

Walaaybaa (Country)

Judi Morison

My mind adrift. *Yarraan* (river red gum) leaf spinning on a waterhole. *Gulayaali* (pelican) riding the air currents. I'm mapping country, acknowledging country I've known. Mud mapping at the water's edge. Mapping connections. Connecting then to now, now to then. All is connected. Connection is all.

Wangal 1

I'm born on *Wangal* country, at Concord [**concord** *n.* **1.** agreement between persons. **2.** peace. **3.** compact or treaty.] Where was the concord in February 1788, when Captain John Hunter sailed west from *War-ran* (Sydney Cove), past salt marsh full of waterbirds, fish and crabs, to stake more land for Empire?

Born while my father's *Gomerioi* mob were still verandahed – isolated, excluded – on the McMasters Ward in Moree. I'm raised right and proper – not the same as proper way – in a 1930s brick bungalow on Burwood Road. Home is choko vine and sweet peas on paling fences. Paths lined with lambs ears. A houseful of aunts and uncles, Friday cake-baking. Weekends, Dad back from working out bush, perched on his knee, drinking sweet, milky tea.

Home is Mum reading *Alice in Wonderland*. Howard Craven's 'Rumpus Room' and Bob Dyer's 'Pick a Box' on a brown bakelite radio. Hanging from the front gate, waiting for Big Sis to come home from school. Birthday parties with pastel nylon frocks and fairy bread, Sunday School. Dad chasing a chook around the yard on Christmas Eve, Mum in the kitchen, plucking feathers.

May 1954. With Mum in Concord Park, Big Sis lined up with her kindy class. All jostling to see the fairytale pair drive by – to wave. They renamed it Queen Elizabeth Park, pretending she was our Queen.

Gundungurra 1

A picnic at Oberon. First memories of *Gundungurra* country. Bluebag sky and pine resin. I wear a hand-knitted jumper – prickly – and royal blue beanie. Dad makes a fire, boils the billy. Stirs the tea with a gum twig and swings the billy overarm. Magic! Sausages on a grill, air smoky with fat spluttering into flame. We're camped on a creek bank. Clear water laughing over fat brown stones, smooth and polished, ice cold.

Burramatta

Dad builds a new house at Cabarita, which might mean 'by the water' in *Dharug*. Lost language throws us off the scent. The house squats high above the river, on a sandstone shelf over Hen and Chicken Bay. *Eora* from Port Jackson and surrounds met here to trade, share food and stories.

They named the river Parramatta, from the *Burramatta* people – *burra* meaning place, *matta* meaning eels. The river dissects the twenty-nine clans of the *Eora* nation, bound by the *Dyarubbin* (Hawkesbury), *Yandhai* (Nepean) and Georges rivers.

A later time, at *Burramattagal* Eel Festival, Elizabeth Farm, I celebrate the eel migration. From fresh water to the sea, and back again. The river runs fresh, then estuarine. Salt and fresh water mix. Salt of the earth. That's us. Yarning with mob, sucking fingers oily with Uncle Fred's barbeque-smoked eel. Fresh water, salt water people connecting.

Darkinjung

Summer holidays at Tuggerah Lake. The old Buick, packed with supplies, winds the Hawkesbury River road, through Gosford and Wyong, to a rented cottage at The Entrance, Long Jetty or Toukley. *Darkinjung* country.

Like Mum, I'm fair. Zinc-creamed and t-shirted against the sun. Big Sis, like Dad, isn't. A freshwater man – grown up in creeks and dams – he fears the sea. Respects it.

Teaches us to dog-paddle, to swim and dive through the pillars of his legs. At the boathouse we hire canoes and paddle the weed-flecked lake, counting jelly-fish. The water remembers us.

Some nights, after tea, when the moon is right, we haul out the prawning net, just as the old people did. In sandshoes for the toadfish, holding tight to Dad's hand, we drag the net through murky shallows. Stay in the glow of the Tilley lamp, drawing the prawns in. Around our knees, translucent forms flicker like the moths they mimic. On the beach, water boils in a kero tin. If we stay awake, we'll share in buttered bread with salt and vinegared prawns.

Wangal 2

Another home, in Concord West. An 1870s cottage, a fireplace in every room. Off the back verandah, a kitchen with a fuel stove. Fried scones and golden syrup. Sundays, bread and dripping from the roast lamb pan. Outside, a dirt-floor laundry with a copper for boiling clothes. Peach and apricot trees to climb. A chook-shed cubbyhouse. For Christmas, a Maid Marion outfit – with real bow and arrow. Dad worries we're deprived and lets us have a cat. We name her Killer and wheel her around, dressed in babies' clothes, in an old stroller.

Kameygal

We move to Oatley, named for a pardoned convict they gave three hundred acres, near the Georges River – its true name one more word lost. Another river. Boundary for the *Dharug* to the north and *Dharawal* to the south, it coils north-east, fifty miles from Appin swamps, connecting with the waters of *Ka-may* (Botany Bay). Along its length – still – engravings, campsites, middens tell of connecting, feasting, Dreaming.

Oatley is on *Dharug* land. Our new home perches above Gungah Bay, the block falling down to the river. Oyster farmers lease the cove where the *Kameygal* band gathered shellfish, snared waterbirds, caught jewfish.

Saturdays, Big Sis and I pack lunch and scramble through the bush, stomping loudly, warning snakes away. Eat vegemite sandwiches on a sandstone ledge then descend to the river. Knock oysters off the rocks and smash them open. Suck salty flesh, warm and gritty, from the shell. Squat beneath a honeycomb overhang black with smoke. Whose fires burned here? Where did they go? What clues did I miss at ten?

Gadigal

Sydney University. I miss the Freedom Ride but catch the vibe. Tutor for The Settlement and march for Land Rights. Rent share houses in Chippendale and Waterloo. Play snooker with blackfellas in Redfern pubs. The local cops don't play nice. Burst into our house one night wanting drugs or sex. Three educated 'white' sisters stand up to them. What chance do my black sisters have?

Gadigal land is first contact country. Remember. April 1789 at *War-ran* (Sydney Cove). *All dead! All dead!* The smallpox spread, like in America. Was First Fleet Surgeon John White's vial of pus unstoppered, or a handkerchief with scabs left as a gift?

Today we have *Barangaroo*, named for one of Bennelong's wives. The old ones fished and hunted there for eons, their middens used to lime the colonists' homes. It's summer. Through Wynyard's psychedelic tunnel to Hickson Road I walk at dawn. Our mob is gathered at the Reserve. Sandalwood smokes, yidaki moans. Dancers tread the mindful earth, clapsticks beat eternal time. Elders speak of resilience and a choir sings in language. Survival Day.

Gundungurra 2

I leave *Eora* country for a new home in Blackheath. Pied currawongs sing onomatopoeic songs. Scarlet-breasted king-parrots raid the cherry tree. Yellow-tailed black-cockatoos drop pine cone bombs and wail their way across the sky to warn of rain. For months it pours.

One winter morning, I wake to radiant quiet. No birds. Then high-pitched laughter gives the game away. It's snowed. Until the spring, bronze-green bowerbirds descend in flocks to feed.

Everywhere on *Gundungurra* land are signs of the old people. Grinding grooves, shelters, caves. Rock paintings, engravings of the stars, of wallabies, fish and birds. Men's and women's sites, birthing and burial sites. Life was rich here before Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth 'found' a way across the range and sowed the seeds of conflict.

The Bathurst War: between the *Wiradjuri* nation and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. January 1824 to 28 December 1824. A British victory. Over 1,000 Wiradjuri men, women, children died.

We walk the Six Foot Track, three days from Nellies Glen to Jenolan Caves. In the Megalong Valley we ford the Cox's River and next day breast the bleak Black Range. Along a fire trail, the leader steers us to the right. On our left, a red-bellied black snake, two metres long. A quarter of its length upright, it flaunts its crimson flanks. We obey the command – slowly – eyes glued to the reptile's round, dark orbs. Once past, all exhale. The serpent lowers itself, uncoils, and winds off through the scrub. Caves House—an anticlimax.

I drive down to Sydney, not long back from Brisbane, where my father is in hospital. But Dad's invincible; he'll pull through. Sunlight flashes off red-tipped gums and the early morning mountains hum. On the road at Woodford Bends, a kookaburra, Dad's favourite bird, lies like a flung toy. As we approach, one wing is lifted by the slipstream of the car ahead. A slow-motion wave. I could almost count the azure speckles on the mottled brown plumes. *That's sad*, I say. *Kookaburras mate for life*. In Sydney, I'm told to phone my mother. *Your Dad's gone*, she says. *He went peacefully, this morning*.

I drive up through *Gomeroi* country. At the funeral I don't wail and daub my face with clay, or beat my head with stones to bring the blood. My tears come later, when I want to know what he remembers of his *Gomeroi* land, or how to mend a screen door. All the questions I have to ask will stay unanswered. But when I sense I'm being watched, and hear that swelling cackle from a powerline or eucalypt, I know his spirit's close.

Spirit is what holds us strong. The old people who stayed on after the convict road across the range were forced out of Burragorang for Warragamba Dam, then evicted from Katoomba for a racetrack in the 1950s. They kept fighting for their place. In 2002, The Gully, headwaters of Katoomba Falls Creek, was handed back to the *Gundungurra* and *Darug* peoples.

Gomeri 1

Gomeri are my mob. Here's a history lesson. Red black soil on the Liverpool Plains. September through October 1827 at Yarramanbah, Quirindi, twenty plus *Gomeri* or *Guyinbaraay* – identity unimportant – shot for speared cattle. June and July 1836, eighty *Gomeri* 'cleared' near Barraba. November 1837 at Gravesend Mountain, two hundred *Gomeri* for two stockmen. At Waterloo Creek, 26 January 1838, forty *Gomeri* for one wounded trooper. Slaughterhouse Creek at dawn, 1 May 1838, three hundred *Gomeri*. Myall Creek, 10 June 1838, twenty-eight *Gomeri*, roped, hacked, bodies burnt. Seven stockmen hung. It didn't stop.

I'm blood mapping, mapping massacres. [**massacre** *n.* **1.** the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a number of human beings. **2.** a general slaughter of human beings.]

Wadi Wadi 1

I move from the mountains to the coast, driving south-east through Appin. It has a black history too. By moonlight, on 17 April 1816, seven *Gundungurra* shot or sabred, seven rushed off a cliff, five captured. Two bodies hung on McGee's Hill.

In Wollongong, studying and teaching beneath the mountain they call Keira, I meet a wise Aunt. She tells me Grandmother Mountain is a learning place. The pull of it each time I'm close! So strong the whitefellas built their institutions at its foot. Grandfather Mountain (Kembla) sits beside her. Not my stories to tell.

Time after time Aunt welcomes me to her *Wadi Wadi* country. ‘*Yalunga! Yalunga!* Come in! Come in!’ she sings. She shares her crows with me. The whirr of their wings as they fly by blesses me. They’re sharp and funny like her. She shares Coomaditchie Lagoon, where she was grown up, and Five Islands, where pelicans and seals breed, and whales come in to shelter as they migrate south with calves.

Driving with Aunt to Huskisson to visit Uncle Laddie – painter, pyrographer, storyteller like most blackfellas – we cross the Minnamurra River. On 1 October 1818, by night with muskets and bayonets, settlers shot and slashed six *Dharawal* at their riverside camp. The only massacre site recorded in Kiama. Driving on, Aunt nods toward the escarpment. Another site, not listed. Not forgotten.

Gomeri 2

I take the train north-west, back to the country where I belong. From behind the range on my right a full moon rises. The sun sinks red-gold on my left. Across the plains a drought has broken and the dams are full. With cousins, I drive out to where our *Gomeri* roots grew, between Garah and Mungindi, still cut-off by flood. The creeks and waterholes remember us.

I’ve arranged a visit to the run first leased by my convict great-grandfather. Native grasses once covered this plain and sweet water flowed freely down fish-filled creeks. Now 8,000 hectares of self-mulching loam, fragile cracking clay, are sown with thirsty cotton, fed by channels, pumps and dams.

Yuin

For decades I’ve visited Yuin country. I first camp at Lake Conjola in my twenties, heal there in my thirties, and return to plunge down sandhills into window-clear water. Weightless, as flathead drift in on the tide, bream shoals dart and flutter. The lake is lazy afternoons with lorikeets and grazing roos, nights around the fire, and fresh-caught blackfish for breakfast.

Years later, I walk the beach at Meringo, the tide-line a rattle of grinding shells, the shoreline kelp-snarled. The old salt moon still lures fish to ancient middens. Along the track that traces *Yuin* song lines, sea eagles wheel and strike. Further south, *Gulaga*, Mother Mountain, waits.

A *Yuin* friend shares with me his Black Duck family, his whale dreaming. I connect a name in his lineage with one in mine. Picking at threads, I find his great-great-aunt – sent by the Aboriginal Protection Board from Wallaga Lake (far south coast) to Mungindi (north-west plains) – married my great-uncle. On their marriage certificate, my grandmother's name as witness. Saltwater and freshwater connecting.

Wadi Wadi 2

I move north, to Thirroul. The name may come from the *Wadi Wadi* word *thurrural*, meaning 'the valley of cabbage tree palms.' Behind, the escarpment wraps me in its rainforest cloak. Below, McCauley's Beach and Sandon Point, for millenia a meeting place for *Wadi Wadi* and others travelling through.

A sacred site. In 1998 the 6,000 year-old skeleton of a *kuradji* (clever man) was uncovered. More are probably interred there. The re-burial place is secret. We haven't forgotten that whitefellas stole our bones.

December 2000, Kuradji Aboriginal Tent Embassy was set up to save the site from development. Police, armed guards and dogs met a blockade. In 2005 the Office of Environment and Heritage declared it a significant Aboriginal place. Arson followed.

I walk that beach the old people walked. For eons they met, fished, traded, practised ceremony here. A midden is evidence of their riches. Wood ducks and moorhens forage in the creek, and birds and reptiles thrive again in regrown spinifex and sand scrub.

Gomeri 3

I take the bus north-west, back to country again. Headed to Walgett for a women's *Gali Guumaldanha* (Water Gathering). The same full moon rises, blood-red this time, the same sun slumps. This time the creeks and rivers are parched. Walgett is dying, families forced off-country. On the banks of the thirsty *Ngamaay* (Namoi), we hold ceremony and yarn up how to fix the water crisis killing our land.

Next day, I bathe in sandalwood smoke and walk with Uncle Allan along the sacred *Baawan* (Barwon). The *yarraan* (river red gum) are skeletal, the river bone-dry. Uncle has found fossilised remains of prehistoric animals among the tyres, bottles and mussel shells that litter the sand. We trace the empty river bed, grieving.

Wangal and Wategora

My great-grandmother Caroline died off-country. She's buried on the land of the *Wangal* and *Wategora* (Duck River) clans of the *Darug/Eora* nation. Land granted to free settlers in 1793 and sold back to the government in 1861 for Rookwood Cemetery.

Our old people buried their dead in wallaby or possum skin rugs or cloaks, or wrapped in sheets of bark, facing the rising sun. Women painted their faces with clay and gashed their scalps with stones. Mourners wept.

Caroline's grave is unmarked except for a rambling rose, borrowed from Christian rites, and the slow-dying wails of resident crows. One of her sons, my grandfather, keeps her company nearby, with one of his sons, my uncle, and my baby sister.

My cousins take some earth from Caroline's grave back to country, to Gil Gil Creek, where she was born.

Yawi (Spirit)

Like wind-blown seeds of the native plains grasses the old ones harvested, many of us are scattered off-country. Each morning, in meditation, I trace the boundaries of *Wadi*

Poetry: *Walaaybaa (Country)* by Judi Morison

Wadi country, respecting the land on which I live. But I will always belong to *Gomeroi* country. When my time comes, like my great-grandmother Caroline, may my spirit travel back to my old people unhindered.

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