

ISLAND

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160



BLUE ECOLOGIES – a wide-ranging conversation about water
plus **NONFICTION • FICTION • POETRY • ART • PLAYLETS**

Cover image:

Bruce Thurrowgood, *looking in – blue water*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 138 x 138 cm. An exhibition encompassing five decades of Bruce's work, including new works dedicated to water, will be held from 27 November to the end of the year. handmark.com.au



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An introduction to *Blue Ecologies*

from **Luke Johnson**, guest editor

The idea for the 'Blue Ecologies' theme that runs through much of this issue was conceived on the ancestral lands of the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation. It began with five writers sitting by North Wollongong Beach on a sunny spring morning, discussing ways in which we might turn what can often feel like a painfully solo, even solipsistic, activity – writing – into something more collaborative, more communal, more ecologically attuned.

At the time, the devastating bushfires that would burn some 18.6 million hectares of land along Australia's eastern seaboard over the coming months had not yet been sparked; the virus that would render such gatherings as ours illegal had not yet been coughed out into the world; the fatal knee that would incite a wave of peaceful and not-so-peaceful demonstrations from Minneapolis to Melbourne had not yet located its ill-fated neck. And yet even still, we felt frustrated and saddened by much of what we were witnessing, what we were living through, what we were being co-opted into. At best a meritocratic society rewarding ingenuity, aspiration and personal excellence. At worst a divisive cult of individualism thriving on the sort of existential anxiety our society appears to have all but perfected.

Ideological and philosophical concerns notwithstanding, we were pragmatists. We weren't looking to install a new world order, we were just looking for a writing project that would make us feel less shitty about the current world order. A project that would enable us to pool our individual pursuits and practices into something where the whole would outweigh the sum of its parts. To say we were in search of common ground would be to make an irony of where we ended up, for the answer wasn't beneath us so much as right there in front of us – an entire ocean full of it.

Water connects. This is true at the micro level, where it mediates the vital transfer of energy between organisms and their environments, just as it is true at the macro level, where it directs astrobiologists across vast stretches of the

cosmos in the search for life beyond earth. The Greek mathematician, astrologer and philosopher Thales of Miletus considered water the originating principle of all matter, a single substance malleable enough to change form from solid to liquid to gas and back again depending not on some stubborn or divine will of its own, but upon its receptiveness to the surrounding environment. Thales's successor Heraclitus seized upon this notion of perpetual change by claiming that 'no man steps in the same river twice for it's not the same river and it's not the same man'. Two and a half thousand years on and we'd like to challenge this proposition by arguing that it's *always* the same river. Which is to say that there is only one and, regardless of its form, it's the one which flows through us all and into which all of us flow.

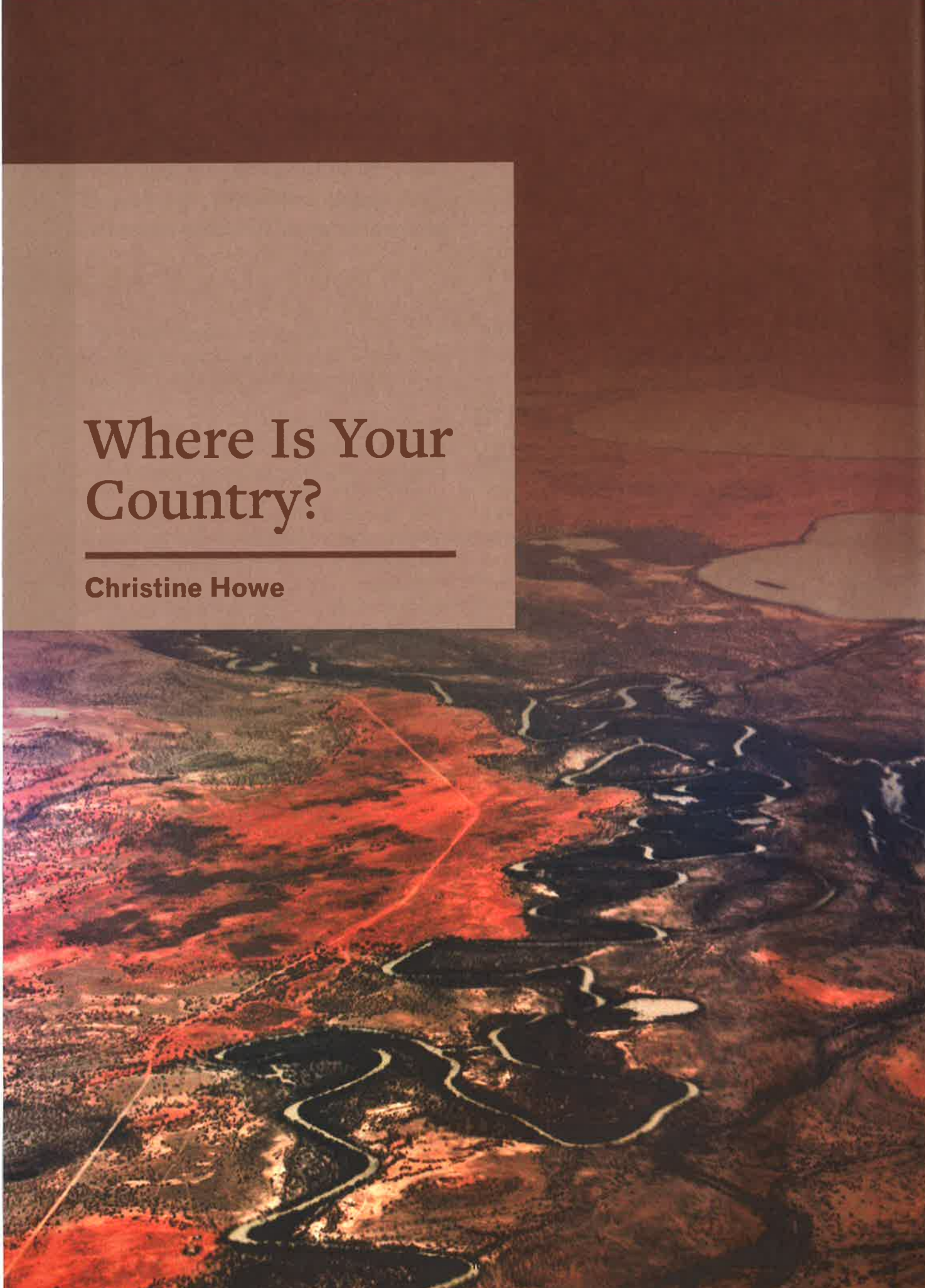
In joining with *Island's* regular editorial team we were able to expand the scope of our project significantly, inviting writers, artists and thinkers from around Australia to entertain this conceit by 'stepping into the river with us' and reporting on the experience. We were particularly interested in hearing from First Nations Australians whose encounters and knowledges are part of a tradition as old as the waterways themselves and, on this front, we are lucky to be able to include writing from a number of acclaimed Indigenous authors. We feel equally fortunate to be publishing our work alongside the diverse and capable collection of non-Indigenous authors who've helped germinate our theme.

Not all the pieces in this issue relate explicitly to water. As already mentioned, a lot has happened over the course of production, and so, taking our cue from the originating principle itself, we've altered the magazine's form to try to capture a small part of this calamitous moment in human history. If anything, such vicissitudes only served to remind us of the notion we agreed upon while sitting on the grass alongside North Wollongong Surf Lifesaving Club all those months ago: that we are all connected. That is to say, that we are all of the same substance.

We hope you enjoy what flows forth. ▼

Where Is Your Country?

Christine Howe



Two of Australia's most iconic rivers – the Murrumbidgee and the Murray – meet in my loungeroom. They've been there for so long I tend not to notice anymore. The artist's name is Urrunga, and the rivers traverse a 22 x 12 centimetre plywood rectangle, black acrylic lines following the contours of his mother's country: land, river, sky.

I've never stood at the junction of the Murrumbidgee and the Murray. Unlike the coastal estuaries I grew up alongside, I don't know the smell or texture of the air, the shape of rivergum limbs, the bird calls. Because the joining of these rivers takes place day after day above our fireplace, to me they've become more mythical than real.

So it comes as a shock when, one day, one of these rivers actually appears. We're just outside Canberra when it happens, heading towards the Tidbinbilla ranges, making bets about whether the thermometer in our car will drop below zero as we pass frost-encrusted paddocks and road workers in beanies and high-vis jackets. We dip down a reedy embankment and an innocuous road sign announces that we are about to cross the Murrumbidgee.

I'm ridiculously excited. My daughter, who is seven, begins bouncing up and down in her too-small booster seat, yelling 'The Murrumbidgee, the Murrumbidgee!' After we've crossed the bridge she asks, around a mouthful of almonds, 'What's the Murrumbidgee?'

I do my best to explain the significance of this river, but I don't do a very good job. I'm trying to navigate at the same time, and instead of zooming out on Google Maps to see

where the next intersection is, I'm zooming in on that tiny blue line we just crossed, watching it wriggle down from the Snowies towards Gundagai, Wagga, Narrandera, Griffith, Hay. Eventually it will meet the Lachlan, the Murray, pass through the almond plantations of Mildura, and join the Darling. On the map, the Murrumbidgee is a small intestine, pastel blue, looping towards the large intestine marking the border between New South Wales and Victoria.

Later, I find a *Guardian* article that follows the Murray-Darling river system from Cubbie Station in the Darling Downs to the sprawling Coorong wetlands at the river's mouth. The satellite images are of patchy kangaroo-red, wallaby-grey earth, stitched together with the thread of the river, casuarina-green. The Menindee Lakes, on the lower reaches of the Darling, are kidneys, teal and grey, marked by branching capillaries. Last summer, more than a million fish died here in an algal bloom triggered by one of the hottest, driest years ever recorded in this region.

Thousands upon thousands of fish suffocated (Murray cod, golden perch, silver perch, bream) – and that was just the beginning. More mass fish kills were recorded along the river system, including thousands of fish in Redbank Weir on the lower reaches of the Murrumbidgee. The scale of the loss is mind-numbing. Birdwatchers and botanists report not only dwindling numbers of migratory birds at Menindee, but also fewer native plants. Residents are worried about the quality of their drinking water.

I have never been to Menindee, though, or Redbank Weir, so in a sense, none of this feels real – they're intestines and kidneys on Google Maps.

I have never been to Menindee, though, or Redbank Weir, so in a sense, none of this feels real – they're intestines and kidneys on Google Maps.

Almost two hundred years ago, Charles Sturt described the upper reaches of the Murrumbidgee in his expedition notes, subtitled 'observations on the soil, climate and general resources of the colony of New South Wales'. 'The scenery around us was wild, romantic, and beautiful', he wrote, 'as beautiful as a rich and glowing sunset in the most delightful climate under the heavens could make it.' Further down-river, at Pondebadgery Plain – Wiradjuri country, not far

How would he describe this river now that it has been harnessed, diverted, piped, pumped, sprayed, sprinkled, hosed, flushed, drained?

from where Wagga is now – Sturt reflected, ‘It is deeply to be regretted that this noble river should exist at such a distance from the capital as to be unavailable.’

The Murrumbidgee catchment now supplies water for one-quarter of the fruit and vegetables currently grown in New South Wales, half of Australia’s rice production, and the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme. I wonder how Sturt would describe this river now that it *does* wind right past the doorstep of Australia’s capital city? How would he describe this river now that it has been harnessed, diverted, piped, pumped, sprayed, sprinkled, hosed, flushed, drained? How would he describe a river bearing water that is now part-owned by Webster Limited, Australia’s largest walnut producer, whose website states that the company’s ‘competitive advantage’ is underpinned by the ‘scale, diversity and surety’ of their water entitlements?

The water threading through this ‘wild, romantic, and beautiful river’ is now bought, leased and sold year by year. The general resources of the colony Sturt described in his expedition notes have been put to use, generating water, food, energy and wealth.

On my quest to discover the virtual flow of the Murrumbidgee, I find images other people have shared of the confluence of the Murray and the Murrumbidgee, but none of them feel quite right. Where are the curving hills, the rippling plywood grain, the fine zig-zag lines? Where is the black sun?

Tara June Winch’s novel *The Yield* is set on the banks of the fictional Murrumby River, based on the tributaries of the Murray-Darling. One of the central characters, Albert Gondiwindi, compiles a Wiradjuri dictionary, which includes the phrase *dhaganhu ngurambang* – ‘where is your country?’ This question, he explains, is more about kinship than location: ‘The map isn’t the thing, this country is made of impossible distances, places you can only reach by time travel. By speaking our language, by singing the mountains into existence.’

Where was Sturt’s *ngurambang*? Born in India in 1795, educated in England, promoted to the rank of captain in the British army after fighting in France, Canada and Ireland,

and finally sent to Botany Bay with a boatload of convicts, Sturt was a child of the Empire. He didn’t learn the languages of the communities he met as he traced his way along the Murrumbidgee, further and further from the coast. The relationships he formed with people who guided, accompanied and challenged him as he mapped the colony’s resources were temporary.

In February this year, a mass fish kill occurred in Wallagoot Lake, on the far south coast of New South Wales. Thousands of snapper were found dead, floating in lake weed in an estuary that’s been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. One night, when I was seven, we came prawning here. I remember the excitement of our family gathering in the dark by the shore, my old holey Dunlops squelching with summer-warm lake water, the green hand-held nets, the torches. I remember the flicker of something wriggling into my shoes, and the clamour to take them off on the sand. We shone the torch into my lake-wet shoe and found a tiny fish, swimming where my toes had been.

This place is not an imagined icon for me, like the Murray-Darling Basin. This is not a foreign land I travel through. Those vacant-eyed, bloated corpses lining the lake are relatives of the wriggling little fish slip-sliding against my seven-year-old toes.

The Murrumbidgee meets the Murray in our lounge room. But flowing into this painting, between the irregular parallel brush strokes, the golden plywood river, the thick black banks, are the casuarina hills of Wallagoot Lake, a stingray’s dark rippling wing, the splash of terns diving to feed their young, the baking sand dunes and the whip of my daughter’s hair in the gathering wind. ▼

Christine Howe is a writer and academic who teaches at the University of Wollongong. Her first novel, *Song in the Dark*, was published by Penguin, and her poetry and other short works have appeared in journals such as *Griffith Review*, *Cordite*, *Law, Text, Culture* and in various *Spineless Wonders* anthologies.

Image: Tim Keegan, *Menindee Lakes in NSW from 16 000 ft*, 2009

Sea Sorrow

Joshua Lobb

In a foamy bath

drifting

from scalding to lukewarm to wrinkling cold

trying to fathom

a body of water

a body in water

a rubber duck diving and resurfacing

an ocean full

of currents and undertows

slipstreams and rips

sudden dips in temperature

that catch the lungs

dumps of rain, freshwater unmingled

titanic raindrops, meniscus unbroken

salinity anomalies

freshwater bathtubs traversing the ocean

sliding over the warm water like jelly

following the coastline and then digressing

seeming to dissipate, then resurfacing in the Arctic

a supple sadness

of bath toys jettisoned in the Pacific

a container of containers

a children's palette of plastic

raincoat-yellow ducks, ketchup-red beavers

turtles blue like ice-cube trays

kermit-green frogs

following the desirelines of the sea

chasing the weather

warped by the mirror-bright sun

washing up

on the sands of Waikiki

in an Alaskan otter's nest

gliding the Bering Strait

furrowing through a stuttering creep of ice

then melting onto the rough shores of Greenland

bleached by cold and salt

brittle husks

of message-less bottles, half crushed
 corrugated, degraded
 technicolour grains of plastic
 tangled jellyfish bags
 tumbleturning in the swell
 the carcass of an albatross
 nylon ropes unthreading, a rubber tyre
 a lacklustre hat with smear-brown sweat stains
 a single shoe, laces tentacling
 a bathtub for molluscs
 a packing case, barnacled, belly-up
 waterlogged books, the text illegible
 a purgatorial vortex
 of jar lids and golf balls and shampoo bottles
 labels faded and peeling
 the corroded pain

of fractured coral limbs
 bits of cryptic sponge, the detritus of pearl
 the thinning carapace of an oyster
 a swarm of seaweed
 a sea-sorrow of decay
 sweltering in a bath of murky water
 phytoplankton gasping
 a sigh, a cry, a surging sewer
 the sticky sediment of phosphate
 a bodywash of silt
 blooms of oil
 diesel spit
 a red-raw gargle
 a chemical peel
 as the ocean's vitals churn down the pH scale
 from limestone to salad dressing to
 a crumpled can of coke
 a salinity anomaly
 leftover film of soap on wrinkled skin
 and a duck, acid-faded
 coming up for air.

Joshua Lobb's stories have appeared in *The Bridport Prize Anthology*,
Best Australian Stories, *Animal Studies Journal*, *Griffith Review*, *Text* and
Southerly. His 'novel in stories' about grief and climate change, *The Flight of
 Birds* (Sydney University Press, 2019), was shortlisted for the 2019 Readings
 Prize for New Australian Fiction and the 2020 Mascara Literary Review
 Avant Garde Awards for Best Fiction. He is also part of the multi-authored
100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder (Open Humanities Press, 2019).



Tour of Grief

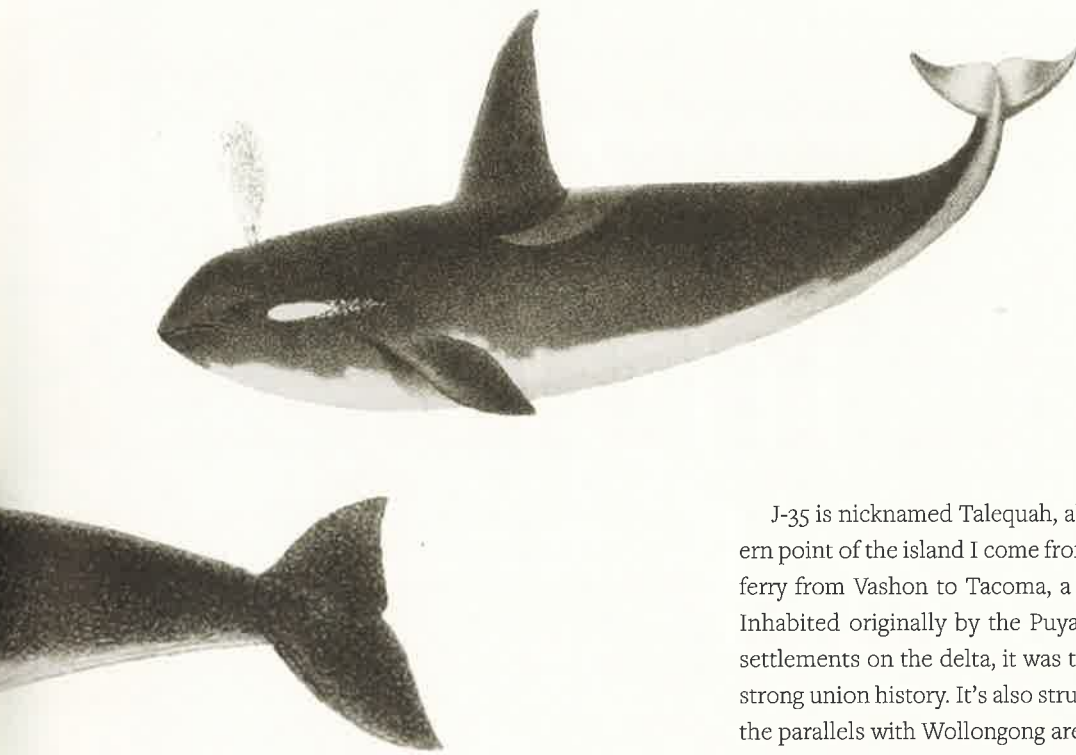
Shady Cosgrove

C. M. Scammon, del.

Lith. Britton & Rey

ORCAS OR KILLERS.

1. ORCA RECTIPINNATA, COPE. 2. ORCA ATER, COPE. 3. ORCA (ATER, VAR?)



In her novel *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson reminds us that bridges join but they also separate. The water connects and separates Wollongong, where I live now, from the small island in the Puget Sound where I grew up in the United States. At North Beach, skydivers whoop overhead, the sand grips my toes, and swimmers laze between the flags just beyond the breaks. The beach where I grew up was rocky, freezing cold even in the middle of summer, and stacked with driftwood. And yet: those waters are connected. The present follows the currents to the past. South equatorial meets north.

The last time I was on Vashon Island, mother orca J-35 kept her dead baby for seventeen days, pushing the body with her head through the water for over a thousand miles. The orcas are specific to the region and there are only seventy-five left, across three pods. J-35 was just north of me, where Canadian and American waters meet, and news reports documented her path daily. Researchers worried that she wasn't eating with the effort of keeping the 500-pound (227-kilogram) baby afloat – diving down and drawing it back to the surface when it began to sink. Other members of the pod eventually took turns, helping with the physical labour of keeping the dead whale on the surface of the water.

J-35 is nicknamed Talequah, also the name of the southern point of the island I come from. It's where you catch the ferry from Vashon to Tacoma, a port city south of Seattle. Inhabited originally by the Puyallup people, who lived in settlements on the delta, it was the site of a smelter, with a strong union history. It's also struggled with corruption, and the parallels with Wollongong aren't lost on me.

It was on that ferry run between Tacoma and Talequah that I last saw a pod of orcas. I was in high school, coming home from an athletics meet, desperate to escape the yelling and bustling students on the bus. I climbed the stairs to the passenger level and stood outside on the deck, listening to my Walkman as dusk settled over the water, the outline of Mount Rainier fading into the evening clouds. And there, just behind the boat, the slow, unassuming progress of dorsal fins rising and falling. They were crossing in our wake, moving like a chorus – one, then another – keeping time and tracking distance. Black creatures in swirling black water with only the tiniest underside of white visible in the quiet light.

The orcas of the Puget Sound and San Juan islands are in danger of extinction, and they are hungry, dependent on the Chinook salmon, which are now endangered too. The Lummi Nation, who see the whales as relatives, have resorted to feeding the pods with giant Chinooks. They approach by boat, dropping live salmon overboard. But overfishing and habitat destruction have made even these fish scarce, and now this vital link in the food chain is contaminated 'with everything from flame retardants and lead to Prozac and cocaine' (says Susan Casey, in an article in *The New York Times*, 4 Aug 2018).

Noise pollution is also an issue. Ambient noise from ships, seismic exploration and military sonar mask the low frequencies the orcas use to hunt and communicate. That ferry I was riding: it was making it harder for the whales to find food.

While we can't know what cetacean grief feels like, it seems dangerous to assume it doesn't exist.

Talequah J-35 carried her baby for seventeen days. It's dangerous to anthropomorphise animals, to read their behaviour and assign it with human motives. But whale behaviour and neuroanatomy indicate a complex inner life. As Casey explains, their brains are bigger than human brains, and their paralimbic lobe and insular cortex are both highly developed. They also have rare brain cells that signal a capacity for empathy, communication and social intelligence. While we can't know what cetacean grief feels like, it seems dangerous to assume it doesn't exist.

How does the emigrant sleep at night? It's well past midnight. I slip into my shoes and leave the house, cut over the train station, past gated car dealerships and the fluorescent petrol station. The beach isn't listening to the Saturday night drunks or the rev heads – only that ancient, white-capped rhythm. Further out, black water and sky meld into each other and Australia's whales make the migratory climb up the coast but, beyond, Talequah J-35 is travelling the Haro Strait with her pod.

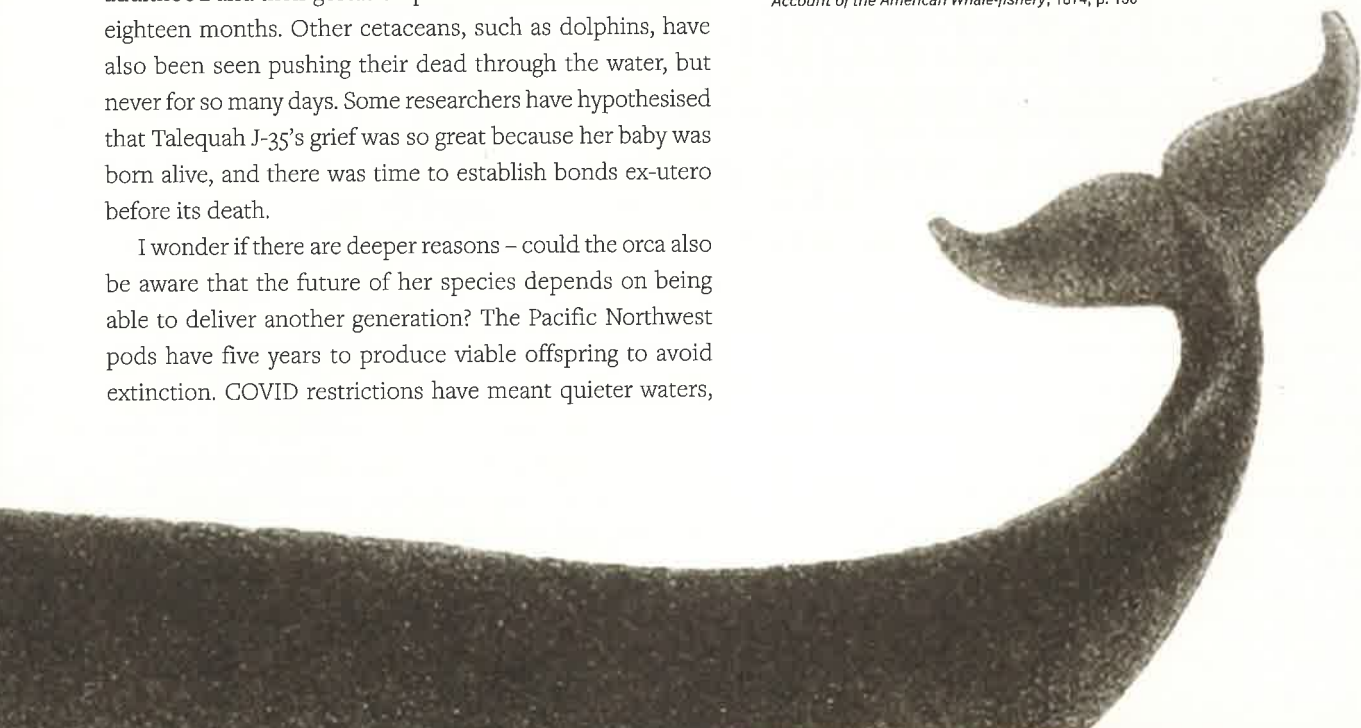
What is my responsibility to her across the ocean that separates and connects us? Why this grief? Yes, the sadness of a mother losing her child. But also, the idea that Talequah J-35 could know her species is in danger. Orcas don't repopulate easily. Only a quarter to a third of their calves survive to adulthood and their gestation period is between fifteen and eighteen months. Other cetaceans, such as dolphins, have also been seen pushing their dead through the water, but never for so many days. Some researchers have hypothesised that Talequah J-35's grief was so great because her baby was born alive, and there was time to establish bonds ex-utero before its death.

I wonder if there are deeper reasons – could the orca also be aware that the future of her species depends on being able to deliver another generation? The Pacific Northwest pods have five years to produce viable offspring to avoid extinction. COVID restrictions have meant quieter waters,

something that may help the orcas with hunting and communication. But even so, their numbers are tenuous. Might Talequah J-35's vigil be one of pleading: please keep your fishing nets and anti-depressants out of our water. Let us swim and feed and raise our young. In 2018 Washington State Governor Jay Inslee initiated a task force on orca recovery that made thirty-six initial recommendations, but without adequate resourcing the whales are still in danger, and now the task force has disbanded. The idea she could be aware of her powerlessness: that's what haunts me. ▼

Shady Cosgrove is the author of *What the Ground Can't Hold* (Picador, 2013) and *She Played Elvis* (Allen & Unwin, 2009). Her short works have appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Overland*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and various *Spineless Wonders* publications. She teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong.

Image: Charles Melville Scammon, illustration from *The Marine Mammals of the North-western Coast of North America, Described and Illustrated; Together with an Account of the American Whale-fishery*, 1874, p. 150



most of it is water

Catherine McKinnon

summer
hot
night
the river
walking by the river
three of us – josie, lily-rose and me
talking
always talking
a text to mum to say we're having pizza
she hates us going to the river, day or night
she thinks there's a rapist hiding behind every tree
there's not
and if there was
safety in numbers
and if there was
we're not stupid
some crazy barcode attacks us we kick him in the balls
and run

we're smart
i'm smart
there's things we don't know
things i don't know
like what will happen tomorrow

my grandma's a hippy, still
mum's the opposite
say the word sex and she jumps
nine to fivers grandma calls my olds
they are old
and ... they have no idea what i get up to

dad says, these days the river is biblical
downstream, dead fish floating
yellow water not blue
someone wants to plant willows, clean it up
old mr brown says, willows are weeds
downstreamers say, there are weeds and there are *weeds*
they're arguing about it still
and about other things
about how *our* part of the river flows and downstream
it doesn't
about how *we're* taking more than our share
there was a big blow up at the council meeting
dad was there
i wrote it up for miss wilson's science essay
(miss wilson is an actual human, like a good one)
she says i should send my essay to sciencegeeks online
i'm thinking about it

lily-rose is ranting about dams and water and the poem that
we did in class where one of the 'good' girls wrote
we are water

she was trying to be poetic
i had to tell her it's a fact
we are water
a man is sixty per cent
a woman fifty-five

babies yeah babies are like seventy-five per cent,
that's a lot of water


i think i might study science when i leave school
maybe

i stop and look up at the night sky and see the clouds racing
deep purples and crimson
a storm is coming
i'm thinking yeah
i'm thinking how amazing
the weather
the energy of it
it's the shifts that blow my mind
the way water can become a solid, like in winter when the
school pond is covered in ice
but heat that ice and the water is liquid and the molecules
get jumpy and their energy ramps up like runners on a
track, hydrogen and oxygen are their names, heat some
more and everything electromagnetic that binds those
molecules gives way boom! boom! it's chaos

lily-rose calls to me and i run to catch up
whole patches of the river are dark
lemon from the eucalypts, i can smell that
and grass and soil and dead things
dead wood, dead branches, dead leaves
we hear screams
they're coming from the river
someone in trouble
we run along the banks and call out
only a streak of moonlight on the black water
the screaming stops and then ... nothing
and then josie points to the middle of the river, and at first
it is hard to see
but then we do see
a woman and a man
a swirl of current around them
the man splashes about, he sinks down beneath the water
surface, comes up for air and gasps
the woman holds onto him
she's treading water and spluttering
the woman screams again and we see the man go under
again
we've got to help them, lily-rose says to me
we are both lifesavers at the pool and know what to do
we fling off our sandals and jump in the water
it's cold

the current tugs at my legs
we swim together, stroke for stroke, and when i stop to
catch my breath, lily-rose stops too and the man is
splashing furiously and the woman is crying
we see the man raise his arms up above his head
like he is trying to reach something
but then he sinks below the water and the woman goes
under a bit too, swishing her hands around her
i've lost him, i've lost him, she screams
we swim as fast as we can and reach the woman who is
dogpaddling her way in a circle looking for the man and
yelling, *where are you, where are you*
she flings her arms around lily-rose, and lily-rose sinks,
and water spurts up but then lily-rose takes hold of the
woman
i circle them both, with my hands out in front, searching
for the man
i know i have to dive under but i'm putting it off because
the water is another kind of night
the woman screams, *he's down there*
so i dive
and it's like being nowhere and everywhere
the strangest feeling
like a leaf falling
i wave my hands in front
nothing
i come up for air
the moon on the woman's face
and the light in lily-rose's eyes
i dive again, deeper this time, and i touch something solid
and a shiver goes through me but then it is rough and i
know it must be a tree branch tangled in the reeds
my lungs are bursting and i let myself drift upwards
because i don't want to swim the wrong way
when i break the surface the woman screams, *find him*
she's still swinging her arms out in the water, looking for
the man
he's gone, i say, treading water next to her

the woman howls
lie back, lily-rose tells her
lie back, i say to the woman
but she doesn't lie back
he might have drifted downstream, lily-rose says
he might have drifted downstream, i say
i don't believe it, not really, but we have to calm the
woman
help me, lily-rose says to me
i link my arm under one of the woman's arms and we try
to swim, lily-rose and me, which is not how you are
supposed to save someone but the woman won't do it
the proper way
she can't even swim but she wants to keep looking for the
man
she is ranting now and making no sense
i let go of her arm and i twist around in the water and i slap
her on her wet cheek
i saw grandma do it when my mum was having a fit, the
day grandpa died
hey hey, i say to the woman, *quiet now*
the woman keeps screaming so i slap her again, harder this
time
oh, she says, and she looks at me but she quietens down
and she and lily-rose bob in the water
let me do the work, lily-rose says to her, *lie back*
the woman does as she is told and lily-rose cups her hand
under the woman's chin and begins to swim to the
banks, pulling the woman with her
halfway there, i take over
when we reach the shallow water josie splashes in and
helps pull the woman up to the grassy area
josie has called an ambulance and so she runs back to the
road to wait for them
the woman sits on the banks, dumbly staring at the water
we sit beside her
all of us dripping
all of us shaking

lily-rose goes behind the woman and begins to rub her
arms to stop the shiver
i want to say sorry to the woman, sorry for slapping her,
but i don't know how to say it
so instead i ask, *what's your name?*
jasmine, the woman says
mine is madeline
the woman nods but she doesn't look at me, she just stares
at the river
it's like she's a zombie
he's a dj, she whispers, *a bloody good dj*

the police come and two paramedics
lights everywhere
people everywhere
the paramedics check the woman, ask her questions, wrap
her up in blankets, lay her on a stretcher and carry her
to the ambulance
she'd be thirty years old, i reckon
i don't know about the man
how old he was
one of the paramedics, the female one, comes back to
check on me and lily-rose
we're fine
just wet and cold
the paramedic gives us each a blanket, and we sit wrapped
up until a policewoman separates us to ask some ques-
tions
me first
talk to me, she says
i say what happened
then she goes to lily-rose

i look up
the moon has dark clouds around it now, but there is a tiny
glow, saffron glow, deep in the night sky
the storm is almost here
it's like i can feel it in my body and maybe i can because a
human heart is more than seventy per cent water and
so is a human brain and human lungs, even bones have
thirty per cent water in them

i'm thinking about what will happen
not just to me
to everyone
and everything
to the river

i wish now i'd said sorry to the woman, sorry for slapping
her, and also, sorry that the man drowned
i don't know why i couldn't say it
i wanted to say it but couldn't
so dumb really
i do a lot of dumb things

babies
i've never even held one

miss wilson says i should tell my parents
or tell my friends
she says it's my decision
what to do

i keep touching my stomach
because it's hard to believe
something is growing in there
and most of it is water ▼

Catherine McKinnon's second novel, *Storyland* (Harper Collins, 2017), was shortlisted for the 2018 Miles Franklin Literary award. Her next novel will be published in 2021. Her plays have been produced nationally, and her short stories, reviews and essays have appeared in *Transnational Literature*, *Text Journal*, *RealTime*, *Narrative*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Meanjin* and *Griffith Review*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong.

Image: Patrick Schneider

LITTLEPROUD!!!

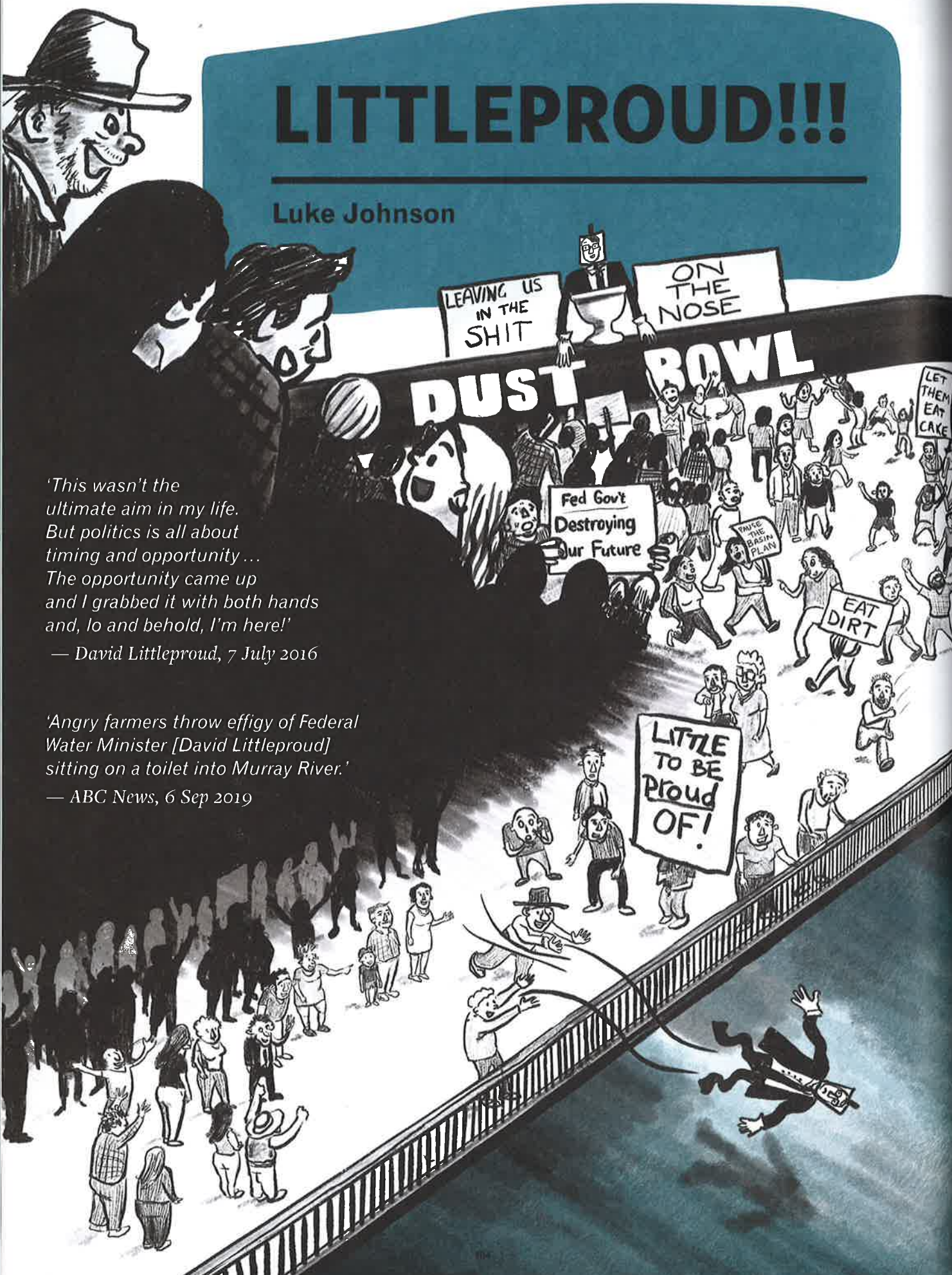
Luke Johnson

'This wasn't the ultimate aim in my life. But politics is all about timing and opportunity... The opportunity came up and I grabbed it with both hands and, lo and behold, I'm here!'

— David Littleproud, 7 July 2016

'Angry farmers throw effigy of Federal Water Minister [David Littleproud] sitting on a toilet into Murray River.'

— ABC News, 6 Sep 2019



Holy Maranoa! – what have I gone and got myself into this time?! The Hon. David Littleproud being floated down the main street of Tocumwal on a toilet! What an unexpected and inexplicable turn of events. I mean, who could have predicted it? That the humble boy from western Queensland who rose to parliamentary prominence on the back of nothing more than a year-twelve education and a healthy dose of temerity should find himself strapped to the rim of a stainless-steel bowl, hitched to the tray of a flatbed truck and paraded through town like a prize ram on show day. It seems like only ten seconds ago I was sitting in my office up there in the sunshine state, telling my assistant Stacey that I'd rather drink dollar-a-litre milk from a Woolworths dumpster than accept an invitation to a rabble-rouser like this. And then *poof!* – here I am, riding shotgun on the old groan throne right through the centre of town. Well, I tell you what, southern New South Wales might be a long way from sunny Chinchilla where I grew up enjoying an awesome range of outdoor activities such as cricket, football, swimming, camping and fishing, but I have to hand it to them down here in the blue state, they sure know how to get their man!

And they sure know how to bung on a rally too. Just get a go at this crowd, would you? This is a country crowd. A real salt of the earthier, this one. The mums and dads of regional Australia pounding the pavements with their placards and their posters, showing those inner-city trendies that you don't need an expensive university degree in Advanced Marketing to get your message out there. A sheet of cardboard and a magic marker from the local newsagent and Roberta's your aunt! IRRIGATION NOT RUINATION; FOODBOWLS NOT DUSTBOWLS; ROYAL COMMISSIONS NOT POLITICIANS. Absolute poetry in motion, it is. One of the very reasons I got into politics in the first place, too: to help bring a voice to regional Australia. Real regional voices voicing real regional choices! Because this is what my coalition counterparts back up there in the nation's capital don't get about regional Australia: that you can defy the laws of science by instantaneously teleporting a bloke halfway across the country, ratchet-strap him to a toilet and taunt him with

derisive rhymes about his involvement in an increasingly contentious piece of bipartisan legislation, and still be BFFs at the end of the day – or should I say BRFFs: Best *Regional* Friends Forever!

And hello, what's happening now? Making our way out onto the bridge and over the River Murray, are we? You beauty, I love a good bridge! Especially a good *regional* bridge. Hey, here's a tagline for you: *Real regional bridges connecting real regional communities!* Dingo! – another winner from the D-man! Although, if I'm to offer myself some constructive criticism, then I might want to think about changing the word 'communities' to something starting with *r*, just to give it that extra bit of razzle-dazzle. I know, how about: *Real regional bridges connecting real regional riverbanks?* Double-dingo! – that works, and it's true: regional bridges really do connect regional riverbanks! Because if there's one thing I know about regional voters it's that they love alliteration. It doesn't matter what state you're from, there's just no resisting a rollicking run of rambunctious repetition!

And while we're on the subject of a-a-alliteration, can I also just say, how good is regional Australia! I mean, you can take the boy out of the bush but you can't take the bush out of the boy. You know who taught me that? My dad, the Hon. Brian Littleproud: National Party Member; Queensland Minister for Education, Youth and Sport; farmer; grazier; school teacher; and all-round dead-set legend! And how proud he was to see me, his little Davey bean, rise to the position of Federal Minister for Mismanagement, Dishonesty and Bad Policy.

No, wait – hang on a minute! Scrap that last bit! My train-of-thought's been hijacked by a couple of teenage girls – twin sisters by the look of it – waving a white bedsheet between two wooden poles down along the riverbank. Hmmm, let me see: Mismanagement, Dishonesty, Bad Policy ... M-D-B-P. Right, now I see what's going on here. Nice try, girls. Very clever. But you can't fool me. MDBP doesn't stand for any of those words. It stands for Murray Darling Basin Plan. And I know this because I'm the Hon. David Littleproud, Minister for Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance, Natural Disaster and Emergency Management – *for realies!* And if you don't believe me, then I suggest you put your supercilious

sign down, take your smartphones out of your jeans pockets and start scrolling. Because one of the really cool things that happens when you become a federal minister (which I am!) is that you get your own webpage, and mine has a picture of me standing in front of a windmill. How regional is that! And I hate to have to blow your minds twice in one day, girls (not really), but guess what else? I never actually stood in front of that windmill. I kid you not. This is what's known as 'chromakeying', or more commonly 'green-screening': a post-production technique for compositing two images or video streams together based on colour hues. Pretty high-tech stuff, if you ask me. But, then, you didn't ask me, did you? No, that's right, you were more interested in taking the Mickey Mouse. Well, two can play at the acronym game. You want to know what I think MDBP stands for? How about, Malicious Defamatory Belittling and Phoney – because that's what I think when I look at your sign! Or here's one for you, Murray Darling Brat Patrol – which is what I think when I look at the two of you standing there with those smug smiles plastered across your freckly faces!

Alright, alright, alright – I admit, I might have got a bit carried away there on that last one. But that's just because I can't stand to see the Basin Plan being misappropriated like that. Say what you want about yours truly – I'm a big boy, I can handle it – but don't go dragging a perfectly good piece of legislation through the mud with your ill-informed ideological insurrections. Because that sort of negativity isn't going to help anyone. And it sure as sheep poo isn't going to deliver any more water to regional Australia, either. The fact is, we're smack-bang in the middle of one of the worst droughts in our nation's history. Times are tough, people are hurting, emotions are raw. And I don't need a couple of troublemaking teenyboppers pointing that one out to me!

But let me just remind you, young ladies (in case your adolescent brains are too backed up with hormones to remember), it was drought that led to the conception of the Basin Plan in the first place. A decade of depleted rainfalls in the early 2000s and the Murray-Darling was on the verge of total collapse. Animals were dying, towns were emptying out and our world-class wetlands were looking drier than a nun's nasty. Enter the federal government with their daring rescue plan: a \$13 billion initiative aimed at returning 1.1 million Olympic swimming pools' worth of water to the environment every single year – eat your heart out Thorpedo! Is it a perfect plan? No. Is it a popular plan? Well, also no. But it is a plan, and at the end of the day that's good enough for me!

So, sure, by all means, girls, wave your nasty flags at me from the river's edge; have your smarty-pants mates shout 'Littledick!' when I'm out there touring the regions in my all-terrain Toyota Kluger; troll my Facebook page with Harry Potter memes and pictures of Brains from the supermarionation television series *Thunderbirds*; but just know that when all's said and done I couldn't give a rat's bottom, since it isn't *me* who's making the fool of myself, it's *you* who's making the fool of me – or rather of *yourselves*! Because when push comes to shove, the Basin Plan's not going anywhere. It was written into law in 2012 and is still there today in 2019. And as long as it's here to stay, then *so am I* – the Hon. David Kelly Littleproud: MVP of the MDB—

—*Peaky Blinders*! Who, or rather *what*, on God's great green earth is that? Staring back at me from the truck's rear windscreen! It looks like, well, like *me*, sitting on a toilet with my slacks pulled down around my ankles. I mean, the beady little eyes, the almost imperceptibly askew bottom jaw, the bold-framed spectacles lending a stately somewhat spunky air to what is otherwise a fairly nondescript face ... who else's reflection *could* it be? And yet, at the same time – and this is the really freaky-deaky part – it looks remarkably *unlike* me, inasmuch as I'm pretty sure it isn't even a real person! It has lumpy resin-like skin, white cotton-glove hands, floppy dislocated limbs and, notwithstanding the jolts and judders that cause its slightly disproportionate cranium to wobble back and forth like one of those hilarious bobble-headed figurines people keep suction-cupped to the dashboards of their cars, it shows no signs of any autonomous movement whatsoever! What sort of Victorian voodoo is this that's come wafting over the border? I mean, it was one thing to teleport me here against my will and without any prior warning, beaming me halfway across the country to poke fun at me for doing an objectively awesome job of upholding the integrity of the ministerial office I was chosen to represent, but to subject me to all manner of transmogriying forces in the process, rendering me more mannequin than man, more figurine than fella, more dummy than David ... Well, I think it might be time to bring the third umpire in on this one, because that's just not the gentlemen's game I thought we were engaged in here!

And as if my unanticipated inanimate condition weren't an obvious-enough indicator that something sneaky were stirring down here in the southern regions, add to it the fact I've just spotted a scoop of local reporters milling about up ahead with their camera lenses uncapped and their note-

books ready for action. Hoping to catch a shot of yours truly for publication in the regional rags no doubt. Well, I'll give them something to send to the printeries, alright. I mightn't be able to move my limbs or alter my facial expression, but as long as I'm being paraded before the public like some paralysed prince of the privy, I can still strike a paper-worthy pose. So, flash away, you fiends of the fourth estate! Capture me in all my physiognomically disfigured magnificence! From Maranoan upstart to ministerial superstar to über-marionette of the Goulburn Valley Autobahn! Nothing can stop me now!

Hold the phone, I may have spoken somewhat prematurely, because unless I'm mistaken, the truck upon which I find myself an involuntary, inanimate passenger appears to be, well, stopping. Right here at the halfway point of the bridge as it were. What a weird and dare I say *dangerous* destination for the driver to be discontinuing this disgruntled demonstration of undeserved degradation – right in the middle of the highway, for Dog's sake! Good luck to the 3000-odd people marching along behind us should some long-hauling, No-Dozing, deadline-racing freight-truck driver come barrelling along in the opposite direction now. It'd be absolute carnage, I tell you. Bodies strewn left, right and centre. Although, that said, it's hard to complain about the view from up here. Just look at all that water down there! The majestic Murray River surging its way toward the Great Australian Bight at near full capacity. Proof the Plan is working!

Okay, fair enough, glancing around I get the impression there might be a few primary producers present who'd prefer to see that water being pumped out and put over a paddock at this point in time, who probably can't understand the logic of letting league upon league of life-lending liquid flow out to sea when there's crops withering and wilting from Womblebank to Wilcannia. But to them I say don't blame the Plan for your hardships. Blame each other! Because the water entitlements are there to be snapped up, you've just got to be willing to outbid your neighbour for them, that's all. Sure, we could argue all day over the integrity of a plan that's led to widescale commodification of our most valuable natural resource, creating a situation in which smaller operators find themselves being outbid by multinational investor groups who, with no agricultural interests whatsoever, have been allowed to purchase and withhold large quantities of the wet stuff until scarcity drives prices so high that the only ones who can afford to pay for it are the equally

nefarious multinational farming conglomerates. But in doing so, wouldn't we also have to debate the logic of free-market capitalism, conceding that there are at least some occasions when the indispensability of a resource should be enough to convince governments that deregulation isn't always the best approach? And isn't that starting to sound a lot like capital-P politics? And aren't I an important member of the party committed to reminding people that when it comes to capital-P politics, regional Australians have had a gutful? That they're not interested in the point-scoring or the pork-barrelling or the publicity stunts? That what they want and respect more than anything at a time like this is capital-C certainty? Because nothing spells certainty like raw data! Just try a few of these facts and figures on for size and tell me I don't know what I'm talking about:



Made up of **22 catchment zones** and spanning an area of more than 1 million km², the Murray-Darling Basin constitutes the largest and most complex river system in all of Australia. (*Wicked!*)



It's home to over **40 Aboriginal Nations**, who've been looking after the rivers and land here for at least **40 000 years**. (*Great job, guys!*)



Today, some **2 million people** live within the Basin districts, while another **1 million people** rely on the rivers for drinking water. (*Anyone fancy a dash of Cottee's Cordial with that?*)



But it's not just people who rely on the rivers. The Basin also provides habitat to **46 species of native fish** and **98 species of waterbird**. (*Way to go, nature!*)



With almost **50% of all Australian farms** located within the Basin, it serves as the nation's veritable food bowl, generating close to **\$19 billion in agricultural commodities** every year. (*Boy, I wouldn't mind having a food bowl like that on my kitchen bench!*)



Owing to the Basin's relatively flat topography, only **4% of the annual rainfall** makes it into the river system, with the remaining **96% evaporated or transpired by plants** before it can reach these important waterways. (*Gee, thanks a lot, evaporation!*)



Following the **2000s Millennium Drought**, a large-scale audit found that approximately **two-thirds of the water that does make it into the rivers** was then being extracted for human use, with most of it being put towards agricultural production. (*But we need food, right!?*)

Yes, we do need food (*good question, David!*), but we also need to protect the environment. And that's exactly what the government's **\$13 billion Murray-Darling Basin Plan** seeks to do! Through a combination of water buybacks and infrastructure-improvement programs, the Plan aims to return **2750 gigalitres** per annum back to the rivers by **30 June 2019**, thereby ensuring the ongoing sustainability of one of our most precious natural resources! (*Yee-ha, ninja cowboy!*)



Hang on a minute, aren't we **4 days into September** already? And haven't recovery targets been stuck at around the **80% mark** for some time now? And doesn't this mean that the Plan is both late and underperforming?! (*Gulp!*)



Fear not! On **13 January 2018**, the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism was passed into law, which allowed us to reduce the overall target by **605 gigalitres** on the proviso that states could demonstrate equivalent environmental outcomes through improved water efficiency measures. In making this adjustment we were also able to extend the water recovery target deadline to **30 June 2024**, which means we're not running *behind* schedule ... we're running *ahead* of schedule! And ...



... as the current Minister for Water Resources, I don't mind saying that this is an outcome of which I'm profoundly proud – an outcome for which all Australians should be profoundly proud of me, in my humble opinion. In an age of partisan politics and deep dogmatic divide, I was able to put petty particularities aside, reach out to my opposition and state counterparts and get the Plan back on track! And who in their right mind could possibly want to criticise a bloke for an achievement like that?

'G'day, everyone. My name's Keith Daly.'

Like a clap of thunder it comes! Ricocheting off the bridge's trusses and along its metal stringers, vibrating across the wrought-iron cross-girders, up through the truck's rigid chassis and into my own rigid chassis! *Keith Daly ... Keith Daly ... who the doorbell is Keith Daly?!*

No sooner do I ask myself the question than he appears – the megaphoned misterioso! – out of the truck's cabin and up onto the tray top with yours truly, pausing his digital ditties – *Two-four-six-eight, let us all irrigate! Zero-three-six-nine, pause the Plan and show some spine!* – to introduce himself to the crowd who've followed us through the streets and out over the water.

'For those of you who don't know me,' he tells them as he moves closer toward me, 'I'm an irrigation farmer from

down Benjeroop way and one of the organisers of today's Pause the Plan Rally.'

'Good on ya, Keithy!' a younger man dressed in a flannel-ette shirt, jeans and boots calls from the perch he's taken on the bridge's metal guardrail.

'Yeah, thanks, Stevo,' Keith responds, swatting a fly from his face. He's standing very close to me now. Close enough that I can all but smell the regionalness seeping out of him. A powerfully pheromonic combination of hydraulic oil, bulldust and, if I'm not mistaken, Imperial Leather shaving cream.

'I'm also responsible for Minister Little-to-be-Proud-of here,' he adds, setting his earthy, manly hand down on top of my narrow puppetry shoulder.

And it isn't the cad sitting on the guardrail who calls out this time, but rather a middle-aged woman whose white t-shirt has been screen-printed with the phrase LET THEM EAT DIRT. Big black letters right across the chest. 'Send the bastard to the guillotine!' she shouts, drawing a clamour of laughter and applause from those standing near enough to have heard her rancorous remarks.

Okay, not to sound alarmist here, but I have to say, this sudden invocation of violence catches me a little by surprise. Because while I'll happily support a person's right to free speech – it's the cornerstone of a healthy democracy, if you ask me – I do think there's a certain etiquette that people ought to subscribe to when expressing their views in public. And to me, appropriating the words of some long-dead French aristocrat seems very much out of keeping with the regional spirit of a demonstration like this one. I mean, if you're looking for someone to quote in t-shirt form, why not quote Tim Fraser @tim_fraser77, who took the time to respond to my recent parliamentary update on the status of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan by tweeting: 'Finally someone willing to give credit where it is due and get on with doing what is right by the nation. Go you good thing!?' Because I reckon a quote like that would make for an awesome piece of wearable merchandise. Or what about tumbowl @tumbowl who reckons I'm a 'breath of fresh air mate'? I can totally see these words superimposed over a picture of me standing in front of a windmill (*get it? fresh air!*) and printed on a long-sleeved T. Thanks, tumbowl! Or then there's Glen Smith @Glenevo who jumped onto the old Twitter thread recently to commend the sensible and methodical way that I've gone about decentralising Basin jobs, moving them out of Canberra and into the regions where they belong: 'Great move forward! These communities commend this courageous

initiative!’ Now, if those words aren’t wardrobe-worthy, then I’ll be a wether’s worthless willy.

And I hate to sound like a total grumble bum here, but this is precisely the time when Keith should be drawing from his natural repository of regional camaraderie to help a brother out!

But is this what I get in my time of need – *help*? No. What I get is a very uncouth Keith tapping the side of my head with his conical speaking device and quipping, ‘Well, we could chop his head off, but I don’t think we’d find much in there ... *ha-ha-ha* ... a bit like the real Littleproud ... *ha-ha-ha*!’

And doesn’t that get the crowd going, whooping and cheering and pointing their camera phones at me like I were a giant fibreglass pineapple and them a busload of Taiwanese tourists enjoying just one of the many wonders the Sunshine Coast has to offer. Never mind the illogicality of such a remark, speaking about me as though my current corporeal conversions were an indicator of some sort of inner inauthenticity, just so long as you get your cheap laughs. Well, I tell you, I mightn’t *look* like my real self, Keith, but don’t go judging a Queen Garnet plum by its skin colour, because I still *feel* like my real self. And right now that real self is feeling like I’ve had just about enough of this New South Wales nonsense! I can take a joke as well as the next bloke, believe me, but there are times when the joking can get out of hand. Whether it’s being humiliated in front of one’s coalition comrades by some whoopee-cushion-wielding joker from the ALP who thinks that sneaking across the floor to stash an air-filled rubber bladder onto the padded seat of his opponent’s parliamentary pew makes for a clever and appropriate way of welcoming the new boy to town – ah, *hello? it doesn’t!* – through to this current indignity, I can tell you now, Keith, there’s nothing funny about toilet humour!

And yet here I find myself all the same, strapped to the crapper with no option but to listen on as you belittle me with your libellous list of indictments, including ‘... criminal mismanagement of the Barmah Choke (yeah, right) ... catastrophic environmental degradation caused by running rivers at continuous full capacity (and I suppose you’d rather see them running on empty, would you?) ... explosion of the carp population (seriously, Keith, *exploding carp*?) ... increase of hypoxic blackwater events (um, hello, ever heard of speaking English?) ... accusations of corruption and fraud (I don’t know how many times I need to say it: that was my ex-wife’s once-removed second cousin – nothing to do with me!) ... government-imposed systematic euthanasia (careful

you don’t hyperventilate with all that hyperbole) ... deliberate and wilful neglect ...’

I think I’ve heard just about enough of your conspiratorial catastrophising, Keith. I’m not sure where you’re getting your information from, but I suppose Chief Executive of the Basin Authority, Phillip Glyde, missed the boat entirely with his recent claims of ‘major improvements in compliance’ and ‘the passing of important amendments which will improve outcomes for the environment, and for Basin communities and industries’, did he? And that I should be taking my directives from you and your bunch of cronies instead? Well, let me just remind you, my friend, there’s a stark difference between democracy and mob rule, and where water is concerned, I’d advise you to restrict your mutinous mayhem to the high seas! The Basin Plan may not be the cash cow that you and your charming farmer friends here were hoping it would be, but that doesn’t give you the right to start taking hostages from the House of Representatives. Now, in the name of all that is regional, Keith Whatever-Your-Middle-Name-Is Daly, I demand you untie me at once! *Emancipato ... Expelliarmo!*

And lo and behold, as Murray Cod is my witness, it works! The formidable Keith, without a moment’s hesitation, lifting his hand away from my shoulder, closing his four fingers into a fist and giving me a great big thumbs up. Who would have believed it! A complete turn-around. A total one-eighty. Hip-hip-hooray! Hip-hip-hooray! Now, if only I can find a way to reverse this sedentary spell which has reduced me to all but a sliver of my usual sly self so that I might return the gesture with a great big *right back at you, cobber!* Imagine that for a climactic end to the day’s bewildering events! Letting all that bad blood wash out to sea with the delusions of so many irrigation-reliant farmers by offering up my own symbolic display of solidarity. *One basin, one nation, one sausage-shaped salutation!* Let me see what else I have in my bag of tricks. I know – *Accio pollexio!* No? Alright, how about this one: *Piertotem automotum!* Fiddlesticks – it isn’t working! Try as I might, the miraculous moment refuses to surface. No rapid recovery, no sudden surge of strength, no immediate improvements in my capacity for activity. The best I can do is stay plonked right where I am: on the dunny with my hand dangling from the end of my arm like a discharged udder as Keith sets about punctuating his gesture with a verbal vow of validation.

‘One,’ he begins. ‘We call on the New South Wales and Victorian Governments to immediately withdraw from the current implementation of the Basin Plan.’

Okay, not what I was expecting. But perhaps I've misunderstood. Perhaps what he meant to say was *We call on the New South Wales and Victorian Governments to immediately withdraw from the Basin Plan*— No, wait, that's literally the same thing. Okay, now I'm confused. Are you with me or against me, Keith? The thumbs up, the conflicting verbal confirmation – you're sending mixed signals here, Keith.

'Two,' he says, unfurling an index finger and paying no attention whatsoever to my inaudible protestations. 'We call on the Federal Government to immediately pause, review and revise the Basin Plan.'

Oh no, I see what's going on here: this isn't a peace offering, this is a list of demands! Keith, you fool, what are you doing? The stones have been cast, the wheels are in motion, the future is upon us! To turn back now would be disastrous, Keith, absolutely diabolical! Perhaps you aren't familiar with the 2014 computer-animated science-fiction film *Mr Peabody and Sherman*? Well, let me bring you up to speed, because the plotline couldn't be more relevant. Mr Peabody, a highly intelligent anthropomorphic dog living in present-day New York City embarks on a time-travelling adventure with his adopted human son, Sherman. And does everything run smoothly for Mr Peabody and Sherman as they weave in and out of the past, Keith, interfering and intervening in the actions of their antecedents? No, it doesn't! In fact, the movie is a veritable public service warning against these sorts of temporal interventions! What's done is done and should not be undone!

'Condition three,' Keith presses on, determined it seems to prove that the problems of a few southern irrigators might indeed amount to more than a hill of Maranoan mungbeans in this crazy world. 'We call on the Federal Government to allocate 1000 gigalitres of conveyance water to southern basin irrigators for immediate relief from the drought.'

How many different ways are there for me to say it, Keith?! THERE'S NO MORE WATER! Zip! Zero! Zilch! Outside of paying through the nose for it, the only way you're going to get more water is if it rains. And I can't make it rain. I wish I could, believe you me. I wish I could call God up on the phone right now and say, 'Oh hey, God, it's the Hon. David Littleproud here, Minister for Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance, Natural Disaster and Emergency Management,' and have God say, 'Hi, David, how's it going?' and me say, 'Yeah, good thanks, God,' and God say, 'How can I help you, David?' and me say, 'Look, I don't mean to bother you, God, but I'm kind of between a rock and a hard place here,' and God say, 'How so, David?' and me say, 'Well,

you're not going to like this, God, but the irrigation farmers of southern New South Wales and northern Victoria are annoyed at having had their water entitlements taken away from them under the Murray-Darling Basin buyback scheme and have started blaming yours truly for their hardships,' and God say, 'That doesn't sound very fair, David. I mean, you only came into this thing at the eleventh hour. It was a veritable shit storm when you arrived,' and me say, 'No need to remind me, God,' and God say, 'People can be very unreasonable, David,' and me say, 'They sure can, God,' and God say, 'If anyone's to blame, David, I reckon it's got to be that burst blood vessel Barnaby,' and me say, 'Well, I'd prefer not to comment on that one, God,' and God say, 'Very diplomatic, David,' and me say, 'You can't afford not to be, God,' and God say, 'True, true. Mind you, you do realise that I can read minds, right?' and me say, 'So you already know the way I feel about my colleagues,' and God say, 'Sure do,' and me say, 'And you also know the reason I'm calling up?' and God say, 'You're calling to ask for more rain,' and me say, 'Amazing – you really can read minds!' and God say, 'I told you I could,' and me say, 'Sorry, I shouldn't have doubted you,' and God say, 'That's okay, I knew that you would even before you did,' and me say, 'So, how about it, then – can you send some our way?' and God say, 'Okay, David, on this occasion I'll help you out,' and me say, 'Yippee!' and then hang up the phone and come and deliver the good news of the Lord to the people of the southern Basin like Moses returning from the mountaintop! But unfortunately, I don't possess those powers, Keith. Nobody does. I once witnessed an aforementioned National Party colleague of mine climb to the top of a wheat silo and accuse a cirrocumulus cloud of duplicitous behaviour, shaking his fist at the fluffy white heavens like a shepherd shaking his fist at a fleecy flock of jolly jumbucks. But even that wasn't enough to bring on the waterworks! So, what chance does a mild-mannered minister from Maranoa like me have, meddling in such mystical and meteorological matters?

'And four,' Keith says, raising that most noncompliant of all the fingers – the wedding ring finger, 'we demand the Federal Water Minister David Littleproud be removed immediately from his portfolio as we have no confidence or trust in his ability to deliver a Basin Plan on a sound economic, social and environmental footing!'

Sacré Bleu! I can't believe my ears! What foul fate that I should have been spared my hearing in the face of everything else that has been stripped away from me! To be audibly assaulted in such a manner. Say it isn't so, Keith. Say it's



all just one big joke. Say the real reason you've whisked me down here is to present me with the region's Most Dedicated and Best Politician award: the inaugural MDBP! Because I'm not ashamed to admit that I've been dreaming of such an award and such a moment since first entering parliament back there in December 2016. The former agribusiness manager and proud franchisee of a Mr Rental outlet following in the footsteps of his father and his father before him.

'Enough's enough!' somebody screams.

'Throw him in the river!' another somebody bellows.

'Lynch him – just lynch him!' a third somebody froths.

What did I do to accelerate such animosity amongst my fellow regional Australians, that in three short years of service they should be calling for my blood like this? Didn't I always roll my sleeves to the correct height – midway between my elbow and wrist, so as to ensure that nobody would ever be able to accuse me of looking too regional nor not regional enough? And didn't I always inflect my speech with an impressive selection of idiotic idioms and mixed metaphors, like the time I tried to rally support for the Plan by assuring my fellow Australians that 'we all hold the keys but we've all got to grasp them because the window of opportunity is there but unless we do it together, unless we do it together, we'll miss the boat'? And what about the way I voted *no* on the same-sex marriage bill – what about that stroke of genius? Didn't that demonstrate my deep commitment to the core values of those regional Australians I vowed to represent? Don't listen to them, Keith! I beg you! I know you can feel what I'm feeling. There's a bond between us, Keith, a bond stronger than all the misinformation and muckraking in the world. You just have to trust in your heart,

Keith, and I promise you, *I promise you*, we'll get through this thing. What do you say? Huh? *Huh?*

Placing the megaphone at my feet, Keith unfastens the strap from my thighs, carries me to the edge of the truck's checkerplate tray and hoists me high into the air like the opening scene of *The Lion King*. And, I tell you, somebody get me Craig Black of the Craig Black Motor Group on the phone quick-smart, because *Oh, what a feeling this is Toyota!* The Hon. David Littleproud: reigning rajah of the rivers and regions below! A happy ending after all!

Then he speaks: 'Send us a postcard when you reach the Bight, you balderdashing bastard.'

And, *hakuna non matata*, because over I g

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Luke Johnson is a writer and academic. His stories have appeared in such places as *Southerly*, *Griffith Review*, *Westerly*, *Overland*, *Going Down Swinging*, *HEAT*, *Mascara Review*, *The Lifted Brow* and previous issues of *Island*, and have been listed for numerous national awards, including the Josephine Ulrick Prize, the Elizabeth Jolley Prize and the Katharine Susannah Prichard Prize. He lectures in creative writing at the University of Wollongong and is treasurer of the Australian Short Story Festival.

#### Images

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