jap'
attack on Pearl Harbor, and took the rap
for a smashed asbestos fence.
And down *there*, the vast expanse
of bushland – waiting for developers,
honeycombed with homemade bunkers,
all of us burrowing deep into
grey sand and hearing kangaroos
and trail bikes churn the dirt up overhead.
Now, it's just houses, and decades have passed.
You don't live there now, neither
does your amanuensis. Sure,
you expect change but still want to lay claim.
Few would remember outside the dream:
that thin strip of shops: pharmacy,
butcher's shop, deli, newsagency
which doubled as a drycleaner's,
branch of the Commonwealth Bank – tellers
unravelling out over the road
to the brick and asbestos schoolyard,
collecting twenty-cent deposits
and stamping 'first savers' passbooks –
how to save and plan for a crisis
with tin high-rise moneyboxes,
painted sickly gilt and green, the sum
of all you might become
behind their forever-closed windows.
Next shop on, the hairdresser's,
and on the corner, the Foodland
Shopping Centre, where a land

of denial awaited every child,
item on item memorised,
trolleys not quite large enough to ride
because aisles were narrow and crammed.
Over the road, the health clinic nurse
ensured we imbibed the living virus –
polio – some kids still got calipers
with or without the dose.
Down from the clinic, the lake.
Down through banksia and she-oak,
down through marri and jarrah,
down to a paperbark fringe, to banbar
and modong, patches of rush and clumps
of kikuyu, even flooded gum. The Swamp!
The Swamp, where long-necked tortoises
and thieves hid among the revs
of motorbike frogs, to *prey*
on the richer suburb across the way,
across the brackish waters, to peer
out through the reeds at those haves,
taking pickings back to their have-nots,
because the rich want to celebrate
water, no matter what colour, as faith,
because water is space and brings relief,
and birds, garden bores sucking water
out to brighten lawns and render
view a complex one to celebrate,
a reward for their higher rates.
I dreamt you drove me around
the story of your childhood
that was *my* childhood. I recall
every act in my wakeful

state enacted as yours, described
with such exactness. I dreamed
you rode my bike to the house
of a brand new schoolmate, his
mother comfortably naked, rich
thatch of hair opposite the Catholic Church.
His father, a carpenter, asked
if you'd noticed anything special? Bled
dry, you stumbled in your distress
and he said, wood glue smells like cat's piss!
Know that place where your mate insists
an old guy keeps money in his mattress?
And the corner phone box – late one night
it was blown to bits with a stick of gelignite,
a sound that redefined sleep,
brought fear and loosened your grip.
And that stop sign ignored by drivers –
five deaths heard by the neighbours,
by your parents, by you – that *crunch*
you spent your childhood waiting for, that crunch
at the end of a skidding that holds on
too long. When I wake, I won't return.
That house you called your childhood home
is gone, a set of units glow like chrome.
They are surrounded by a kind of sand
I can't recognise. Maybe a sand
found in the deep south, a trendy fill
to lift the esprit de corps? A careful
and steady climb towards higher rents?
What of piles of yellow sand dumped by parents
on the verge to spread over couch grass,
to make buffalo grass rise

high above black beetle, to feed
a 'building-on' – an extra bed-
room or back veranda
closed to the coming weather?
Hear the concrete in the mixer ...
a new house is going up on the corner
where banksias had borne
their yellow candles. Is that now or then?
I dreamt you drove me around
the story of your childhood.
I humoured you as friends do,
even if they can't believe it's true.