

Here Where We Live

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Wakefield
Press

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My Good Thing

This is my daughter's country.

That mallee sea with the undulating dunes and the rockholes where we take her back to camp. Twice a year at least, but sometimes more. This is her house, here near the sea where the bay sparkles beside one window and the mallee grows straight up to the back door. This is the yard where she plays. These are the dogs, her friends and guardians. These are her dark brown eyes, her chubby bronze hand on my pink freckled arm. These are her father's eyes, her grandmother's eyes, back to the Dreaming, looking out of a face just like mine. Her expressions are my expressions. I carried her, but she comes from this land. She sits on the ground in her dusty baby suit and throws the dirt around. Under the blue hot sky she barely needs a hat. Her eyes take in the view – three-hundred and sixty degrees her own place.

This is my husband. Those are his rockholes as well. This is his height and his long brown hair and his shyness and courtesy. He is in charge of logistics on those trips back to the bush. That's his mechanical knowledge, tinkering with the truck. His muscled arms and back carrying water containers and fuel and tarps and tents. That's him making trips to Adelaide for the Native Title Claim. I miss him when he is away. That's him returning to scoop us up, his fair-haired wife and his baby girl here on the old sagging verandah, waiting for him to come home.

My daughter's country is lush after the rain. In spring, we bounce along the track past feathery grey desert rose bushes and meadows of paper daisies, yellow, pink, white and purple. We camp in a place we know that's like a gigantic school yard, full of the rules and reasoning of the bush. The sky is a blackboard, predicting rain, blazing with light. We sit my daughter in her cardboard box to keep her safe from scorpions and watch her goggling at the classroom all around. While we set up camp, her grandmother takes her off to pay her respects to the women's rockhole.

That's her grandmother who loves her to death and teaches her the right way to do things. Her young grandmother with her long

hair and her beanie, her eyes that fill tragically when she thinks it might all be too late, but who keeps trying anyway. She's the one who tells us when it's time to go back and clean the rockholes, twice a year, in autumn and spring. Things can fall into them and drown and decay. Animals. Emus and kangaroos. Camels! You need a strong stomach and a change of clothes to do this sort of work. Nothing can make that smell come off your shoes. My daughter's grandmother smiles after a good day of cleaning. We crack our tinnies and sit around the fire.

Those volunteers from the city are trying kangaroo tail for the first time. They think it's revolting, too rich; I can tell. They make jokes to cover up their embarrassment. One of them keeps looking across at me, trying to work out whether or not I'm Aboriginal. I'm not, it's obvious that I'm not, but they get confused by my daughter's resemblance to the country – I am related to her and she is related to the land. That's when she's happiest, sitting in her box outside. Napping in the shade at noon.

The volunteers carve my daughter a pair of clapping sticks from a certain tree – her grandmother shows them how to select and cut and strip the wood. They painstakingly decorate the sticks with a bit of wire heated to white-hot in the embers. That's the way it's done. Next day my daughter grabs the sticks in her fists and chews the smoky ends with glee. My daughter's chin is covered in drool and her two bottom teeth are beginning to come through.

This country here and down to the sea is good. We don't go further up the track to the north. My daughter's grandmothers and great-grandmothers remember when the country up there was poisoned by the atom bomb tests. Some of my daughter's relations, aunties and cousins, children and great-grandchildren of the women whose country was bombed, have problems now with their reproduction. There are stories passed down about the men in shorts and sandals, driving around in their Jeeps. My daughter's grandfathers and uncles got sick from helping with the clean-up. I am lucky my daughter is strong and healthy.

Down here my daughter's country is good. When our work

is done and we are headed home we stop for lunch by a waterless inland lake. The salt is white; there is pig-face blooming on the shore. Her grandmother walks off to make an inspection and the volunteers stretch out under a tree and go to sleep in the shade. My husband puts on the baby pack. My daughter faces outwards with her legs dangling. I hold his hand and we walk across the salt until we are tiny dots tethered to our campsite by a wavering line of footprints.

We sit on a little sand island in the middle of the white lake and watch our daughter sleep. Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks like a pair of dark brown moths. The slow animals of the island go about their business; the insects, the birds searching the flowers for nectar. In the distance we hear the buzz of an engine. Then we see them on the sand dunes, two guys riding dirt bikes up and down the big white dunes. From here you can see the scars forming as the wheels churn for purchase in the sand. My daughter's grandmother will have a sad face when we get back. She will be worried about the damage to the country. We will have to distract her; or we will have to do something about it, like with the rockholes. We will have to take action again.

My mother gets sad as well. That's her on the phone from the city when we get back home. 'Where were you?' she says. 'You've been gone for days. I couldn't reach you. I was afraid something must have happened.' My mother doesn't like it out here. We took her out bush once and she sat on a camp chair glancing around at the invisible night-time sounds. My daughter's grandmother, the one from here, told her she herself was worried about the wild dogs at night, especially with a baby around. My mother didn't sleep a wink. She wants to know what I am doing out here. 'She's such a sweet girl,' she says about my daughter. 'Can't you bring her back home?'

When my daughter's grandmother, the one from here, was a girl, she had to hide from the police. They wanted to take her away because her dad was white. My daughter's grandmother ran away with her own grandmother to the bush. For two weeks they

hid in the country, up in the mallee, hunting whatever they could find to eat. It was winter and cold. They didn't get caught. My daughter hears that story and watches her grandmother with her huge serious eyes.

'We'll visit at Christmas,' I say into the phone, imagining the hasty bundling of the baby, denying everything there on my front porch, the speed and skill of my daughter and her grandmother in flight, hurrying north to safety. Then the long days of waiting, growing thin and sad, holding my husband's hand on the porch, looking for a puff of dirt in the distance, the triumphant return of the four-wheel drive. How nothing would be right again until I could fit her baby-suited body back into my arms.

This is my daughter's country; these mallee hills; this salty sea. These are her stars and sands and dark brown eyes. This is her home with me.