

THE  
LAKE'S  
APPRENTICE

ANNAMARIA  
WELDON



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*An act of pilgrimage in writing.* NICOLAS ROTHWELL

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# THE PRACTICE OF BELONGING

*'There is a practice of belonging and it starts with forgetfulness of self.'* MARK TREDINNICK, *The Blue Plateau*

I

Perhaps love is a country discovered  
by chance, that you and I tried too hard  
to find. Instead, the land we travelled through  
last gave me its South West lyric, voiced

my best lines: Nullaki Peninsula  
*folded like a hinge between twin skies.* Slopes  
of weathered granite *marooned in low cloud.*

Those headlands *darker than lampblack*, at rest  
on a parchment sea. *The inkstone forest*  
always in sight, *hunkered as memory.*

Winter sun *streaming chinks in the karri*  
tracks *that followed light North to the future.*  
At Green's Pool, *water's way of belonging* –  
the self-forgetfulness of waves on sand.

2

We've lingered. Because this is wine country.  
Slow parting tastes sweet as a vine's late grapes.  
I'd call it grace, but you already know  
this is a place of parables. Outside

your window, a kookaburra's flying  
the unseen, remembered skyway between  
branches, gliding fast across the clearing

in those low, wide parabolas birds hitch  
to burl and bark. But the sleeping boobook  
becomes a wood carving, enters the tree  
and leaves without a wing-beat, dissolving

in a shadow-screen. Look, you say to me  
at his way of belonging – this gradual  
arrival that begins with letting go.







# PART I

*Essays*

*Photos*

*Nature notes*

## NATURE NOTES

### meeting the river

*This is ecology of residence. The Latin root of residence means staying in one place a long time.<sup>1</sup>*

My main preoccupation for the past five years has been the creation story of Yalgorup – a coastal national park in the Peel–Harvey catchment area of Mandurah and Pinjarra – and how its wetlands embody this tradition, which is so central to Bindjareb Noongar culture. Like a circle, this story begins and ends with my heartfelt gratitude for the welcome and guidance I have received. It's a story told with respect for Bindjareb elders past and present, love for their knowledge of ancestors, country and language, with yearning for deeper appreciation of those relationships which endure between them, and sustain us all.

It is also the story of my gradual attunement to Yalgorup's wetlands and the Lake Clifton thrombolites at its centre: how I became the lake's apprentice and my estrangement was transformed to endemophilia. Glenn Albrecht created this term, endemophilia, to capture in one word the particular love of the locally and regionally distinctive elements of place for its people.<sup>2</sup> I lost this once-familiar state of heartmind and embodied experience three decades ago on leaving Malta, my natal island. Writing down my own ecology




of residence brought about my second birth, the one I had been waiting for without knowing it, not understanding why I didn't feel quite at home here in Western Australia, yet.



George Walley was, from the beginning, a cultural guide and mentor; the first to recognise and affirm my growing attachment to his country. The deepening conversation with place and people which he mediated became the ground I traversed on my way home to Yalgorup. George's teaching style and his attitude to embodied knowledge are very subtle, a constant reminder of the difference between Indigenous ways of knowing nature and the western way of sourcing information through research and interviews. I had known the former, being an islander by birth, and then learnt to forget it during years of training and working

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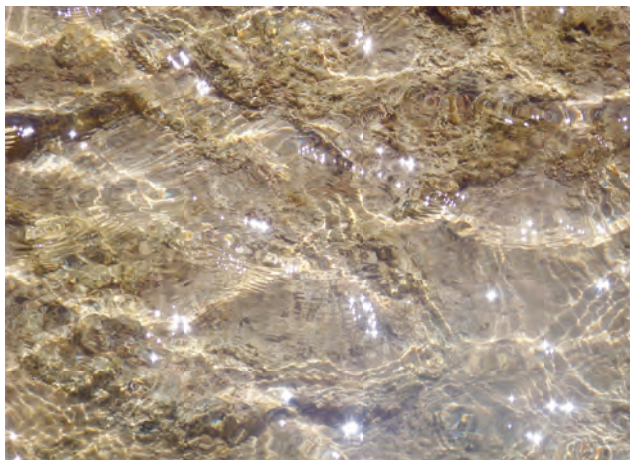
meeting the river



as a journalist. So at my first meeting with George, I plied him with direct questions. What should I look out for and write about at the wetlands? Was it long-necked turtles? Tuarts? Black cockatoos? What else was significant?

Before this siege of words began, I had been showing George my early photos of the Yalgorup lakes. We'd been concurring about the landscape, especially the exquisite quality of its light viewed from the viewing platform at Lake Clifton, where it reveals every feature and, paradoxically, makes





a unity of sky and water, sun and earth, such as I saw in the snowscapes of my childhood. And yet the light is not the same everywhere: on land, it appears in striations, progressing from the high canopies of tuart down through peppermint to the understory vegetation, then the windswept reeds, and finally the samphire and rockpools of the bleached, shoreline thrombolite reef. On the lakebed, ribbons of light become golden nets, and its dazzle on the surface a never-ending discourse with the wind. Each silver or golden strand of light is quite distinct on land, where it shimmers through the different degrees of albedo – the luminosity reflected by each surface and a word I would come to know well at the wetlands. Months later, at the lake, I observed George as he watched the light shifting subtly through these horizontal lines, like a finely nuanced language he could read or hear.

As well as talking about this light, George alluded to a significant aspect of the Bindjareb

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Noongar creation story, the Woggaal's eggs, which are known to non-Aboriginal people as the Lake Clifton thrombolites, and he seemed delighted at my association of this traditional story, so central to his tradition, with contemporary scientific theory which deems microbialites responsible for raising Earth's early atmospheric oxygen levels through their photosynthetic processes, thus enabling other life forms to exist. It was all going well, I thought, childishly pleased that George liked my pictures so much. Thrombolites are as photogenic as they are fascinating; I had captured them through the seasons, inundated in winter and exposed in summer, documenting seasonal shifts







and surrounding water–light effects. Whatever I’ve learned about taking photos was gleaned informally from my father. Obsessed by celluloid, he owned a number of still and movie cameras, had a keen eye for composition, and was patient and perceptive about details. Perhaps it is thanks to his lifelong passion that several of my images have been published, and many capture the wetlands’ dream-like quality. George said that he particularly liked this aspect, and kept right on looking at them when I (concerned at the limited time we had for George is very busy) started questioning him and shifted to accelerated interviewing mode. We were sitting in the courtyard at Fremantle Arts Centre, and while we were looking at the photos in silence, a willy wagtail landed on the table between us, chirping and dancing. But then it flew away, and I noticed (without registering why) that George was leaning further and further back in his chair. At last, becoming aware of his stillness and my own urgency, I stopped

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talking. Then George smiled at me and, gesturing at my pictures, simply said, ‘No need to ask. There are portals everywhere at Yalgorup, and you’ve found them already. Just be there with an open heart’.



I did as he suggested. Many seasons passed. One day I asked George if it would be appropriate for me to visit the Murray River site of the historic Pinjarra Massacre of 1834. Located some kilometres inland from Lake Clifton and the national park, the site is nonetheless within the Bindjareb cultural region and part of the Peel–Harvey catchment area, connected traditionally and hydrographically to the coastal wetland. Beginning to sense that my immersion in the area was incomplete, I felt the need to know more about this event and explore its terrain.

‘Go before the anniversary’, George advised, and started to draw directions. When the arrows of his map began to run off the Dome Cafe’s paper napkin, he looked up and said, ‘I’ll take you there myself’. And that’s how, a few days before 28 October, in the mild



sunlight of that season which Noongar people call Kambarang, I came to be standing high on a bank above the Murray, awkwardly clutching some red roses and some white roses from my garden. I had known we were going to a significant memorial place and was unsure what to take. So before making any gestures of respect, I listened to George relate the story and speak aloud in his own language. His acknowledgment to ancestral country and this river, the very river bend where he was born fifty years earlier, resonated in the morning air. It was incantatory yet conversational, reverent as a prayer and personal as a greeting. I noticed how all the black-faced sheep grazing on the opposite bank lifted their heads and stood absolutely still, in a single line, watching him.

Kindly, and patient as always, George translated for me, later writing down phrases and spelling out each word. But mostly, we just sat, and watched, and listened to the wind, to the birds and river. My memory of that morning is of unhurried time, of being present without the need for conversation.

Mid-morning he mentioned another significant spot further along that we should visit. It was a kilometre south-west, and here we were able to walk through dense riparian vegetation right down to where the river lapped a shallow cove. The ground was silty, and there were small red-stained patches of sand, some kind of mineral deposit, I supposed. George leaned over the water and washed his hands and face, then sat down. So I did the same. Time and the river flowed on. Eventually he said that he was going to take off his

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boots and wade in. ‘Should I do that?’ ‘If you’d like to. We won’t go in far’, he reassured me.

The water was clear, tannin-stained to dark amber, cool around my ankles. River sand, soft and fine, seeped between my toes. The flowing water slowly carried past tiny white stamen, like seams of long tacking stitched to its skin. These had drifted down from the flowering flooded gums which line the Murray’s banks. Water insects dipped, dappling the surface with circles or skimming along it with trailing wakes. Great gnarled roots and the aged branches of fallen trees reared up from their reflections, semi-sunken limbs gesturing from the shallows.






Because I am an outsider to Noongar culture, what George did next surprised me. Even though I've had strong emotional and even physical responses to many places through my life, the Catholic tradition in which I was raised certainly didn't encourage a personal, spiritual relationship to the land, let alone its outward expression. But George addressed the river once more, along with the surrounding country, its elements, creatures and plants in a firm voice, and this time it was to tell them about me. He said I was a storyteller, a poet who came in friendship. He told Bilya Maadjit – for that is the river's traditional name – to know, recognise and welcome me. He asked that knowledge of this place and its story be with me whenever I wrote of it, wherever I may be. George spoke in Bindjareb, translating for my benefit every now and then. And when he had finished, he suggested I speak to the river, to country, aloud, as he had done. 'Speak simply and from your heart, and they will know you. For

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everything in the nature we see around us is totem. It is the living ancestors’.

When our visit was almost complete, we went to the small stone memorial, high on the bank under a grove of trees, by the busy road to Pinjarra. It is an unremarkable place: peaceful and shady enough when the traffic abates. I found it sad and strange that there are no road signs or interpretive boards indicating this is the location of a significant memorial. No names of the deceased are inscribed on the stone, nor is the word ‘massacre’ sanctioned by the local shire. It seems that the trauma of old wounds is deep, and carried by both sides, though only written officially by one.

After George Walley had cut down and given me a branch of river gum – kooloodoo<sup>3</sup> – to take home, we left. That was when he told me to say, if I told this story, that the massacre site was ‘a very strong place’ and therefore being taken through the proper customs was important for my own protection. And I ought to point out, he added, that there is a different way – which he could not tell me about – of introducing a male visitor to the river. ‘I just love this country’, I said. And without missing a beat, George replied ‘It loves you right back’.

- 1 Diane Fouts, 'At The Owl in Kane Creek', article in *Ecology of Residency* (2009), an online magazine which features works from the Ecology of Residency class, part of the Environmental Humanities Graduate Program at The University of Utah, viewed 17 July 2013, <<http://www.ecologyofresidency.utah.edu/?p=72&cpage=1#comment-9>>.
- 2 Endemophilia: an emplaced and home-based counter-term to traditionally defined nostalgia. The English word, 'endemic', is based on the French word, *endémique* and has the Greek roots, *endēmia* (a dwelling in) and *endēmos* (native in the people) and *philia* (love of). Endemophilia captures in one word the particular love of the locally and regionally distinctive elements of a place for its people. See: G. A. Albrecht, 'Psychoterratic conditions in a scientific and technological world', in P. Kahn and P. Hasbach (eds), *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, pp. 241–64.
- 3 George's name for *Eucalyptus rudis*, the flooded gums which he refers to as 'river gums', which is what I've called them in my poem 'The memory of earth', written after this visit and subsequently published in *Westerly*, vol. 56, no.1, pp. 96–7. Common spellings are *kulurda* and *moitch*.

