

THE FUTURE KEEPERS

NANDI CHINNA



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Dedicated to the memory of my dear friend and mentor

Deb Westbury

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‘Long Live Love’

This book was conceived and written mostly on the lands of the Whadjuk, Ballardong and Wardandi Nyoongar people, the traditional owners of the south-west region of Western Australia. I respect and acknowledge the Elders past, present and emerging, and I am grateful for the privilege of living and working on Nyoongar Country.

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TERROIR

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As long as it takes to make the world,
the ferrous country rises and wears away;
black cockatoos alight in paperbark canopies,
the earth keeps spinning inside the window of the glass.

Not wanting to drink alone
I raise a charge to my shadow,
but she is already giddy
with the scent of blue scaevola and red-eyed wattle.

Along the flower ridge to the salt life
windblown honey myrtle binds the cliffs,
humpback whales ride the Leeuwin Current south;
a wave rises and breaks in my mouth.

Down through the peppermint forest
and the body's long hours,
bees hum between marri and grape;
sap is rising in the arteries of the vine.

The afternoon is measured out in rows.
I pass through gated paddocks;
cows graze the pasture grass,
the loam of their making shining from their faces.

The creek rounds the cusp of the hill.
Purling under the thick beams of the bridge,
Wilyabrup Brook tastes like rain; and the earth
keeps spinning inside the window of the glass.

My shadow will not join me;
she ripples away, dissolving into leaves and stones.
The bottle is empty, but the flowers
keep blooming on my tongue.

COCKBURN SOUND

This morning I have spent hours
picking up sea hares from the beach
and tossing them carefully back into the sea.

A marine biologist would say
that I'm wasting my time,
that sea hares beach themselves
this time of year. After mating
and setting their eggs adrift
in spirals of glistening ribbon,
they give themselves up to the damage of surf,
denting against the shore
like giant, homeless snails.

But this time last week it was the stars,
1, 2, 6, then dozens of stars,
whole constellations fallen from orbit,
broken out of space, slipping in and out
with the tide, tripping over each other
in their impatience to curl up
and die on the beach.

Then the useless task of gathering them up
against their inclinations,
spinning them back into the water.

Out in the Sound a dredge ploughs the seabed
relentlessly back and forth.
I stare out, a purple sea hare limp in my hands,
wondering how much more the sea can spit out,
how much more it can take.

LEAVING ROTTNEST

After boarding the ferry I close my eyes,
feel the swell surging in sympathy
with the blood pumping through my heart muscle;
hold the island in those chambers,
hold the sea wind on the south-west bluff,
the osprey circling, diving, returning
with a pearly slash of salmon.

On the ferry's TV the West Coast Eagles are slaughtering
the Greater Western Sydney Giants,
and I'm repeating names like mantras:

Scaevola crassifolia, Westringia, Spinifex, Lepidosperma gladiatum,
seaberry, saltbush, samphires, sedges, Rottneest Island pines;

picturing the welcome swallows
careening above coastal rosemary,
ancient coral reefs split open on the shore,
and the eye's wide gaze across to the blur
of harbour and commerce that is Fremantle.

As the ferry speeds towards the mainland
the island grows huge inside me;
as seen from above;
a leafy sea dragon
adrift in the Indian Ocean.

ASTRONOMY

My niece has never slept outside before
so we drag our swags onto the back lawn,
but sleep is impossible with the sougning
and creaking of the shadowy pine forest,
the stars illuminating our faces.

She's imagining wolves, and monsters
stalking the periphery of our camp,
but it's the animals of the galaxy
who pace and snarl in their nocturnal paddock.

Roads and fences torched by sun
are rebuilt in pitch, wildings
contained there eat blackness,
defecate darkness,
traverse the memory of light.

My niece seems tiny and surreal,
like an animated doll, supine
beneath the muzzle of this lambent herd.

I try to recall the names of constellations
I was shown when I was a child
lying out on a swag with my father,
him pointing out the planets,

then waking up in the night to find
the whole picture has shifted –
though it seems that the sky is rotating
it is the ground, that feels so solid
beneath us, which has turned.

All night the earth pulls away from the sky,
forgetting its astronomy until it returns
to meet those stars again.

AN OLDER COUNTRY

*Wardandi Country*¹

When I say I like to stay on the track
the tall man swallows his laughter
and hands me a pair of blue gaiters.

Leaving behind all notions of walking
we wade through the Earth's silvery-grey fur,
limbo under the fat bellies of orb spiders
trembling inside their golden architecture.
Banksia cones mauled by ngoolyark
ignite along blackened branches,
spiking the cloud-bruised sky.

We crest the dunes and plunge
through the shagreen swords
of shoulder-high sedges
jousting to slice off our limbs.
An aquifer seeps from the hillside,
cold and clear, whistling over bleached sand,
biting our lips as we kneel and sip.

Karri tree antlers gleam like bone,
casting pale light across the valley,
as we leave Australia and enter an older country,
pause upon an island of bark and leaves
that has been forming for centuries;
leaves fall into our footsteps,
erase borders as we depart.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

For Sharyn Egan

The ageing monk is wearing his white
summer robes that reveal the stains
of grapes and thorns and roses.
On Sundays he strolls in the olive grove,
where each twisted tree is planted for a different
country in the world.

Addressing every leaf with a prayer,
he says he has to put himself aside
and let Jesus do the talking,
for how would a mortal human know
how to speak all those languages?

Which is a bit like poetry:
how can a poet know what a poem is
when it arrives rasping like a white bird,
rustling its feathers inside the dark
cavities of the body?

The carob tree buzzes like a harmonium,
casting a fretwork of shade, a scent of honey;
and everywhere I walk, sliding on red-brown pea gravel,
I'm looking for the parts of you that neither of us know.

The latch of the cemetery gate is an iron cross.
I lift and let it fall, walk among rows
of iron crosses planted for all the monks
whose bones lie in Yued clay.²
Up on the rocky hillside

an old stone water tank lies empty
(did you ever dive into it? drink from it?).
Green parrots strafe through the silver gimlets

and below, New Norcia seems so bright
and unpeopled, the hot morning sun
searing the crumbling mortar of the monastery wall
with its red wash of Spanish imposition.

A swatch of bright white cloth
exits from a building, crosses
the empty compound and enters the chapel.
The church bell clangs into the morning
leaden and blunt, but what's louder
is the voice of the darmoorluk ringing through the valley,
speaking your stolen language,
telling your stolen truths.

COTTESLOE FISH

My shoulders fuse with the paddle
as it slices the Indian Ocean into furrows,
along the reef and out towards the cargo ships
perched on the horizon like a phantom city.

Matt yanks the herring out of its last morning;
slashing the blue air, its eyes wide,
gill spike, and final tail thump.

That night at the dinner table
I peel its spine from the white flesh,
feel giddy with the motion of this rack
flexing, propelling along Cottesloe;

smell seaweed rotting in piles on the shore;
wobbegong, rainbow fish, sea hare,
the enormous tide churning aeolianite into sand.

I shiver as we eat this world,
toss its head into a soup pot,
compost its bones.

PADDLING TO BALD ISLAND

Threading through the fatness
of the tabular estuary,
so shallow our paddles jag
in the weedy sand;

swans are singing
across the bows of our boats.
Salty rain bites my lips as I call
out to them, squashing my voice
into an approximation of song.

One seems to call back,
its reeds vibrating over the still water
to where our bright red kayaks
are wedged tight in the throat of the inlet.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Water pools in the ragged scar of the quarry
as across the ridge one plant after another
blooms in a Mexican wave of florescence.

Inside the tangled tea-tree forests
I wonder where all the children are.
Aren't they supposed to be hurtling
along the firebreaks, bending their limbs
into the elbows of trees?
Shouldn't they be hiding in hollows,
waiting, coming, ready or not?

They were here once; they have left
the remains of their species
in broken-down cubbies and bike ramps
for the archaeologists to find,
hidden in swirls of limestone,
in broken shards of glass.

PHYSICIANS

My legs are my physicians, diagnosing my lament:
they carry me to my boots, to the door,
striding out across the park where rain and ibis
have turned the oval into a swamp.

Propelling me across lanes of traffic,
they hike me up towards the ridge,
churning through deep sand,
scudding across the limestone cliff
to where Templetonia blazes in drifts
of crimson, setting the hillside on fire.

A bobtail lizard thaws on the firebreak
lit by a wavering shaft of sunlight,
and the branch of the winter fig tree
where the nankeen kestrel perched yesterday,
now always looks like a nankeen kestrel.

Of muscle, bone, and sinew,
my legs hammer out their prescription;
to leave the four walls and roof of my house,
to tramp again across this aeolian ridge.

RAIN

The parrot bush seems to mutter
and shudder along the ridge.

Serrated leaves tear our clothes,
scratch camera lenses and binoculars.

After cracking seed cases open and leaving
their beak prints engraved in the pods,

the cockatoos alight like a black cloud,
rain falling from the traces of their wings.

NGOOLYARK

Carnaby's black cockatoo

In geological time their existence is nothing
but a tiny puff of breath exhaled against a flapping
of shiny feathers burnt black by the thousands
of years of their becoming.

In human time there are few of us left
who can recall now when the sun was eclipsed
by the size of the flock carving its trajectory
through the ruffled blue of the sky.

Wired to a length of tuart wood in a glass
display case, ID tags swinging from their claws,
the ngoolyark are gathering dust,
their plumes fading under scrutiny.

Archaeology has traced this kind
of disappearance before,
but what data will record the unravelling
in the nest of our ribs
when we see the ngoolyark
in a now-rare formation

circling over the multiplying city,
above the fine new artwork,
a sculptural representation of their habitat.