

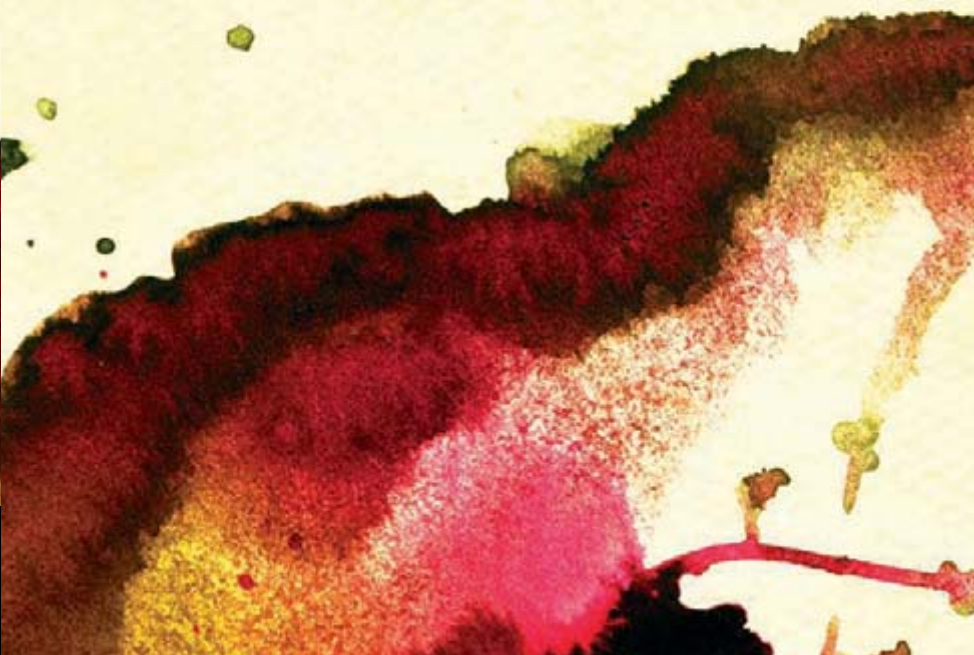
‘Hodgson’s poems are beautifully nuanced ... subtle and powerful’

JENNIFER MARTINIELLO

skin painting

WINNER OF THE DAVID UNAIPON AWARD

ELIZABETH HODGSON





Elizabeth Hodgson is a Wiradjuri woman who lives in Wollongong on the New South Wales south coast. She was born in Wellington NSW, but spent her childhood in a home for fair-skinned Aboriginal children in Sydney. She writes from the perspective of a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman with a dark-skinned father about the racism which has permeated her life.

Elizabeth has had poems published in various magazines and is regularly invited to read her work. Elizabeth sits on the panel of the NSW Ministry for the Arts Advisory Council, the Indigenous Arts Reference Group and is Chair of the South Coast Writers' Centre, and facilitates, mentors and writes for the centre's Aboriginal Oral History Project.

skin painting

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UQP

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I. Title.

Dedicated to the memory of Aunty Joy Williams

13 September 1942 – 22 September 2006

She went down fighting but there are others who have picked up the words and continued the struggle for compensation and recognition of the hurt done to Aboriginal people by the forced removal of children from their families.

And to Les Matthews – my English teacher who told me I would become a writer.

Contents

I am sitting in an exhibition room; alone	1
Somewhere beyond this room is the sound of children	2
At school I spent my time staring out of the window	3
Two girls linger by a triptych —	4
The room is quiet again	5
This is my memory of my life	6
Bindawalla, binda, bindi, bindii	8
Little two-year-old in yellow plastic sandals	9
Mr Cage, can you imagine	10
I am in a room; it is day but the room is dark	11
Sometimes the man and his wife go away	13
These people give me a religion I do not want	14
They change my name, I am no longer Elizabeth	16
Little four-year-old with bells on her slippers —	17
Every weekday – porridge	18
When I don't eat my porridge	19
Drip by precious drip, my life re-begins	21
I have a toy stroller, filled with dolls	22
One day my guardian comes to visit	23
I know many places well – some I can still smell	24
This place that I know well	26
My best friend Vicky and I were invited to the minister's place for tea	27
Some memory paintings are suitable for public display	28

Before Lutanda my father taught us about bush-tucker 29
Sometimes I'd buff my shoes until I was mesmerised 30
My father gave me a camera 32
The adults at Lutanda ran our little lives 33
My mother knitted herself a yellow jumper 34
The tree-lined street where my guardian's lover lived 35
Sometimes we would knock and knock but the door
stayed shut 37
Father gained custody of me and my siblings 39
Now I am fifteen, I am living with my father 40
My father is waltzing me around the lounge room 41
At seventeen I moved into the anonymity and solitude of
Sydney 42
Revered in her church community, the
step-grandmother 43
Have you ever stood on the edge of your country and
wondered where you belong 44
I am twenty, homeless and restless 45
Husband number one tells me 46
Husband number one 47
My culture and my place were things I did not know how
to reach. 48
I have an obsession with polished boots 49
Once, I became a Christian 50
There is so much I have lost, there are things I've never
known about my people 51
When you walk this land do you notice the tracks of my
people? 53

I am a Wiradjuri woman 54
I've heard it said I'm now at the invisibility age 55
What is your yardstick, your benchmark? 56
I am sitting in an exhibition room in an art gallery 57
These words are my phoenix 58
I will not deliberately hurt you 59

Acknowledgments 61
About the David Unaipon Award 63

Skin Painting

I am sitting in an exhibition room; alone

I am trying to trace my history
through the paintings I see.
Dot paintings in varying sizes and colours
track the footsteps of the old people.

Behind me are the bark paintings,
their earthy tones connect me to the land.
The eclectic styles of the contemporary
artists are telling their stories
tracing their past.

They are not my stories,
they are a part of my culture; a history we share.
My story cannot be painted onto a canvas –
it is a skin painting.

*Somewhere beyond this room is the sound
of children*

tumbling into the gallery
flinging backpacks into a corner.
They race up the stairs; crowding into this room.
Their enthusiasm is not unwelcome.

Some dash from painting to painting
talking quickly – giving their own interpretations.
Others move slowly
their eyes following a path of dots
or symbols in the bark.

These children are learning the meanings of these
paintings;
they talk about water holes,
food sources, animal tracks,
the paths of the old people.
These children are learning my culture.

I am wondering about their history;
can they trace their past through these paintings?
I look at their features – eyes, noses,
the shape of their legs, the colour of their skin.
Before I finish a teacher enters and calls them.

*At school I spent my time staring out of
the window*

uniforms, classrooms, assemblies, British colonisation
lining up for sun-warmed bottled milk –

I wanted to find a secluded spot under a tree
where I could disappear –

disappear from view;
where I could see and not be seen.

I wanted to vanish into myself
into my skin.

*Two girls linger by a triptych —**

in one panel a naked white man menaces a young black girl.

In the second panel the young girl
is lying on the ground,
her vagina exposed,
her vulva red and swollen –
she is dead.

One girl points at the penis – *oh yuk!*
Her friend points at the damaged vagina;
they step back in horror
and rush from the room,
grabbing for the safety of each other's hands.

* With thanks to Harry Wedge.

The room is quiet again;

I lose myself in the painting of the girl,
she is young, unprotected.
Little footsteps interrupt my focus,
a small child skips into the room and is surprised by my
presence,
she stops.
She is waiting; she is waiting for her mother.
A woman enters and claims the child
they leave without looking back

I am alone.
I think of the young girl in the painting
her helplessness, her struggle,
her fear, her pain.
The children in another part of the gallery
are animated,
the gallery holds their laughter
throws it from room to room.

On the wall behind me the bark paintings hang –
I ignore them.
I think of the girl in the painting; the children laughing
in the distance.
The bark paintings are drawing me back –
back to my past.

This is my memory of my life;

no-one else can own this memory. I can tell you anything
I can manipulate the truth to my advantage –
how would you know?

When I speak my memory,
its force makes people forget
I can make them doubt their own past
my words can insinuate themselves into their reality
I stand my ground and wait; *yes*, they tell me, *you are right*.

My memory is long and dangerous
I can frighten people with my memory.

If you had my memory how would you hold it?
Could you touch its heart,
feel it beating in the palm of your hand?
Could you breathe in its scent,
hold it in your nostrils; carry it with you
to be recalled anytime?
What if it scratched you, bit into your flesh
jabbed roughly into your tender places?
Would you drop it; try to push it away?

There are too many things I want to forget
but I have a memory that never stops turning.

This room where I sit and remember
is not large,
my life is painted on these walls

my head is a canvas of memories –
 painted with splatters, dots
some framed, others are loose, hung askew
I could carry this room in my head.

Bindawalla, binda, bindi, bindii

bindiis prick at my heels in summer
shoeless fair-skinned child.

At Bindawalla, the hospital
where only Aboriginal babies were born,
the nurses laughed as they put me in a shoe-box
and gave me to my mother; she cried.

I was weighed and measured.
With the Apgar score they rated me
to see if I could survive this world on my own.

*Little two-year-old in yellow plastic
sandals*

second-hand, the neighbour's child discarded
bright yellow, soft from wear
shoes that made a dull soft sound –
 pflatt, pflatt, pflatt
when she ran through her parents' house

A flash of yellow music at her feet

Mr Cage, can you imagine

a world where the only music
was the music of life; the percussion of the everyday?
clanging of plates, the jangle of cutlery, utensils,
swishing of the straw broom across the wooden floor
empty beer bottles ringing
impatient drumming on an old table
heavy boots pacing the floor.
This was the world into which I was born –
my four years and thirty-three days of life music.

Then the music changed;
the crescendo
a big, black car, a new home.

A life without the sound of my mother.

*I am in a room; it is day but the room
is dark,*

outside I hear children playing, laughing.
In this room is a tall glass cabinet
it is full of objects; collections of a tourist.
I am looking at these things through the glass
I cannot unlock the door.

There are snakes coiled in liquid in glass jars, insects
pinned on boards,
old photographs of people and places,
postcards of deserts and beaches and old cities.
There are big shells and small shells, tiny shells on
thread,
beads and seeds and painted sticks, boomerangs,
black dolls with European features and
a stuffed baby crocodile whose rough skin I long to
touch.

While I am looking I see the reflection of a man's face in
the glass
it is ghostly, transparent. He stands too close beside me
when he speaks he has an accent – he is English –
I am learning to speak like him.
These things in this cabinet are his possessions;
he has many possessions.

On the wall in this room are bark paintings;
they are too big for the cabinet.
Once I tried to touch the edge of a painting

but his anger and his hands were quick.
I am learning how to please.

Sometimes the man and his wife go away

they drive to Alice Springs in their old car.
When they come back they show us slides of their trip.
On the wall there is a picture of a red rose with a biblical
verse

it reads: *suffer the little children to come unto me;*
the man takes the picture down,
the wall is bare except for a big blunt nail
when the man shows the slides I look at the nail
mostly it is in the trees or the sky.

There is a slide of an old black man. He is smiling –
his eyes are deep and dark, his teeth are white.
This is our friend Jacky says the man showing the slides
he has another name but we just call him Jacky
and he is a Christian, says the man's wife.
The other adults in the room are pleased at this,
they murmur *Amen*; I look for the nail in the wall,
it is poking out of the black man's eye.

Another slide – a black woman, she is squinting
this is Jacky's wife, Mary. She's a Christian too
it was wonderful to enjoy their fellowship.

They didn't enjoy the fellowship of my parents
as they tell them their children no longer belong to them.
They held puritanical hands against their faces
to repel the alcoholic fumes,
as my father asks to see his children
for one last time.

*These people give me a religion
I do not want*

they are moulding me with their beliefs,
I am frightened I will burn in hell.
They are changing me, they are changing my mind.

I get out of bed at six o'clock
my bed is always made with hospital corners
there are no wrinkles, my sheets are pulled tight
I stand beside my bed waiting for the inspection
then I dress myself
socks and shoes at all times
an apron over my play dress
no slacks or shorts.

We have bible study every day
they teach us about a god who kills
and a meek and mild Jesus.
When the breakfast bell rings
we line up in numerical order
outside the dining hall.
On command we march single file
and stand behind our chairs
then when we sit
and say grace.
We always use a serviette
and never speak at mealtimes
we eat everything on our plates
and stay 'til everyone has finished.

I go to bed at 6 pm
because I am only four years old.

*They change my name, I am no longer
Elizabeth*

because another girl here has the same name;
now I must answer to Beth.

They have given me a number,
this number is tagged on my clothes
my undies, socks and shoes.

It is cut into the wooden towel rack,
the napkin ring,
it is emblazoned on my limp cloth lunch bag.

Later, when I go to school
friends ask why –
I say that's my number; that's me,
I am girl number one.

*Little four-year-old with bells on her
slippers –*

tinkling through the halls of her new home

tip-toeing past his office
his hearing is acute
the door opens
she's ordered in

He locks the door
and I am alone with him –
 inside.

a betrayal of bells at my feet

Every weekday – porridge

thin, grey,
slimy gruel
warm, sticky
when I refuse
it is forced down my throat

When I don't eat my porridge,

they call me ungrateful,
naughty.

They tell me bad children go to hell.

I have to stay at the table until I have eaten all.

The other children go,
I sit quietly without eating,
watching as the tables around me
are cleared and the washing-up is done.

After the chores,
a couple of the adults come back,
one pinches my nose
grasps my jaw and forces my mouth open,
the other spoons the porridge down.
They don't let go of me until the bowl is empty.
The food doesn't stay down;
when I am released I rush
to the outside toilets.
This is a daily ritual.

Sometimes my big sister
helps by eating my porridge.
She is caught and belted,
then they move her to another table.

Now I am weak and very thin;
the doctor comes to see me.
He is worried that I will die

and orders that I am taken
to the hospital.

Drip by precious drip, my life re-begins

in the hospital bed.

Unfamiliar faces peer at me;
they seemed concerned
with my fragile existence, *you're awake,*
they say, *you've been asleep for a long time.*

When I am strong enough

I sit up comb my hair, straighten my sheets,
put on my best smile; and wait.

I wait for my mother,
wait for a visitor from the Home.

I wait and wait.

The *pink ladies* bring chocolates and smiles.

I see the pain in their eyes
as they ask where my mother is.

I have a toy stroller, filled with dolls

a pink plastic pig with a yellow shirt
a koala made of lamb's wool
and a large dress-up doll.

This is my little family which
I take around the hospital,
pushing the stroller
visiting the elderly women.

They sit me on their beds
we laugh and tell stories.
When the nurse comes in she is cross
and stands me on the floor,
she says that I must walk and build up my strength.
I push the stroller along the corridors
and when I let the stroller go, I fall over.
I am too weak and thin to walk on my own.

One day my guardian comes to visit

I sit up straight, smooth the sheets and smile,
she stands beside the bed and tells me to pack my bag
because I am going home.

She opens the bedside cupboard, pulls out my clothes
throws them on the bed, she is in a hurry
and tells me I am wasting her time.
She leaves the ward.

I get off the bed, dress myself,
pack my bag and tuck my koala under my arm.
My guardian is in the corridor waiting.
She walks quickly to the car while I skip and run
trying to keep up.
I am happy that I will see my sisters and brothers again.

*I know many places well - some I can
still smell*

the coke burning in the huge combustion stove
the bread – day-old – toasting on the top
under the weight of the lid,
slice after slice of warm brown toast
tumbling from the wire racks. Toast enough
for ten children at one time
the steam captured under the cotton cloth trapping the
 heat
but always cold by the time
we sit down for breakfast.

On a high stool in the kitchen,
writing my first words,
while she works across the table from me;
I with my pencil
she with her fat fingers working flour and lard
milk and sugar to a sweet pastry dough
rolling and shaping, cutting and trimming
I write two words for every dozen pies
her deft fingers could turn out
quick floured hands – scooping
sprinkling – pie after pie
lined along the table ready for baking.

Whenever I write she leans across the table
takes the paper; she reads and frowns.
In silence she raises the lid
on the combustion stove

drops my words inside.
I watch as the fire leaps up
then dies away from my sight,
write something nice, she says.
She teaches me to write
and teaches me to destroy.

This place that I know well

has many aspects –
peace, stillness, warmth
smells of toasted bread
coke dust that makes me sneeze.

I know well too, its sharp edges
the dark corners,
bubbling porridge,
the weevils in the flour bins.
This place of constant repetitions
the same amount of bread sliced every day
same amount of oats measured
into the same pot –
 this place where you could set your
body clock to work with the smells
rising upwards and
outwards.
Roast lamb with crispy, fatty potatoes
for Saturday lunch.
Leftovers after church on Sundays,
boiled egg on toast for Sunday high tea.

This place where the water scalded
the potato peeler slipped
where chipped china
could too easily
scar a little hand.

*My best friend Vicky and I were invited to
the minister's place for tea*

he said we would be eating fish fingers
we puzzled the whole afternoon
about fish with fingers
swimming around picking up food
from the bottom of the ocean

after tea we were more puzzled
to learn that some fish somewhere
had rectangular fingers

*Some memory paintings are suitable for
public display*

In the mornings when we walk to school
I notice the houses of the normal people,
tiny yards, not enough room for fifty wild kids
their milk in bottles on the doorstep.

In the mornings before school, before breakfast
we gather the eggs, milk the cows
stir up molasses and grains
to keep the cows happy,
dip my finger in the rough sweet mixture
preferring their breakfast to mine.
Milk less than five minutes from cow to my lips
I'd scoop one tiny measure – warm, maternal.

Down at the Boys' Home, where my brothers were taken
when puberty hit,
they tend the vegetable gardens and orchards.

On Saturdays and holidays – after our chores –
we run, play or just be still in the big yard.
Some days we picked blackberries
or ventured off
down to the waterfall.

Some paintings can be hung on a wall.

*Before Lutanda my father taught us about
bush-tucker*

we picked up emu eggs
and berries, he shot feral pigs
dug up witchetty grubs
and handed them to me to eat.
With my father
I began to learn how
to survive in my country.

In the Home my older brother
kept silkworms in a box with holes,
they looked like little witchetty-grubs.
My younger brother and I
ate his silkworms.
They don't taste like the grubs
father gave us.
I spat them down
the front of my jumper.

*Sometimes I'd buff my shoes until I was
mesmerised*

by the sound of the coarse bristles
rubbing back and forth
up and down against my tiny shoes.
I polished while she waited
she is my guardian; she is not the cook
she is not my mother.

Ch-ch-ch-ch up and down the length
ch-ch-ch-ch 'round the heel across the toe
ch-ch-ch-ch the comforting sound of bristles on leather.

I polished while she waited,
waited to inspect my shoes
every chore to military standard.
Ch-ch-ch-ch faster and faster
the brush grates against the leather
pushing into the toe line, the sides, the heel.
Ch-ch-ch-ch faster
the brush bangs its wooden handle
into my wrist,
rough hard bristles bruising and scarring.

She yells her impatience.
Ch-ch-ch-ch I do not stop
ch-ch-ch-ch-ch up and down back and forth.

A circle whirls and spins
on my little black shoes

'round and 'round
it dances a furious waltz
on the toe of my shoe.

My father gave me a camera

and I photograph my sister and her friend
they are wearing socks and shoes
and aprons over their play clothes
smiling, they hold oranges.

Years later I find the photograph
it is black and white and grainy
but their innocence is clear.
I put my hand over their smiling mouths
dull, sad eyes stare back at me.

The adults at Lutanda ran our little lives

scheduled, rostered, ordered
emotions and feelings under their control
loud laughter not acceptable indoors
crying children frowned at.
Once I yelled hatred at my sister
I was beaten and told I would go to hell
because I knew how to hate.
I wait for someone, anyone
to tell me when to laugh
cry or just be.

On the third Saturday of the month
our families from the outside
are allowed to visit,
bringing hugs and kisses,
laughter and tears of joy.

On the third Saturday of each month,
from one to four in the afternoons only
our emotions are not under Lutanda's control.

My mother knitted herself a yellow jumper

and wears it when she visits
she said she had some wool left over
and had knitted another jumper
small enough for a little girl
small enough for her little daughter.

She pulls the jumper over my head
and kisses my face.

That Saturday afternoon
we sit together on the low garden fence
in our matching jumpers.

*The tree-lined street where my guardian's
lover lived*

is close to the water on Sydney harbour
polite old houses of the upper-middle classes
not identical but all the same.
She had a hedge and a neat path to the front door.
I remember the scent of the flowers in her garden
I remember the scent of her, I do not remember her face.
(when I think I see her in my mind
it is not her face I am remembering
but the face of my mother).

Each Wednesday when we visit
I step into another place
small, compact, tidy.

In her house, I know my place.
She brings me milk and biscuits.
My guardian barks her last orders at me
to stay and be quiet,
then she slips through the door with her lover
closing it quietly behind them.
I hear the creaking of footsteps on stairs,
another door closing
while I wait in the lounge-room
with a ticking clock for company.

The street was silent,
the clock ticked.
I could wait forever while her clock ticked.

Later, my guardian sat on a chair
her long legs spread,
hair hanging loosely down her back
buttoning her shirtwaist dress,
while her lover serves her tea and biscuits.

*Sometimes we would knock and knock but
the door stayed shut*

my guardian's strong fist
pounding louder and louder
I stare at the ground
willing the door to open; to let us in,
to relieve the sexual ache in my guardian's body.

Her lover didn't open the door
she had gone out.
She was married and had obligations
to her man.
My guardian hated men
I would see it in her eyes as she clutched
the girls to her side.
I caught her signals, and kept them.

The door remains closed.
For the next week, my life
will be hell.
My guardian impotent and stupid with lust,
rounds on me *It's your fault*
you were naughty last time,
she yells as she pulls me roughly into the van
slamming doors.

We don't go far, down to the jetty
to sit and stare at the water
she – cross and brooding
me – impatient to return to the house
to knock one more time.

She never cried
my tough guardian;
she sat sullen and silent
in her rejection; they had an arrangement
every Wednesday afternoon.
She needed her sweet-sex fix.

*Father gained custody of me and my
siblings*

We had lived at Lutanda for nine years

Lutanda accepted us –

we could be changed, moulded
made into better human beings
they were doing god's will.

For nine years –

I had watched the children come and go
saw the fear grow in their eyes
the nervous looks
the marks of abuse clearly showing on their bodies –
the way it was on mine.

For nine years –

I had watched the makeover attempts
the dull dirty dormitory walls painted,
torn brown blinds and faded curtains thrown away
for cream blinds, white gauze curtains
carpet replaced the once ripped linoleum.

I saw the changes as they toned down, opened up

I left with fear in my eyes

a nervous look

the marks of abuse etched in my mind.

*Now I am fifteen, I am living with
my father*

he is a stranger to me
he is sober, respectable, employed
he has a new wife; she is white.

I do not know him; I search his face
trying to find myself in his eyes, his skin, his hair.
My arm is pale against his black skin.
I ask him why; he dies before he finds an answer.

I am fifteen and leaving school this year.
Those guardians of my welfare and morals
are pleased with their endeavours,
through God's grace and many prayers, they tell me,
we've taken you through school without an unwanted pregnancy.

I am leaving school this year.
I want to find a job
but I have no ambitions.

*My father is waltzing me around the
lounge room*

teaching me to dance for the school formal
he complains that I keep treading on his feet
the way my mother used to.

We go through the dance, step by step –
 but slowly and always
he loses interest in being a tutor
and becomes entranced by the music.
Its rhythm takes him away from me.

He pulls me to him.
I am frightened by the firmness of his body
too close to mine.
As I dance with him,
he is dancing with my mother
many years ago.

I tread on his feet
and break the spell.

*At seventeen I moved into the anonymity
and solitude of Sydney*

and purchased my first wedding band for forty cents.

Quietly, without embarrassment, I slipped the ring on
the third finger on my left hand.

I left the store smiling at my purchase as though a beloved
had given me this token of eternal love,
but it was me unceremoniously securing me
without changing my name.

The ring was tarnished and scratched
but discarded for new.

When the light caught my band
another young man would say goodbye.

I had no regrets,

I was comfortable in my aloneness –
a single unit rather than a union.

*Revered in her church community, the
step-grandmother*

allowed me to live
on her front veranda,
this drifting homeless teenager.

She locked the door at night,
and opened it each morning
to allow me access to her house.
I searched her house looking for my identity,
a connection with her family.
I found nothing.

She lined photographs of her grandchildren
on the piano –
there were no photos of her step-grandchildren.

She insisted on being my new moral guardian;
she offered me Christian charity
in exchange for my soul.
When I refused, she called me ungrateful,
told me I was just like my father.

*Have you ever stood on the edge of your
country and wondered where you belong*

When you tread the coastline you tread the edge of your
country.

Have you ever wondered what would happen if you
slipped off

At eighteen I stood with my back to my country
my face set east, my feet in the sand,
the surf lapped my toes
when I moved back
the foamy water crept up –
it took my footprints away.

I wondered where I belonged
wondered if my footprints
would ever stay embedded in sand.

I stared out to sea towards another land in the east –
That's where you belong, my uncle had said
when I asked him why his skin was black,
that's where we both belong.

I am twenty, homeless and restless

I fly to another country.
In this place things seem familiar
but when I breathe them in
their smell is different –
 damp and heavy with rain.

I touch the bare earth, the grass, the trees,
under my feet the sand feels rough and unsteady,
its tremors shaking off my footprints.

I search the faces of its people.
In a bar I find a man who asks
why I have come to his homeland.
His skin was brown; not dark like my uncle's skin,
it did not look like my father's skin.
It was fair, but not fair like my mother's skin.

It was not like mine.

Husband number one tells me

that when he looks at me
he understands why
Charles Darwin believed
that the Australian Aborigines
descended from apes
he's scared of having
children with me –

in case they come out black.

Husband number one tells me
that he is very intelligent
because his forehead is high.

All I see is his hair falling out.

Husband number one

works on his father's farm
he doesn't go out with women.
His father questions him.

He is looking for a wife; in a restaurant
in Wellington, he finds me.
I am looking for comfort and security,
he gives me that –
and a ready-made family.

When we marry, we only have sex
when I ask – I rarely do.

We are happy in our arrangement.
I am happy having a family
with parents. I take his mother
as my mother.

Young, married and barely educated
I was trying to fit in,
in the valley where I lived.
Farmers' wives private school educated,
speaking schoolgirl French
taught to be goods and chattels for a rich farmer,
their commonsense lost to them.

My father-in-law sells the farm.
Husband number one and I move to Wellington.
I have lost this family.
So I leave.

*My culture and my place were things I did
not know how to reach*

I wandered from country to country
picking up bits and pieces.

I searched the world looking for my own place –
looking for my home.

I tried learning a foreign language;
tried to speak a language that was alien to me,
but my tongue refused to grasp this foreign accent.
I ached to fit in.

I have an obsession with polished boots

and walk the streets looking for a shoe-shine man
slip my hand into my overcoat pocket
feel for a pound coin
slide onto a wooden seat,
or a vinyl stool
polished free of charge
by many and varied arses
sliding backwards and forth across its roundness
worn down
in the front, sloping gently forward.
An old stool
easier to push back into.

I climbed on one and slid straight back off
the shoe-shine man catching me,
he got used to catching his customers.
I love the feel of the press of the leather against
my feet tucked snugly inside my boots as the shoe-shine
man
works at the leather,
his brush moving quickly
ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch
across, around and over my boots.

Once, I became a Christian

because I was still looking
for something to belong to.
I became a part of the step-grandmother's family.
I was accepted. I belonged.
Family members invited me to their houses.
Now I was different,
now I had a right to be a part of this Christian family.

I married a nice Christian man.
He acknowledged my Aboriginality,
my humour, wit and intelligence.
He couldn't acknowledge the consequences
of my childhood.

When I left husband number two,
the step-grandmother turned her back on me.
I left the church, left her god, left them behind.

*There is so much I have lost, there are
things I've never known about my people*

My Wiradjuri mother
a stranger I've tried to know
has been lost to me in rolls and rolls
of government red tape.

My black-skinned father
turned white, got a job
wore a tie, married –
all to release his children
from the bonds of the welfare system.

He got tired of fighting –
fighting the enforcers
fighting the lies
he stopped fighting for his life
we buried him where he fell
in his own country –
Wongaibon country.

My family was large once
big, black and loud.
We became fair-skinned
through colonisation and rape.

Forced to deny our Black past,
our history lost to age, alcohol and suicide.

Our number has been reduced,
but the spirit lives on
through my mother, my aunt, uncles
brothers and sisters –
 their spirit lives on in me.

*When you walk this land do you notice
the tracks of my people?*

Look down, look down
see the footprints criss-crossing your path.
Look down past the concrete and bitumen
gardens choking with imported flora.

Look down, look down
see where you plant your feet.
Can you fill the footprints of the past?
When you cross a river, a mountain range,
do you know you've walked into another country?

I am a Wiradjuri woman

My mother is a Wiradjuri woman.
I see myself in her eyes
the colour of her skin, her laugh.

Under my skin flows blood
many centuries old.
Within my body it is fresh and strong.

Some flows from the people
who braid their hair with feathers;
my Irish Celtic blood
has bleached my skin.

Because of this, my fate
is different from my father's.
If you could meet my father,
how would you see me?

*I've heard it said I'm now at the
invisibility age*

I'm no longer young enough to matter.
Young people think I'm past sex,
they squirm when I mention that I've had
a few too many lovers in my bed.
They blush when I say that now I'm celibate –
as if I'd read their thoughts
on how I should be living my life.

What is your yardstick, your benchmark?

I will no longer bend and reshape myself,
to fit that unattainable yardstick, someone else's model.

I can hold up a mirror to my inner self
and say this is my yardstick,
my benchmark.
I cannot be weighed and measured again,
on the Apgar scale
to see if I am strong enough to survive this world.

I see the image
I want to be equal to; the idea of
my own unique self.

*I am sitting in an exhibition room in an
art gallery*

I am alone.

The paintings on the wall tell many stories;
they are part of my culture.

We have a shared history.

This story is my skin painting –

I can trace my history through these paintings.

Outside on the street,
the school children are laughing
and pushing their way onto a bus.

I search their faces, their features, the colour of their skin
the shape of their legs.

Can they trace their history through the paintings they
have seen?

These words are my phoenix

they return to me in my waking and in my sleeping
these words cannot be silenced or destroyed
they have lodged themselves within my inner being.

These are the words of survival, the words of sacrifice
the words of growth
they were handed to me
some were given in love, some in violence.

Each time I write I am retelling the stories
uniting past and present.

I will not deliberately hurt you,

nor steal from you.
I will not cheat you,
nor tell you lies.

I will respect
your feelings,
your loved ones
and your possessions.

But I will not apologise
for your situation
nor your circumstances.
They are your own.

I will not apologise for
the abuses I received
as a child; nor say sorry
for the guilt of my oppressors.

I will not say sorry
for being tied by
shame, guilt and fear
to white man's religion.
And I am not sorry I left it behind.

I will not apologise
for being an Aboriginal person,
nor apologise for my
mother, my father, my family.

I will not say sorry
for my honesty,
my good or bad
sense of humour,
my ironical outlook on life,

I will not apologise
for my political,
moral and spiritual beliefs.
And I make no apologies
for my successes and failures.

I am an
Aboriginal woman.

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About the David Unaipon Award

Established in 1988, the David Unaipon Award is an annual literary competition for unpublished manuscripts in any genre or Indigenous language by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander writer.

The award is named after David Unaipon (1872–1967), who, in 1929, was the first Indigenous author to be published in Australia. He was also a political activist, a scientist, a preacher and an inventor. David Unaipon was born in Port McLeay in South Australia and is commemorated on the \$50 note.

This prize is judged and chosen by a panel of established Indigenous authors and a representative of University of Queensland Press. The author of the winning manuscript is mentored and the work published by University of Queensland Press.

Winners of the David Unaipon Award receive financial assistance from the Queensland Government through the Minister for the Arts.

Previous winners of the award include Tara June Winch, Vivienne Cleven, Gayle Kennedy, Jon Muk Muk Bourke, Sam Wagan Watson and Larissa Behrendt.

Information is available from the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards website.

SWALLOW THE AIR

Tara June Winch

Winner of the David Unaipon Award

When May's mother dies suddenly, she and her brother Billy are taken in by Aunty. However, their loss leaves them both searching for their place in a world that doesn't seem to want them. While Billy takes his own destructive path, May sets off to find her father and her Aboriginal identity.

Her journey leads her from the Australian east coast to the far north, but it is the people she meets, not the destinations, that teach her what it is to belong.

In this startling debut, Tara June Winch uses a fresh voice and unforgettable imagery to share her vision of growing up on society's fringes. *Swallow the Air* is the story of living in a torn world and finding the thread to help sew it back together.

Swallow the Air won the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards Indigenous writing prize and was shortlisted for the *Age* Book of the Year – Fiction.

ISBN 978 0 7022 3521 4



SMOKE EN CRYPTED WHISPERS

Samuel Wagan Watson

These poems pulse with the language and images of a mangrove-lined river city, the beckoning highway, the just-glimpsed muse, the tug of childhood and restless ancestors.

For the first time Samuel Wagan Watson's poetry has been collected into a stunning volume. A final section of all new work, sits alongside poems from his award-winning works: *Of Muse, Meandering and Midnight* (winner of the 1999 David Unaipon Award), *Hotel Bone* (2001) and *Itinerant Blues* (2002).

Smoke Encrypted Whispers won the New South Wales Premier's Award, Book of the Year in 2005.

ISBN 978 0 7022 3174 2



HOME

Larissa Behrendt

Winner of the 2002 David Unaipon Award

Home is a powerful novel from an author who understands both the capacity of language to suppress and the restorative potency of stories that bridge the past and present. Young lawyer Candice sets out on her first visit to her ancestral homeland. When she arrives at the place where her grandmother was abducted in 1918, her family's story begins to unfold and Candice discovers the consequences of dark skin and the relentless pull of home.

'A stunning first novel. Behrendt creates vivid characters whose convincing inner lives bring this story of loss and survival powerfully to life.'

Kate Grenville

'This novel's greatest strength is its insight into the pain and inherited shame of being a racist society.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'Behrendt brilliantly explores the subtleties of race and identity in a palpable way. It is like getting under another's skin.'

Age

ISBN 978 0 7022 3407 1

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