

NATURE WRITING PRIZE 2017 HIGHLY COMMENDED ESSAY

'Wittenoom' by Kelley Mether

The gorges of Wittenoom.

The gorgeous of Wittenoom.

Wit and doom. Doomed Wittenoom.

Or was it: My doom, Wittenoom?

Of course, I didn't know it was doomed back then. 1991. People still lived there. Not many. The driver and his daughter did, luckily for us.

We hitched out of Karratha, a tiny town perched right up on the coast of Western Australia. Like most of the small towns in the Pilbara, it only existed to serve the mines. There's nothing to keep you there, unless you particularly like mosquitos. A shopkeeper there told me that mozzie repellent is the Perfume of the Pilbara. Karl didn't get the joke. I had met Karl the Kraut at a backpacker's hostel back in Perth. We'd already hitched roughly one and a half thousand kilometres together. He was more than half in love with me. I thought Karl the Kraut was a term of endearment.

Back in Germany Karl spent most of his youth poring over books about Australia. He was besotted with the place. I think he wanted to be in love with me to round out his Australian fantasy. I'm sure every time he'd imagined Australia there he was with his arm around a little sunburned Aussie chick, Ayers Rock in the background. He was good to hitch with - brilliant, actually. We never waited long. He had a certain way of doing it, and insisted I follow suit: no sunglasses allowed, ever. We squinted into the glaring Western sun, our faces forced into open-mouthed grimace-smiles. He said it made us look friendlier. It always worked.

The driver and his daughter lived in Wittenoom. As it turned out, we were lucky someone who actually lived in the town picked us up; apparently, it only had a population of about fifty. Any other traffic would be heading out to the live mines and chances where we'd have been stuck at some cross road in the stinking heat in the middle of nowhere, possibly for a couple of days between vehicles. He'd been shopping at Karratha, and he'd chanced upon us on the outskirts of town. He always picked up hitchhikers, he said. It was good for his daughter, he said. The girl looked up at her dad, her eyes bright. Since I'd climbed up into the cab she'd been playing cranial ping-pong; she was squashed in between us and stayed silent the whole way, her eyes excited at the adult conversation she was overhearing. I asked her how old she was. She held up one hand, closing and opening her hand twice, then put up another two fingers. Twelve, I

guessed out loud. She grinned in sheer delight. I asked her dad if there were any other kids in town. He threw a smile my way and winked at his daughter. What do you know about Wittenoom, he asked me.

Not much, I had to admit. I recited from Karl's oft-repeated spiel. Poor Karl could have told them himself, but he wasn't in a very good position. The flatbed truck we were travelling in consisted of the single cab that I was comfortably squished into, and an old tractor tied down to the flatbed. Karl was in the tractor. There was no suspension on the flatbed. And to add to his discomfort, we were taking the inland route, not the longer, more regularly used bitumen route via Port Hedland. Almost two hundred and ninety kilometres of unsealed road. I turned to watch poor Karl bounce around inside the tractor once we hit the red corrugated dirt, but it got too painful to watch. And besides, I couldn't bear for him to see me laughing.

I began: township of Wittenoom. Used to be a mining town, now deemed unsafe for human habitation. The township was at the end of Wittenoom Gorge, which was apparently full of stunning scenery. On the border of the beautiful Hammersly Ranges. End of recital.

The driver and his daughter exchanged smirks. They looked like they were mocking my dumbed-down Lonely Planet version of events. Now I was obviously going to get the real story. The girl settled back into her seat, ready for the well-loved tale. The driver enthusiastically obliged.

Asbestos mining started in the 1940s at Wittenoom Gorge. The township of Wittenoom was established in 1947 specifically to serve the Wittenoom mining force, and by the mid-1950s it peaked at a population of five hundred odd souls. Odd probably being the correct word, according to the driver. The town's life was short-lived: a decade later, diseases such as asbestosis and mesothelioma resulting from asbestos inhalation had become world news, but not before the popular blue asbestos from the mines had become de rigueur for use in the construction of an extremely large number of Australian houses built over that time. The desert is a windy place. Wittenoom is not technically desert, but the drive between Karratha and Wittenoom was certainly desert-like, and Wittenoom was windy. Tailings, the leftover dust from the mines, covered the streets and houses of Wittenoom. What to do? According to the driver's version of events, the government got scared and over-reacted.

In response to growing public hysteria and deliberate misinformation the Western Australian government decided to start shutting down the town in 1978. Residents were encouraged to leave with government land buy-back schemes, and people started to move away. There was no reason to stay anyway - the mines were closed. Wittenoom was remote - far too remote for the tourist industry to take an interest, even if the town's residents wanted them to. The driver just wanted him and his daughter, and the few remaining townsfolk, to be left alone to

live a quiet life. There was no school, no medical centre, no shop. The way he told it, it was utopia. She's the last kid in town, he went on, jerking his head towards his daughter. Everyone loves her. She gets too much attention. I asked about school. He shrugged, with very real unconcern. He obviously didn't give a shit. She learns from me, he said. Do you worry about your daughter inhaling the asbestos, I asked. He shrugged again. It's not as bad as the government makes out. You just have to be careful. Yes, he said, it did make up almost a foot-thick layer of the soil throughout the whole town, but all that meant was that you had to grow your veggies hydroponically. Don't disturb the soil. Simple.

Outside the car I watched as a willy-willy rose up suddenly, its small tornado force whipping leaves and dirt into its centre, keeping pace a few metres with the truck before veering off and heading over the bush, petering out weakly as it hit the bigger of the scrub trees. Willy-willies are so common and un-dangerous they don't usually get noticed. Now I imagined it sweeping over the parched red dirt, swirling through the main street of town, picking up tailings and dust and going up my nose. Was I scared? No. I was young, invincible. In retrospect, add: stupid. How to describe the land between Karratha and Wittenoom? This is not the beauty of rambling walks in rolling hills. It is not the sun-seared beauty of a sand desert. And it is definitely not the fecund beauty of a rain forest. The land at the top of Western Australia is raw, survivalist beauty. You would not get lost in the trees. You would get lost in the unending openness. Low, knee high native grasses, sharp even through your jeans, the few trees a distant tease, beckoning you out of the harsh sun into their sparse shade. Only to get there, look back, and not be able to work out which direction you came from. Never ending sameness. Everything, even the tree trunks, in various shades of white, red, orange, ochre. Dust, the faded hue of the iron-infused soil. It's beautiful, but it's also death. There's no food, there's no water, and there's no traffic. I was glad to be in the cab and I hoped to god the old truck didn't break down.

The humidity made shimmering mirages rise above the road. I played a game with the driver where we tried to give a name to every shade of red that we passed. Giant anthill - ochre. Stained trunk of a gum tree - rust. Corrugated road - iron. Some sort of parrot - crimson. The rule was that we had to avoid the word red. I spotted a rusted out wreck of a car lying upside down just off the road and said vermilion. The driver burst out laughing. What's vermilion look like, he said. I dunno, I replied, but it sounds good. We were having fun and it wasn't really surprising that we didn't see the kangaroo until it was almost too late. It was a red kangaroo, of course, and big. We hit the brakes and swerved sharply, the kangaroo sensing the danger it was in with just enough time to give one huge thrust of its tail and back legs and go leaping straight over the bonnet of the car. We continued in shaken silence and I craned my head

around to look at Karl. He was staring after the disappearing kangaroo and looked as white as a ghost. I snickered inappropriately. If we'd hit the animal, it would have been an Aussie versus German stand-off: the driver and I ready to carve the road kill for food and Karl wanting to dig a hole and give it a decent funeral. It would have been hilarious.

I became aware of a repetitive slurping sound. I looked down at the girl. After her father's tale, a comfortable silence had fallen; now she wanted more entertainment. A thin cotton string with a colourful paper tag attached to the end of it hung from her mouth. She was sucking on it. Horror must have registered on my face because she grinned and stuck her tongue out at me. A worn out looking tea bag perched on it. What on earth are you doing, I asked. She pointed at a styrofoam cup stuck in the drinks holder. It was half full of tea-coloured water. Still grinning at me, she took the tea bag from her mouth and dipped it into the tea, before quickly popping it back into her mouth. Her eyes danced. That's gross, I said, smiling at her. I thought she was showing off for me. Yeah, she loves it, said the driver. I've told her it'll rot her teeth. She puts four teaspoons of sugar in the tea. I have four teaspoons of sugar in my tea too, I told her. I decided I loved her.

Is he your boyfriend, asked the driver, jerking his chin toward the back of the flatbed? No, just a backpacking friend, I replied. He doesn't think that, said the driver. At the word 'boyfriend', the girl had perked up even more, watching me with interest. I smiled at her as I answered, enjoying her attention. I was probably closer to her age than most of the adults in Wittenoom, the way things sounded. Karl thinks he's my boyfriend, but that's because he's romantic and wants to have an Australian girlfriend to match his Australian adventure. It was my turn to shrug. He's fun. The driver was only a few years older than me, but he gave off no sexual overtones whatsoever. He was one of those men you felt you could talk to without the worry of having to fend him off later. Eventually I would get to meet his girlfriend in Wittenoom and I would find out my instinctive trust of him was vindicated. For now, we lapsed back into easy chitchat as the unending miles rolled by, with the daughter continuing her role as the silent ping-pong spectator.

Wittenoom's corrugated iron roofs reflected the sun back at us long before we reached the town. There wasn't much to it. As we drove in I could see that most of the houses were deserted. The Gem Shop and Doc Holiday's Cafe were the only two businesses that looked like they were actually still businesses, although they too appeared deserted. Being purpose-built to house and serve miners and their families, this town had never been pretty. But you only had to look out, not very far, to see the escarpment looming up out of the flat land. Behind Doc Holiday's Cafe the spiteful spinifex grass grew in pretty, grey-green, rounded humps, luring the unwary to walk between them. It stretched out for a kilometre or so before meeting

the base of the escarpment, which rose sharply and majestically, the dry-red-slippery rocks striated with brave attempts by the grasses to take root on the slope. On either side of the escarpment the land rolled off, dusty, sparse, breathtaking in its endlessness. I realised that Wittenoom was set into a perfect, early British artist's interpretation of the stark, untamable Australian bush.

They lived in a typical square asbestos box. A big enough box, though. There was no garden, just more of the grey-black asbestos dust that covered the whole town. They had a pretty cool collection of old metal security doors welded together to form the basis of their hydroponic vegetable plantation. On closer inspection, I was unsurprised to find it was actually a dope plantation. No matter, the police station had closed down years ago. The daughter enthusiastically showed me how the system worked without saying a single word. Poor Karl, still limping and looking bruised from his tractor bouncing experience, was explaining to the driver our plans for hiking into Wittenoom Gorge and exploring the old mine sites and the famously beautiful waterholes. The driver was enthusiastic too. Next thing his girlfriend was rolling up on a motorbike and between the two of them they sorted out all the camping things we didn't have - camp stove, fuel, tent. We weren't heavyweight backpackers, we were amateurs.

We spent that evening in a dope-induced torpor. The driver and his girlfriend expounded at length on the government conspiracy to scaremonger the asbestos mining industry to death. Something about a richer, rival mining company bribing the government to close down the Wittenoom mines so they could open another one elsewhere, give it a different name so it was no longer associated with the diseases of asbestos, shady international backers, off-shore accounts, the usual conspiracy crap. Then they started snogging and crawled into their bedroom. Karl and I writhed around a bit on the floor but were too stoned to take it seriously, then suddenly realised that the sun had gone down, and it was freezing. We scampered into our respective sleeping bags. I was a bit worried the next morning; we'd been shivering from the cold all night, and we weren't even out in the open yet. But tough, determined, intrepid travellers we fancied ourselves to be, so mid-morning found us waving goodbye to our benefactors, backpacks loaded with food and water, and vague instructions to head "that way", with the driver pointing a finger to the end of his street.

They were pretty accurate directions. A dirt track led downwards from the end of his street, a well-worn path that cut through the spinifex, gently descending along a scrubby grey hill. In the distance, we could already see the gorge - we were walking down into it, over about a kilometre of rock and gravel. The gorge cliffs rose steeply vertical as the path widened. Just before we entered we came across our first real evidence of mining. Two smallish rusty

corrugated sheds, their doors hanging slackly open, revealing decaying old machinery. The sheds were already the ochre colour of the surrounding cliffs, probably more symptomatic of dust than age. Bits of man-made metal scraps lay around as if thrown down in a fit of rage when the last miners were told it was all over. It had an odour of neglect. The townspeople of Wittenoom had wanted to turn this place into a tourist attraction, keep the old machinery and huts and sheds as evidence of a bygone time. But nature was reclaiming it fast. In a few years, it would be like one of those three-dimensional illusions, where you have to bend the paper a certain way to make the object stand out from the background. The shed would be part of the cliff behind it, only making itself known when the sun made a certain shadow fall from it. We left it behind us and descended into the gorge.

We probably walked fifteen kilometres that day. There was no real danger of getting lost. Sometimes the gorge widened dramatically, like a vast plain, but in the distance, either side, we were hemmed in safely. The landscape made for easy walking; the native grasses became gentler and more scant, it was flat, not very rocky. As the sun moved over us it bestowed an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colours, reflecting off the steep cliffs and the white trunks of the gum trees clustered around the swimming holes at the base of the cliffs. In the early stages of our hike the most striking thing was the complete, utter, silence. This was not a place that anyone visits. This was no Gold Coast, Great Barrier Reef, or Sydney Harbour. In the glaring heat, even the birds were hushed. The sound of our clodding, inept feet in their comfortable western hiking boots jarred the silence, bounced off the cliffs and echoed, a fraction of a second too late to feel that the sound really belonged to us. The stillness struck us dumb and our dumbness played on our nerves. I conjured up groups of Aboriginals, long since believed to be gone from this area, hiding and watching us. It was easy to imagine.

We came across many more mine sites. There were often huge piles of tailings surrounding disused sheds and old conveyor belts. We didn't disturb them but we didn't avoid them either. By midday the sun had reached its peak and we were sweltering. A few hundred metres away a large gathering of tall trees erupted in screeching white flight as we disturbed a huge flock of sulphur-crested cockatoos, so we moved toward the trees to see what they were so interested in. It was a real waterhole. Not just the shallow depressions filled with a couple of feet of crystal clear water that we had seen thus far, but a proper, big, waterhole. To the far end a smattering of pretty wild water lilies were open, their bright pink faces soaking up the sun, but the rest of the water was clear for the first few shallow feet, then quickly dropped off to the scary black of deep water.

We scrambled out of our clothes and jumped in. The water felt silky clean and cool. After a while we pulled out the camp stove and cooked ourselves a lunch of two minute noodles and

tea. We used the water from the waterhole and tea never tasted so good. I poured some of the tea onto a rock next to the waterhole and we marveled at the similar colours. Then something clicked in me and I looked more closely at the trees dipping their exposed roots into the water. Tea trees, I said, pointing them out to Karl. They give the water its colour. He looked confused. Ti trees, he said back, spelling out each letter. T.I. Not T.E.A. Just in case I didn't catch on. T.E.A. I said stubbornly, already knowing I was wrong but refusing to back down. It's the tannin in the leaves, just like the tannin in tea, I continued knowledgeably. That's where it gets its name. He dismissed me with a patronising shake of his head. I pretended I'd won. Afterwards we packed up our rubbish and carried it with us like the good environmentalist backpackers we were. We were still starving and unpacking our food supplies had made us aware that we had seriously underestimated just how hungry all the walking was going to make us. That's not going to last us two nights, I said. It has to, he replied matter-of-factly. No way was Karl going to let this little Australian ruin his perfect Australian fantasy with a dose of reality.

The rest of the afternoon we moved slowly. We had no end-point in mind anyway. The plan was just to walk till we were too tired to go on, then find a good place to camp for the night. We were spoilt for choice. At a bend in the gorge we found another deep waterhole. A circle of trees formed a natural shade shelter, so we decided to set up camp while it was still light. We had no torches. Karl astonished me by getting a blazing fire going within minutes. Do you have boy scouts in Germany, I asked him. No, but I always wanted to be an arsonist, he replied. I laughed but the trouble with Karl was that I never knew if was trying to be funny or not. I'm pretty sure he was serious this time, which made it funnier.

The mercury plummeted immediately the sun finished its last dazzling display. It was like the sun was saying: Right. I'm finished now. Off you go straight to bed. So we did. We woke not much later to the sound and feel of the wind hurtling down the gorge and whipping straight through our tent. We scrambled to zip everything up, but it was too late, we were covered in dust. That didn't worry us as much as the bitter cold the wind brought with it. We shivered most of the night, falling asleep from sheer exhaustion in the wee hours. It seemed only minutes later that we woke to the incredible earsplitting noise of what seemed the whole Australian bird population making its way down through the gorge the minute the sun peeped over the horizon. We watched in amazement as flocks of brilliantly coloured birds zoomed past us. There must be something at the other end of the gorge they want to eat, I said. Karl said maybe the end of the world was coming and the birds were escaping while they could. In the early morning light, it was easy to imagine this as the last place left on earth. It was eerie and beautiful, apocalyptic when you remembered the wind howling through during the night.

We ate a pretty big breakfast. We hadn't discussed it but we both knew that we'd be walking out that day. Even Karl wasn't willing to go through another night like that. It didn't spoil our mood though. We huddled close to a raging fire and watched the sun bring the gorge to life. It was spectacular. Small lizards scurried, and a few goannas, over a metre long, came to look at what the good smells were at our campsite. They obviously weren't used to humans and were completely unafraid. A massive water monitor heaved itself out of the waterhole and onto a rock ledge on the cliff as soon as the sun hit it, and went immediately to sleep. Further away amongst the native grasses a few smallish kangaroos grazed. I pointed them out to Karl. All foreigners love our kangaroos. He looked back at me scornfully. They're not kangaroos, he said witheringly. They're wallabies. I told him they were actually joeys. I had no idea what the difference was but I started an argument just for the sake of it. It was my country, after all.

Packing up the campsite proved a messy business. We pulled the sleeping bags out first and vigorously shook the dust out of them before stuffing them carelessly into the backpacks with our clothes and toothbrushes. Then we each took a corner of the tent and flipped it around violently. The dust flew in every direction. Did I think for a moment that it may be unwise to be throwing this dust into the air and all over us? Not for one second. I was too young to take the newspapers seriously and besides, the driver's cavalier attitude toward the asbestos had really dulled any fears I might have, should have, had. So we threw more dust around and spread it through our backpacks and over our food and continued on our merry adventure. This time, we crossed over through the wide plains, walking toward where the kangaroorwallabyjoeys were still grazing, skirting around them as they stared at us wide-eyed and interested, and heading back through the gorge on the opposite side.

The last day was a blur of beauty. When I have tried, over the years, to explain what was different about Wittenoom Gorge, I've always found myself at a loss for words. It was sort of like being in a majestic old church. The silence and the reverence. It was sort of like being in an art gallery of Australian landscapes, you could imagine the early settlers trying to scratch out a life in the harsh surrounds, or even escaped convicts on the run and living wild. It was sort of like being in the Garden of Eden, if you excused the fact that Karl and I were a long way from innocent. It was sort of like being the last people left on earth, the isolation of it. We swam in several more waterholes. One I remember most clearly abutted a beautiful deep red cliff, and about one metre above the waterline there was a large natural hollow, an indentation in the rock that immediately brought to mind the image of an Aboriginal burial site, or other sacred usage. We managed to wrestle our way up to it but it was empty. We took turns sitting in it and pretending to meditate. It seemed appropriate.

When we got back to the first mining site we had come across at the very start of the gorge,

we sat down on a small hillock of black tailings and gazed back at where we had been. If I had known then how unique this adventure would be in my life, maybe we would have stayed longer. Maybe we would have gone back to the driver's house, resupplied our food and got an extra sleeping bag each, and headed back into the gorge. But I was young and the rest of the world beckoned, so after a brief rest we hauled ourselves back up and onwards to the little town of Wittenoom. A day later we hitched back out with a friend of the driver's who was heading up to Port Hedland to go to a mate's barbecue. Must be a good mate, to be driving nearly three hundred kilometres to his barbecue, I commented. He looked at me blankly. That's how far I drive for everything, he said.

Wittenoom officially does not exist now. The government closed it down to such an extent that even its name was scrubbed off road signs along the highways. The airport was closed in 1993, and the electricity and all services were cut off in 2006. I've heard that three stubborn residents still live there, growing their own veggies and using generators. I doubt that the daughter would still be there. That girl was silent but full of noise and life. I could imagine the driver still there though, doped up to his eyeballs and cursing the government. Studies undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s deemed Wittenoom and its gorge to be potentially dangerous to humans, and there have been no real attempts to get tourism going there. Now I remember its silent beauty and I'm glad. Since I was there, asbestos and mesothelioma have increasingly made headlines, and I know now how dangerous my Wittenoom adventure may have been. I'm glad we never went back for that second night.

Wittenoom.

Beautiful, doomed, Wittenoom.

We came. We saw. It remains to be seen who was conquered.

Cough cough.