NATURE WRITING PRIZE 2017 SHORTLISTED ESSAY

‘Grassland’ by Tanya Massy

You are reading on screen, perhaps on paper, rapidly interpreting these clustered black symbols of human invention which I have written. Symbols that are not large enough to carry country to you. I write knowing that if you go to the place I am writing of, these clusters may shape what you hear there, how far you see. You may be so busily trying to locate these words that you trip over a poa tussock, crushing your ankle and twenty three bull ants as you stumble, spiking your hand on a blue devil and splitting your pants on the way down and then… well, first impressions last they say.

Yet here on this page, words are all there is to reach across the divide from me to you, these small loaded vessels are where we trade, my cargo of histories and meaning mingling with yours. Please know this is my incomplete, singular, minute version of a part of the world that I love. That my words are not ‘the thing itself’. For this reason, I will un-sheath names and elements a bit at a time so that you have room to see the things I carry, and feel your own, and perhaps, at times, glimpse something beyond. Here, from the grasslands, is a portion of my holdings to trade with you.

Dance.

I am five, mustering a large mob of ewes. My sisters, our kelpie Bundi, and I on foot, Dad in the truck. I am smaller than the summer grass, too small to see what is going on, where the sheep are. The world is threaded top to bottom with slender gold stalks that brush my face as I run, whisking my skin as I jump up and down trying to gain the height to see. The movement of this world bewilders me. I run my hand along grass tops and they sway and return upright. I move forwards and they close the space behind me, backwards and they close the gap in front.

Block the gate, block the bloody gate!

I race towards my father’s voice, jumping at times see the mob, to make sure I’m heading the right way. I pick a grass stem as I get closer. put it in my mouth to chew like I see the men around here do sometimes. Makes me look like I been working hard as a shearer.

Read.

It takes work to read the movement of animals in this country. It's easy to get things confused, to think there's a six-foot brown snake around the cattle yards when it's just a strawberry fattened blue tongue lizard, pushbike tire or a kangaroo's long paw track. It's like learning to read: see a shape and hear its name a few times, speak it, and the unknown becomes known. Some are more obvious than others, like the stark caverns and cliffs left in an ant's nest after an echidna has bull- dozed in for a feed. The difference between rabbit and wombat holes. Between animal scuds: fox, kangaroo, wallaby or wombat? Being able to read these traces helps fill in the gaps between night and morning, between dawn and dusk. Who has passed through. Where they were coming from. Where they were going. Visitors or locals. A track that has always delighted me is one you have to search for, hunting the edges and gaps of grasses, bending low to find a soft hollow in the ground, the size of your palm. Don't touch, for this intimate circle marks the boundaries of a bathroom, tracing the dust bath of a quail.

Halt.

There is always movement if you choose to feel it in the grasslands, creatures moving across the land, birds and cloud through the sky, wind racing at you, grasses stirring. It is easily missed. So too the deep quiet that lies beneath. This is a place where you can hear feathers brush against air. Deep quiet underlays all movement. If I'm walking without being there, deep in conversation or casting off thought about other places and people, I will miss it. There are no human stop signs to enforce the pause that is required. The closest we have is a road sign my mother put up near the ramp, an official looking traffic sign of black shapes on yellow, a bossy looking girl leading a boy by the hand as a signal for truck drivers, visitors and grandpa to slow down and watch out for the grandchildren. Elsewhere, there are plenty of calls to attention.

Walking through grass, a bullet burst of quail from feet height jumps the pulse, leaves me face up to the sky.

Halt.

Look for shadows.

There was no stopping in the European invasion of this area. They swept in swift and brutal. The country saw it all and still holds the shadows. Absence is the word my mother gives to many of these shadows, to the deep loneliness she felt in the land when she first moved

here, loneliness for the presence of the Ngarigo people. This absence is everywhere, if you're able to face up to it. Stone axes stumbled over in the bush, and grinding stones, the shape of a canoe carved from a snow gum, that of a coolamon from a kurrajong. This is landscape shaped and managed by hu- mans since ancient times. There are histories that have been buried deep, calcified and swollen from the refusal to look and retrieve. These include a massacre on the hill behind the local pub, the lacing of rations with arsenic, the genocide and forced displacement of an entire tribe. As white people in an invaded country, my family has attempted to excavate this history, and continue to grapple with its implications for our presence here, now.

The key part of this journey has been getting to know a Ngarigo elder who wants to share his knowledge with local farmers, and to gain access back to country. It is a relationship that has gifted incredible knowledge about the grasslands in the form of ancient and living stories, names, language, ways of seeing and managing country. Also, it is a journey that is canvasing by turns brittle and searing emotions in me. Deep and shaking grief for the culture and people that were 'removed' from here, for the continuing denial of this history and a throbbing sense of loss for the shallow re- lationship to country this denial enforces. Shame for what I represent and a deep sense of debt, of

which it is difficult to write and far more difficult to face. Yet I know there is no other choice, if I am to ever make peace with my intense love of this country and the aching doubt that I have no right to call it home. There was a week at my primary school, when four Ngarigo elders came to share their culture as part of NAIDOC week. On the final afternoon, we stood up in the long grass at the top of the school yard, a rag bag bunch of white bush kids being unusually quiet and respectful. The men unwrapped two boomerangs and gave each of us the chance to throw. One of my friends threw the only boomerang that didn't nose dive into the ground. We stood there in a cluster watching it curve back towards us, ducking too late as it flew thwack into her brother's nose. There was blood, tears, laughter.

In this memory is an instruction that has been confirmed over and over again. Excavate history. Face up to the pain and keep going. Do not turn your back.

Ocean.

A night wind and you hear the ocean, the grasslands thrashing, gusting and subsiding. Lie down to watch the winter sky and lose the anchor point where earth ends and atmosphere begins. The only other place I encounter this expanse is the ocean, so too the helpless fear of me, as a very small creature, encountering a large and powerful force. A spring storm

blows in swiftly at the tail end of a muster, lightning forks a tree at the top of the hill, and fear and exhilaration charge the dash for shelter. A firestorm in the mountains blows ash down to the grasslands and so a vigilant watch be- gins. At a certain point, there will be nothing that can be done but flee. Here, too, are constantly shifting tides and currents. The tide of seasons that peak in heat and light, and retreat towards the middle of the year into ice and snow, flowing with them are bird movements, insect hatchings, ebbs of growth and decay. Currents in wind form bring rain from the north, and dry heat from the west.
The south sends snow, or a milder morning relative in a frosted slap that jolts you awake, and in evening heat I look to the east for its cool breath of salt, skin rippling in welcome.

Gods and Wolves.

There are many versions of this place, many different eyes that look at this country. Recently a friend who traveled through the Monaro for the first time said he and his girlfriend were spooked by the long sweeping spaces and emptiness. Another friend has likened her bewilderment here to being on the moon. Yet it is home to me. University lectures taught me that this is a nutrient poor, de- graded landscape that needs chemicals and fertilisers pumped into it to function productively, and that this ecosystem is here for no other reason than as a platform to produce food for human consumption. A weed identification work book was a key assessment task, requiring me to collect and identify a range of weed species and explore the best practice herbicide treatment for their elimination. A different school of thought tells me that many of those species are valuable ecological players, some fulfil a role in ecological succession, others are native grasses whose place in a grass- land ecosystem is pivotal. This same school of thought positions grasslands as complex natural systems, capable of regeneration and renewal without synthetic input. There is contradiction and counterargument at every turn. A farmer a few valleys away relentlessly hunts wedge tail eagles. Another in our valley takes her children and grandchildren daily to watch in wonder a pair of eagles brooding in a large nest, and the hatching of their eaglet. I read an academic study found that the majority of landholders in our area have poor knowledge of native grasses, and little interest or understanding in the role their ecological function. Yet there are farmers that excitedly report on the return of Kangaroo and Wallaby grass to their paddocks, who will drive across the state to attend workshops on native pasture management and renewal. I read too from Barry Lopez, who once spent a long period of time studying wolves, and the people who live alongside, study and hunt them. Reflecting on this experience, and on Joseph Campbell’s work on mythology, he wrote that ‘men do

not discover their gods, they create them. So, do they also … create their animals' (Lopez 2004: 5).

Over, over, and over again I learn that we also create our country.

Dust.

This is not bucolic or gentle country. The light can be harsh, so too the temperature, wind, heat loneliness, desiccation. At times, it seems more dust than grass. Spend a long day in the sheep yards and even after a hard shower scrub you will wake up with black sleep in the corner of your eye and a dust stained pillow. We are learning how not to do this, how not to bare the country to its bones. We are learning the role of native grasses and shrubs, their resilience in the face of a variable climate as opposed to introduced 'productive' species, the stability of their deep roots and the rich source of nutrients for stock. Still the yardstick of time has been drought. I was born at the end of the 1980s droughts, and started high school the year after the mid-1990s farm buster of a dry that almost broke my parents. The taste of dust is not something you can forget. The early 2000s saw another dry period. Walking one evening up through the back paddocks, I turned to watch the western wind race down from the mountains, blowing the dry lake and basalt country away, hoping that Mum and Dad were inside, and did not see.

Seed.

Summer and grass seed go together like beach and sunburn, and my Grandpa's rule of thumb for shearing was the seed drops at Christmas time. Shear before they fall, and you avoid a seeded wool clip, but things have shifted in recent times. Every summer for the last six years the seed has dropped three weeks early at the start of December, and so we track a changing climate through the seed. All through summer we are looking for seed, checking kelpies paws each evening to pre- vent abscesses, checking lambs' eyes to prevent blindness, clearing out motorbike exhausts to avoid fire. I pick them out of my socks one evening, and lie them on my palm and the variation in

shapes and colours bewilders me. There is kangaroo grass arching in loose bronzed clusters, wallaby grass bleached white, brush tailed spear grass straight and fierce, and the winding pointed shape of corkscrew grass. Over twelve thousand years ago the ancestors stood like this, holding seeds in their hands, and worked out how to plant, cook, grind and store them. It is an ancient story that is stored in all our bodies and memories, occurring in

different parts of the world, at different times. History in some of those places took the sharp turn towards settlement, that ended in cities and modern industrial agriculture and all that has followed. They are powerful tiny storehouses of life. Weeks later in the city I spend an uncomfortable day at work in itchy underwear, and undress that evening to find the culprit; a stipa corkscrew still nestled in the cotton that lay against my skin.

A sheath of grass.

Sunday. I was twelve years old, leaving our farm to live at a school in the city. Tucked in the top pocket of my suitcase, wrapped in newspaper, lay a cluster of grasses. Old yellow and longer than my arm, tapering into crisped and flaking seed heads at top. I've tried to remember the shape and patterns of the seed heads in that original bundle, to work out which grasses I had gathered as at that age I hadn't yet learnt to call them by name. I only knew they were home. Knowing the pad- dock, and remembering the length of some of the blades, I suspect they were a collection of Spear Grass, Wild Oats and Phalaris. Ecologists use such samples to assess aspects of ecological health in a landscape. Tallying the presence of successional species, exotics and deep rooted perennials can tell you a lot about what stage a country is at, the level of biodiversity and soil health. In the years since I have learnt, and continue to learn this way of reading the grasses. Still, my first heart reaction is of the child, and I continue each time I leave home country for a long stint away, to gather a sheath of grass. They carry a size of sky that knocks humans down to size.

Underfoot.

There is a painting that hangs in my parents' house that shows the sky as a narrow ribbon across the top of country, broken only by trees. The rest of the world in this image is the earth, and all that lies beneath. There are shadows, holdings of water, and patches of light all forming and melding deep underground. Perhaps the artist was also an ecologist, because the proportions in this painting match the proportions of a grassland, where up to ninety percent of the ecosystems biomass is underground (Campbell 2011: 247). Looked at from a distance, a grassland looks like a simple ecosystem in comparison with a tropical rainforest or temperate woodland. We are finding the opposite is true. These ecosystems are complex, shaped by ancient forces, dependent on webs of relationships too intricate for the naked eye, and mystery weaves across their global spread. The Tibetan plateau, the steppe's of northern Asia, the savannah of east and southern Africa, the prairies and plains of the North America, chalk downs and heath of England, the pampas of South America,

and here. The south east temperate grasslands of Australia, which are now one of the nations most endangered ecosystems. So, when you are here, make sure you look down, past grass height. There is so much underfoot we don't see, or understand.

Talk.

As a kid, I would talk to country, walking it, or sitting on a rock, a tree trunk, a creek bank. I had end- less questions, and news items. Do you think there's any rain coming this week? My sister broke her arm today. Sarah at school didn't play with me at lunch. Josie the kelpie is pregnant! Important, profound stuff. But if you had thrown these words at me: God. Friend. Tree. Sky. I'm pretty sure I would have said they were all one and the same and I think, if probed, that would still be my answer. I don't know where I would be without this ongoing conversation.

This last word is a gift. It was given to me and I pass it on gently, with two hands, for it is of old lineage, and does not belong to me. Just as this country does not, and never will, belong to me. This word was spoken by a Ngarigo elder and it captures, in one word, what I have tried to pass on in all my words above. The rhythm of the grasses. The silence that stills. An ever-shifting light. The rightful word for these grasslands translates into English as the long grass country. Speak it softly. **Narrawallee.**

Works Cited

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