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Phillip Hall is family to Blackfullas ... a champion who writes like truth ... he sees Country like me, like a lot of Blackfullas – seeing the minute, and seeing the inferences.

**Paul Collis, winner of the 2016 David Unaipon Award**

Phillip Hall, you loved our kids and worked very hard, always smiling and planning a camp. You respected Culture and listened. So we care for you very much. You are our friend and poetry mentor – thank you.

**Jeanette Yawanjibirna Charlie,  
Yanyuwa Language Teacher**

**Fume**

## **Phillip Hall**

Phillip began living in Borrooloola in 2011 when he went to work there as a teacher of sport and camps. He does not identify as a First Australian though Nana Miller has adopted him into Gudanji family. Here he has shared the rich culture of the Wualiya Clan of the Karranjinni (Abner Ranges) who speak the Gudanji language. Phillip's nana gave him the skin name of Jabala. She also gave him the traditional or bush name of Gijindarraji; she wanted him to have this because it was the traditional name of her pop. Phillip's mother is the goanna and emu though Nana Adie always joked that his true Dreaming was the 'worry bird' (also known as the curlew). But the town of Borrooloola is also home to the people of the Yanyuwa, Marra and Garrwa language groups. Phillip feels very fortunate to call these people friend and family.

In 2012 Phillip established Diwurruwurru (The Borrooloola Poetry Club). Diwurruwurru means message stick and is used by permission of the Traditional Owners. Diwurruwurru has collaborated with Lionel Fogarty, Amanda King, The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, Blank Rune Press and the Northern Territory Writers' Centre to perform at festivals & to create a film and chapbook of their work - a wonderful celebration of creativity in the Gulf.

Phillip now lives in Melbourne's Sunshine where he is a very passionate member of the Western Bulldogs Football Club. He loves to cheer, and to honour the First Australians of the Northern Territory's Gulf of Carpentaria.

Phillip Hall  
**Fume**

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Singing with the  
Yanyuwa, Marra, Gudanji & Garrwa  
of  
Borroloola,  
in the Northern Territory's  
Gulf of Carpentaria



And in loving memory of  
Nana Miller (nee Raggett):  
proud Custodian of Gudanji Culture,  
Traditional Owner of McArthur River Station,  
Jungkayi for Jayipa (Catfish Hole),  
my teacher -  
there is so much Sorry Business

# Contents

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

Carpentaria Running the Flag **12**

## **Bad Debt 13**

## **Fume**

Note Regarding Cultural  
Sensitivity **21**

Walk up Tank Hill **22**

Borroloola Blue **26**

Brolga Clan **27**

Concourse **28**

Borroloola Class **31**

Millad Mob da Best! **32**

Icy-pole Trade **35**

Lullaby **36**

Inheritance **38**

Dawn Song **40**

Waterlily Light Well **42**

Mermaid Growl **44**

The Gudanji's Dry Stone  
Country **46**

Gudanji Old Moon Curlew **47**

Turtle Camp **48**

Build-up **52**

Fallen **54**

Talking English **57**

Dystopian Empire **58**  
We have the song,  
So we have the land **60**  
From on a Cloud Looking  
Down **61**  
Poppy's Pools **63**  
hand (pay) back (out) **64**  
Welcome to McArthur River  
Mine **66**  
Royalty **68**  
Shimmering Snake Slide **70**  
Message Stick **72**  
Discharge **74**  
Fizzer **76**  
Professional Conduct **78**  
mercenaries, missionaries,  
misfits **80**  
Cactus **81**  
From Garden to Gallery **82**  
New Moon **84**

**The Stick 86**

**Glossary 98**

**Acknowledgements 102**

# *Acknowledgement of Country*

## **Carpentaria Running the Flag**

Heat radiates off the back-broken  
bullish escarpment where lost cities rise  
as columns of silica crusted in iron  
above pocketed zinc seams, gouged cattle plains  
and salt flats; a backcountry driven bony  
even as floods flush north to the Gulf  
and I cast bait, slipping past crocs and luring barra  
on bloodied lines; channelled, shimmering,  
verdant as those caught thrash  
on sand before being parcelled in paperbark  
and sweetened in coals amidst bunched  
golden beard grasses and cathedral mounds; the Savannah Way  
a graded fence line vanishing into the rusted  
landscape where a charged sphere percolates

Indigenous space.

## *Bad Debt*

As a child I lived in the Blue Mountains of NSW. My house stood a stone's throw from the Great Western Highway and railway line: noise and bustle, the Indian Pacific, Mack trucks. From our front veranda I gazed up that highway, west, all the way to Perth, while outside our back fence was a gully. I mucked up, the artful dodger escaping jobs, turning to outside-the-back-gate.

Once in my gully, I was an adventurer or an explorer, maybe even an escaped convict. One daydream, however, bound itself to my child imagination more than any other: I was a lost Aboriginal, defiant, living in Eden. As a child, I hero-worshipped this ideal, with almost no sense of the cruel barbs of colonialism's crooked paths, even though my best friends were three Aboriginal boys - Kimberly, Michael, Peter - adopted by a local family. We went to the same school, Blaxland Primary, and together we got up to such joyous mischief.

At the head of our gully was a series of small rock pools surrounded by thick native bush and blackberry and filled with tadpoles, insect larvae and dragonflies. From the rock pools, the creek flowed a few hundred metres before reaching a small waterfall. At the base of this sandstone cliff line there was a cave hidden in the shady bottom of the gully. Here we kept a tarp, billy, matches and a knife. With this knife we were blood brothers, and while we never got permission to stay in our cave overnight, from it such bravery was planned.

If you struggled down the creek line for about an hour, over slippery and mossy rocks, you came to the Glenbrook Gorge. Here there was much more water: fish and yabbies, sometimes turtles. Big boys told stories of how the trees around these swimming holes were filled with snakes. Snakes so big that they swung from tree to tree and from one side of the gully to the other. But the truth is that in all the time we spent down there, snakes were a rare spotting: a

death adder, a diamond python, a few red-bellied black snakes, that was all. We once saw a wallaby, sometimes echidnas and lyrebirds, lots of blue-tongues, water dragons and kookaburras. The bush was a marginalised place, squashed by suburbia and kept in our child minds, just for us. We traced moss, lichens and fungus with our fingers, carved sandstone, threw rocks, made spears and ochre and sucked the honey from Mountain Devils.

Looking back on those childhood ramblings, I might wish that our joy had been more lasting; that play could somehow find a path through the thicket of race, but of course colonial colours are indelible. As an adult I continue to play in the bush, to remember my friends, but teasing out a just path where they have the same advantages as me has been a burden of lament.

As an adult I have been able to make the bush the place of my professional life. I work as an outdoor educator, taking small groups of predominantly teenage participants into remote national parks for up to a fortnight. All of my expeditions are intended to foster respect for First Australians and are based on a model of minimum-environmental-impact bushwalking in difficult and trackless terrain. I reject the idea of 'wilderness', as racism – yet another version of *terra nullius* – and challenge those with whom I walk to cherish the custodianship of First Australians. The following extract from my poem, 'Learning on the Line', attempts to encapsulate my approach to this type of experiential learning:

At last the end of Narrow Neck  
and we climb the cliff line, down  
to Medlow Gap and two hours more  
to the Mob's Swamp cave, our camp.  
*What bastard promised this would be our 'easy' day?*  
With sugar levels low, the careless  
push for camp fractures certain tempers  
so amidst some cranky laughter I readdress the rules,  
motivating our final effort when freed of packs,  
a coffee and a freeze-dried meal will make  
the relief of conversation around

the fire at night, before the luxury  
of an overhang's dirt floor,  
the Milky Way and the full moon lighting  
its veneer outside.

We wake at dawn, or thereabouts,  
a cold fog in the casuarinas  
outside. Breaking camp a little later  
than I might have liked we look  
at maps, measuring the angles  
of our route and set to climb  
Warrigal Gap; contouring round  
the western edge of Merrimerrigal  
we traverse Mt Dingo to the Bushwalkers'  
War Memorial – Splendour Rock.  
Lunching with views of the days  
ahead – the Cox's Gorge, the Gangerang Ranges  
to Kanangra Walls – a grasstree – *Xanthorrhoea australis* –  
high on conglomerate rock collects  
our attention like regimental colours  
and provokes Smithy: *Come off it Phil, it's a blackboy,  
a spear throwing blackfella, quick, let's souvenir the shaft.*  
I sweet-talk the group with the adventure  
of bush tucker and craft, a one plant supermarket:  
spears, fire sticks, sugar, grubs and glue –  
*You think this is wilderness. It's 'Country'.*

This is my idealistic approach with the kids I lead on hike: to deflect racism with humour and to challenge with knowledge and respect.

In 2011 I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime to work in remote Indigenous education. There was a position vacant for a sport and camp teacher at Borroloola, in the Northern Territory's Gulf of Carpentaria. Borroloola is now located on Yanyuwa country. But after close to 150 years of massacre and dispossession the town is also shared with members of the Garrwa, Marra and Gudanji peoples. Borroloola's Indigenous people have been forced to hold

much of their shocking frontier contact history locked away inside of themselves. The Gulf was northern Australia's thoroughfare for the cattle industry from very early on in the colonial period, trafficking cattle from northern Queensland into the Territory and Kimberley. The Gulf was once home to at least twelve Indigenous language groups; four remain. A map of the Gulf includes such place names as 'Massacre Hill' and 'Skull Creek'. The old people in Borroloola, the bardibardi and malbu, were grown up on eyewitness accounts of massacres. They remember stories of those poor old fullas, like thieves, collecting the bones for remembrance in caves. I have wept at these 'strong places' with Gudanji family. The trauma, like seismic tremors, repressed still.

This anger and loss is locked inside Borroloola's First Australians, who make up around 95% of the town. Borroloola's population is around 600-700 in the Dry Season, when the town is already hopelessly over-crowded in poorly maintained and inadequate housing. But during August's rodeo week, and in the Wet Season, this population swells to 1000-1200 as more and more people are schooled into town by rodeo fever and flooding waterways. Over-crowded and poorly maintained housing is the cause of so many health problems: sleep deprivation, scabies, boils, head lice and a plethora of stress-related illnesses. The flag is raised every day: black for the people the country sings; yellow for the sun percolating with energy and life; red for the country rich with iron and rusted in blood.

It is said that only 'missionaries, mercenaries and misfits' move to the Territory. I am a missionary and misfit. I believe in education, proselytising the downtrodden, and self-sacrifice. I want to empower Indigenous youth to make their own choices, to thrive in liberal democracy, and to assert their own choices and culture. But when I moved to Borroloola I wanted to do too much, too quickly, and I rubbed myself out in earnestly trying to create programs and opportunities that most Australians would assume as their right. This sounds very 'Whitlam-esque' and, of course, I crashed in punitive and bullying systems concerned, it seemed to me, with conformity, collecting statistics and doing the least amount of work. My 'good fight' now includes a slippery dependence on alcohol (so common in

the Territory), self-harm and severe depression (including an attempt to take my own life). My air-evacuation out of Borroloola to Darwin Hospital and then on to Cowdy (a psychiatric ward) was the subject of government investigation in 2015. It found that I had been the victim of a workplace injury, and that the most convenient outcome was to compensate me at the expense of silence. I am still not at liberty to disclose the details of my settlement with the department or the findings of the investigation into my breakdown. It is the intervention that I required in late 2014. I returned to Borroloola – I am family – but I have found living amongst so much remote and repressed trauma a dangerous thing.

In Borroloola I worked as a teacher of sport and health programs, and after school I coached AFL with the goal of taking teams away to participate in carnivals. These opportunities were offered to the kids as part of a wider incentive program to encourage school attendance and good behavior. Participation required me to not only coach and manage the team but also to drive a coaster bus to and from the event (a minimum round trip of 1500 kilometres). My job was to reengage disadvantaged Indigenous kids by developing these sport and camp opportunities designed to teach emotional resiliency, cooperative group learning, safe decision-making and environmental education. And I worked with all the self-destructive passion of a zealot.

Teaching in a place like Borroloola is very stressful – even when your work mainly involves the coaching of sport. Over-crowded and poorly maintained housing leads to many health crises as I have outlined. Sleep deprivation, and dehydration from not drinking enough water while living in such hot and humid conditions, causes much irritability (especially during the difficult afternoons). These conditions, which are even further complicated by issues around payback and family responsibility, create the atmosphere for a lot of conflict and fighting. And this challenging behavior is very stressful for a non-Indigenous teacher to manage. Fortunately for remote schools in the Northern Territory, there is a commitment to employing local First Australians as home-liaison officers and as teaching assistants, to sort through these complicated yet important cultural issues. During my time in Borroloola I worked alongside many glorious First Australians who

fulfilled these roles. And one of these was a Gudanji elder named Lady Miller who would become one of the most important people in my life. Tragically this elder passed away in 2016 and is now known as Lady Miller or Nana Miller.

Nana Miller had an enormous capacity for love and goodwill. But more than this, she somehow exuded a quiet, proud strength that brought you into her orbit. She challenged you to want the best for these Borrooloola kids but also to embrace enough humility to accept that not all complications were easily navigable (unfortunately I really struggled to accept enough of this humility). By early 2013, I had already been in Borrooloola working hard for a couple of years, nurturing strong relationships, when one day outside the staffroom, there was a secondary male student running amok and stoning the school buildings. The school immediately went into lockdown, a not unusual routine as we reacted from one crisis to another.

After D.R.'s frustrations and rage had subsided I found myself outside with him attempting to pacify his remorse and shame. D.R. had poor hearing, and limited capacity to communicate orally, though he was a gifted athlete and proud Gudanji man. His difficulties in communicating meant that he was often unable to control his temper when confronted with injustice or setback. But I had bonded with him very closely. He was one of the first students to welcome me to Borrooloola, and he never failed to growl at any fellow student who he considered was acting disrespectfully towards me. D.R. was in my secondary boys AFL team, and so we spent many hours together on the field, in the gym and running up sand dunes. On this occasion he felt that he had been treated unfairly by being excluded from a vocational education opportunity to gain a certificate in quad bike riding. It was an experience that he had been looking forward to for a long time. I was an old whitefulla, usually found lifting weights in a gym or boxing a punching bag, but here I was weeping with D.R. - crushed by yet another collapse in goodwill.

I think it was this episode with D.R. that finally made up Nana Miller's mind to 'formally' adopt me into her family and Gudanji Culture. One weekend she drove me out to Jayipa (Catfish Hole) to meet family and Country. She discerned that she was my nana,

or arwuju, and this meant that my skin name was Jabala. She also announced that my traditional or bush name would be Gijindarraji. She wanted me to have this because it had been the traditional name of her pop. And she sung me as jungkayi for Jayipa. This was one of the proudest days of my life and began a long journey of discovery and enculturation that often saw me out bush with Gudanji family on holidays and weekends. This new arrangement changed the nature of my relationships with the Borroloola community. For one thing I was now related to half the town. And due to the circular nature of skin relationships D.R. became my 'little dad' (or *lil-dad*), a relationship that he never stopped grinning about.

In early 2012 my love affair with the Borroloola communities found another practical outlet. Knowing my interest and respect for Culture many of the kids with whom I worked, and their parents and grandparents, began to share stories and memories with me. This storytelling soon merged into meals and games around a campfire. Later I was asked if I would enjoy writing some of these stories down. This passion became the Borroloola Poetry Club and we started to meet every Friday after school (and sometimes out bush on weekends and school holidays). We were given permission to call our club Diwurruwurru (which means 'message stick' in Yanyuwa) and, despite all my hilarious poor attempts at spelling and pronouncing words in Aboriginal English and Language, we soon had enough written celebration to begin appearing at festivals and in publications. I will have a lot more to say about this First Australians storytelling group in my later essay, 'The Stick'. Diwurruwurru was always a lively creative place where family and friends would meet to explore, experiment and assert First Australians Culture and Story. The message stick that it generously shared was one of pride, respect and strength.

My first book, *sweetened in coals*, was launched at the 2014 WordStorm in Darwin, the festival of the Northern Territory Writers' Centre, with a busload of Diwurruwurru members present at the party. This book was the product of about twenty years of writing. I write slowly. And I was busy working and growing up my own family (as the glorious Olga Masters said: 'my best books'). Between

2011 and 2014 I was too busy with Diwurruwurru, and my work, to complete very much writing of my own. During this time I only wrote five of the poems that are to be found in *Fume*: ‘Carpentaria Running the Flag’, ‘Borroloola Blue’, ‘Concourse’, ‘Borroloola Class’ and ‘Dystopian Empire’. The remaining thirty poems of *Fume*, were all written in Borroloola in 2015, after my breakdown and while I was recovering at home. It is important that they were all written on Country and while I was physically close to my Borroloola family and friends. The whole manuscript was reshaped over 2016–2017 in Melbourne’s Sunshine where I now live. I write to honour the First Australians of the Northern Territory’s Gulf of Carpentaria and to interrogate colonialism’s twisted and violent paths. I also try to write myself back to health.

The five years that I lived at Borroloola were some of the proudest times of my life. My welcome into GudANJI family and Culture was such a generous acclamation of my work, the memory of it still brings me to tears. I cherish every moment out bush with family learning about Culture and bush tucker, our AFL tours, the annual excursions to the Tennant Creek Poetry Festival with the Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation, teaching the kids to play hockey and waterpolo (with competitions for trophies), and the raucous joy of Diwurruwurru. In Borroloola I gained so much, but it also came at a considerable cost, I just couldn’t help breathing in trauma. I should have been more resilient, but I wasn’t, and it made me sick. After my breakdown, when I could no longer do the work that I loved so much, I was filled with shame for a long time. I am still knotted with it (and with the scars of my self-harm). Am I returning to health? Can the Borroloola kids, whom I love so much, expect the same opportunities that I assumed as a boy running amok in the Blue Mountains bush?

# *Fume*

## **Note Regarding Cultural Sensitivity**

Many of the poems in *Fume* respond in a very intimate way to the barbs of colonialism's crooked paths. Permission, from First Nations people who own these stories, has been given for me to include my poems about them in *Fume*.

'Walk up Tank Hill': *Yalinga* is Indigenous language (Yanyuwa/Garrwa) in the Gulf region of northern Australia for 'foreskin'. This word should not be voiced out loud as it is connected with Ceremony. It should be read as 'foreskin' during public readings. I have permission to write this word, as it is another example of generational/cultural crisis in a post-contact world. It is often spoken in the Gulf, usually by young males, to cause offence.

'Hand Back': on November 26, 2015, a native title determination by the Federal Court returned some rights of surviving Gudanji clans to hunt and hold ceremony at McArthur River Station. The contemporary accounts of the massacre of First Nations that occurred on this station, and which I quote from in this poem, can be found in Tony Roberts, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900*, (Queensland University Press, St Lucia, 2005), pp 168-185. McArthur River Station managers and stockmen knew one of these massacres as the Malakoff Creek Massacre. They cynically named it so to celebrate one especially bloodstained Russian battlefield. This poem responds to the offensive values of those who carried out these massacres, and of those (all of us who are not First Australians) who benefit from the dispossession of First Nations today. Too much of our reparation is piecemeal and symbolic.

# Walk up Tank Hill

*For my lil-dad, Dwight Raggett, Gudanji man*

I was Carpentarian born again  
and your eyes growled  
*give him a go:*

so a team sprinted  
in and out of drills, a left  
and a right, a drop  
punt and the perfect hooting  
screamer. We ran on sand  
and cheered even as certain tempers fractured –  
the *life style choices* of remote Indigenous  
living:

then one afternoon, after  
all that dreaming on a white lined  
and dusty oval, with a swim in a pool,  
it was the foot-pad, a singles  
track up Tank Hill:

that stifling  
climb, bare feet stone-hopping burnt,  
the dragons scuttling  
for their shade:

climbing  
in familial chatter, someone up line  
farted, and amidst howls  
of *yalinga* and *black hole*,  
those poked ‘I’ll bash ya’ eyes,

a rock silenced  
everyone, grazing  
my shoulder as it speared  
on past:

a reshuffle  
in some humour moved  
us on, picking  
berries as someone shared  
a little law: *dis one bark medicine,*  
*dat one tucka, not now but,*  
*he drop ta ground den*  
*millad mob eat'im, an d'rectly*  
*millad sugarcane'll sing:*

it was all  
red-hot and heady  
as wilderness grew  
into country and you were my map, amplifying  
a lore's perspective:

soon we discovered  
the knoll's summit and it was broken  
gaze through scrub:

water

pumped, slantwise, from bores  
to this hill top, a steel storage  
tank burning silver in this late  
afternoon heat:

water banked  
underground for millennia and tapped  
in manicured access holes sung  
in law and now siphoned  
for consumption under an authority's bill:

we repossessed  
and the Gulf lifted  
and opened to dark  
stringybarks and woollybuts amongst spear  
grasses and cathedral mounds – the centuries  
of law disrupted/defiant, singing  
a storm still:

so hard  
to imagine a straight spine  
but here they were, a raw ironstone,  
rusted but ochred dancing  
still  
since dwelling off country is to wait for sickness  
like diwurruwurru lantana-  
engrafted:

heat shimmering  
with shadows on cave walls, the red hands  
stencil-blown for company, a mark  
signed on a canvas of their making, already  
weathering back to wild stone:

you perched  
in the elbow of a woollybut just  
where my snapshot shows you, grinning straight  
back at me:

so in the nature  
of circular skin ties:

me a middle-aged munanga; you  
my lil-dad, the teenaged ruckman shining  
even as storms grazed  
side-long with the ache of your sniffing,  
a sadness-stone like the ngabaya's bony  
choking clutch threatening dead-of-night torment  
on top this country's Tank Hill.