

2021 Nature Writing Prize shortlisted essay

*Twelve and a Half Kilometres of Road* by Jenny Sinclair

This is a tale of two countries.

One is a legal fiction, known on VicRoads maps as Section 2(b) of the Western Highway duplication project: 12.5 kilometres of theoretical dual carriageway on National Highway A8.

The other is a place heedless of all that: a stretch of land engaged in the business of existing: living and breathing as it's always done, and will do until the moment the legal fiction sends real-life machinery to flatten and destroy it. There's a third place, Country with a capital C, but it's not for me to speak of that. Still: we are entering Djab Wurrung country, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

All three places are the same, spatially speaking, but they cannot coexist.

This is a tale of the living land that the legal fiction – the laws and plans of settler Australia – will replace with barren asphalt.

I will not begin at the beginning, because that might be 2018, when protestors set up camp to stop the road; it might be around 2008, when the duplication plans were first announced; it might be 1835, when John Batman and his mates landed at Port Phillip with their sheep; it might be January 26, 1788; or perhaps it was the dawn of time, when the first Djab Wurrung set foot on the land.

I'll start, instead, on a freezing, damp morning in mid-July, 2020. I'll start early, hours before dawn, getting into my car in a back yard in the city, 180 kilometres away.

The road west from Melbourne unfurls like a dark grey ribbon, first in a moving patch of headlight-glare, then in the light of dawn, diffused by heavy fog. The world around me is monochrome but far from featureless. The bleached bones of a dead tree loom and fade as I pass; the stark timbers of an old sheep-race show dark against the fog like glyphs on dirty parchment.

Twenty kilometres before Ararat, the road narrows. Two carriageways join in the shape of a tuning fork, and I'm there.

I can't keep calling it Section 2(b). That name reduces it to what the road builders want it to be. Even so, the particular slice of land I'm thinking of *is* Section 2(b), carved out of farmland by surveyors and engineers. It runs roughly east-west in a sweeping arc to the south of the existing highway. It crosses a road, a railway line, another road, a river, traversing hills and valleys as if the land were a flat sheet of paper or a computer screen. It's as wide as it needs to be to accommodate four lanes of highway. Until it was Section 2(b), it was part of the surrounding landscape. Now it's a work site, and the focus of five court cases and an Ombudsman's report. Its edges are invisible, although in places they are marked by hostile keep-out signs and strings of Day-Glo bunting.

When I arrive in July 2020, there is still a lot to come. The police are yet to drag screaming protestors away from sacred trees. The three protest camps on the land are yet to be bulldozed. The chain-link fences patrolled by security guards are yet to be erected. There are some works underway in the middle of the route, alongside the existing highway, but otherwise the road exists only as a theory.

First, I drive to the far, western end of the route. I lock my bike to a fence and drive back to the eastern end, where I park my car up a side road, between the trunks of two big gums. In my backpack: water; snacks; notebook, pens and pencils; a Department of Environment topographic map on which the new highway is already marked as a pair of pale-grey lines.

I pull on a beanie and gloves, add a jacket to my several layers of clothes. The jacket is bright red, so it's not like I'm sneaking in, I think. As the car alarm makes its tch-tch sound behind me, I say aloud: fucking cold. I answer: you'll get used to it, and I start to walk.

I go east, along a muddy slip road to the highway, where the route first diverges south. Somehow it feels important to begin there: to cover all the country.

The highway, the slip road and the side road form a rough triangle. On one view, it's a degraded little patch. All of the land has been driven over or used

to dump road materials at some point. Tyre tracks hold puddles of icy, dirty water and there are bits of rubbish here and there.

But also: hardy grasses stand up across the ground in straw-coloured tufts.

There's a miniature stand of trees – eucalyptus saplings all about two years old, racing for their patch of sky. Somewhere in the boggy soil a frog is croaking. The closer plants are clearly visible in the diffuse sunlight but everything beyond 20 metres or so fades into a uniform foggy white.

The stillness of the air, the earliness of the hour, the obscurity of the surroundings, give this bedraggled patch of land a sense of place. The young trees seem to have every intention of growing big.

But of course they won't. They will be bulldozed. A truck coming east, overnight from Adelaide, roars past on the highway, reminding me.

There is no word I can find for the strange sense of advance nostalgia this stirs in me. The prospect of its ending makes it difficult to relax into the place, to quite believe in it, even as its qualities of geography, wildlife and weather draw me in.

There may be a reprieve. A court case may come through; a politician may see the light. Meanwhile, I'm here to see what I can, while I still can.

These saplings, left alone, could live 500 years. Scattered across the low wet grass is something more ephemeral; hundreds of spider webs, catching the light like diamond-studded nets. I look closer. They're classic hub-and-spoke webs, anchored to the blades of grass at multiple points. Each strand is hung with drops of dew, and with the weak filtered sun behind them, they shine with all the clarity that's lacking from the foggy scene around them: bright brooches on an old grey woollen coat.

Ahead, three eucalypts about my height are standing in a shallow pool of yellow water. My own feet are already damp and I'm regretting wearing sneakers. The frogs keep calling.

I pass the side road and reach the field the new road will cross. The field is about a kilometre long and nearly as wide. It was purchased from a farmer six years ago and hasn't had farm animals on it since. The road reserve is marked by a row of solid concrete posts strung with heavy-gauge wire, and a line of overhead powerlines.

To enter, I walk around a barricade of twisted tree branches and rusty fencing wire. There's an old bike lock securing what's left of the gate, and a sign warning that I'm entering Djab Wurrung land.

The ground beyond is marshy without quite being *marsh*. In summer it's firm and dry but now the mosses beneath the grass are plump with water.

Two of the most significant trees in the dispute over this land are here; a "grandmother" birthing tree with a hollow at the base, and her grandfather companion, a towering old gum.

On other days I've circled the trees – never touching them, not even taking photographs. The birthing tree is lower, broader, her hollow facing away from the dark mass of Mt Langi Ghiran to the north. If you look carefully, you can see right through the tree. The grandfather tree is a little further south, taller, with long vertical patches of variegation on its bark, showing new patterns and colours every time I visit. Between them there's a barely discernible depression in the land; a seasonal watercourse that's sometimes dry, sometimes alive with mosses, reeds and insects. The highway will run within metres of them; another sacred tree, to their west, will be removed.

Today, though, I'm staying well clear of the trees and of the camp that's near them, because I've come from Melbourne, where the coronavirus infection rate is in the hundreds. I keep to the concrete fenceline, swishing through damp grass and around small saplings. The two trees are barely visible, 100 metres to my right. It's after 9am but the sun is still shrouded.

As the highway falls behind, the traffic noise takes on a muffled tone, softened by the marshy ground and fog. The field slopes up towards a railway line hidden by trees, and I enter the shelter of a twisted, drooping gum.

Condensed fog drips from its leaves like rain and the soil under its canopy is bare. I pause in this makeshift room and look down the foggy field. The two trees are dark smudges in the distance. Fifty metres away, a leaning gum tree is a flattened form: limbs with soft-looking bunches of leaves at their extremities. Hanging from the lower branches is a solid clump of mistletoe, forming a perfect heart shape.

Two rainbow lorikeets sit on a branch nearby, just out of reach, and screech at me in the brightening fog.

I strike out again, trying to ignore the moisture seeping through my socks. The trees are denser around the railway line, the undergrowth thicker. The line itself is built up on a bed of blue road metal, and runs dead straight and level. I cross the shining lines and a sticky clay track and reach a fence. It's not much of a fence, but I feel a wave of nervousness as I step over it and into another paddock.

This next paddock is on a different scale to the lower field. It's broken up by a dam and stands of medium-sized trees, and the upward slope of the hill is uneven. It feels enclosed. Up on the ridge I can make out two roos, one tall, one very short, alert and looking in my direction.

The top of the hill is thickly crowned with trees, and every kangaroo I disturb heads straight for it. I'm skirting the northern slope of the hill, through patches of fungus, low bushes and more tall, damp grass. Raising my eyes, I see I'm on a trail, just wide enough for one. It's not a human trail.

Halfway around the hill, I reach the concrete fence again. The fencers have left half-rolls of wire, and I have to watch my step. In doing so, I see tiny star-shaped mosses; yellow toadstools no bigger than my smallest fingernail; lichens of exactly the shade of green you'd get if you mixed one part white with three parts moss-green. Once, I see a furry caterpillar clinging to a blade of grass.

It's all, of course, doomed.

Young trees have grown since the fence was put in. They are several metres high. I pass a miniature casuarina forest of six or seven trees. As I head downhill, I startle a group of roos. Two adults clear the fence easily, but two juveniles are trapped in a corner.

They bound around, increasingly frantic, bouncing off the wire fence like it's a force field. I stop and wait. One, then the other, finds a gap and joins the pack. I think about what the former owner of this land once said to me about the road, how it would throw up barriers across the landscape.

Standing in what will be the westbound lane of the new highway, 750 metres from the existing road, I scribble in my notebook: ROAD STILL AUDIBLE.

When the trucks come through here, I think, their roar will fill this valley to the very top of the roo-copse and down to the plain beyond. Magpies are carolling in the trees; they'll be drowned out too.

I'm only seeing the big animals – the roos and birds – but these fields are home to smaller, less common creatures. There's the Golden Sun Moth – critically endangered and made more so by its erratic breeding pattern. Its larvae live at the base of native grasses for up to two years: once in their adult form, they cannot feed. They fly about on warm days in early summer, frantically flashing their colours in the sun; they mate, breed, lay eggs and die. There could be larvae under my feet right now. They rely on native grasslands such as these to survive. (When settlers came, these fields were so rich in native grasses that little new grass was planted.)

Somewhere here, there's the Striped Legless Lizard, which is "only" vulnerable: a snake-like creature that is so notoriously hard to find in the rocky crevasses that it favours that scientists don't even try to count it any more. In the Hopkins River, up ahead, there may be Dwarf Galaxias, a bright little dart of a fish, nationally significant, and endangered. This rare and short-lived fish is found nearby; researchers hope that during floods it may spread to new homes.

The environmental battle over this road has been long and litigious, bringing little credit to VicRoads, who under-counted trees to a degree that would be comic if it wasn't tragic – claiming 221 trees would go when it was really 1500 – and when they discovered the error, failed to tell the locals for nine long months. Such bumbling management contrasts with their environmental plan, which devotes pages to the transplantation of a single Spiny Rice-Flower plant.

Then there's the Button Wrinklewort, a plant that looks exactly like it sounds: a wrinkled, yellow button of a thing, atop a spiky bunch of stems. In 2014, there were only 233 of them in all of Victoria; some are adjacent to the road route. These are scientific stories, of the delicate interplay between habitat and organisms. They are stories that stem from the kind of Enlightenment thinking that has endangered this country in the first place.

There are other stories here, not mine to tell. They are to do with eels and cockatoos, and songlines that tie the land together. When Djab Wurrung elders appealed to the Federal Minister for the Environment to stop the road, they told her:

*(the trees) are two highly culturally significant ancient hollow trees, which sit in a [sic] extremely significant area at the basin of the Hopkins river, and are connected to our songlines and stories that reach from Langi Ghiran, our black cockatoo dreaming site and also along the Hopkins river which is connected to our eel dreaming. VicRoads intends to physically destroy and remove these ancient trees that are particularly culturally significant to our women.*

*...These old trees are named 'Delgug' meaning 'tall person'. These trees are our ancestors and we must protect them to the best of our ability. Destroying them is severely upsetting, and brings bad fortune.*

The Minister declined. By the time I'm writing this, in February 2021, the Federal Court has twice ruled that the Minister was wrong: now another minister must assess the claims. Between that and a case pending in the Victorian Supreme Court, the land remains in limbo.

When I reach the fence corner that had trapped the young roos, I need to climb awkwardly up a straining post and wire strut, and I feel that rush of anxiety again. There is no one in sight, not even a house.

I tramp downhill towards a line of trees that conceal another road, another camp, and, beyond the road, a sugar gum plantation. The fog is lifting, or maybe I've climbed above it, and to the west I can see a line of blue hills rimmed with cloud: Gariwerd, the Grampians. The range is the western boundary of Djab Wurrung country. A few years ago I walked up one of its peaks at dawn and looking east, I watched the sun illuminate a broad plain dotted with the canopies of big old gums. Now I'm *in* that view.

At the road, I follow the highway-reserve fence until the edge of the camp comes into view and then, like a thief, alter my direction so I cross just out of view. A few metres of wattles stand between the road and the plantation and once again I'm on an animal track until I reach a more substantial fence: chicken wire to the ground and on the other side a single strand of electric wire. I range up and down like a trapped roo until I find a buttressed strainer

post. Even then it's difficult to get across – I throw my backpack first, committing myself, and land heavily.

The plantation is disorientingly uniform. Upright gums, lacking lower branches, run out of sight in rows. There's no undergrowth except some small moss gardens and the odd golf-ball of fungus. The fog lingers here and I feel like I'm in the setting for a bad horror movie – that these lifeless avenues were made for someone to be pursued through, like prey. I've never been afraid to be alone in the bush, but these trees, planted to be harvested, creep me out.

I cross the plantation as fast as I can. On the northern side, the land opens onto another hillside and I can hear the highway and its trucks again. The sun is burning through the fog and more birds are tracking my progress.

Off to my left, there's a clearing of sorts, a break in the regular rows. In it, there's a large eucalypt. But that's not the tree I'm looking for. A hundred metres on, almost at the end of the plantation, I see it: the Directions Tree. When I first heard about this tree, in late 2019, the name conjured a kind of living signpost: limbs pointing the way to every corner of Djab Wurrung country and beyond. It's the kind of mistake you make when you parachute into a world that has its own linguistic shorthand. The tree was somewhere off past the camp, I knew. It was a month or so before I got to see it.

That morning began around a smoking campfire: me, propped on one end of a grubby couch and several young white "allies" eating pancakes. After a while one of them led me up a rough two-rut track along the edge of the plantation. We turned right into the rows of trees and there it was, standing in its clearing. I think that's when I lost my objectivity and balance on the question of the road.

Looking at it, I heard a voice in my head, an audible, fully formed statement: "They just can't."

Can't cut it down, of course. There was something about the baroque arrangement of its branches, the wild whorls of its bark, the glorious disarray of the whole thing in the middle of the regimented rows of sugar gums, that struck me deep. The tree was a yellow box gum; it wasn't clear why it had survived when the plantation was established. I like to think it was because the settler-farmers knew it was significant. Perhaps it was just luck.



At any rate, that first time, I stood and stared, then circled it at a respectful distance, absorbing the shapes of the branches, the swirling, wave-like patterns in the bark, and watching the rosellas nesting in its branches.

Later that morning, Zellanach Djab Mara, a leader of the protests, stood under the tree explaining its significance for the benefit of a videographer.

“Directions” had nothing to do with signposts; rather it referred to spiritual guidance. Such trees, he said, had children’s placentas buried at their bases, and those children returned as adults to seek direction on their lives

This July morning, I don’t go to the tree: I keep walking, climbing another gate and putting the plantation and the camp behind me. I trust, wrongly, that the tree’s beauty and significance will protect it. By the end of October, it will be felled.

From here, the road route runs along the base of a steep, south-facing hill that’s mostly cleared. There are, though, stands of gums here and there, and patches of those saplings that date from the land’s acquisition.

I keep walking, up and over the base of the hill into a valley, broad and green. It’s peaceful – idyllic, almost – protected from the winds, enfolded by ridges but with views out to Gariwerd, 50 ks away. I can see the full width of the reserve now – about 100 metres, side to side. I feel the grassland soaking up the winter sun.

Half a kilometre south, there’s a farmhouse surrounded by outbuildings and European trees. Past the house is the row of wattle bushes that mark the road; past that, rolling downs that stretch more or less all the way to the Southern Ocean. I stop under a lone tree (doomed) in the middle of the slope and feel the south wind picking up.

Walking on, a hilltop to the north comes into view. It’s crowned with trees and massive granite boulders and I remember that these are the foothills of a mountain. I can’t see Mt Langi Ghiran from here, but I can feel it. Those boulders on the peak are the bones of the land. They are synecdoches for the more massive outcrops of the actual mountain: the same rounded shapes, same material (crystal-flecked stone, 250 million years old), same lichens and mosses.

The road reserve runs straight, cutting through old fencelines. I reach a triangular patch of scrub, a half-empty, muddy dam. Outside the reserve is an

abandoned zone of young trees, shrubs and boulders. Up there, at least, the roos will have refuge from the road.

Ahead on the grassy hillside is a rise of boulders, right in the path of the road. Their shade is narrow but inviting; like a kangaroo, I feel safer settled in against them. I eat, drink, stare across the valley to the south.

It's not far now to the existing highway and the roadworks that have begun down there. As I set off, I see another boulder, half-buried in the hillside. The fencers have drilled straight into it and inserted a metal pole to hold their wires. The land slopes both west and south and I try to imagine how the road builders will level it. I wonder what's beneath my feet – plants, moth larvae, artefacts? I picture it all being torn up by a shining rectangular blade, three or four metres across.

On the valley floor, I meet the highway again.

The reserve fenceline is well away from the speeding westbound trucks, so that's where I stay, picking my way through trees and gullies. For several hundred metres, the bush has been burnt out. I cross bare patches of hard-baked clay between blackened trunks sprouting new growth from root to crown. Tough flax-lilies have regrown already, and pink flowering heath is coming into bud. Past the burnt zone, the grass is a mixture of green undergrowth and straw-like wallaby grasses.

Several mature gums stand in the open grassland, in what was once a paddock. They are in the centre of the road route. There's no sign that they are special – they are not *very* old, or *very* large, or visibly marked by Indigenous culture. They're just nice big old trees, photosynthesising quietly. I wonder if they know. Because 100 metres further on is a sharp, snub line across the landscape, 100 metres wide: the new road.

It's an odd thing. On one side of the star picket fence is tranquil grassland. On the other, a hodgepodge of bulldozer tracks, orange mud and scattered drainage pipes. This is the section of road that's been underway since a compromise deal was struck in 2019; a halt on some works, a start on others. Trees have been cut down and woodchipped; fields have been stripped back; embankments have sprung up and in the centre, a dead-straight carriageway, a twin to the existing highway, has risen.

It has the peculiar effect of turning the long and varied strip of roadside vegetation along the highway, once connected to the surrounding land, into a kind of nature strip between two lines of bitumen.

The verge is full of long grass, fallen logs, holes and bushes. My shoes are soaked through and it's heavy going. I can't walk along the new road, even though there are no workers today: there are large "No Entry" signs, and around some of the remaining trees, bright bunting: a "No Go Zone". I feel harried and self-conscious as trucks and cars whiz past. I'm no longer walking alone on country on a peaceful morning. I'm a tiny human figure out of place beside a busy road.

Eventually I give up, cross the highway and take refuge beside the railway track, more walker-friendly with its stony verge and cleared surrounds. When I pass the site office, there are several large machines, bright yellow against the blue sky and green grass, sitting idle.

The section ends as abruptly as it began, just before the Hopkins River. There's a huge and graceful eucalypt not far past its end, in the centre of the road reserve. Its trunk leans at 45 degrees, but its upper sections stand straight, branching and branching again to form a healthy, solid mass of leaves. The lower section has rough bark and nesting hollows and I know it's full of life.

Descending from the railway line, I become enmeshed in a patch of tangled, boggy grass, sinking up to my ankles in brackish water. I can hear the frogs again: the echo of the wetlands that once ebbed and flowed here. I have to double back a hundred metres and dart across the highway to the south side. I'm nearly at the end of the route, but first I need to cross the river.

The Hopkins is one of those surprising waterways that flow through a deep gully, giving little warning of its presence. The river is almost completely concealed by tall rushes and fallen branches, and the banks are more like earthen cliffs. Teetering on the edge is a giant gum, roots exposed below, one side burned out into a massive hollow. One day it will fall, unless the bulldozers get it first.

The road runs over a narrow bridge. I hesitate and seek another way. Under the bridge is an open stretch of water flowing over bluestone pavers, some kind of weir from years ago. The water is fresh and clear. The rocks, though,

are slippery, so I clamber up the bank again and wait: four minutes, five, six. Then I run across, full tilt, just before another semi thunders by. All that remains is to walk past another camp – the main protest “Embassy” – and I’ll be done. I start off along a vehicle track that’s worn into the grass. I can’t picture how the new road will cross the river. This bank is much lower than the eastern side: more marsh, more frogs. I guess they’ll just truck in fresh soil and rocks and dump it here. That will erase the contours of the land and further bury evidence of traditional Djab Wurrung occupation. I slip and slide on the muddy track; stop to admire an earthworm (doomed); until I see signs of current Djab Wurrung occupation. First, a blue camping chair, tipped over as if a guard had evacuated in a hurry. Then the blue tarpaulins, drab canvas marquees, old caravans and scattering of pup tents that form the main camp. And two trees: another grandmother, with a birthing hollow big enough for at least three women, and a broad, solid grandfather under which the activists maintain their fire, cook, talk and wait. I’m not going in, which feels odd, despite my sound pandemic reasons. So I wait for another gap in the rushing wall of trucks, cross the highway and pass by on the north side, only recrossing to reclaim my bike. This is where the new road will rejoin the existing highway. It’s taken me six hours to walk the route. Now it will take an hour to ride back to where I left my car. I’m tired, and the road makes no allowance for a small middle-aged woman on a bike. I get off the road every time I hear a truck. There are a lot of trucks. According to VicRoads’ estimates, the new highway from Beaufort to Ararat – about 40 kilometres – will shave two minutes off a driver’s travel time. This section is about a third of that. Crashes would be reduced by thirty per cent in “incidence and severity,” the government claims. It all seems very abstract. Not abstract at all are the rocks, trees, animals and flowering plants I’ve just walked amongst. The protestors’ objections, expressed via two years of sitting on country, feel real to me in a way an engineer’s estimate cannot. The engineers see a road route with a few objects in the way; I see a piece of living country; the Djab Wurrung see Country and their culture.

While I'm putting my bike in the car and peeling off my wet socks, two cars pull up. In the first is Zellanach: he has a way of being everywhere and seeing everything that happens on this land.

I don't think, no matter what he says, that he really expects the land to be returned to Djab Wurrung. I do think he expects, somehow, to stop the road being built.

But I don't share his conviction. Back in Melbourne, locked in the city for months by the restrictions of the state, I can't stop picturing those trees, those waving grasses, those crystal spiderwebs. I keep thinking about those flighty roos and stolid, solid boulders, sitting in the fields in sunshine and under rain and hail, waiting to be lost.