



Mike Ladd

karrawirra parrri

walking the torrens from source to sea



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parri



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Mike Ladd

Photographs by Cathy Brooks



Wakefield
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To Lachlan Colquhoun;
friend, editor, provocateur.

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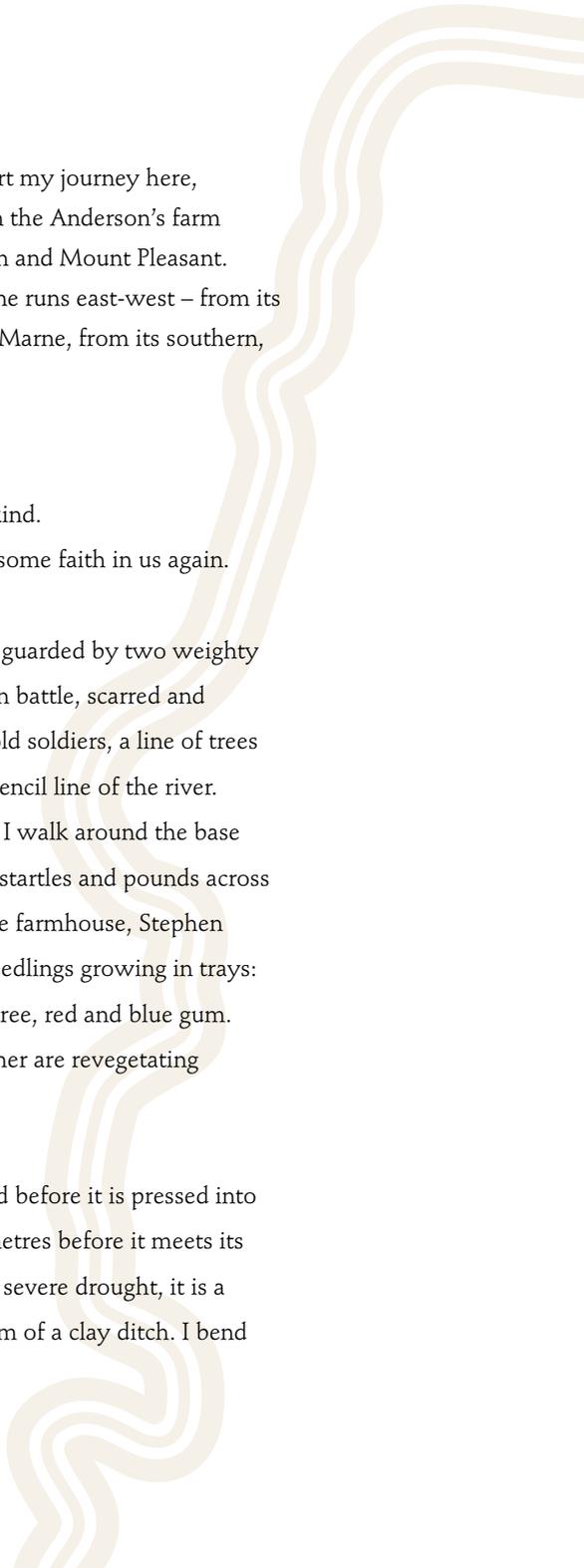
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Between the late autumn and early spring of 2007, I walked the river Torrens from its source to the sea, writing in my notebook as I travelled. The description of the journey was later serialised in the *Adelaide Review*, accompanied by photographs by Cathy Brooks. The complete series is published here for the first time. “Karrawirra Parri”, meaning “river of the red gum forests”, is the official Kaurna name for the Torrens. Taking the form of a haibun (a diary written in prose and poetry) *Karrawirra Parri* is a social and natural history of the river as well as a collection of personal observations along the way. My thanks to the committee of the Barbara Hanrahan award and to the many people who helped me with research: Carol Hannaford, Bryce Bell, Neale Draper, Gwenda Dally, Chester Schultz, Rob Amery, Lewis O’Brien, Joe Mitchell, Lyn O’Grady and Rick Hosking. I gratefully acknowledge the Kaurna Warra Pintyandi for permission to use the name Karrawirra Parri.

Mike Ladd



Late autumn – I start my journey here,
in this paddock on the Anderson’s farm
between Springton and Mount Pleasant.
A ridge of ironstone runs east-west – from its
northern slope begins the Marne, from its southern,
the Torrens.

At last, it’s raining.

Straight down – the best kind.

It feels like the world has some faith in us again.

The top of the paddock is guarded by two weighty red gums, well-seasoned in battle, scarred and twisted. From these two old soldiers, a line of trees runs southwest; the first pencil line of the river. As Stephen Anderson and I walk around the base of one of the trees, a hare startles and pounds across the paddock. Back near the farmhouse, Stephen has thousands of native seedlings growing in trays: sedges, reeds, she-oak, ti-tree, red and blue gum. With them, he and his father are revegetating their land.

The river has no childhood before it is pressed into service. It runs only 150 metres before it meets its first dam. Now, after such severe drought, it is a remnant pool in the bottom of a clay ditch. I bend

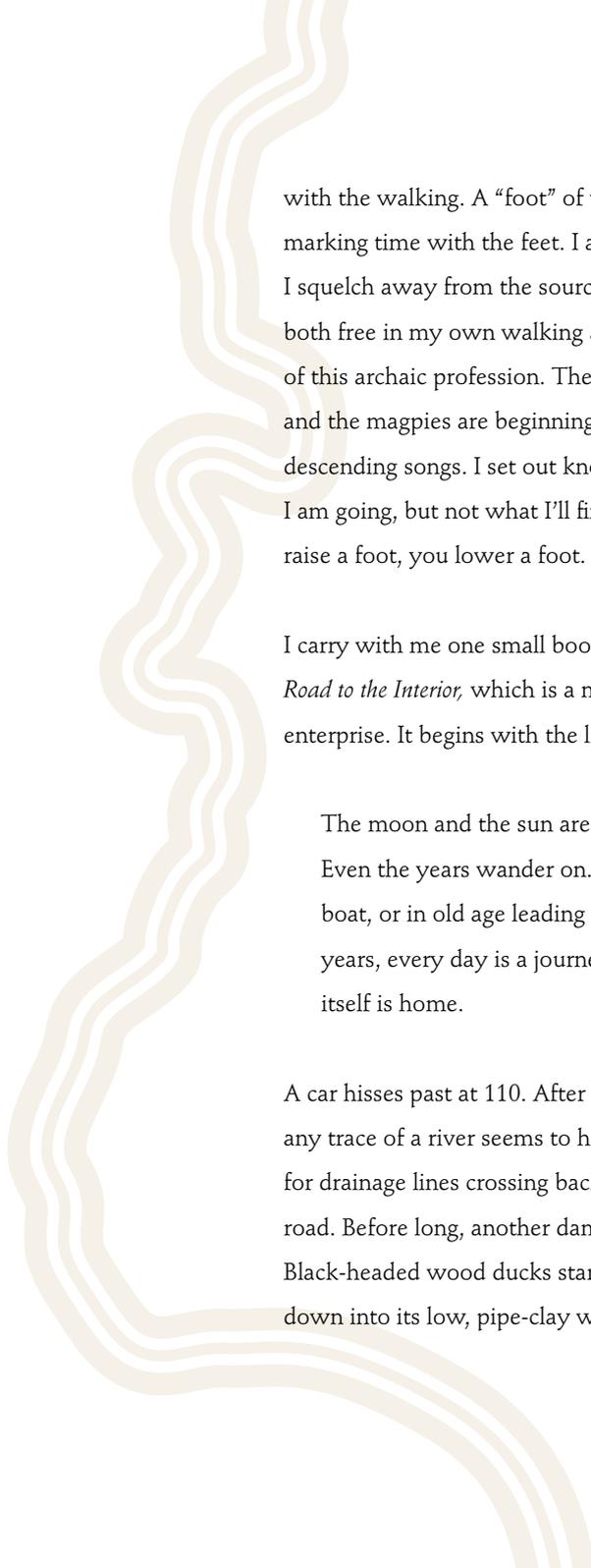


to the surface, and dip in my hand. The source of a river is like the source of a language – manifold and lost in mythology. “Pegai” means “source” – Pegasus is so named because he was born near the source of the ocean. He is also associated with rain. Pegasus flew to Mount Helikon, and where he stamped his hoof, a spring was born – the Hippocrene fountain. Sacred to the muses, those who drank its water were given poetic inspiration.

There are no winged horses here – just a magpie or two, and that hare watching from the bushes. If I drink this water from the bottom of the dam I will more likely be given a bellyache than a poem. Nevertheless, I scoop a handful and drink. The water tastes of clay, eucalypt, dead beetles – and it tastes of beginnings.

As I walk southwest, following the road to Mount Pleasant, I think of my heroes, the walking poets: Basho, trudging the roads of northern Honshu, his shoulders sore from his pack; Wordsworth, muttering to himself, striding along the edges of ditches in the Lake District; and Mandelstam tramping the snow-locked streets of St Petersburg and then later pacing his prison cell because he couldn't keep still, the poetry coming through him





with the walking. A “foot” of verse derives from marking time with the feet. I am thinking of this as I squelch away from the source, and I feel glad to be both free in my own walking and to be a member of this archaic profession. The air is clear and cool, and the magpies are beginning their afternoon descending songs. I set out knowing roughly where I am going, but not what I’ll find on the way. You raise a foot, you lower a foot.

I carry with me one small book, Basho’s *Narrow Road to the Interior*, which is a model for this whole enterprise. It begins with the lines:

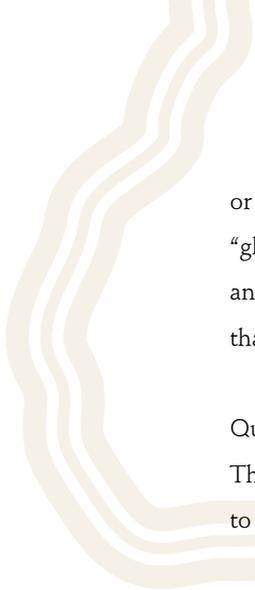
The moon and the sun are eternal travellers.
Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.

A car hisses past at 110. After the Anderson’s farm, any trace of a river seems to have vanished, except for drainage lines crossing back and forth under the road. Before long, another dam, ever larger, appears. Black-headed wood ducks stare from the dam rim down into its low, pipe-clay water.

This is Peramangk country, and perhaps they had a story for this river, much older than Hesiod or Pegasus. As I pass red gums with their bases hollowed out, I think of families wintering in these shelters, their bodies wrapped in possum fur, the smoke from their fires curling up inside the great black chimneys of the eucalypts.

It is said the forest and hill-dwelling Peramangk were feared by the plains peoples and vice versa. They had opposite tastes in horizons; but they traded with each other. The Peramangk exchanged tool-making quartz, possum skins and good canoe bark, for the light whippy spear-shafts of mallee brought to them by the Lake Alexandrina tribes, the Portaulun and the Jarildekald. They also traded fire-making flint and pyrites with the Kaurna and visited them on the plains for ceremony.

The Peramangk originally thought the colonists were the ghosts of their own people, but the ghosts stayed, and the Peramangk were swiftly pushed out from this prime land in the hills. Some of their descendants now live in Mannum and Nildottie on the Murray. They left their rock paintings throughout the Mount Lofty Ranges and traces of their language survive – “Kuitpo” means a sacred



or forbidden place. Now I, a descendant of the
“ghosts”, walk through a gloomy section of trees,
and I can’t help but think of absences, an emptiness
that haunts the forests.

Quartz and bone in the river bed.
The Peramangk became ghosts
to the white ghosts of their dead.

The Peramangk told the European settlers that in
this part of the world there was a twelve year cycle;
seven years of drought, followed by five of rain.
I hope they were right; it’s been dry since 2000.

The source of a river is not just the drain lines and
little creeks sketched in blue on the maps – but a
whole geology. Sediment from a thousand-million
year old sea was formed into rock and pushed up
five hundred million years ago to create these ranges.
Ground by ice, faulted and tilted, they were worn
down to make the source hills of the ancestral river,
slowing winding to a further-off sea.

The river forms the ocean,
the ocean forms the river.

