Bunyip

At the north-east corner of my property in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales, is a waterhole. For a long time it was overgrown with lantana, through which a few eucalypts and gloomy camphors had found their way.

Lantana replicates itself industriously, efficiently, and will cover everything except shadow, which it cannot abide. A tree with a spreading canopy may be surrounded by lantana as if besieged. But under the canopy's shade there will be a pool of empty space circumscribed by a wall of lantana.

Lantana is noisy and brooding and resentful by day, and deep, endless and vast by night, impenetrable and unseeable, soaking up darkness like a sponge. When the moonless night descends it is as if we are sunk deep beneath a sea of lantana. Far above us, are atomised motes of white light.

Through the screen of lantana, the surface of the waterhole could be glimpsed. It was like a sheet of glass, under which a clot of shadow had gathered. The day I discovered the waterhole, a strange day of sadness and revelation, I became convinced that a bunyip lived in its depths. The waterhole seemed to be covered by an opaque dusk that did not vary. It is a strange thing to try to describe, and even stranger for the eye to try to grasp. In the heat of summer or the transparent gloom of torrential rain in late Autumn, the waterhole exuded its own shadow into the surrounding air.

In 1846 crowds of people filled the Australian Museum in Sydney to see the skull of a bunyip. It was as if they were queuing to view a sacred relic, or a freak show in a circus at the end of the world. It was an apocalyptic and fantastical time, the white invasion of Australia, like the smashing of the stained glass windows of a cathedral in order to break in and sell the rood screens and fittings for pin money, before setting fire to the useless structure.

After a few days, the skull of the bunyip mysteriously disappeared from the Museum and was never seen again. Its discovery on the bank of the Murrumbidgee River earlier in the year, coincided with a rash of bunyip sightings by white settlers. Of all the spirit inhabitants of the Aboriginal landscape that the settlers could have discovered it was the bunyip, the malign troubled spirit of the water that kept appearing to them, over and over.

In the same year that the head of the bunyip went on display in Sydney, Aboriginal people were being relentlessly hunted down by vigilante bands and killed without mercy, as the settlers worked their way up the east coast. On the Darling Downs, an area that the settlers were just beginning to occupy in numbers, there were pitched battles and campaigns of extermination.

For a long time I lived in the city of Toowoomba, on the eastern edge of the Downs on the Great Dividing Range. Toowoomba is a university town and a farming town, stamped across a series of gullies and steep slopes, a town of odd cults and violence, a town of minor real estate kings, that in Spring publicly celebrates the suburban flower garden.

From the lip of the Range one can look towards Brisbane across a wide undulating plain. Immediately below the Lookout can be seen the flat volcanic stub known as Tabletop. Tabletop is 600 meters high and its steep sides are covered in a dark basaltic scree, through which a path can occasionally be found. The summit is covered with a thick yellow grass. No trees will grow there, but in colonial times Tabletop was

known as One Tree Hill When I think back on the time that I lived in Toowoomba I continually imagine Tabletop with a single tree on its summit like a gallows twisted to the shape of the wind.

My daughter was born during this time, a period in which I took to writing short stories that were like dreams, as though I had pulled them out of the air. I wrote a story about a pair of huge silky oaks that grew on the footpath outside our house. Silky oaks always seem to be damaged as though broken by storms or an explosive airburst. Their feathered leaves are dark as if blown with soot, and rising out of the earth like huge broken quills they seem to gather darkness like ink. Even on the brightest summer day darkness adheres to the foliage clinging like a cloud of oil.

Every year during my daughter's infancy and early childhood I would climb Tabletop, first with her on my back, then later scrambling up after me through the scree. Among the shelves of books that filled her bedroom, was a book about a bunyip that lived in a billabong, a melancholic, dark and lonely creature perpetually in mourning. In the landscape of my daughter's imaginings, everything spoke and many things were puzzling, and those that were most important were invisible. And if a bunyip could lurk mournfully in a pool of water, was there also something unseen that stopped the trees from growing on Tabletop? Was it something just as sad and mysterious? It was as if she were continually asking the question about the Australian landscape that no-one will answer: why do we know so little about it, when we pretend we have always been here?

In 2010 the National Library of Australia purchased a collection of household documents, family albums and scrapbooks at an auction. Glued into one of the albums was a series of half-a-dozen pencil sketches by Thomas John Domville Taylor. Domville Taylor was a young Englishman of wealthy parentage who came to Australia in mysterious circumstances in the late 1830's, returning to England around 1846. Domville Taylor settled west of what is now Toowoomba. The locality of Tummaville, west of Toowoomba where Domville Taylor had his selection, is probably a corruption of his name. Just south of Tummaville is a plain once known as Darkey's Flat, where as recently as the 1920's the bones of Aboriginal people killed by white settlers could still be seen.

Domville Taylor's sketches are mostly of bucolic scenes around his homestead. But one drawing, obviously done in great haste is of an incident that took place a week after an event known as the Battle of One Tree Hill.

When the white settlers began to arrive in numbers in the early 1840's, the Aboriginal nations of the Darling Downs began to find their access to traditional sites and to food and water, in the words of a National Library historian, 'severely restricted.' In other words they began to starve, and their capacity to care for the land and continue the intricate psychogeographies that had sustained them and the integrity of a fragile continent for thousands of years was crippled.

Under the leadership of the warrior Multuggerah, over a hundred men of the Jarowair, Barunggham, Giabal and Keinjan peoples gathered and planned to attack the settlers only supply route that led from the coastal settlement at Moreton Bay, 150 kilometres to the east, and shut it down. The spot they chose for their attack was slightly to the north of Tabletop, near present-day Helidon.

On September 6, 1843, Multuggerah and his warriors attacked a convoy of drays. After the attack the men retreated to the summit of Tabletop. A few days later they were themselves attacked by a large band of heavily armed squatters in retaliation for the Helidon raid. The squatters were driven off by Multuggerah's men, with many of the attackers sustaining serious injuries. After the confrontation, the Aboriginal men withdrew to the east taking refuge in the still-existing Big Scrub around Rosewood.

The settlers sent for help to the colony at Moreton Bay. On 19 September a squad of soldiers from the 99th Regiment arrived. But in the interim, the squatters had taken matters into their own hands. Vigilante groups rode out searching for any Aboriginal camps they could find.

Domville Taylor's sketch bears the title, *'The Blacks who robbed the drays on the Main Range of the Mountains - attacked by a band of Darling Downs Squatters after following them for a week. D.T. 1843.'*

In the drawing a party of eight or nine identically-attired squatters are firing at a fleeing group of twenty or more Aboriginal people. Some members of the group are carrying babies or young children and so are presumably women. Some of the children are running alongside the adults. In the foreground one figure appears to be crawling away from the shooting, perhaps wounded. Near the wounded figure, an Aboriginal warrior conceals himself behind a tree. Several of the fleeing figures are tumbling to the ground, drawn at the instant of being struck by the squatters bullets.

We are witnessing a massacre, mostly of women and children. The fact that the drawing seems to have been sketched with some rapidity suggests that the artist was very possibly a witness to the events and wanted to inscribe the image while it was fresh in his mind.

The vigilante bands roamed the plain below the Dividing Range until the end of the year and the hunting of Aboriginal people went on for at least another decade. They were still regular events when the bunyips began appearing to the settlers of the east coast.

From the summit of Tabletop, the blue and yellow plain floats toward a sky descending like a rain of dust. The plain is burned dry and is largely treeless. Water is pumped from the arterial basin to water huge crops of broccoli and potatoes in the farmlands around Gatton. The land is turning to salt. It is a landscape of disaster. Two summers ago, a violent and catastrophic flood wiped out the small village of Grantham. The Big Scrub into which Multuggerah and his warriors disappeared, is gone. It is across this plain that the Jarowair, Barunggham, Giabal and Keinjan people were hunted down and killed.

In this landscape of ruin into which the continent has been transformed, we are situated in the in-between, suspended in the shadows of the catastrophes of the past and of those yet to come, inhabiting a sense of place where place has no longer any meaning. It is like living on a plain of bones on which monuments to forgetfulness have been erected.

The children of a hundred years ago, the children of the squatters who had formed the vigilante groups after One Tree Hill, carried something of a tradition among themselves, a memory they could not forget of the massacres of which they had been

told. One Toowoomba woman who was a child in the 1920's and 30's said of the killings at Darkey Flat, 'I grew up with the knowledge that there had been a battle on the Tummaville Plain.' In the 1980's on the western Downs a middle-aged grazier spoke of his father's complicity in the killing of Aboriginal people.

Shortly after I left Toowoomba, the city gazing out over the killing plain, I seemed to lose my memory. Having understood that in this destroyed continent, as damaged as if a nuclear blast had swept over it two centuries ago, that to experience a sense of place was virtually an impossibility, I became the person governed by forces he could not understand. It was as if my life were a kind of epiphenomena eddying on the gusts of wind created by that blast, a wind now fading as the sky began to fracture and bleed a burning cancerous light and the structural integrity of the landscape began to disintegrate.

I could never find the weight that would allow me to be anchored to a functioning imaginary, a place that in its endless creation of meaning could overwhelm the reality of being a stranger on a devastated continent.

And yet, as the children who grew up in the shadows of the massacres on the Darling Downs found, that which has had its voice stopped, its memory severed, its ways of meaning-making dismembered will still speak. It is as if we can have dreams on each other's behalf, dreams that can never leave us. And this begs the question, that if the invaders had not tried to systematically exterminate Aboriginal people, and if we had not also slaughtered much of the populations of beasts and birds, would our dreams now be radically different? Instead of the claustrophobic nightmares of suburban life would we now have dreams that are lighter, more transparent, more conducive to being knitted to the seams of of our days, days in which we now spin like dead leaves.

Shortly after I discovered the waterhole on my Northern Rivers property I took a journey to Melbourne, visiting a friend with whom I had shared some thoughts of my odd dreams and attempts to construct a memory. I wanted to write a story about the unresolved nightmare that is the Australian imagination. When I was previously in Melbourne I had noticed the proliferation of gargoyles on the roofs and facades of both private and public buildings of the 19th century, the time of the appearance of bunyips.

We drove around Melbourne's inner suburbs, searching for gargoyles. Most of them had been carved when many of the massacres and vigilante killings of the previous decades were in the process of being systematically forgotten, forgotten so effectively that in our memories there is now only an empty space, an emptiness that forbids us from examining the landscape in which we live.

As we drove around the suburbs of inner Melbourne, aided by memory and Google Streetview, I photographed the gargoyles perched high on rooftops and considered their lives ticking slowly like a sheet of ice. A gargoyle is strictly speaking a statue that functions as a gutter, throwing the rainwater out from the walls of a building. A statue that resembles a gargoyle but does not have this function is considered a grotesque. But perhaps we could think of a grotesque as a gargoyle that has freed itself from the labour of spewing rain and is no longer a channel for the polluted water sluicing off the poisoned roofs of old buildings. It has taken on a new function.

But it was when we arrived in the old suburb of Carlton that I became

overwhelmed by the sense of dislocation that had been growing on me for years.

It's rare that we can make a full answer to questions of who we are. It is as if we are always out of sync with the idea of who we are supposed to be and it's characteristic of so many of us that we feel displaced, think we should be elsewhere, never feel at home, even when (or perhaps especially when) we're at home. So many of us have a niggling feeling that something is not as it should be in our lives, that some primitive dilemma is unresolved.

On top of a two story building, once known as the Carlton Club, were a row of four grotesques. They crouched like kangaroos, and were perhaps a metre and half tall, with doglike faces, perched on the building's parapet as though about to take flight. They seemed to be peering into the far distance, as though waiting for something to arrive across reaches of time not available to the rest of us. Because of their position far above it was difficult to discern their features or their true shape. What may have been ears may also have been horns. What may have been humped shoulders may have been folded wings. Their snouts were like beaks.

They possessed a kind of live watchful quality without the petrified fury of their cousins that I had observed around the city. From their viewpoint overlooking time they observed our unravelling catastrophe, encompassing it all on the surface of an eye rolling like the eye of a startled horse, a time sitting packed in tight interpenetrating layers, from which the imaginary had been stripped.

And I suddenly understood with a dark flash of insight that they could well be bunyips. And it was this recognition, that gave me the sense of time as a kind of topography, a landscape in which we believe we can travel along linear paths, but which betrays us at every turn. We journey for days, months, years only to find when we look back that we have barely even moved. And yet, while we are considering the route we might take to achieve some kind of wished-for state, we discover that we have somehow traveled a vast distance, a distance that seems inconceivable, a distance we could not cover in a decade of walking.

This is a way of describing the history of the white settlement of Australia. The topographies that we have established bear no reference to a sense of place. They are locations only, sites of utility. We do not understand where we are, or what we have done. A landscape is not a sense of place for the non-Indigenous inhabitants of the continent. It is just somewhere we happen to be.

We passed beneath the gaze of the bunyips hulked like crows on their stone parapet and whether they even saw us it is impossible to say. Perhaps looking through the eye of the bunyip is like looking through a faint but undeniable mist, full of odd lights and shadows. I had the strangest sense that I was standing at the bottom of a deep pool of water, looking up through the distortion of the water's surface at the bunyips crouched at water's edge, waiting.

When I encountered the bunyips in Carlton I had reached a point in my life from which no retreat was possible. That very morning I sat in Federation Square in Melbourne's CBD waiting for another writer and scribbling in my notebook. It was bitterly cold. Sometimes when I take out my notebook and begin to write I am overcome with the strangest feeling.

There is a kind of urgency, as though the physical world were made of liquid

and is pouring away before my eyes never to return. I write to try and speak of this to myself, because I can't speak of it to others. What could I do, stand in the middle of Federation Square and shout, "Everything is draining away"? "The world is made of rain"?

I spent the evening talking with other writers. I was still convinced that I was at the bottom of a well of water. My vision seemed distorted and my hearing subdued. At the time I felt that I had made something useful of the evening. It was only afterwards that I saw it as the catastrophe it was.

After I returned from Melbourne I began a habit of writing late into the night with the TV on. I accumulated piles of DVD's and fed them into the player one after the other. For a week I watched nothing but Swedish detective movies, where women are endlessly tortured and children raped and kidnapped and the men drink and carry angst like stones in an invisible backpack. For another week I watched movies set in Aboriginal Australia in which the omnipresence of violence could never be overstated, and tales of loss and mourning and regeneration were repeated over and over.

In these long evenings as I scribbled in my notebooks trying to marry a kind of political understanding that I knew I lacked with some threads of my interior life, things I had never before revealed, I understood that everyone I met that evening in Melbourne after I encountered the bunyips in Carlton was deeply unhappy. I could not understand how I could have been so mistaken and what state of mind I had been in. Or to put it another way, how often had I made the same mistake, been immersed in relationships with others and yet been unable to touch what was so visible in their interior lives?

It is as if, beneath the ordinary miseries of life, there is a current of displacement that allows us no rest. Our thought is always dislocated and perhaps this is ther inevitable outcome of our attempts to consider ourselves at home in a landscape we have so spectacularly devastated.

When I returned to the Northern Rivers someone had taken the tractor and slashed around the waterhole clearing the lantana and revealing the surface of the water as tensile as silk. Over the following weeks during an uncharacteristically dry Spring, the waterhole slowly emptied, revealing precipitous sides thickly carpeted with dead leaves. The empty waterhole was five metres deep and funnel-shaped. At the very bottom there remained a pool of black water. Despite being unreachable by the wind, the surface of the water constantly moved as though it were the surface of a mirror in which was reflected a movement invisible to my eye. The water's surface was a transparent skin continually sliding across a dark entrance into which no light could penetrate.

And who knows what the gawking crowds in the Australian Museum believed they were actually looking at. It was later claimed that the bunyip skull was actually the skull of a deformed foal. And yet, Aboriginal people who saw it identified it positively as that of a bunyip. It is not of course outside the realm of possibility - given what we have done to the fantastic landscape of Australia, a landscape that once existed in several times and dimensions, peopled with spirits and creatures whose nature we can scarcely imagine - it is not beyond the realms of possibility that bunyips were found and slaughtered, dragged from their lairs in the depths of waterholes and fathomless

billabongs and butchered like cows. Emerging from the depth of water whose nature was bottomless, perhaps changing their form into something more convenient and quotidian, investigating the noises of destruction above, the cries of the dying, the despair of the mothers with their murdered children, they were perhaps mistaken for just another darky, shot and dumped into the billabongs where they sank slowly like bags of leaves.