

## **Chapter One**

### **Distance**

#### **Nearing Cobar, undoing**

From an eroded dip by the highway, comes a chain of gobbling birdcall. I watch feet moving around our midday fire, scattering clumps of curled leaf litter into new positions; and worry that we are interfering with something. I take a wander, further out into the clearing, to remind myself that we are simply rearranging and shifting shapes. These elements are always on the verge of becoming their opposites: here, old bits of timber are so dry that they have come to resemble water; long ribbons inscribed with deep flows from end to end. The wood looks like the spores of a sea, blown away to propagate itself elsewhere.

How strange, then, that we have come to talk about tropes of metonymy and metaphor as aesthetic constructions, when it is plain to see that wood is water, a bough is a creek. After all, literature works that way: its connections and communities of ideas, works, eyes, hands and sounds are just malleable elements. Unfixed, they fly away from their maker and settle in the mind of the reader like so many grains of sand can suddenly form a break, or even a dune. Boneless, writing is an echo until an audience replies and cuts across its call.

Even the ants at my feet, carrying splinters of bread, are undoing the great disintegrating metonymy of scale. They lead to a vertebra punctured by tides. I no longer touch bones with trepidation; I like to hold the vertebra deep and tightly closed in my palm, feeling the vitality still in its warmth, in its cavity where insect webs quiver. Stand here like this, in the clearing; listen, and you'll hear the distant rush of wheels, or a wave spreading through treetops and jumping the road, rolling down to a dense mound of granite pebbles rising from the soil. We are living with echoes; the earth is simile.

#### **White Cliffs**

As we cross the marshy fields around Wilga Station, and the prehistoric seabed at White Cliffs, a flock circles overhead: herons, black across the wings and

white beneath, drawing webs that fade into uninterrupted blue. They put me in mind of Jennifer Rankin's poem "Earth Hold", with its sudden bird:

My slow fingers close about.  
This pod. Seed and pod.  
Squat brown seed-pod. Closing about.

Wrapped inside the mud-bed.  
Mangroves. Mangrove tree and root.

Oyster and shell.

Now it is the grey heron.  
Now my white ibis flies.

This warm morning's sun.  
This valley folding away.  
Sea-glare.

And thin houses. Weather-whitened.

And, as though manifested by the poem, the grey heron - alone as usual - appears. Its heavy, startled sweeps lift it low over the saltbush.

It's not the first time that Rankin's imagery has surfaced far from her poetry's coasts and islands. The work suggests that there is a deeper element in those littoral places. In one of Rankin's earlier poems, "Seasonal Move", a shedding tree not only leads to soil, but also further down to the water table, where "scraping apart the sweet-matted needles/I find earth. Hard and cold".<sup>ii</sup> On the road through to Tilpa, the only sound is the tide of wind through desert oaks, and the floor of needles on silky, orange soil. But the herons indicate that the sea and cliffs once here are now inching up through these groves.

If earth can collapse our sense of time's scale into a place, so a poem can overturn perspective. While Rankin's poems alight on patches of earth and the objects found there, they also sail like the heron over great distances. Their panoramas are able to account for the shifting arrangements in a place comprised of several others.

Even when they seem to speak of ocean, they are aware of the more complex realities of time and space. Reading her poem "Earth Count", I feel its words chasing us from high above the dried rivers:

At the centre the sea has dried up.  
Earth itself is burning away out there.  
Now I speak a subterranean language  
burrowing in beneath the ground.

Moon mix

and dust scratches back off the walls

she-oaks are dying

tropical palms needlessly making desert-shade.<sup>iii</sup>

Ghost gums are flourishing in the Darling River's absence, marking its sharp banks. Plains flank the riverbed, gradually developing low and gentle hills. Their profile is a bristle of sparse marks, a threadbare mane of round acacias and stiff, bright wax. When the earth is lightly tipped by these rises, I can see that it's evenly spotted with green-grey puffs of saltbush. The country becomes aeri ally orientated and one-dimensional: the heights formed of cracked rock; the rock crumbling into slopes; the slopes reducing to pebbled soil. Eventually, the hills plateau to such a low line that they are once again barely distinguishable from the plain. The only way across is up.

### **Crossing the border**

The outlines of silver outcrops are neatly broken off, as their diagonal pipes of stone turn into air. They point out of New South Wales, over into South Australia, toward a stretch of warm and taut earth, furred by grass. A lip appears over the plain: the crest of a fat, slow, embryonic wave - its edge rubbled with pockets of foam, forever peaking to a break. To the south, more rugged ranges begin to dive up from

the horizon. I don't know whether they are meteoric craters or volcanic rims: the earth surrounding them has calmed into smooth, crafted oceans of soil.

I am thinking more about the conundrum of representing space in language, and particularly the community of attempts upon its solution. On his first visit to this area, the painter Hans Heysen (1877-1968) remarked how difficult it was to paint clear space. If Heysen struggled to realise his desire for clear space, the colonial painter John Glover (1767-1849) saw good reason to fill it. Critic John McPhee writes that Glover's work is obviously "witness to a new land" and "emphasises that we also have a responsibility to look at [the land] closely and to read its symbols". It was imperative for Glover that his landscapes identified "the particularities of the trees and their distribution". This view prioritises orientation and form over composition, which we might associate with drawing rather than painting. As McPhee explains, Glover's "veracity can be ascribed to his early self-instruction, which consisted of sketching the countryside".<sup>iv</sup> Calling me back to poetry, Glover's habit is reminiscent of the notational, highly localised mode adopted by William Wordsworth and John Clare, and quite unlike the hybridised landscapes created in the work of Australian colonial poets such as Henry Kendall and Charles Harpur.

In turn, I look at the border country and see, manifested like the heron, the language of space in Fred Williams' (1927-1982) inland-scapes. As Paul Carter observes, they find expression through the creation of "a grammar in a visually chaotic or grammarless nature". To do this, Carter notes, Williams desired an "underdetermined" landscape.<sup>v</sup> Compared to Australian painters before him, Williams was tremblingly efficient with three or four landmarks - wiping from the work's ground the minutiae that Heysen and Glover found important. It could be said of Williams that, like Glover, he set out to "sketch" the You Yangs of western Victoria: even in painting, Williams is drawing the ground as located points and positions. Perhaps Williams struggled with Heysen's problem of clarity some fifty years later than he, in places far from here (Victoria and Western Australia among others). Are Williams' minimal crescents of paint and etched twitches the residue of a draughtsman's impulse to flag a location; or do they clear common ground all the way from Geelong to the Pilbara?

The line on the etching plate or canvas encounters the line on the page or screen: how easy it is to find plentiful words and images that wrap around a place or flow over it without restraint. The challenge of representing space, on the other hand,

is between pressed, faceless ridges and poetry's economy; and in whether or not three or four words are capable of bristling at our feet and colouring those distant creases. In the smattered plateau around Broken Hill, there's a grammar in being here, by this outcrop; or there, close to that circle of saltbush. In reading place, Williams was reading those painters before him; both marking and erasing a line that connected their problems as artists.

Are the possibilities in the expanse of canvas so very different to the printed page, or can we see a shared lineage of painting and poetry that deals with the problem of space? "You try a middle distance that remains/distant", writes Barry Hill in his poem "Some Centre: Nolan/Thomas". Placing enjambment before the ultimate "distant", Hill creates an open edge: the way Rover Thomas's compositions are bordered within the edge of the canvas. A wash of white, emerald green or deep navy is laid down and lurks at the outer edges of a painting as if the top design has been haphazardly stamped onto it. The final painting, then, is, an arbitrary enclosure of the wider subject matter and its line: "All gives way to ground/shadow of ground, a pick of blues", writes Hill.<sup>v</sup> The work is floating and drifting over the fixed surface, rather than sticking to it. Line moves on and in. As Hill puts it:

*The shade from the hill comes over and talks in language*

Rover Thomas

because it must.

And because shade is  
and language is

one black ball  
folded into the shade  
you can hear the black ball talking.

You can walk this way  
and come over into language.

You can walk this way  
and come over into shade.

The language comes over  
the shade comes under.<sup>vi</sup>

Having crossed the borderline, we are among red ridges hung with treeless cliffs. Williams' solutions to the problem of "interior" drew a new line, a transfer of gestural energy, between painters as historically and culturally distinct from one another as Rover Thomas and Sidney Nolan. Both, like Williams, are able to read locality in order to depart from it. The picture space is opened and turned outwards like an unfolded carton. Rather than being marked, it is clothed in tones and sometimes textures like Thomas's ochre stains. His earth is an equilibrate field in which terrestrial surfaces possess shifting overlays more usually associated with cloud.

From tone comes complexity: the thickening and thinning that happens between layers of paint, and a surface that has been smoothed down. In a mail plane north of here, on 28 June 1949, Nolan began his desert series; focusing on bringing fresh yellow and green tones through the red surfaces, mixing PVA with dry pigments to create washes, then scraping this back with a cloth. By going so deep through the soil profile, Nolan's desert series appears to find blankness; yet this blankness is comprised of substance. The brush is used to drag a wind current into fast-drying paint. Giving the canvas evolution and wear. Clearing evidence of particularity.

For this space is not only an inland line: painters of the East Kimberley such as Thomas work with even expanses, too. In the bubbled white bordering and pale cream of his dim earth tones, there's the inkling of subterranean wetness. How often, from our plane windows, are unmarked earth and water seen from above. From there, they cease to compose maps and begin to build layers. These are not only earth lines: at Cooktown and Fraser Island, Nolan developed a sense of distance through fathoms and light rays. Working with the vocabulary of ink, his nocturnal swamps find green and blue within black, and lose drips along the way. The paint coagulates to a murky green lagoon into which the scratched legs of a bird, "Great Heron" (1949), dissolve. Nolan's broad tug of cloth across the canvas echoes the mopping motion of calligraphic hair brushes. In the salt glare of his Burke and Wills series, and even in the straining folds of his desert works, Nolan anticipates the forms of Antarctica.

Nolan's Antarctica series is, as Rodney James puts it, "quite literally black and blue ... wiped to the 'bare bones'" with knife and comb.<sup>viii</sup> The rubbed, plastic surface of "Headland (Antarctica I)" (1964) has the appearance of oily feathers - laden and

intricate yet dry and damaged. James points out that the generic titling of the series - in which the evasive repetition of “Antarctica” becomes tantamount to “untitled” - was Nolan’s way of liberating both the viewer and himself from the novelty of the unfamiliar place and from a fixed experience of it.<sup>x</sup> Nolan’s written notes were used to aid his later process, in a kind of negative practice that then wiped the page clean. “These mental images, like words”, writes James, “would become sublimated in the physical act of painting”.<sup>x</sup> Following his trip to Antarctica, Nolan’s painterly act was mostly undertaken in a London studio, far from the deserts and tundra of its source. And so the painter steps away from a responsibility to the landmark, as if ice peaks might just as likely appear among that other tundra, in central Australia.

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Down the Barrier Highway, alert pink gums begin to fill the plain, which undulates about their roots. Paper silhouettes drying into gluey creases, the high rock walls are layered one upon another. A man walks the railway like an insect stalking beneath the ranges. I imagine the regular rhythm he can hear, and then it comes: blocks of green and rust, blue, and a stripe of yellow; and, inside that sound, a tangle of motion between the carriages as they cut across my view of sooty shrubs and the dirt-streaked, chalky apex of a hill. Snatches of purpling lines rip across the hill, hovering with cool detachment until, at last, the train moves ahead and the man is left walking, as if backwards. At the level of his feet, the plateau’s eroded profiles form miniature versions of the ranges: little cliffs of soil cropping away into shadows, and shallow pits in the banks of bare creeks. To his eyes, the slopes spray down to iron soil. Distantly, it is covered by grey lawn, and in one of the paddocks he sees a fallen roll of wire unscrolling from a cylinder to a cone, becoming a shell the size of a wombat, worn to its spidery core.

After I read Hill’s poem I run a bath in the motel room and roll my hands under the water. On the edge of desert, I realise that I had nearly forgotten what it was to stand on a boulder and look through bands of water, down to sand or weed. But I have remembered enough to know that the cold earth in Rankin’s poem is not, in fact, impenetrable. When I read, it reverberates with other images and places, and the page seems to tremble. As if enacting these odd networks of affective connection, her

poems burrow up and down; they spiral through layers, like the wombat in her final major sequence, “The Mud Hut”:

Mud cracks  
the skull’s temple cracks

wombat stretches inside his burrow inside the earth  
he loosens himself his skin gliding easily on the head-bone  
the thin white bone of the skull that picks its way out  
hard and thin against this dry earth  
these burrows deep and always winding  
up now and out he leaves <sup>vi</sup>

As the poem breaks down the telluric profile, it cuts through air and time:

Yet this is earth-tremor country

and in these crumbling walls new cracks  
shuffle and reshuffle the light.

Now the roaring draws closer.  
The walls twist and split.  
And the distant clatter of the train  
drowns in itself at last  
as the earth takes itself back.

I crawl through these remnants  
this diligently worked entrance  
this exit dug by the wombat.<sup>vii</sup>

Given that things dive into soil, as well as out of it, I wonder if I’ve been looking at earth the wrong way. While there is a “surface earth quality”, Rankin once told an interviewer, it is not a blank floor of soil or quite what painter John Olsen calls “the void”. Rather, by “going into the desert, going into any desert, it’s sort of like getting under the earth: there’s always limestone caves under the earth, there’s always this

cool room in the dark hut”.<sup>xiii</sup> Its stalactites and stalagmites create what appears to be a space without gravity, in which verticality stretches in two directions. Seeping through stone, rainwater creates these expanding pockets and, above them, a floating floor. That, perhaps, is the reader’s ground.

### **Reading as burrowing**

Outside of Peterborough, with its lemony scent of pepper trees and the red-dusted steps of a grand bluestone Federation Hall, abandoned stone cottages slump in the paddocks. We pass the unsealed entrance to a signed property, *Rankine*. I think of Rankin’s “dark hut” - a place of comforting relief, but one without solid walls. I look at the eyes of a cottage, through to the lush green and orange of the hills in the back of its mind.

From a long way off, the Southern Flinders Ranges are tightly blushed. They resemble distant, blue mountaintops that I once saw from a train in France. It passed dark red vegetation, dry and fresh like the carpet of lavender leaves that have cropped up here. That rusty shrub continued over to the west of France, around the Neolithic limestone caves of Périgord. Heading into the Vézère valley, hawks cruised over pastures and the train ran alongside undergrowth where rabbits, mice and squirrels went. The valley opened suddenly at Les Eyzies de Tayac - a corridor of white and grey cliffs, bulging over their bases. In *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, titled for the motel at Les Eyzies, poet Clayton Eshleman describes these walls as “the abyss of everywhere”, of “dead/fresh stone,/air/pervasive cenotaph”.<sup>xiv</sup> Inside them, the sounds of the valley were distant and muffled. They held something in; and something out. It was already chill, and I kept encountering a feeling of moving underwater. The river itself worked fast to clear obstacles out onto its banks. When, at sunset, I emerged onto the rooftop of the town’s famous prehistory museum, nothing and everything appeared to move. A golden limestone shelf curved around toward troglodyte houses, which rose out of the stone like growths under skin. It was Dante’s first Cornice of Purgatory, engraved with images of Pride: “So there, with livelier likeness, due to skill/Of craftsmanship, I saw the whole ledge graven/Where, for a road, it juts out from the hill”.<sup>xv</sup> Above my head, the lip of the cave reeled upward, the ceilings of the human structures melted into it, stuck for good. A silent and stormy sun glossed the valley, and the thick river

still flowed speedily into evening; at its bottom, cream sand stepped into great fingers. As the light dropped, I trailed into the Abri Pataud with a school excursion, and the kids' droning warmth sharply brought out the lines of a little, pallid ibex protruding from the lining of the cave, horns turned in a whip of triumph.

## **Wilpena Pound**

In the early morning, the sky is ripped thin, but still the cloud keeps coming from behind the nearby range. I watch it from the house we are renting, where two birds are nipping back and forth out of a red gum until one takes off into the range, gone into that backlit shape. As the sun draws warmth out of the rock, I see the raised cicatrices of the range. Its lit face is shot through with vein-rich blue, purple and orange; its darkened wall is dormant.

*Gasps and fibrillations* - the oaks bring the phrase back to me from a Stephen King audio book we've had playing in the car. I make my way over the floodplains of wildflowers to get a better look at the cliffs beyond Wilpena Pound, but the ground is strewn with pieces of the two rock faces. The burning red stone is porous and sparkling, ready to crumble; whereas the shadow shale is more constant - if it cracks, the block shatters, flaking off in egg-like boles. Black oaks nod. Long forgotten pods open at their tips. Their needles twitch and circle. A group of three trees passes the wind from one to the next, feeling it a little then flicking it off. The open lattice of dead branches crawls with ants and pellets. It's breaking into twigs, matches, splinters. Every now and then I hear a zip or jangling keys, but it's something else.

The crags at the top border of the Pound are ten or so tablets leaning upon one another. In fact, there are twenty-six in total, named the ABCs. Each slab's truncated trajectory into the air is a phantom limb, its original scale somehow visible. The ABCs are the roots of a Precambrian era range that edged the downfold of rock into the Pound's basin. To the Adyamathanha peoples, a group encompassing Nukunu, Pankarle, Kuyani and other languages, the creation serpent woke to drink the gorges dry, leaving the depression of the Pound behind him. Returning with a swollen belly, he vomited lichen and pissed waterholes. In the dry Wilcolo Creek, I sink into small bricks of brown and purple shale scattered by the crumbling ABCs. Along with shit-coloured sandstone, these lozenges compose the lower hills and slopes of the Pound's

floodplain. 600 million year-old Ediacara fauna are stored in both the quartzite and shale: jellyfish, segmented worms, sea pens and *Dickinsonia costata*, fossilized into a fanning round of lines like a periwinkle, radiating out into a sea that has now gone into the sky. What words will be left for the range of letters to form, when it has finally eroded down to earth? A full, flooding current lifts up the folding chair and bobs me away downstream.

### **Standing/looking/moving**

In the sixties, American experimental psychologist James J. Gibson developed his theory of ambient optics. According to this thesis, human cognition is formed by the consolidation of individual sense data into public perceptual knowledge. We attain this knowledge, he argued, by piecing together data not from one point in space, but from our own multiple, motile places or positions. Not only do we use constantly shifting perspective, but we also work with an assumption that parts of a place - what's over the precipice, behind the boulder or past the horizon - are invisible or insensible to our own body. In this way, one person's positional placements will and will not resemble another's, and both will come to share or exchange perspectives of a surrounding environment.

What our perceptual knowledge ultimately agrees upon is that objects, as well as places and events, are environments in which things intersect. According to Gibson, our senses tell us that the earth is one big nest. Through "paths of possible locomotion", Gibson suggested, we constantly reassess the world. "We perceive that the environment changes in some respects and persists in others ... We perceive *both* the change and the underlying non-change".<sup>xvi</sup> I am sitting in the Wilcolo, that rain of shale talking at my ankles, and I am looking up and I am looking down.

### **Inside**

It is possible that several bodies and minds have, as though outside of time, responded to an unchanging problem of Australian space. The problem remains; pondering it, I walk and drive around it, gathering the collective memory of other artist's views. Charles Buckmaster's 1971 poem, "Wilpena Pound", speaks of the

enclosure of the downfold, to have “first noticed that we were/inside”; and to turn, seeing:

Sunset. To the west, etched  
in a sky of all colour - a lone tree against the light:

and to the north, the Pound: a circle of fire.<sup>viii</sup>

Buckmaster’s sky takes us through the passage from the Pound, north into the first ranges. Its last light flashes onto a long web, which drifts toward me then washes over. The light pulls over the faint lines that separate element from element, material from material; over the forgetting of the line itself; over the very notion of forgetting. As it reaches me, I have almost remembered it all.

## **Writing out**

Yesterday, a flat brown cloud pushed across Mount Little and passed us in the streets of Hawker. A local history describes a colossal dust storm in the nineteenth century, during which pastoralists watched magpies and sparrows leave the sky and huddle, together with families and their stock, inside dwellings. Today, windless, the air of the plateau is moved by flies and stalking emus. But the earth finds other ways of moving itself, grinding away beneath us. A recent tremor, we’re told, sent livestock fleeing the local properties.

At Sacred Canyon, the Adyamathanha set aside the human hair string that they used to weave story patterns, and took up chisels to peck in Panaramitee style at a break in the southern wall of the ranges. Like chiselled work found around the Australian coast, these animal and linear designs could be 40,000 years old. Descendants of the rock tribes tell that they were created by ancestral beings, but their symbolism within the original ceremonial laws of this place of caves and waterfalls has been buried in time.

At the top of a dry creek bed flanked by a straight avenue of gums, the canyon sits about one storey high. Shale tablets slip away underfoot, displacing each step with the next. The entrance walls are long, vertical palings of red stone balanced in a precarious frieze. At shoulder height, I spot two circular designs for rockhole or

waterfall. They are head-sized and picked out with single lines. As I slip deeper into the canyon toward the signed water, the corners of its corridor lock the next bend out of sight. I step up to the first, empty rockhole and as my foot leaves the loud shale, I hear a sound running below. My ear tunes in to a low, even murmuring above the canyon. The closed bend faces me, and I hesitate; I'm not sure why I want to clamber here, through empty sinks that must be so rich when water comes to touch them. The droning carries on. I am about to crunch back into the creekbed when I see the shadows of insects against a rock at my feet; and then a swarming in front of it, as hornets draw themselves out of a mouth in the grey limestone. I recollect the bees in a prose poem by Rankin called "Koan":

I make a mental note as the bees crawl out of the mud walls. They are using the crack from the tremor. This interests me. They are crawling into and out of the crack. [...] I search their wall. I search the crack they enter. I search remembering the trenches I have built remembering the pines. And the notches.....

There are more designs at the first sink, this time higher on the flat red wall. They seem to be a series of rockholes, and a pair of the inverted horseshoe shapes that denote a cave or sacred site - and, in a different hand, "1867".

The singing drone carries on through the canyon, and I notice that a second nest of hornets is turning beneath these higher engravings. The nest's opening is positioned to shield the inner rockhole: no longer red flint but grey limestone that swims up into arcs as smooth as a sea mammal, as smooth as fat. I slip over the lapping tones of grey on grey, its whorls chunking off into jade and blue chips. Climbing up over a causeway, I emerge onto the floor of an enclosed place walled by more flint. Jagged, chaotic ladders form around a scorched cave that lies deep behind what will again be the mouth of a raging waterfall. Lichen and noon sun glint, and I can already see the gathering of people messing about under a rush of chalky rain.

My hands and feet slide away; I wish I hadn't come. Writing this, I wish it once again, but feel instead that my mistake is only more deeply re-inscribed. I imagined that writing could smooth together lives and places; that the grammar of human expression could intersect to make a persistent and unchanging view of space.

I sense the dry creek at the canyon's entrance waiting to take in my steps; and the hornets down below, invisible under the soft limestone, filling up the canyon floor and ready to flood out into the passage.

### **The sea outside**

Wind brings a high-tide boom against the ridge and we turn to see the falling wave; realising, in the same moment, that we've been teased. When the water pulls out then falls a second time, I turn again and feel trapped by my impulse. From the top of this thin spine, at 566 metres, we can just glimpse Lake Frome posing as a mirage. Its miles of salt appear to be a sandbar across the horizon; several days in from the island coast, and many metres below sea level, it's the beach we can hear behind and ahead.

Water's memory is everywhere between the empty gorge walls: in the dense, trampled mud that's still soggy and deep when its surface cracks, and in the waterfall runnels streaked with absent rapids. Trickling and dripping are somewhere, invisibly. As we go further through the halls of the gorge, we find dried debris wrapping itself urgently around the trunks of white gums. Imitating the line of water that once was, some of the gums lie at full stretch. When I try photographing some of these, their line does not come; instead, it springs out of their roots in the sliding shale and waits for when the rain will carry it along the creek's course. The wind's memory of wetness is even more distant but nevertheless, it carries from the south to flap about our heads.

The night before, a young German astronomer had brought a nebula into the view of the observatory telescope, spreading his arms to the night air and speaking of *this mess* - this mass of ice, fire, and dust particles that cloak an absorptive nebula, shielding it from light. If this morning's gorge were wet, it would pool at Stubbs Waterhole where I clamber and slide over boulders parked in the silt. They're milky blue, with a random grab of smoothed pebbles protruding from their strange, set sea: tillite, a conglomerate formed when glacier drives a rock forward, forcing it to collect other fragments in its path. The tillite is held together by a rumour of water, caught in the blue-grey tone of the parent rock. It's the same colour Nolan used for under-painting in the Antarctica series - as flat as sea washing over ice, and as deep as the

constellations lodged in it. When the ice dissolved, the boulders fell into ocean mud and stuck where they are; and when the tillite garden ends, we are in a shallower place. Low tides have pressed themselves against tablets of quartzite, leaving indented ripples that cast shadow stripes in the spring sun.

In the serpent's time, the organisms of this place had not yet developed shells. Instead of skeletons and eyes, there were mounds of soft tissue that travelled over the slime bed of the inland sea, new shapes everywhere. The slime took their imprint, and sealed them in sediment. Their creeping, trickling movement seeps through and runs beneath art and language.

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We have just crossed the Murray River at Paringa, when I see motion down in the willows by the eastern bank - slow and soft, and now still - a grey heron. Only as the car climbs the hill can I glance back and see what it sees: the bones of the river, its cliffs dropping down to a white mess. The heron stands where the river runs into a milky whirlpool. The bird is a vortex, in Ezra Pound's sense - not the visual idea of repose, but *now* - a concentration of the river's real motion in bones and muscle, and an event that both receives and generates a line of energy in the water.

In the scrub around the citrus farms of the Murray, the malleefowl hen builds a mound over one metre high by kicking together earth and leaf litter. Inside the mound, she incubates her eggs, and goes about habits of sedimentary life. Her terrestrial structure, a form of permanence and return, diverges from the aerial domesticity and nomadic or migratory departure with which we like to associate birds. A nest, of course, is homely, but it's not an enclosure. When the malleefowl sits or stands atop her mound, the dwelling has not only a biological and protective function, but also a territorial and defensive one. On top of the mound, she is positioned exactly half way between ground and nest levels. The bird is able to survey her environment with an elevated perspective, but not with the horizon view or aerial breadth seen from a nest. Her height, in fact, matches the average human eye-level. The malleefowl knows the burden of gravity - the binding of time - for even the skyward bird must return to ground.

To be held to the earth is to take in the entire periphery of places; and writing, like painting, is also bound by this line. In *The Linguistic Moment*, J. Hillis Miller

describes the peripheral tradition that surrounds language. For Miller, “each text is seen as referring to some still earlier text” and the poetic text is positioned in a burrow:

Each is like a thousand borrowed atoms dancing in the air or like stone made of minute, once-living fragments agglomerated ... Each poet's precursors are present, whether or not he knows it or wishes it, in the intimate texture of his material, in the words he must use to speak or write at all, there in the language like tiny fossils in the builder's stone.<sup>viii</sup>

From there, revelling in the bind of gravity, the poet discovers an infinite community of distance and scale. Her grammar cannot be original, but she finds a language of perspective in events of texture and surface and motion.

- i Rankin, *Jennifer Rankin: Collected Poems*, p45
- ii Rankin, *Jennifer Rankin: Collected Poems*, p23
- iii Rankin, *Jennifer Rankin: Collected Poems*, p53
- iv McPhee, J 2003, "A Stranger in This World", *Australian Financial Review*, 21 November, pp4-5
- v Carter, P 1996, *The Lie of the Land* Faber, p363
- vi Hill, B 2008, *As We Draw Ourselves*, Five Islands Press, p31
- vii Hill, *As We Draw Ourselves*, p33
- viii James, R 2006, *Sidney Nolan: Antarctic Journey*, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, p11
- ix James, *Sidney Nolan: Antarctic Journey*, p18
- x James, *Sidney Nolan: Antarctic Journey*, p16
- xi Rankin, *Jennifer Rankin: Collected Poems*, p108.
- xii Rankin, *Jennifer Rankin: Collected Poems*, p110
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