

Reflection Statement

My poetry suite explores the power of landscape and the integrality of its role in rural lives. It aims to give voice to the meaningful everyday life experiences of those who may be silenced by geographical isolation, and show that each personal story is valuable. Addressing this purpose, the suite utilises a fragmented form, changing viewpoints and interplay of voices to allow for a diverse depiction of experiences, and post-modern acknowledgment of the plurality of truth.

Centring around one regional family, Stories of Home reflects on the unseen forces which influence us - the impacts of the past, and its people, on the present. My intention is to convey the message that despite the ancient forces that may ground, bog, or even carry us, life must bluster onward. A water motif and book-ended imagery of the vivacious ‘*gentle creek*’ links the poems and represents this continuation of life. My understanding of the land being undeniably bigger than us all solidified after listening to Yankunytjatjara elder, Bob Randall in Global Oneness Project’s video The Land Owns Us², ‘*no human being is older than the land itself.*’ Integration of water throughout the poems – a powerful and essential element – is my way of emphasising the enduring nature of the landscape.

² Global Oneness Project. (2009) *The Land Owns Us*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0sWIVR1hXw>

My Major Work is likely to connect to regional audiences through its representation of everyday instances which readers may not have had time to reflect on, and engage urban audiences through its exploration of the universal challenges of family and aging, and dramatic tension between life, death, past and present. My work would suit display at the Byron Bay Writers Festival which attracts readers from semi-rural Northern Rivers, as well as travellers appealed by the region's local culture. The work showcases a distinct Australian voice through use of idiomatic expressions '*old codger*,' and culturally distinctive elements '*gallon drums*,' and may be well-suited to publication in the Best Australian Poems alongside authors such as Les Murray.

Simple, concrete language removes barriers that may disengage the general public, and thus online publication in newspapers such as The Newcastle Herald which has a tradition of showcasing creative works as part of its annual Summer Shorts story competition, would enable my Major Work to reach a wide Australian audience, and not just those with a specific interest in poetry. Its present-day context and consideration of contemporary challenges to regional Australia, including drought '*hopes dashed with the failed crop*,' and the process of generations and their traditions becoming outdated, make the work relevant to regional audiences of the Outback Magazine or ABC's TV program Landline and its website www.abc.net.au/landline.

I initially intended to write a collection of short stories about rural characters, having been inspired by the evocative depictions of hardship, and bush romanticism of country singers, particularly Sara Storer. Whilst studying Shakespeare's King Richard III (Module A, Elective 1: Intertextual Connections) for English Advanced, I began to appreciate the poetic, lyrical qualities of Shakespeare's work, finding similar use of sensory and auditory devices in A.B. Patterson's colourful verse. Enamoured by Patterson's vivid style, I planned to create my own contemporary bush ballads, however realised that repetitive stanzas and progressive plotlines may be overbearing for a contemporary reader, and not permit a three-dimensional exploration of compound concepts such as spirituality.

Challenged by the rigid constraints of conventional rhyme and verse structure, I turned to a more organic form found in the poetry of John Foulcher and Denise Levertov (English Extension 1, Navigating the Global). Despite a lack of rhyme or consistent structure, Levertov and Foulcher maintain compelling rhythms. This achievement through non-traditional means was very useful in my departure from the vigorous, inflexible style of the classic bush poets. Techniques I have reproduced include organic use of line breaks, em dashes, and enjambment to foster an unbroken motion and create pace and emphasis. I rejected the conventional use of capitalisation to begin lines, only using it sparingly for emphasis, so that clauses flow across lines without the reader being jolted. The brevity of my poem, Low Buzz mirrors Foulcher's imagist depiction of fleeting moments. To maintain audience interest, I have made sure to include longer poems such as Gentle Creek, providing diversity.

Reg Cribb's play Thomas Murray and the Upside Down River (2016) delivered immense insight into rural culture and many of the central concerns in my poetry. I realised the importance of companionship when Cribb's protagonist remarked '*everythin' that I love 'bout this country flows outta her,*' reflecting this in This Place Rubs You in which a couple experiences the potency of the land after growing apart. '*The whole place breathing in your ear / too loud, too loud*'.

Thomas Murray directed me to explore ideas of generational trauma and the impact of the past on our lives. '*What's a farmer Dad? 'Well son...he's a person who passes a huge burden down to his offspring.*'³ A grave motif, through repeated references to bones and the '*Graveyard Paddock,*' suggests the presence of past beings in My Major Work. In This Place Rubs You the young farmer - an inheritor of place - feels tormented by the '*ghosts*' of the land until the whims of his children force him to reconcile with the past.

when the graveyard ghosts

swing at you in the night

a weight you hadn't anticipated

and you steer clear of them

for half a year

until you're forced

to make your peace

when two young'uns call on you to string up a swing

³ Cribb, R. (2016) *Thomas Murray and the Upside Down River*

Similar juxtapositions of death and life reinforce my message about the necessity of accepting the past and moving forward, as seen in the final lines.

He stops at the foot of the

Graveyard Paddock

to wonder at those lives

and gets lost way past dawn,

*until the cattle rouse him with their dusted footfall, shudder and
great low baying*

stream of big bodies leading back home.

My understanding of spirituality was deepened by study of Winton's Cloudstreet (1991) for English Advanced, Module B: Critical Study of Texts. Winton's symbolic presence of indigenous peoples is similarly manifested in the '*people who watch on*' in Over Town and the '*silver moony reflections*' in Tommy's Country. Cloudstreet embodies a post-modern refusal to accept that all aspects of human existence can be fully explained in a coherent pattern. The Lambs and Pickles' experiences of a '*life lived in terms of half-felt understandings*'⁴ and their self-made ideologies, were highly pertinent to my own interactions with country folk. Moreover, Lucy's blunt, but unexpectedly sentimental statement in Thomas Murray, '*this country sings when it rains*,' reinforced my notions of the unspoken spirituality that exists in rural lives, however uncharacteristic. This conflict of 'battler' attitude and quieter sentimentality was especially interesting to me and one which I cultivated in the old man's questioning of the '*big unsolved forces that roused and stirred him*;' his realisation that there are more forces at play than just brute strength such as luck and fate, revealed in To Find a Leak.

A motif of songs signifies connection to land. In Over Town '*tunes don't carry*.' Silence is contrasted with the '*songs that used to soar*,' highlighting the deep intuitive connection of the Aboriginal people, a spirituality that is not as prevalent in the present-day. The older generation is shown with a '*stony silence*' that '*built up inside*,' communicated through further talk imagery to demonstrate how a person's context affects their interaction with landscape. Through contemplation and rumination, my protagonists lead a journey towards opening themselves up to a conversation with the land.

⁴ Quin, R. (2008) *Ideology in Cloudstreet*. Available at: http://englishteachingresources.typepad.com/english_study_resources/files/ideology_in_cloudstreet.pdf

I looked to Dylan Thomas' Under Milkwood (1954) in my attempts to weave distinct and varying voices. Like Thomas, I juxtapose the epic and trivial, dramatic and comedic, to show the varied nature of life. In Gentle Creek experiences are both deeply emotional sagas, *'muttered curses'* of *'a man's desperation,'* and light-hearted blunders of kids who *'fill the dusk with stupid, stupid laughter.'* An observational third-person omniscient narrator enhances the sense of hidden forces at play. In Tommy's Country inclusive language yields to an intimate but imperative tone, also used effectively in Under Milkwood. *'If you ask he'll tell you where the biggest secrets lie in folds.'*

The creation of my Major Work has been a process of bravery and dogged reworking, and has enhanced my skill and knowledge of the poetic form, my overall understanding of bringing together an extended narrative, and a desire to further investigate my passions. The work shows the ways in which extremes of life, death, hardship and deep connection are often richer and that much more immediate and entwined for individuals leading lives on the land. I hope the poems offer a healthy counteraction to the fast paced, increasingly desensitised modern society, and that the reflective intimate tone nudges people back to their roots; that they may be lead back home.

Word Count: 1,466