

## Summer On The Painkalac by Gregory Day

I swim around the riverbends with a childhood friend. The water is fresh but ancient, silken, sepia, then golden when catching the western light. It holds a mirror under our chins as we breaststroke and talk.

My friend lives these days in Hong Kong, a city he calls the New York of Asia. He looks for patches of good humour in a seriously busy life. He also looks out for cul de sacs of nature in his Blade Runner-ish city: an Atlas moth on his doorjamb, a Chinese porcupine on the small patch of forested hill behind his apartment building.

As we approach the new jetty the shire has recently installed at the wide riverbend three goggled holidaymakers, evenly spaced across the river, freestyle towards us. They're obviously not past masters at this as their strokes make quite a foaming splash and racket. By comparison our breaststroke seems almost stealthy.

Something however alerts them to our presence because suddenly, just as we're beginning to divert towards the reeds, their arms stop flailing, their heads spring up, and they remove the goggles from their eyes. They express complete surprise at our presence.

'Get back in your lane,' my friend jokes. The holidaymakers scan our faces, computing, assessing us for balances of irony and seriousness; then, laughing, one joins in on the mirth: 'Sorry,' he says, 'but I couldn't see the line on the bottom.'

This 'silly season' banter is disarming. They regoggle, we pass on by their commotion, with only the paddocks and the northern sky above the hills ahead of us now. We continue slowly towards the wide riverbend where in the aftermath of the humour swallows begin to duck and weave between our ears. The swallows' movements are expert, balletic, hi-tech. They are the rivertop connoisseurs, we are a visitation from another world, a world of ingenious but often fearfully excessive infrastructure.

Now we are swimming into the middle of the wide open bend we have both known since we were born. It is more an elbow than a bend actually, as its turn is something like

a hand-drawn 90 degrees, but a bend is what we have always known it as. A close family friend drowned himself here as an old man to avoid social services. He got up one night in his pyjamas and dressing gown, walked down the little slope from his house behind the pub, folded his bedclothes on the bank as he had been taught as an orphaned child, and jumped into the water like the swaggie in the song. Sometimes these days people use this man's name to denote the bend. Butler's bend, they say. But not Butler's elbow. Through his long and quiet life here in town Joe liked often to wander in for a stout at the pub, so to use elbow would be confusing. For those in the know it would most probably conjure up pictures of him on his stool at the bar. Or behind the bar back in the days when he was publican. So Butler's bend it is.

As we enter the expanse of the bend we see what a fabulous spring it's been for grass. It stands tall in its multishades of green, hale and happy along the far paddock bank. We breaststroke smoothly through the riverskin. We look and discuss modern life as we go, family, politics, work: we are a bit like two banjo frogs twanging along in old and familiar water.

On the southern uncultivated bank to our left, a bank that only recently was rife with boneseed, ragwort and flax-leaf broom, but where now, thanks to a group of local weed-haters, native herbs are asprayed and beaded glasswort prospers in its segmented succulence, we watch for the kangaroos who usually browse on that spot at this time of evening. I tell my friend how the roos make me nervous at times, because of the story of old Reg Vowells and his curly retrievers. Back in the day, those soft-mouthed dogs of Reg loved nothing better than to swim across to the wild bank and hound the roos around and around amidst the acres of sedge, boobialla, weed and tufted common reeds, as if they'd stumbled into some ideal canine video game. Then one day the curly retrievers' fun came to a halt. One of the dogs, in full slobbering chase, was led on by a big buck roo to the river. The roo jumped in and the excited retriever followed, whereupon the buck promptly swivelled about and drowned the dog with a breathtaking deftness.

These days when I am swimming alone and I see the roos right there, first feeding then periscoping their ears as they register my sibilant approach, I imagine the horror of them jumping in beside me. Wincing, I visualise the rip and tear of those prehistoric talons, my

pale skin sliced open, my crimson blood spilling into the sepia stream. I sense the atavistic defence of their domain, their mastery of a habitat that I, as a house-dwelling human swimming in boardshorts, am still at least one remove from.

Anyway, today there are no roos down amongst the brookweed tendrils, no threat amongst the palette of glaucous goosefoot and the summer-reddened glasswort. And so we swim smoothly by.

A few minutes beyond Joe's bend we arrive at the pomaderris hut, on the southern bank about halfway along the next straight stretch of river. The Wybelena hill is straight in front of us in the west: pyramidal, ironbark-clad, with these days the town mobile phone tower perched jagged and grey in a roughly dozed gash at its apex. We can hear the roar of ocean off beyond the hummocks in the south. Treading water I peer through the foliage and point out the hut to my friend. My kids and their friends built it over the quiet winter months, hiding it deep inside a copse of boobiallas. It's in a great spot, out of sight of any house or road or pathway of town, unless you bother to leave the land and swim or canoe upstream. What looks like a random pile of bosky bush is actually watertight cladding on a knobbly frame, worked on secretly all through the snakeless time, and now left unattended through the warmer months, when those same sleeping snakes are awake and weaving like Celtic lace in the sun.

I can see that my friend – whose name is John - is happy that the hut exists. Its dishevelled existence seems a long way from the sheep-like tourist traffic of this time of year, when police helicopters hit the sky, and the crowds come like the Peterburgets and Peterburgenkas swarming to their summer dachas in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. John is happy because, despite the naysayers, the kids' hut is proof that free range childhoods still do occur.

We tread water there for a few minutes, discussing the ins and outs of hut-form, as memories upmerge in us from the depths of our middle-life. We begin to talk of when we were young on this same riverflat, young and 'free' and *brutal*, cheeky and ignorant, but as fit as the roos. We laugh at some of those old events: the daggy new year's eve square dance we boated to upstream, the day we chucked yabbies all over the kitchen walls of some girls we liked (such an elegant way of expressing our attraction!).

Then we swivel in the dark layers of the water, and stretch out, silently kicking our feet down low and spreading our arms to propel us back into the rhythm of our swim.

Now amongst the pastoral grass on the opposite bank to the hut, the cultivated paddock bank, we notice three welcome swallows perched superlightly on the tender stems. The swallows make a tiny vignette amongst the vertical cluster of the grass. It is like haiku but in three dimensions, like something you might see under a Japanese glaze. The way the swallows are positioned also reminds me of music, of bird-notes on a grass-stave, a small living notation.

I say nothing to John but am filled with pleasure at the scene. Despite everything that is going on in the world we are but two seeing-bodies in the river after all, 90% immersed, with no visible appendages, only our heads poking out into the clarifying light.

I see John looking at the three grassperching swallows as we go by. The way they sit so nimbly there. ‘That’s pretty,’ he says. In the normal run of life John is never without his mobile phone, just like I’m pretty fond of my iPad. We both agree that these so-called ‘devices’ are actually much more. They are supercomputers, augmenting our bodies, our memories, fragmenting the ancient constraint of our geographies. Because we are in the river, in only bathers and skin, I am aware that John’s normal impulse to grab for his phone and photograph what has pleased him is thwarted. Swimming side by side I feel that, despite the difference in our lives these days, we are already retuning to each other. I almost inhabit my old friend’s skin as I intuit his impulse to reach for the impossible technological adjunct.

Still looking at the three welcome swallows as we swim quietly by - their russet throats, their Prussian-blue wings - I say:

‘You know the best thing about that scene, John?’

‘No, what?’

‘It’s not on Instagram.’

He smiles, then says, 'I was just thinking what a great photo it would make.'

We leave the swallows behind and swim on. We swim past the small bunch of persistent blackberry bushes that I've been checking regularly for the annual harvest. The flower has just turned to hard budding fruit, so it shouldn't be long. We swim past the slowly dying riverflat redgums where the old kangaroos, or *go-im*, as they were once called in these parts, seek the morning shade on particularly anthropocenic summer days. We swim past the stately black ironbarks at the base of the Wybelena hill, that look as if they've lived forever. Perhaps they have. In the past they were used by the Wadawurrung as sepulchre trees, for sky burials. Their name was *ngangabook*. When local squatters like my own ancestors defined the pastoral lease around here during the nineteenth century land grab they named the lease with that word but left off the glottal *ng* sound at the beginning. The trees, the place, the river, the sea, were all now being looked at with faraway eyes, the sounds they made were heard with different ears, named with a different configuration of the mouth, tongue and throat. With a European alphabet. Beginning with *a*.

We swim into the ironbark shadows and rest for a time, chatting. Like when we were kids we don't talk about the trees. We joke, make each other laugh, and comment on the houses crowding the eastern hill-lines of the town.

Finally we turn and swim back the way we came. It's strange how, when you're breast-stroking along at water level, some stretches of the river seem to be flowing uphill and some downhill. The stretch flowing south back out of the ironbarks seems to be going up and the stretch that runs back past the hut seems to be going down. How does that work? No matter how many times my mariner friends explain it to me I'll never understand. All I know is that illusions are everywhere in the landscapes of water, and that fact alone has always made them somehow talismanic to me. The imaginative world never exists in-itself, but always as a collaboration with our senses, and with mood and feeling.

When we get back to the wide open water of Butler's bend we see that, while we've been upstream, three humans have taken up positions on the new shire jetty on the town bank. Three people: one man, two women. The man is dressed in a rather debonair

fashion: light linen jacket, shoes with heels, a summer trilby. The women are also looking fine. One of them films with her phone as the other two sit on the picnic rug they have lain over the jetty planks, clinking their champagne glasses in a festive new year mood. In that moment the newfangled shire jetty is a celebratory jetty, and I make a mental note. The thing is, when the jetty was built a few of us who live with the river as a store of defragmentation and joy, and who want the riverbank to remain 'natural', decried the jetty as unnecessary, an excess, an environmental tautology.

John and I swim along a little more self-consciously now, like a couple of top-end crocs with the potential to break the happy tourist moment on the new jetty.

But no, the voice of the woman with the phone splits the air. 'Good evening!' she calls, glancing us out of the corner of her eye while continuing to train the screen on her friends. Her words ring out across the water.

'Hello,' John says in bass response, from our stealthy level in the wet brown water.

And then, perhaps because of the fact that I'd mentioned Instagram to John upstream, and therefore had the phone issue rattling about somewhere in my mind, I couldn't help myself.

In suddenly pointed yet quite affable cheer, with the jetty-three still clinking their champagne glasses and the filming woman capturing it all on her arm's length supercomputer, I call out cheekily: 'What do you think would happen if you weren't filming that?'

The woman with the phone is surprised. She pauses, factoring everything in. Even in the soft evening light I can see her face cogitating. I want to say then that it's not because I don't battle my own digital urges that I've asked the question. No, it's just that in the free motion of the river the words came flowing out of me before I could throw up a weir.

The river waits. How will this turn? I wonder.

Eventually I notice her face relax. The question drew closer to its answer. What would

happen if she stopped filming her happy moment with her friends? Opening her arms wide, she finally replies: ‘Well, it wouldn’t exist!’

What I say next is not exactly true but because of her good cheer I call it out anyway.

‘That’s what I thought you’d say.’

Of course that wasn’t actually what I thought she’d say but something in me did think that that was what she may, somewhere in the currents of her being, actually suspect. Or fear. It’s likely too that from time to time my own feet in the river have given a little extra scissor-kick at the thought that if all this wasn’t recorded, edited, posted, or published, it simply wouldn’t exist.

Anyway, now that we’d come this far and had enough ebullience to communicate as strangers across the unifying river, I took an even bigger gamble and said:

‘Well. It puts a new spin on Descartes doesn’t it.’

The mind is as quick as any galaxial beam. I had decided, in the time it takes a *go-im* to drown a dog, or a swallow to land on a grass stem, to make the quite unlikely move of bringing the French philosopher into it. Looking back, I suspect this may have been partly because the woman was, either consciously or unconsciously, referring in her phrasing to his most famous maxim, but it was also because I had decided that it wouldn’t matter in the end if a bunch of visitors on the jetty had no idea who Descartes was or whether or not I was barking mad. Perhaps though such a decision had something more to do with the playful confidence we are afforded by the gravity-free zone of river swimming.

So yes. ‘Well. It puts a new spin on Descartes doesn’t it,’ I said.

The woman holding the supercomputer looked nonplussed at first, but before she could put words to her disorientation it was the dapper man in the summer trilby and cream linen jacket who took up the baton. He saved the moment from veering flat, he deepened the open riverbend even further. Laughing, with champagne glass in hand, and

nodding in acknowledgement, he said, ‘Yes, yes, I *film* therefore I am!’

My smile spread easily above the river. The woman with the supercomputer seemed to relax again then too, and even to understand, as if some distant undergraduate memory had been jogged. It was the same with John. He remembered as well.

But then the dapper man went one better and managed to improve upon his initial response.

‘No, no,’ he cried, triumphant and full of panache. ‘*iPhone* therefore I am!’

We continued on our way then and the man wished us a lovely evening and thanked us for decorating what was already for him a happy scene. We continued quite cheerily beyond Joe’s bend, heading due south, finding our way back into the always uphill-seeming home stretch of the river. We were two childhood friends breaststroking in sync, past the lemon-scented gum where the landrail lives, past the striated stumps of the original jetty site of yore, where we used to fish on baking timbers as small children in the 1970s, in the days before we knew any of the ancient local names for things, let alone what the word tautology meant.

Eventually we arrived back at the river-rope, which hangs from a battle-scarred manna-gum opposite the Carroll’s old house. A big tiger snake’s been living in the bushes there since just before Marg Carroll died so we know to give it a wide berth. I have swum with the snake in the river there though, and so have my children. Its name is *kaan*. Or *kangalang*. I tell John how when a new resident put up handmade texta-drawn signs alerting visitors to the snake it had the happy effect of keeping people away from the river. An old fashioned quiet had temporarily returned. *Kaan* and us were free to swim in peace. Even fear can sometimes have wonderful consequences.

John and I stopped just there but rather than climbing out and swinging from the rope like we might have done once, we treaded water and peered into the opposite bank, where over the previous few weeks I’d watched a white guano nest being secretly fashioned amongst the boobialla branches by a willie wagtail couple. *There*, I whispered to John, nodding my head but not wanting to point in case anyone walking by on the river

road might see me and be alerted to the nest. John peered in the direction and then we both could see the female wagtail, the thin white markings of her glossy black brows, sitting snug but wary in her pottery nest.

I was keen to look but not to linger, to observe the nest but to move slowly by, so as not to distress the mother bird unnecessarily on her eggs. John was more inquisitive. Because he lives a long way away nowadays and was only visiting his family home for the new year, he hadn't seen the nest being constructed like I had. Thus he was enchanted, and naturally super curious. He veered off on a slow diagonal towards the musty aqueous shadows of the boobialla fronds.

By this stage I'd gone on ahead a bit, and was quietly willing him to realign to the centre of the river and to come on up beside me and swim on. I didn't want to say anything though, I wanted him to sum it all up for himself. I was confident he would. John's father Hec had been a great champion of the riverbirds when we were young, a real classic twitcher complete with binoculars and stats. I felt sure that the son of Hec wouldn't trespass much further.

And so it went. Once again two old friends were tuned in by the river and *voilà!*, John veered away from the tableau of nest and frond, tree and stream, mother and child. He stroked his way back towards me. Then, with our chins resting on the soft ledge of the rivertop, we swam on side by side for the last little stretch we had remaining.

Finally approaching the spot under the pines where we'd begun our swim an hour or so earlier we caught sight of John's sister and her farmer-husband walking along the river road. John had told me earlier that he was expecting them. They were coming down for the new year celebrations from their grape farm in northern Victoria.

'G'day,' we called.

'G'day,' they replied.

'Have you done a lap?' his sister Anne called then, with smiling ironic eyes, as if a lap of such an intricately curling thing as our eely river would ever be possible.

John and I chuckled, causing micro-flurries of humour in the stream. Then I saw the insignia of a familiar football team on John's sister's farmer-husband's cap. Immediately I made a jovial remark across the water, as if to say: despite how things may have changed around here and in the world at large, despite the rise in the price of everything and the gap between rich and poor, and how that means the old town seems at times to have been invaded by cold fish and stressy gentry, despite the fact that barely known French philosophers are these days being discussed openly from the centre across to the edges of the stream, we still know how to extend a good ol' down-to-earth gumbranch of camaraderie.

A half-shouted conversation thus ensued, about John's brother-in-law's footy team, the season just gone, the season ahead, me in the river, he on the bank, moving us along towards the end of our swim. Though he didn't have a loudhailer we were I suppose a little like a rower and his coach, calling across the divide between water and land. It was fun, and we seemed to agree on the important things.

Suddenly then, before we knew it, John and I had arrived back at our starting point. Suddenly too we'd emerged from the waters and were standing upright in the somehow less rarefied and certainly cooler air of normal life.

John's sister and her farmer-husband came over and shook our hands warmly by way of saying an official hello. Perhaps, if you were watching all this from a distance, you might have imagined this shaking of our hands as a form of congratulations for some great river swim John and I had just completed. We had swum the English Channel hadn't we? We had forded the wild Orinoco. Surely we had braved the eye of the needle and crossed Bass Strait?

No, we had merely performed ordinary feats in familiar summer waters. We had swum our way back into the magic of our childhood river. As one year was finishing and a new one beginning we had managed not to drown in nostalgia. We had allowed ourselves instead to be carried side by side in the old current, letting the place and its multi-storied spirit touch our skin. We had refreshed the past to use as ballast for the future. We had allowed the river, for an hour or so, to retune our receptors and detune our limbs.

Temporarily at least it had washed away what ails us all, the glary politicking on dry land, our click & swipe addictions, all the unnecessary distance we put between one another.

As I walked back to my house I thought of that willie wagtail on its pottery nest and the old Wadawurrung name flew into my mind. *Yellpillup*. The tail wags for sure but that alone could never describe the whole bird.