

Return to dust

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*'And you will eat the plants of the field;
By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.'*

Genesis 3:18–19

BEGIN AGAIN

From the sky, the country is a sea, a swirling petrified sea. A stilled life of embryonic waves and calm, of endless cradles and peaks. Cloud shadows drift like ghosts, becoming and unbecoming, seemingly unconcerned. Vegetation appears in scalloped patterns, dark scalds on a red sea floor, which is sometimes pink, sometimes purple or bruised blue, beneath scattered skylight.

This is how Amber can live here, so far from the coast. She cannot plunge into its earthy mouth like she can in the open ocean, but she can rest her eyes upon it. She can throw her thoughts into this landlocked country and let them be tossed and turned by something outside herself. She can cast her questions into it, and sometimes reel things in.

‘It’s like a painting,’ says the woman in the seat in front of her, as if to the man beside her, but he is absorbed in a movie, headset fixed to his ears. She nudges him. He lifts a headphone away from one ear and she repeats herself. But something of the wonder expressed the first time is sapped by the repetition. ‘I said, it’s like a painting.’ He leans across her, towards the window. ‘It’s getting pretty red out there,’ he says. Then, as if counting an appropriate measure of time, he withdraws, shuts the headphone back over his ear and returns to his screen.

As they begin their descent, Amber starts to recognise the markers on a map that is familiar. The shimmering silver roofs of outlying settlements. The single ruled line of a tangerine road. Swathes of creamy, coarse-grained sand that snake across

the country, and sometimes collide. A year ago the rivers were in flow. The country was green. Now they lie empty, waiting to be animated by the next good rain.

She has missed this country, this palette of colours. The red dust, the dirt roads, the on and on of it. The ground so solid, the sky so sure. Now the ranges appear, like ancient beasts in slumber. You can follow a single spine from east to west, in a line broken only by gaps and gorges. Three hundred million years ago they were as high as the Himalayas. It is hard to conceive that what is visible of these ranges is only the eroded remains. It is a cliché to describe this landscape as ancient, but age is what imbues it with such grandeur. The distant past is carried in the country, like memory.

When finally the town comes into view, it might be an island, adrift from the mainland, surrounded by an archipelago of Aboriginal communities and homelands. Another country, out of the minds of most. It is almost as if it had vanished in her absence, sunk beneath the waves, so that it is somewhat of a surprise to find it here upon her return. But it is as close as she's ever come to feeling at home in a place. Which is strange, given her birthplace is thousands of miles away.

But from that very first night of her arrival, ten years ago, when she climbed the hill behind the house in the late afternoon and looked out across the townscape, with the ranges reigning behind, the sky ringing blue, she'd felt a sense of coming home that made no sense. She wondered at first if it might have been the physicality of the landscape, which bore some likeness to the drought-ridden country where she grew up. Where the foliage was, for the most part, scanty and scrubby, with trees dispersed, mostly lining creeks and rivers; where water was often absent. And sepia paddocks littered

with the bones of fallen beasts. Cattle stations and cleared land. Gates and grids and broken fences.

But, at the same time, this country was new to her. The rocky hills and foothills, the ranges that rolled out of town in bands of mauve and blue. The sandy soil and clay that made for resilient plants, like saltbush and mulga, that made it hard to grow things. The absence of moisture in the air.

Perhaps she'd been broad-brushing when she first arrived – grasping for the familiar, glossing over the detail, clustering together the known to counter the *terra incognita*. For the more she stayed, the stronger the lens, the more this country distinguished itself from anywhere else.

Perhaps the most particular difference was that, from the outset, she felt like she'd arrived in a foreign country. There was the immediate sense that it was somebody else's home. This was true of the whole of the continent, of course, but elsewhere you could avoid thinking about it. Here the people who belonged to the country were present. And this gave rise to an immediate tension for Amber, the conflict of feeling such a strong sense of home at the same time as being an outsider. It couldn't easily be resolved, and created for her a kind of push-pull relationship with the place.

But there was a kind of romance surrounding this fabled frontier town, in the middle of the desert, where the wind blows in. She'd hoped, in leaving a year ago, that she might be through with it. That it might fade for her, then dissolve forever. Yet here she is again, driven by the need to come home, hoping home will be enough. Soon she will be swept back into its current and things will be reversed, with the outside world becoming remote. And she can begin again.