
The Lumen Seed

*Yeah, it make me real sad and cry for my country. Because God bin put me there, God put my people there. Why someone could move us, because of his power, because of his idea? Cutting off God's power, God's idea here, God's word, God's light. . .and that is the true. Cut off like this electric wire, if you cut him off, like that.*

—Jerry Jangala

# THE LUMEN SEED

*Judith Crispin*

Cofounders: Taj Forer and Michael Itkoff
Designer: Ursula Damm
Copy editor: Elissa Rabellino



Supported by




ISBN 978-1-942084-24-2

Printed in China



Daylight Books
E-mail: info@daylightbooks.org
Web: www.daylightbooks.org

*For Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu*

**Warning**

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be aware that this book contains images and names of people who may have since passed away.*

## Acknowledgments

My thanks go to ArtsACT for funding this project; the Australian Catholic University and Manning Clark House for their support; and Magnet Galleries, Daylight Books, and Warnayaka Arts Center for their advocacy and hard work.

I'm grateful to the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu for the honor of sharing their stories. I'd like to especially thank Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Jerry Jangala Patrick, Henry Jackamarra Cook, Rosie Murnkumarnku Napurrurla, Molly Napurrurla, Neil Jupurrurla Cook, Likatiya Napangardi Patrick, Beth Nungarrayi Patrick, Tabra Nakamarra Cook, Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali Hargraves, Sonya Napaljarri Cook, Shemaiah Nakamarra, and all the kids of Lajamanu. I also wish to thank Aunty Matilda House, Ngambi elder, for her encouragement and support.

My thanks go to Dave Musgrave for editing the poems for this book, and to Philip Salom, Juno Gemes, Gary Nihsen, and Bob Adamson for their feedback on the writing. I'm also grateful to Juno Gemes for writing the foreword. This book would not have been possible without the travel companionship of John Gollings, Dave Musgrave, Sebastian Clark, Victoria Royds, and Gordon Pritchard, and also Rolfy and Alwin from Lajamanu. I'm grateful to Richard Butler for his help and advice in the darkroom, and also to John Gollings and Michael Silver for sharing their developing and printing wisdom with me. Thanks to Greer Versteeg and Petra Crispin for editorial advice; Ben, Arc, and Jonno for their modeling skills; and my family and friends for enduring my rants about Maralinga, comets, aliens, and reconciliation.

## About the author

Judith Nangala Crispin is a poet, photographer, and composer of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage, based in Sydney, Australia. She is a Research Fellow of the Australian Catholic University in the Institutes for Social Justice and Religion and Critical Inquiry. Judith's first collection of poems, *The Myrrh-Bearers*, was published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2015. Her poems have been widely published in literary journals, and she reads regularly at poetry events, including the 26° Medellin International Poetry Festival. Judith's photographs are widely exhibited in galleries and festivals in Australia and Europe. She is photography director of a large cultural heritage research project in Sydney.

## Foreword: Five Minutes to Midnight

There is nothing like twilight in red dirt country—the soft crackling of fire warming your billycan as the Seven Sisters begin their dance across the night sky. Or the camaraderie around a campfire as people speak in their indigenous languages—the women making jokes about the day's goings-on or about mistakes made in the intricate protocols of a Law you are learning, day by day. Everything that lives has meaning here. Upholding knowledge is a life-long obligation for First Nation Custodians—not only in the present but into the future. How can we Australians know this land or our place in it, if not through relationship with our hosts, the Aboriginal people?

When inviting me to write this foreword, Judith Crispin explained her choice, saying, "You are uniquely positioned, as Australia's premier and longest-serving photographer who has worked collaboratively with Aboriginal people in communities around the country making their culture and struggle for justice visible." Truly, in both a professional and a practical way, I know the difficulties and the deep satisfactions of working in community. I understand the privileges of learning about the Law, the reciprocity of gratitude, and the obligation to stay true to the received teaching over a lifetime.

As a photographer of long experience, with friendships in Aboriginal communities, I know how everything depends on one's openness to experience, on the give and take inside relationships that informs how one sees and feels. Photographers in this tradition work in slow time. You learn to move with the people, move within the rhythm of their days, within their country, their wind and sky. What is learned through these relationships can change how one sees forever. By invitation, we become messengers from the frontier of interpersonal experience, conveying urgent messages from our teachers and hosts.

Into this collaborative tradition of relational interpersonal documentary photography—which began with the work of committed photographers in Australia during the 1970s—now steps Judith Crispin with her important book about magic, knowledge, and history. She relates teachings of the Law men who adopted her, who gave her the skin name Nangala, a name that defines her relationship to everyone in the community. In this way, she is being "growed up," learning how to see the universe according to Warlpiri Law.

> There is a particularly miraculous vision of the world that comes only with the diagnosis of serious illness. . . . Something is different now—because I know there is a secret world nested inside this one. I've seen it.

*The Lumen Seed* opens onto an apocalyptic scene. A hardwood mulga tree, reaching for the sky, holds a placard: "The Lord's Return is Near." In Coober Pedy, a curved handmade house rendered in warm mid-tones is edged with the sign "Welcome to Nowhere." Dusty desert roadscapes unfold into the giant sacred stones of Karlu Karlu. An emu wanders nonchalantly into a gas station. We're in Emu Dreaming Country now, meeting Crispin's traveling friends.

A UFO mural at the gas station resonates later in the book with stories of Wolfe Creek Crater, where the meteorite landed. In the Jukurrpa we are told two rainbow snakes created that country, way back at the beginning. UFOs "zipping around the trees" form part of our desert lore. Funky and surreal, these images are imbued with humor. The images that follow lead us onward into a country of visual narratives—foretelling beginnings and endings. Intuitions manifest unpredictably. We enter a thousand kilometers of "bull dust and bone-jarring track, into the Tanami Desert," which is as nothing

compared with the howling grief of Crispin's first poem, "Five Threnodies for Maralinga":

> Es atmet mich, it breathes me,
> this cremated field,
> whose pulmonary veins were fused
> by atomic blasts.
> It is breathing slowly
> like a heart, or an animal dying
> and in the periodicity of its own blood
> is become sternklang,
> the language of stars.

The poem continues:

> Ten year old Yami Lester played on Emu Field,
> that day when all birds vanished,
> when nothing in that grassland breathed.
> And turning,
>
> by instinct, stopping
> he pressed knuckles into his eyes
> a split second before the flash and double boom
> roared toward him like a crashing road-train.

The poem recounts how our friend, courageous activist Yami Lester, lost his sight at Maralinga because of British nuclear tests on Aboriginal land. Yami remembers a black cloud rolling along the ground toward him—the last thing he ever saw. We now have entered the tough multilayered world of Australia's shared history and its long lis of unattended consequences.

Warlpiri elder Jerry Jangala Patrick's first-person response introduces us to how his clan of Warlpiri people came to live on Gurindji country at Lajamanu.

> We never entertained fear. Even my older people, my family, didn't entertain the English. They never entertained what this one mean—collecting people—and they put them on a truck and take them away. I don't know, Nangala, it doesn't make any sense. Where I live until now, make me feel bad. Because some of my family buried here. . . . But my father buried alone in Warlpiri country, and my grandpa, my mother's father or my uncle's father, at a place called Yaluyalu. All our country's there—we are split between two countries.
> (Jerry Jangala)

Tree limbs, black and white, dance intertwined, as bright young people happily engage with Crispin's lens. The tenderness in these photographs acts as a counterpoint to the gravitas and sadness of government neglect—Jerry Jangala's stories of official indifference to his people who have been displaced from their country and are therefore unable to keep their obligations to it. We are taken deeper into this recounting with Crispin's second teacher, in her work *Henry Jackamarra and Jukurrpa Tracks*.

The Jukurrpa, or Dreaming, is a dimension rather than a time. For Warlpiri people, all time exists simultaneously—there are layers of time, and the Jukurrpa is the deepest of these. Stories of the Jukurrpa, many of which involve migration or nomadic paths, unfold continuously. They are the past, in the sense of creation stories, but they are also unfolding now and into the future—they are linear but unbound by linear time. Every nation or tribe has the responsibility to keep the Jukurrpa stories for future generations.

This drawing depicts Jukurrpa tracks of the Warlpiri people. Lajamanu elders have used this diagram, itself based on an older drawing, to demonstrate the location of Henry Jackamarra's sacred site at The Granites.

The intimacy of these photographs counterbalances the painful truth of elders' testimonies. Photographs and texts are poetic expressions of a wisdom taught, and upheld,

under the most difficult of circumstances. Crispin has sucked these poems out of the heart of this country—images and texts, all pulling together, digging down through the layers of experience that coexist there.

The Holy Ground brings us earth and a karaoke bar, which also passes as a Baptist church. Lajamanu has two churches, both led by Warlpiri Law man and Baptist minister Jerry Jangala. The night church is the painted wall of a tin shed on a football field. The congregation sits on folding chairs, leaving the wooden picnic tables for dogs to lie on. Jerry Jangala tries to find a balm, or an explanation for his sense of unease at not living on his own country.

> When God bin put you there, in your country, that's it. You got a right to live on there. You can get sick alright, but not too much. Yuwayi, you know God? He say, "Yeah you get sick but you'll be alright," you know? "I'm with you there," that God talking. And same thing for our ceremony too. You're right to use your ceremony. You're right to sing your own dreaming song and talking to your country . . . and tell it true—real true.
> (Jerry Jangala)

Portraits of Law-women painters Sonya Napaljarri and Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali Jurrah-Hargraves echo the feelings of the men while also engaging directly with Crispin as a younger woman:

> Without the connection between the land and the person the individual is lost, empty inside, not connected to anyone or anything or the land. If the connection is lost they won't survive and their identity no longer exists. Jukurrpa is our life first. Jukurrpa connects us to our country. It is Law that makes it our right to our country. We can't be sent away.
> (Warnayaka Art elders)

On an intricate map, Walpiri Dreaming tracks are drawn on paper by Law men Jerry Jangala and Henry Jackamarra, for their pupil Nangala. About a kangaroo hunt she is told, "The animal is honored by sprinkling handfuls of dirt over its fur before it is prepared for cooking in the traditional way." Everything that is shown to her becomes an illustration of how the Law works in the daily life of the Warlpiri.

The portraits of Crispin's teachers are the most moving. In Henry Jackamarra Cook, Last Kangaroo Dancer, trust and affection are evident. Here Henry Cook, his big hat filling the frame, his eyes with delicate sight, gazes directly out to us. His whole life etched in his face. Judith quotes him in her poem "Light Trails of Henry Jackamarra Cook":

> Photo me like this Nangala
> I am a beautiful man.

"In Henry Jackamarra Dancing", Henry dances alone on sacred ground. These are among my favorite images in *The Lumen Seed*—they are poetic, direct, spacious, and unflinching, in warm mid-tone portraiture.

In drawings, and through enacting ceremony, Law men and Law women speak of their plight to Crispin, while explaining their Law and life at the same time.

> But Kurlpurlunu country what we talk about. Yeah it make me real sad and cry for my country. Because God bin put me there, God put my people there. Why someone could move us, because of his power, because of his idea? Cutting off God's power, God's idea here, God's word, God's light . . . and that is the true. Cut off like this electric wire, if you cut him off, like that.
> (Jerry Jangala)

Jerry Jangala, also a rainmaker, goes on to explain:

> It's like that water—rain comes in and grow them up more trees, more grass. That song is the same. Sing the song and you see the same thing like water. My father and land too. What I'm saying that, maybe with that singing too, rain when he come, comes new what you call plant like this one, yes?
> (Jerry Jangala)

Lily, a senior artist and Law woman, takes Crispin to Catfish Waterhole to meet her "Mother." Crispin tells us:

> There she turned water over her palms, the traditional way of greeting the waterhole and avoiding surprising any Warnayarra who might be there. The deep love that Warlpiri people have for the landscape, its mountains and waterholes, is almost incomprehensible for white people. Here Lily sings quietly to Catfish Waterhole—not for any ceremonial or traditional reason, I'm told, but just because it makes the waterhole feel loved.

Crispin's images are filled with compassion and tenderness. This is not an easy work. So much deep knowledge is revealed, along with the painful reality of Warlpiri displacement at Lajamanu. The depth of knowledge held by the people, against all odds, is testament to their courage and tenacity. It is also a strong indictment of the callous and ignorant indifference of successive governments.

I sent *The Lumen Seed* to anthropologist Fred Myers, a longtime friend and distinguished writer on the Warlpiri, for his response:

> I was surprised to find how much of an impression the photographs and text had on me, of unusual sensibilities and connection, and wondering what Crispin's Warlpiri friends were wanting her to learn. It's quite a powerful experience.
> (Fred Myers, Silver Professor of Anthropology, New York University)

*The Lumen Seed* is a tough and powerful work. In photographs, narrative texts, drawings, and poems it sings stories of the Warlpiri at Lajamanu at five minutes to midnight. Who will hear, who will see, who will act?

Judith Crispin's experience echoes mine 40 years earlier, although I could not always get back to the same teachers. We belong to a long photographic tradition. It is the tradition of Tina Modotti and Josef Koudelka—a generation of documentary photographers who believe fervently that if you show people what is actually happening in the world, they will understand and be moved to demand change. Activist social documentary photography has always been defined by this passionate subjective belief in democracy and action.

*The Lumen Seed* puts this dictum to the test. The rest, dear reader, lies with you.

Juno Gemes
Hawkesbury River
April 11, 2016

## Introduction

In late 2015 I was diagnosed with cancer. Before then, I'd not understood how five words could change everything. "I'm sorry, Judith," my doctor told me, "it's cancer." It's a cliché that you only learn to value life when death is walking beside you, but it was absolutely true for me. I remember driving over Clyde Mountain to bring the word *cancer* to my parents' home. Every tree on the range seemed invested with vital force. Every leaf was vibrant, iridescent. Gray mountain gums, in headlights, seemed to manifest ancient intelligence—bearing witness to the fleeting existence of human beings. The threat of death reminds you how precious people are—your oldest friends, children, lovers, parents—you wonder how you'll bear to leave them. There is a particularly miraculous vision of the world that comes only with the diagnosis of serious illness.

The interval between diagnosis and surgery is an eternity. The surgeon showed me a chart—"If the cancer falls into this range," he said, "you'll live; this range and you'll die." I felt like Schrödinger's cat, neither living nor dying. People who see their own death live in two worlds, one mundane and one miraculous. Later, when the cancer had been removed and my death sentence lifted, I watched that other world diminish day by day. No matter how I clung to that miraculous vision, it faded—just as the certain knowledge of my death faded. But something remained. Something is different now—because I know there is a secret world nested inside this one. I've seen it.

Years earlier, I'd sat with a friend who was dying of liver cancer. In her last weeks, Marilyn was transformed into a being of another order, into something altogether fey. She saw the world inside the world, just as snakes are said to see ghosts through transparent eyelids. And she told me, "Don't wait—don't wait until you're dying before you learn to see." Her words returned to me on that night mountain drive: "Don't wait." And being a somewhat melodramatic

woman—raised on a diet of Christian mysticism and the terror of death—I did the obvious thing and fled into the desert. I don't know what I expected to find. John the Baptist, perhaps, high on acacia and locusts, flagging a ride from Woomera to Coober Pedy . . . but the urge to run was overwhelming, so I ran.

By this time, I had already made several visits to the Warlpiri people at Lajamanu, while searching for my family's hidden Aboriginal heritage. Artist and elder Wanta Jampijinpa walked into my Canberra office one day in 2012 and stayed for three years. He had come to the city with an ambition to educate white people (Kardiya) about Warlpiri culture and to instill in them a desire to "care for country." But many had seen him as a novelty—an anthropological subject or curiosity from Australia's past. It was optimistic to imagine that urban white culture, with its emphasis on property and security, could be brought into the service of trees, but Wanta tried. When he returned to Lajamanu in 2014, he felt that he had failed to convey Warlpiri values to a single white person. But he was wrong. Because when my world fell apart, and all things suddenly shuddered to life, when trees watched, when blades of grass became unutterably precious and the desert held out its burning arms, the only destination that made any sense to me was Lajamanu.

The earliest photographs in this book were taken in 2013, when I still believed the Warlpiri needed my help—to promote literacy and health, to outline positive pathways toward reconciliation, and so on. The later photographs were taken in December 2015, when I knew, without a shadow of doubt, that I was the drowning woman and the Warlpiri were the lifeboat. Lajamanu's elders, especially Wanta Jampijinpa, Henry Jackamarra, and Jerry Jangala, were kind to me. They gave me a skin name,[1] a bush name, and showed me how to care for Jdbrille Waterhole. They were very motivated to kindle my my interest in Warlpiri cosmology, which they illustrated with stories and drawings—some of which are reproduced in this book. The older women took me "hunting" for wattle seed and bush potato. They told me stories of covenants entered into with ancient star-beings and showed me places along the Tanami Track where min-min lights had chased travelers. Fairy tales and mysteries take on new importance when your life feels precarious.

Lajamanu in 2016 is a meeting of two universes. Elders check their Facebook status on iPhones while explaining, in matter-of-fact tones, about a landscape that will hold you or kill you, depending on your scent—where spirit snakes live in the waterways and the dead walk side by side with the living. In Lajamanu I lost my fear of dying, and more importantly, I lost my fear of living. This is a book about magic. Not the magic of Kabbalists, Theosophists, or conjurers, not Crowley's magick with a *k*, nor the magic of the New Age or Western religion—but magic that describes the world hidden inside this world, a world seen only by Aboriginal elders and the dying.

1 The Warlpiri divide their relatives, and by extension the entire population, into eight named groups called *skins*. Similar kinship systems exist in Aboriginal societies across much of Central, Western, and Northern Australia. The skin system underpins all Warlpiri society. It determines how people address and regard each other. People with the same skin name refer to each other as siblings, whether or not they actually share the same genealogy. All Warlpiri women, for example, who share the same skin name as one's own mother are referred to as "Mother." It is impossible for Warlpiri people to enter relationships with people without first knowing their skin name. Traditionally it is the first piece of information offered between people when meeting for the first time. Often Warlpiri people address one another by skin name alone. When adopting English names, a Warlpiri person will normally use his or her skin name as a middle name or surname.

This is not a book of photojournalism and makes no attempt to be objective. Quite the contrary, in fact, I wanted this book to be as subjective as possible. These photographs, especially the portraits, have grown out of my love for this community—the poetry of those who have become my desert family, whose unshakable belief in the deep magic of the landscape gives them a strength rarely evident in the city. Warlpiri culture is gentle; it leaves no tracks on the earth. The history of Aboriginal Australia is largely a record of gardening—"cleaning up country" with firestick farming and ceremonies to strengthen trees through song. When Warlpiri people move through the landscape, they introduce themselves. They apologize to that country for breaking twigs. They ask permission to take water from the creeks. If humanity ever transcends its selfish and murderous nature, it will be because of people like the Warlpiri.

It was in Lajamanu that I encountered stories of the giant invisible snakes we share the country with. Tales of rainbow snakes, the Warnayarra, underpin all Australian Aboriginal cultures. These early extraterrestrials emerged from meteors at impact sites like Wolfe Creek Crater. They live in the waterways, in rivers and creeks, and the ridges and mountain ranges are records of where they have passed. According to Warlpiri culture, the Warnayarra gave people their language, and they can rise up to protect the country in times of dire need. In the 1950s, when the UK dropped eighteen nuclear and thermonuclear weapons on Maralinga in South Australia, it is said to have been Warnayarra snakes who propelled the atomic cloud back to the military base at Woomera, killing all the children under five. The sentience of landscape is the heart of these *Jukurrpa* (Dreaming) stories about Warnayarra snakes. My journey began in the center of Australia's Anglophile government, Canberra, and ended at Wolfe Creek Crater, birthplace of the serpent.

As this book presents some of the views and customs of Warlpiri people, I obtained permission from senior Law man, Jerry Jangala,[2] before publishing the material. Here, and in subsequent places throughout the book, I have presented excerpts from an interview recorded with Jerry on July 27, 2015, at 10:40 a.m. Jerry refers to me throughout as Nangala, which is my Warlpiri skin name. A recording and transcript of the full interview is available should anyone wish to consult it. Jerry was rather excited about the idea of a book and suggested we might do another in the future. Here are his thoughts on the matter:

> We can just talk about it like that, but if you make a book here, that's alright, I can agree with that one. But that book is not for everybody . . . only visit to Warlpiri? Not more *yapa*?[3] I'd like to see that! Only to the Warlpiri! That's alright—that can make a book in the area and story, you know? But I want to do this—Western Warlpiri, South Warlpiri, and North Warlpiri, and East Warlpiri, that too, Warnayaka Ngaliya,[4] it's like my hand here. You are right with that one, yeah. . . . But I'm thinking about something else like songline, storyline, corroboree line, and all that. Even marriage business, religion, all mix up that one too. Like all stripes, like that, in a way . . . in a way, because we have skin groups real strongly and that little bit mix up, that one.

2 Jerry Jangala is a senior Warlpiri elder and Law man from Lajamanu in the Tanami Desert. Here he is speaking with me and also Henry Jackamarra, also a Warlpiri elder and "spiritual person." The two men are jointly responsible for traditional Law and traditional knowledge in the community of Lajamanu and the wider Warlpiri region. Jerry Jangala (which is a skin name meaning "rainmaker") is also an ordained Baptist minister.
3 *Yapa* refers to Aboriginal people.
4 Wider Warlpiri nations.

Because of, maybe different idea we get—or really, people can get it maybe from *Kurdiji* sign,[5] *Kurdiji* idea or maybe in everything now, you know? That mean, it matter—right to it, we hunting in that part too. Our skin system, but that's alright, that's alright, like could be in a same law, same idea—in a proper right way, like right way. But today it is all mix up. Because there's too much grog too, more things coming from another country too. Even though that one, I don't want to call all that one . . . but we know it's a grave danger for everybody. Yeah, and our culture too. It already happened we bin losing our culture. I want to say this one here, Nangala—God can keep us that culture.[6] For everyone, every tribe. And now the Warlpiri really losing that. It's something you said remind me of it, in saying that American culture it covers right over. I don't know what they are wanting. . . . But I want to say, I don't know, it may be wrong . . . but in a book in the Bible they say . . . yes . . . some of them may be just a tricky Christian, they come, you know?

And I want to say that even a sacred site—God the one who put people there. And God want people to live there, keep that secrets in what they want. Yeah, they can keep a public one too. That law, not only for Warlpiri, no, but whole world. Like a home. But you have this one, you have this one, you have this one, you have this one, you have this one. That's alright, but really . . . look after it. And to be proper family. Friends and all that, you know?

(Jerry Jangala)

5 Kuridji means "shield," and it refers to guardians of traditional Law and culture. Such guardians can take the form of ceremonies, people, ideas, etc.
6 Nangala is the skin name that I was given by Warlpiri people. It is the female equivalent of Jangala, which makes me Jerry's sister.

You shall not trap me in this fish-trap of yours in which you trap the dead,

because I know it, and I know its name,

I know the name in which it came into being.

(Coffin Texts)

**The Lord's Return is Near** (Coober Pedy SA, November 2014)

The Stuart Highway is a bisecting line in a thousand kilometers of nothing. The sheer scale of the landscape is overwhelming. I'd driven for two days with only Leonard Cohen and David Bowie for company, and had never felt more isolated. I don't know why I stopped, leaving the Land Rover idling in the middle of the highway, and walked over to the tree. Perhaps its tallness startled me—its length so exposed above the desert floor. I wanted to lay my palm against its bark. At first I didn't notice the sign nailed high on its trunk: "The Lord's Return is Near."

This stretch of highway lies south of the rocket range at Woomera. There are oceans of blood on this land. The Woomera immigration detention center continued a legacy of suffering that began years earlier, in the 1950s, when Maralinga's radioactive clouds blew over Woomera, a military township, and killed all the children.

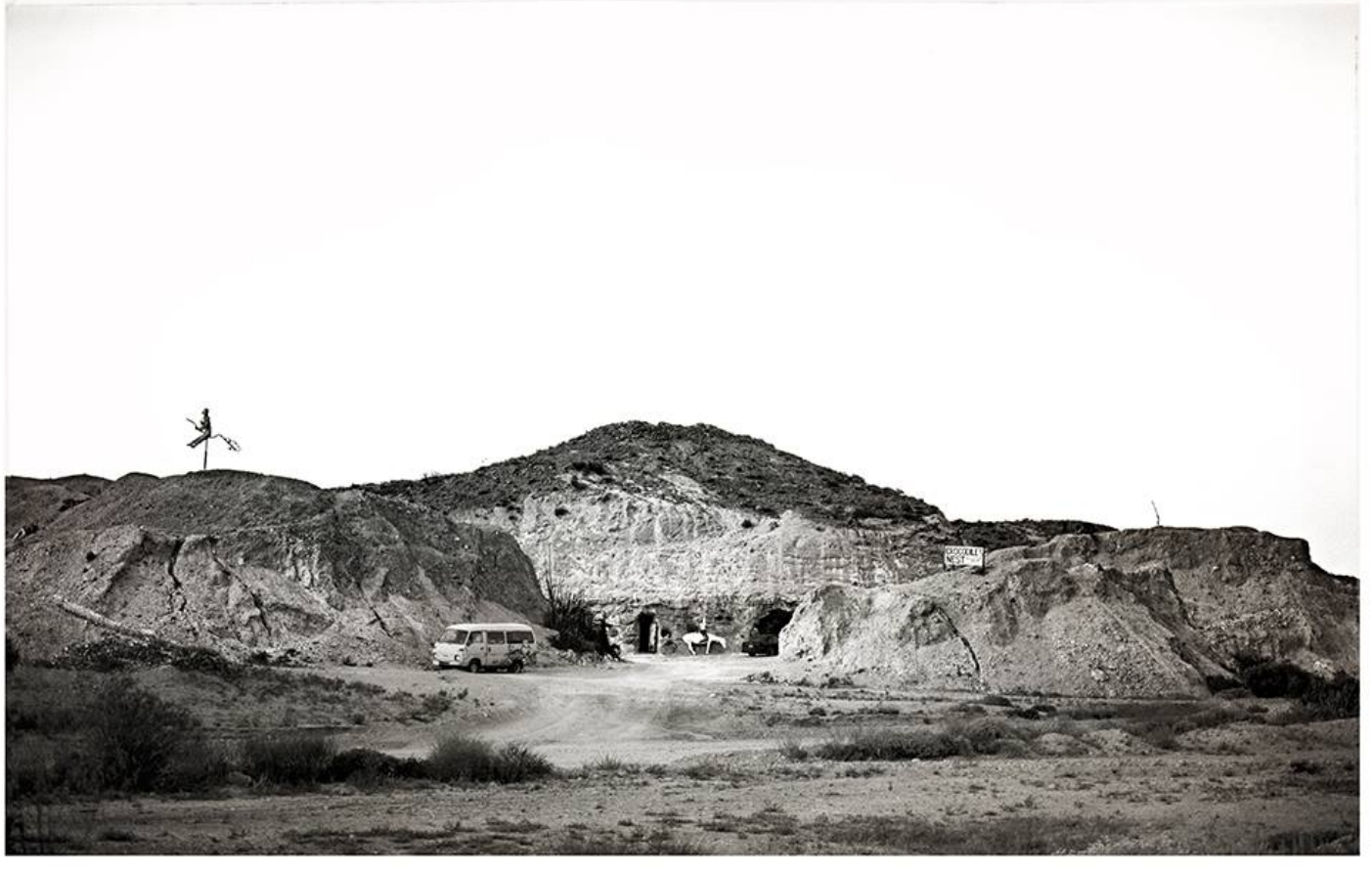

THE LORDS
RETURN
IS NEAR

Between 1952 and 1963, British forces dropped nine nuclear weapons and nine thermonuclear weapons between Woomera and the Western Australian border, within contamination distance of urban centers. The Menzies-led Australian government of that time was wholly complicit and lied about the known dangers of nuclear tests. Between these bombings, Britain conducted continuous "minor trials," which, according to the *Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, additionally detonated 99.35 kg of beryllium, 23.979 kg of plutonium, and 7968.88 kg of depleted uranium. By contrast, Little Boy, dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 by the United States, contained only 64 kg of uranium-235, and Fat Man, dropped on Nagasaki in 1945 by the United States, contained only 6.4 kg of plutonium. Anyone who wishes to immediately lose faith in the human race should read the short transcript of the Royal Commission, which is freely available online.

A rough timeline is provided:

October 3, 1952: Operation Hurricane, Monte Bello Islands, **25 kiloton nuclear weapon**
October 15, 1953: Operation Totem, "Totem 1," Emu Field, **9.1 kiloton nuclear weapon**
October 27, 1953: Operation Totem, "Totem 2," Emu Field, **7.1 kiloton nuclear weapon**
1953: "Kittens," Emu Field, chemical detonation, **0.036 kg beryllium**
1955: "Tims," Maralinga Naya 3, chemical detonation, **1.38 kg depleted uranium**
1955–57: "Kittens," Maralinga Naya, chemical detonation, **0.75 kg beryllium**
1955–57: "Kittens," Maralinga Kittens, chemical detonation, **120 kg depleted uranium**
May 16, 1956: Operation Mosaic, "G1," Monte Bello Islands, **15 kiloton nuclear weapon**
May 19, 1956: Operation Mosaic, "G2," Monte Bello Islands, **60 kiloton nuclear weapon**
September 27, 1956: Buffalo, "One Tree," Maralinga, **12.9 kiloton nuclear weapon**
October 4, 1956: Operation Buffalo, "Marcoo," Maralinga, **1.4 kiloton nuclear weapon**
October 11, 1956: Operation Buffalo, "Kite," Maralinga, **2.9 kiloton nuclear weapon**
October 22, 1956: Operation Buffalo, "Breakaway," Maralinga, **10.8 kiloton nuclear weapon**
1956–58: "Rats," Maralinga Naya 1, chemical detonation, **151 kg depleted uranium**
1956–60: "Tims," Maralinga Kuli TM4, chemical detonation, **6605 kg depleted uranium**
September 14, 1957: Operation Antler, "Tadje," Maralinga, **0.9 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
September 25, 1957: Operation Antler, "Biak," Maralinga, **5.7 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
October 9, 1957: Operation Antler, "Taranaki," Maralinga, **26.6 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
November 8, 1957: Operation Grapple X, "Round C," Christmas Island, **1.8 megaton thermonuclear weapon**
1957: "Tims," Maralinga Naya, chemical detonation, **1.6 kg beryllium**
1957: "Kittens," Maralinga Naya 1, chemical detonation, **5 kg depleted uranium**

1957: “Kittens,” Maralinga Naya 3, chemical detonation, **23.4 kg depleted uranium**
April 28, 1958: Operation Grapple Y, Christmas Island, **3 megaton thermonuclear weapon**
August 22, 1958: Operation Grapple Z1, “Pennant,” Christmas Island, **24 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
September 2, 1958: Operation Grapple Z2, “Flagpole 1,” Christmas Island, **1 megaton thermonuclear weapon**
September 11, 1958: Operation Grapple Z3, “Halliard,” Christmas Island, **800 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
September 23, 1958: Operation Grapple Z4, “Burgee,” Christmas Island, 2**5 kiloton thermonuclear weapon**
1959: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK33, chemical detonation, **0.008 kg plutonium**
1959: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK29, chemical detonation, **0.14 kg beryllium**
1959: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK28, chemical detonation, **0.25 kg beryllium**
1959: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK27, chemical detonation, **0.23 kg beryllium**
1959: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK30, chemical detonation, **0.10 kg beryllium**
1959: “Rats,” Maralinga Dobo, chemical detonation, **28 kg depleted uranium**
1959–60: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM11, chemical detonation, **26.2 kg beryllium**
1959–60: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM11, chemical detonation, **67 kg depleted uranium**
1960: “Tims,” Maralinga Naya 1 TM100, chemical detonation, **0.6 kg plutonium**
1960: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak, chemical detonation, **67.8 kg depleted uranium**
1960–61: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM16, chemical detonation, **39 kg beryllium**
1960–62: “Kittens,” Maralinga Naya 2, chemical detonation, **32 kg depleted uranium**
1960–63: “Vixen B,” Maralinga Taranaki, chemical detonation, **22.2 kg plutonium**
1960–63: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM16, chemical detonation, **731 kg depleted uranium**
1961: “Tims,” Maralinga Naya TM101, chemical detonation, **0.6 kg plutonium**
1961: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK60A, chemical detonation, **0.294 kg plutonium**
1961: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak VK60C, chemical detonation, **0.277 kg plutonium**
1961: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM5, chemical detonation, **10 kg beryllium**
1961: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak 60A, chemical detonation, **1.72 kg beryllium**
1961: “Vixen A,” Maralinga Wewak 60B, chemical detonation, **1.72 kg beryllium**
1961: “Vixen B,” Maralinga (Taranaki site), chemical detonation, **17.6 kg beryllium**
1961: “Tims,” Maralinga Kuli TM50, chemical detonation, **90 kg depleted uranium**
1963: “Vixen B,” Maralinga Taranaki, chemical detonation, **24.9 kg depleted uranium**
1963: “Vixen B,” Maralinga Taranaki, chemical detonation, **22.4 kg depleted uranium**

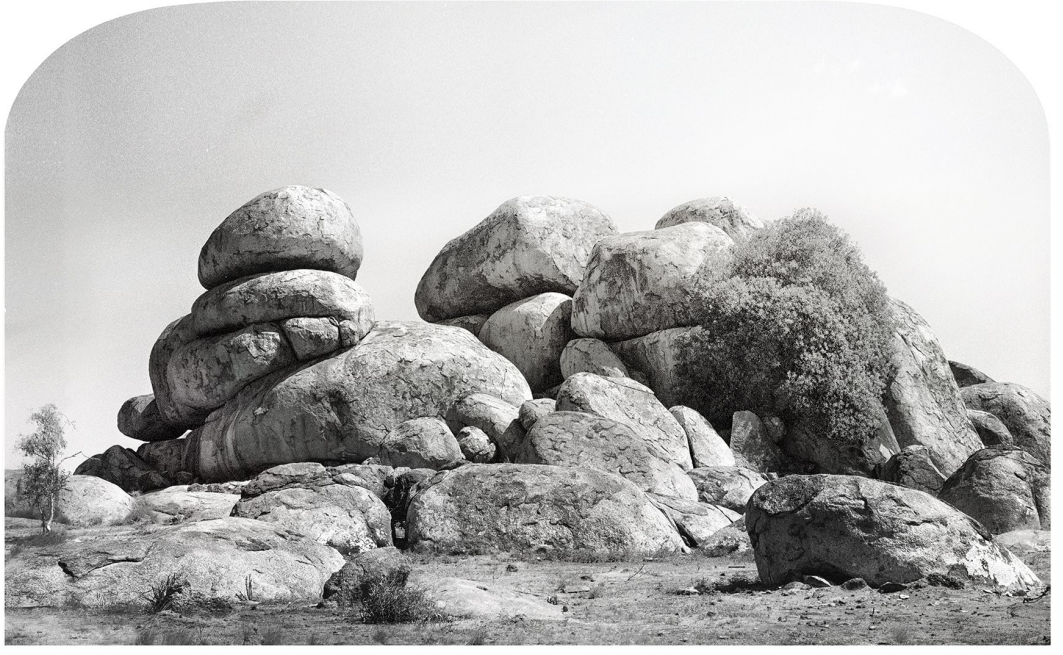


**Crocodile's Nest with Van, Witch, and Horse** (Coober Pedy SA, November 2014)

Latvian sculptor, uranium prospector, and crocodile hunter Arvid Von Blumental, a.k.a. Crocodile Harry, built this dugout and named it Crocodile's Nest. Harry was notorious in Coober Pedy for having once urinated on the flames of a burning hotel and goose-stepping down the main street dressed as a World War II German soldier. Harry's success with women was largely self-advertised. The interior of his dugout was decorated with a huge collection of women's underwear, as well as signatures he claimed to have gathered from more than a thousand virgins.


**Welcome to Nowhere** (Coober Pedy SA, November 2014)

I arrived in Coober Pedy the same week that dust storms tore the roof off the pub. This dugout, borrowed from friends in Alice Springs, was built from a disused shaft. I slept near the door separating their home from the remaining length of shaft, extending far into the rock. Strange sounds echoed behind that door—sounds of wind, or dogs howling. The door was nailed closed. When I first visited Coober Pedy, it was the farthest into the desert that I had ever ventured. Beyond it stretched the expanse of the Great Victoria Desert, Simpson Desert, Strzelecki Desert, Pedirka Desert, Tirari Desert, and Sturt Stony Desert. I was at the start of a journey that would follow Stuart Highway into nothingness and emerge in the huge Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Leaving the dugout, I stopped to photograph the words painted on its roof: “Welcome to Nowhere.”



**Karlu Karlu I** (near Ayleparrarntenhe NT, November 2014)

Karlu Karlu, nicknamed “The Devil’s Marbles” by white people, was long considered too spiritually dangerous for anyone but Warumungu elders conducting ceremony. Between these giant stones, on a 48-degree day, the radiant heat is almost unimaginable. Near the skeleton of a burned office chair, I found patches of black glass. A Warumungu friend explained that the heat has, in recent years, become so intense at Karlu Karlu that the air itself ignites, fusing desert sand to glass. In Australia’s deserts the evidence of climate change is irrefutable.

Yankirri [Emu] (near Wycliffe Well NT, December 2015)

My friend Wanta Jampijinpa “found” my skin name, Nangala—“the water that moves.” His own skin name, Jampijinpa, is the water that remains still. Our skin names are related by water, particularly rain, and our special relationship with emus. In Dreaming stories and ceremony, Warlpiri people of our two skin groups call the emu *Wapirra* ("father"). Jangala/Nangala and Jampijinpa/Nampijinpa belong to the emu, to the color blue, and to the north. Warlpiri cosmology is underpinned by the movement of the flying emu (the dark nebula, or coal sack) through the Milky Way.

Before leaving Canberra, I phoned Wanta in Lajamanu for reassurance—“What if I get lost?” I asked him. “There’s no reception out there.” “Follow the emus,” he answered, doing his best impersonation of a Buddhist sage. We laughed, but every single morning of that first trip, at Mildura, Woomera, Coober Pedy, and Alice, emus walked toward me out of the desert.

**Last Bridge before Wycliffe Well** (Stuart Highway NT, December 2016)

**Karlu Karlu II** (near Ayleparrarntenhe NT, November 2014)

In the *Jukurrpa*, Arrange, the Devil Man, traveled through Karlu Karlu. As he walked, he made himself a traditional hair belt like those worn by initiated Aboriginal men. Clusters of hair dropped to the ground as he spun, becoming rock formations.


**Eemie at the UFO Roadhouse** (Wycliffe Well Roadhouse and Van-park NT, December 2015)

UFO enthusiast Arc Vanderzalm moved to the desert in 2004 to establish a UFO-themed van park. In the van park's early years, Arc rescued an abandoned emu chick and raised him by hand. He named him Eemie. Travelers stopping for fuel at Wycliffe Well roadhouse are sometimes surprised by an adult emu staring in at them through the window. While a guest of the van park, I once startled Eemie by walking into the ladies' shower block. He peered out at me through the shower curtain with an air of embarrassment, as though I'd intruded at a delicate moment. Later, as I drove toward Tennant Creek, I spotted Eemie chasing a farm dog down the highway, legs akimbo.

**UFO Wall** (Wycliffe Well Roadhouse and Van-park NT, December 2015)

Three hundred kilometers north of Alice Springs on the Stuart Highway, Wycliffe Well Roadhouse and Van-park occupies an area ranked fifth in the world for UFO sightings. The roadhouse features a life-sized model of the alien dissection at Roswell, and its walls are lined with newspaper reports of local sightings. The garden van park displays alien-themed murals and a huge corrugated-iron “UFO viewing platform.” Deserted most of the year, the van park is home to two resident donkeys and, of course, Eemie. When I asked the proprietor if he’d come to the desert expecting to find UFOs, he became uncharacteristically grave: “It began as a joke,” he said.

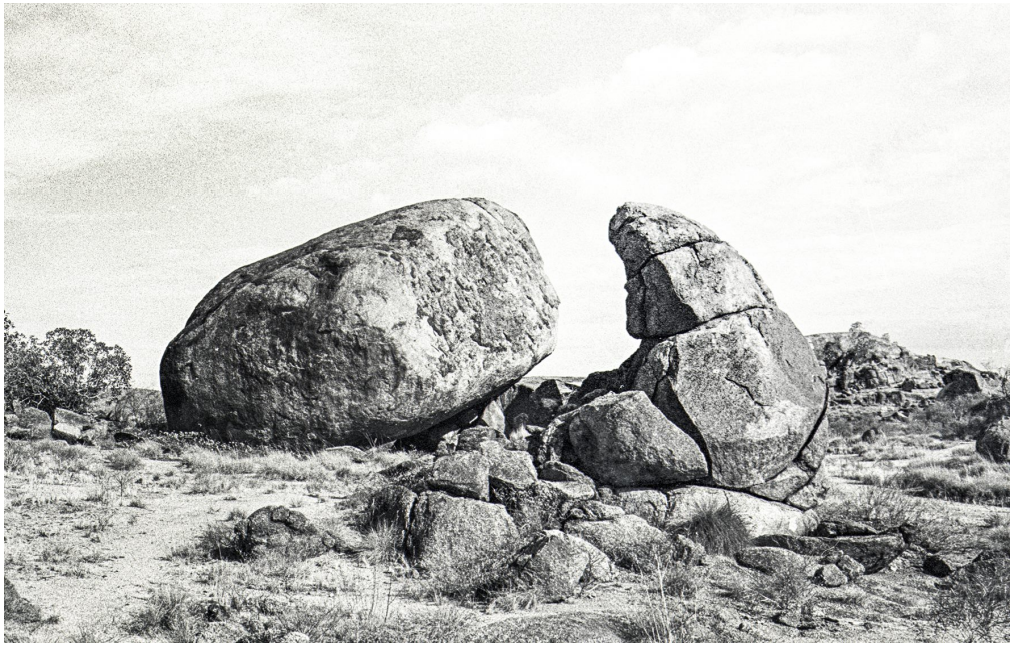
**Arc Vanderzalm Dressed as an Alien** (Wycliffe Well Roadhouse and Van-park NT, December 2015)

Arc Vanderzalm, owner and proprietor of Wycliffe Well, captivates travelers with accounts of bright lights “zipping around the trees” or colored saucers lifting from the dam on still nights. He has a way of speaking, unfolding a story from a cheeky smile laced with gravitas, that makes you want to believe. But Arc’s biggest smiles are reserved for families with kids.

It was afternoon, midsummer, and a young father brought his nine-year-old son into the roadhouse for ice cream. Even before the door curtain strips had stilled, Arc was around the counter and in front of the boy. “I’ve got a real alien in there,” he said, pointing to the back room with its model of the Roswell alien. “Caught him when his saucer crashed in the dam—go take a look.” The father, delighted, no doubt, by this outback fairy tale, led the boy into the other room. Quick as a flash, Arc ducked behind the bar and emerged in full alien costume. Pausing briefly (to be photographed by me), he tippy-toed dramatically after the kid and his father—a perfect Nosferatu tippy-toe. I watched him slide up unnoticed beside the boy, who was totally absorbed by the Roswell alien. “Do you think it’s real?” asked Arc. The boy glanced around. I’ve never seen someone’s eyes grow so wide. The kid screamed, the father glared, and Arc laughed until their Land Cruiser pulled away.

**Benny and the Flame-Tree Seedpod** (Wycliffe Well Roadhouse and Van-park NT, December 2015)

We'd stayed all night on Wycliffe Well's repurposed tin shed UFO-viewing platform, looking for flying saucers. On the edge of the Tanami, the night sky is indescribable. It arches from horizon to horizon, the whole stellar bowl extending right down to the ground on all sides. On a moonless night you can see clearly by starlight alone. And things move in the sky all through the night. Things that streak are falling stars. Satellites orbit. You can tell the space station from its wing. Aeroplanes flash. Every few minutes something crosses the night sky, and we spoke their names—"star," "star," "satellite," "space station," "star," "plane." We waited for lights that changed speed, or dropped suddenly, that zigzagged too fast to be human made. By midnight we were naming the constellations—Orion, the Southern Cross, Pleiades, the Dog Star, the Watercourse or Milky Way. No saucers appeared. In the morning we arranged flame tree seedpods and driveway pebbles into constellations.



**Karlu Karlu III: Egg** (near Ayleparrarntenhe NT, November 2014)

For Warlpiri, Warumungu, Kaytetye, and Alyawarre people, the giant stones of Karlu Karlu hold extraordinary power. Many sacred men's and women's sites are located between the footprints of these stones. As with all sacred sites, it is believed that damage to Karlu Karlu can bring devastating consequences upon its custodians. The removal of a stone from Karlu Karlu in the 1980s by nonindigenous people is said to have caused the death of an Aboriginal elder. The stone was returned in 1998. Karlu Karlu is an oasis of water and food for traditional people. Native figs, bush bananas, and land crabs can be gathered here. The noticeable effects of thermal stress weathering create the impression that the stones are alive. The extreme temperature differences between day and night in this region cause the rocks to expand in the day and contract again at night, as though breathing very slowly. These repeated cycles cause cracks and sometimes split the stones in half.

**Sexy John** (Alice Springs NT, November 2014)

Sexy John was rescued as a small calf after his mother was culled as part of a government program to reduce feral camels. He was raised by artists in a collective on the outskirts of Alice Springs and befriended a wild blond-haired boy. More than 160 thousand camels were culled between 2009 and 2013, approximately one-fifth of the camel population of the central deserts.

**Jonno and the Gunyah** (Alice Springs NT, January 2014)

A campervan community on the dry Todd River features planter gardens (with car parts instead of pots), a Buddhist prayer grove, and ponds with a resident eaglehawk. Jonno, a musician and lodger, is pictured here in front of the community gunyah, or humpy.[1] It was summer, too hot to move in Alice Springs. We drank beer and reminisced about 2012 and how the world had not ended after all.[2] Jonno told me that he'd spent New Year's Eve at a dance party in a crater organized by a local shaman "just in case." When Niburu, the returning Sumerian planet, failed to materialize at the stroke of midnight, the shaman was unfazed, the DJ changed the music, and everyone kept dancing.

1 A gunyah, or humpy, is a traditional Aboriginal shelter made from bark and tree branches.
2 Conspiracy theorists and hippies widely speculated that the world would end in 2012 because one of the great cycles of the ancient Mayan calendar finished in December of that year.

**Mouth of the Tanami** (Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

The Tanami Track is a thousand kilometers of bull-dust and bone-jarring corrugations between Alice Springs and Broome—no fuel, no water, just camels and mining vehicles for most of its length. It is one of the most isolated roads in Australia. We left this road and ventured into Warlpiri lands about 600 kilometers past Yuendumu, in the middle of nowhere. And it was here, with limited fuel and no phone coverage, that we hit floodwater.

The road, with its dips and river crossings, vanished ahead into a dark brown sea, without banks or end. Abandoned cars leant against acacia clumps with all doors open, water rushing though them. If the floodwater had not yet joined the river, it would be free of crocodiles—no way to be sure. But without enough fuel to return to Yuendumu, we had no choice. We crawled slowly into the floodway. When the water was visible against the side windows, I began to hold my breath. When we emerged on the other side, dragging tree branches and covered in mud and leaves, I exhaled again.

## Five Threnodies for Maralinga

The mushroom cloud dispersed rapidly. For a few seconds it took
the intriguing shape of an aboriginal face silhouetted over Australia,
then it eddied 1500ft high, and was blown away to the north-east . . .
(Douglas Wilkie, the *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, October 16, 1953)

### I

*Es atmet mich*, it breathes me,
this cremated field,
whose pulmonary veins were fused
by atomic blasts.
It is breathing slowly
like a heart, or an animal dying
and in the periodicity of its own blood
is become *sternklang*,
the language of stars.

In the 1950s, Robert Menzies
surrendered this desert to men who look down
from flag-draped podiums
and parliamentary stairs.
They built bombing ranges that
from outer space resemble
occult sigils.
*Es atmet uns,* it is not in the nature of demons
to refuse such invitations.

Low on the horizon
a greasy cloud makes whispering noises
as it advances
erasing the mulgas.

Sun glints from its surface
like something solid.

And its interior is the muscle
of a snake, coiling recoiling—
it dislocates its jaw
and spews blackened birds
into the desert,
Wedgetailed eagles
with their eyes burned out.

Soldiers club them from air
with axe handles—
some of them are crying.

Do you remember?
These rivers, these mallee and paper daisies
We took it all away.

II

A summer of aeroplanes,
of air excited
by radios: public, private, and military.

Ten year old Yami Lester played on Emu Field,
that day when all birds vanished,
when nothing in that grassland breathed.
And turning,

by instinct, stopping
he pressed knuckles into his eyes
a split second before the flash and double boom
roared toward him like a crashing road-train.

And traveling in that sound,
                a blue-white diamond,
                a second sun
passing through the bones of his hands,

left x-ray impressions
of blood and skin,
the intricate network of nerves,
and his eyes
                burned.

It was black when the pressure wave hit
a feeling of being underwater,
and then the air sucked back,
billowing out his body like sheets on a line.

He didn't see the rain
that smelled of chemicals and fell
in dense heavy drops
but he heard its tattoo

and distantly, from the direction of houses,
his mother screaming.

III

When they came to Juldil Kapi,
called Juldi, called Ooldea Soak,
the United Aborigines Mission,
in Jeeps and covered trucks
they looked like moon men.

*Soldiers everywhere,*
the older ladies recalled.
*Guns. We all cry, cry, cryin'.*

Time enough to pack a dilly bag
of clothes, a framed photograph,
a child's favorite toy,
before the trucks rolled out,
leaving mission buildings to heat
and swallowing dunes.

And she, between soldiers,
on those hard troopie seats,
secretly fingers a stone
held deep in the pockets of her skirt—
*nulu* stone, she thinks, last fragment
of the meteor.
Its dust colors her skin.

A hundred kilometers to the south
departing helicopters drop leaflets
written in English
warning Aboriginal people
to not walk north.

But here on the savannah,
groups of figures separate in spinifex.

And later, when sky pressed toward them
like a wall, they laid their bodies
over their children
and rose again coated in tar.

Soldiers found them sleeping
in the Marcoo bomb crater.
They gave them showers
and scrubbed their fingernails.
But in the months that followed

their women gave birth
        to dead babies, to babies
        without lungs, babies without
        eyes,

and their men speared kangaroos
they couldn't cook
because they were yellow inside.

## IV

A marquee stood on Emu Field
among fruit trees, with chairs and tables
for politicians and members of the press.
They served lemonade
and plates of sandwiches.
Songbirds
flitted in the eaves of a grandstand,
purpose-built for compelling views
of the mushroom cloud.

And after the last bus,
when the marquee was packed away
and only uniformed men flashed binoculars
on the grandstand,
they ordered their soldiers
to crawl
on all fours through atomic fields.

Their bodies drag the dust.

On a clear day, you could see their backs lifting
though layers of mist
like elephants bathing in the Ganges.

And those who flew Lincolns into fallout
came back without throats—
*coincidence,* the English courts explained,
*we all smoked back then . . .*

But I want to know what happened to my grandfather—
dead before fifty from multiple cancers.
They gave peerages to nuclear scientists
and to soldiers, melanomas
and the chance to buy an unofficial medallion
for thirty dollars.

And I want to know what happened to my uncle—
dead before sixty from heart attack and stroke.
Cells transform into other cells,
like the songbirds of Emu field
whose calls were the silver
of shaken metal fragments.

I want to know if I'm going to live—
*You're young*, the surgeon said, *for this kind of cancer.*
But he couldn't tell me
how people become dust,
how sand becomes glass,
or how Menzies could send soldiers into atomic mist,
and still hold the word God in his mouth.

V

At Woomera,
seventy-five identical graves
remember babies lost to the predation
of atomic clouds.

Their epitaphs are brief—
Michael Clarke Jones
died 24 August 1952,
aged eight and a half hours.

No one has been here for a long time.

Weeds struggle.
A military vehicle passes,
heading east toward the rocket range.

In the west, Woomera township
is a grid of air force housing.
Land Cruisers fill neat driveways,
lawns are trimmed,
blinds closed.

And no one ever steps out for milk,
no one walks a dog.

I photograph each headstone,
stooping sometimes to straighten a plastic posy,
a tilted ceramic bear.

Wind presses a faded greeting card
to the metal fence.
A matchbox car beside a small boy's grave
is blue.

There are nineteen stones without toys or flowers,
for stillborns named only "baby"—
Baby Spencer,
Baby Dowling,
Baby Stone.

Don't look at me
Baby Gower
Baby Roads
from a soldier's gunny bag
with your eyes too white, too open
like the eyes of poisoned fish
tumbling
in the Pilbara's poisoned surf.

Was it night when they came?
those soldiers who emptied the graves?

A secret harvest
of twenty-two thousand children
whose bones were crushed
for Strontium-90 tests in the UK.
Their parents were never told.

The ground here is hard.
Centuries of heat-fueled wind
have baked clay to shale.
To open a grave you'd need
sledgehammers,
pickaxes,
crowbars.
It would not be gentle.

I see them starlit,
Shadow-striped by the wire fence,
they draw a baby boy from earth—
pale as a frog
mud-marked
and he wears my grandson's face.

I don't want to tell him
our bombs unleashed a serpent
older than names,
that hung over the neonatal ward,
above the cots of Woomera,
and the gaze of its lidless eye
returned them all to namelessness.

My grandson,
I don't know what world will be left to you.

Michael Clarke Jones,
died August 24, 1952, aged 8 1/2 hours

Robert Lindsay Fox,
died November 27, 1952, aged 3 days

Baby Gibson,
died April 18, 1953, stillborn

Yhonnie Christina White,
died June 27, 1953, aged 1 month

Mark Lawrence,
died December 21, 1953, aged 8 months

Baby Compton,
died January 29, 1954, aged 2 hours

Baby Beckwith,
died April 15, 1954, stillborn

Susan Janette Storey,
died May 22, 1954, aged 4 hours

Elizabeth Mary Paul,
died June 30, 1954, stillborn

Baby Roads,
died August 16, 1954, stillborn

Baby Dowling,
died December 22, 1954, stillborn

Leslie O'Donnell,
died May 8, 1955, aged 2 hours

Baby Stone,
died August 15, 1955, stillborn

Karen Leslie Champion,
died August 29, 1955, aged 12 hours

Warren Bradley Champion,
died August 29, 1955, aged 36 hours

Baby Franzen,
died September 10, 1955, stillborn

Michael Reid,
died June 30, 1956, stillborn

Albert Amos,
died September 26, 1956, aged 4 years

Eric Noel McDonnell,
died October 12, 1956, aged 1 year

Peter Edward van Senden
died November 2, 1956, aged 3 years

Nola Leppard,
died April 15, 1957, stillborn

Daniel Sharpe,
died May 7, 1957, aged 6 months

Baby Lineham,
died August 4, 1957, aged 22 months

Susan Reed,
died August 22, 1957, aged 1 year

Wayne Thomson,
died January 22, 1958, aged 2 years

Christine Austin
died June 5, 1958, stillborn

Anna Markl,
died August 23, 1958, stillborn

Carl William Smith
died December 3, 1958, aged 4 months

Guy Davey,
died July 18, 1959, aged 18 months

Patrick Mason,
died January 3, 1960, aged 21 months

William Mason,
died January 3, 1960, aged 4 months

Sara-Jane Kerr,
died January 9, 1960, aged 2 months

Gary Hitchman,
died January 30, 1960, aged 4 months

Baby Groves,
died May 25, 1960, stillborn

Baby Hancock,
died June 21, 1960, stillborn

Phillip John van Senden,
died September 28, 1960, aged 4 days

Alexander John Murphy,
died December 24, 1960, aged 8 hours

Mark Trusson,
died January 20, 1961, aged 11 months

Jeanette Elva Mark,
died January 25, 1961, aged 4 months

Baby Fegan,
died April 13, 1961, stillborn

Baby Dingaman,
died June 15, 1961, aged 7 months

James Stuart Woollhead,
died August 30, 1961, aged 4 days

Anne Marie Clarke,
died January 9, 1962, aged 4 1/2 months

Diana Wendy Willis,
died February 4, 1962, aged 10 1/2 months

Roger Smith,
died February 11, 1962, stillborn

Joseph O'Bona,
died March 11, 1962, aged 3 hours

Maria Rose Williams,
died April 21, 1962, aged 7 months

Baby Gelby,
died May 7, 1962, stillborn

Stewart Alan Masters,
died June 12, 1962, aged 1 year

David John Woollhead,
died June 14, 1962, stillborn

Jacqueline Bannerman,
died June 28, 1962, aged 7 years

John Stanely Clark,
died August 18, 1962, aged 15 weeks

Kerry Ann Young,
died August 20, 1962, aged 4 months

Andrew Patrick Smith,
died October 31, 1962, aged 1 day

Helene Michele Hiskins,
died March 12, 1963, stillborn

Baby Spencer,
died June 19, 1963, stillborn

Gemma Margaret Hoare,
died July 31, 1963, aged 5 hours

Charlotte Krause,
died May 13, 1964, stillborn

Baby Greagan,
died June 13, 1964, aged 5 days

John Robert Cooper,
died September 2, 1964, aged 2 days

Angela Francis Mascord,
died December 30, 1964, stillborn

Joyce Warren,
died March 23, 1965, aged 7 years

Robyn Lee Smith,
died June 30, 1965, aged 1 year

Baby Gower,
died July 30, 1965, aged 30 hours

Baby Goyne,
died August 14, 1965, stillborn

Mary Talfourd,
died January 16, 1966, aged 1 day

Quentin Marcus Adams,
died October 26, 1966, aged 3 years

Lee Craig Hall,
died December 7, 1966, aged 3 years

Mary McGrath,
died July 17, 1968, soon after birth

Scott Jansen,
died August 7, 1968, aged 7 months

Baby Laird,
died September 11, 1968, stillborn

Lyall Anthony Mathews,
died November 16, 1968, aged 18 months

John Robert Burns,
died July 1, 1970, aged 9 months

Claude Aaron Price,
died April 4, 1971, aged 1 day

Baby Bulger,
died May 26, 1976, stillborn

**Warlpiri Family** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

In 1948, Warlpiri people were forcibly relocated almost 600 kilometers from their spiritual homeland to Hooker Creek, now Lajamanu, in Gurindji country. Old people, afraid to live among Gurindji ancestors and spirits, tried to walk back to Yuendumu but were rounded up and returned. In the 1970s, Gurindji people held a series of unique ceremonies to hand over the area and its Wampana and Spectacled Hare Wallaby Dreaming stories to the residents of Lajamanu. While this gesture brought some relief to Warlpiri people, who viewed their involuntary occupation of Gurindji land as a breach of traditional Law, they continue to struggle with their relationship to the country.

We never entertained fear. Even my older people, my family, didn't entertain the English. They never entertained what this one mean—collecting people—and they put them on a truck and take them away. I don't know, Nangala, it doesn't make any sense. Where I live until now, make me feel bad. Because some of my family buried here. My mother, my uncle, my stepdad, and my uncle's uncle, buried in that Wiliji Creek—that little one there. But when I go with the rangers, when I find that place Kurlpurlunu, it make me sad.[1]

And all that country make me cry, make me think too much. About all my family were there, my dad, my daddy buried right there, right middle of my country, this place here. And my uncle, my brother, my sister, my mother, all that one now, stepfather, they all buried here [Lajamanu]. But my father buried alone in Warlpiri country, and my grandpa, my mother's father or my uncle's father, at a place called Yaluyalu. All our country's there—we are split between two countries.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 *Kurlpurlunu* is a sacred rainmaking site that was lost in the 1940s during the forced relocation of Warlpiri people to Hooker Creek and rediscovered after decades of searching in 2014.


**Born a Skater** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)

In *Yuendumu*,[1] a big mob of people bin coming from everywhere, everywhere—until four Warlpiri men bin killed one another there. I don't know . . . they got in a fight and that bin make more higher than anything against their own people from the government. And that's what I think, they bin taken by everywhere, no? Taken this way . . . cattle stations, make a new settlement here to home us. They want to make a settlement in a country over here, not our country . . . when I bin young men, I get my ceremony to become young men in this country, but not using our ceremony story in this area. It's not right.[2] That's right, they're still hunting us, *yapa* people.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 *Yuendumu* is a Warlpiri community 600 kilometers from Lajamanu along the Tanami Track. It is in traditional Warlpiri country and is still considered a spiritual homeland by many Lajamanu residents.
2 Some ceremonies can't be performed outside the country they originated on. So many important Warlpiri ceremonies have to be held 600 kilometers away from Lajamanu. Other ceremonies have to be performed in an abridged or altered version to avoid offending the country with stories from another area.

**Black Trees, White Trees** (Tanami Desert NT, June 2015)

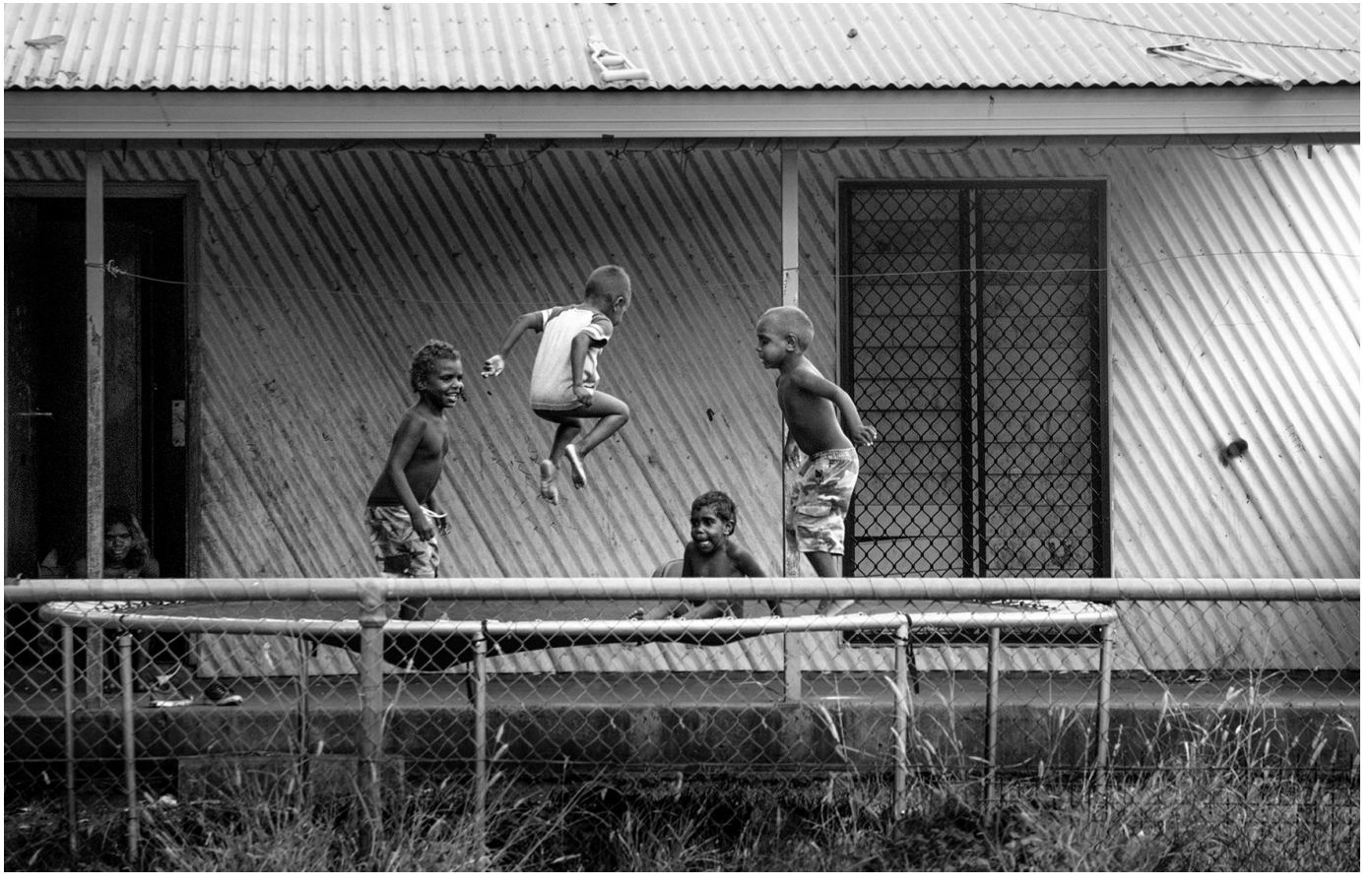
Warlpiri people speak with gratitude about the unique series of ceremonies conducted by the Gurindji people to formally “hand over” Lajamanu to their custodianship. Nevertheless, the prevailing view among Warlpiri elders is that the covenant between a country and its people cannot be overwritten entirely by ceremony. When walking in the bush, they will “introduce themselves” to country, warning the landscape in a loud voice that they are passing through. Jerry Jangala explained to me that the country recognizes its own people by sweat, saliva, and scent. Outsiders are dealt with like toxins in the blood—they are made sick or disoriented, so they wander too far from water or become lost. Since the relocation of Warlpiri people to Gurindji lands, they have lived with a sense that the landscape itself resents their presence.

Country [Gurindji country], hills . . . well, I put country first . . . hills, tree, don't like you—even that water—and that is true. If you drink water from that, or if you not talking to that country because you don't know, you got no songs with that area . . . and in the night, or during the day too, you got no language for to try to talk to that country.

When God bin put you there, in your country, that's it. You got a right to live on there. You can get sick alright, but not too much. *Yuwayi*[1], you know God? He say, "Yeah you get sick but you'll be alright," you know? "I'm with you there," that God talking. And same thing for our ceremony too. You're right to use your ceremony. You're right to sing your own Dreaming song and talking to your country . . . and tell it true—real true.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 *Yuwayi* means "yes."



Four ***Kurdu-kurdu*** [Kids] with Trampoline (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

**Emu Roadkill and Portrait by Shemaiah Matthews** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

In a one-off Lajamanu poetry class given by my friend David Musgrave, ten year old Shemaiah Nakamarra described the experience of arriving in Warlpiri country for the first time. Her poem was accompanied by a beautiful drawing of an emu. One of the most disconcerting aspects of driving the Stuart Highway, from Adelaide to Darwin, is the constant presence of roadkill. Snakes, kangaroos, rabbits, wombats, bloated cows, and, strangest of all, giant emus. After a few weeks in the sun, all that remains are gangly legs, a skull, and a beak.

Coming into Lajamanu
Camels like burnt sticks
The heat is like lava erupting from the sun
I saw 6 horse and some dingo
I saw emu walking pass the road
I saw Lake Kramarra big as Lajamanu
Lots of snakes, there are different-coloured snake.

(Shemaiah Matthews)

**Tabra Cook, with Walking Stick and Fluffy Duck** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

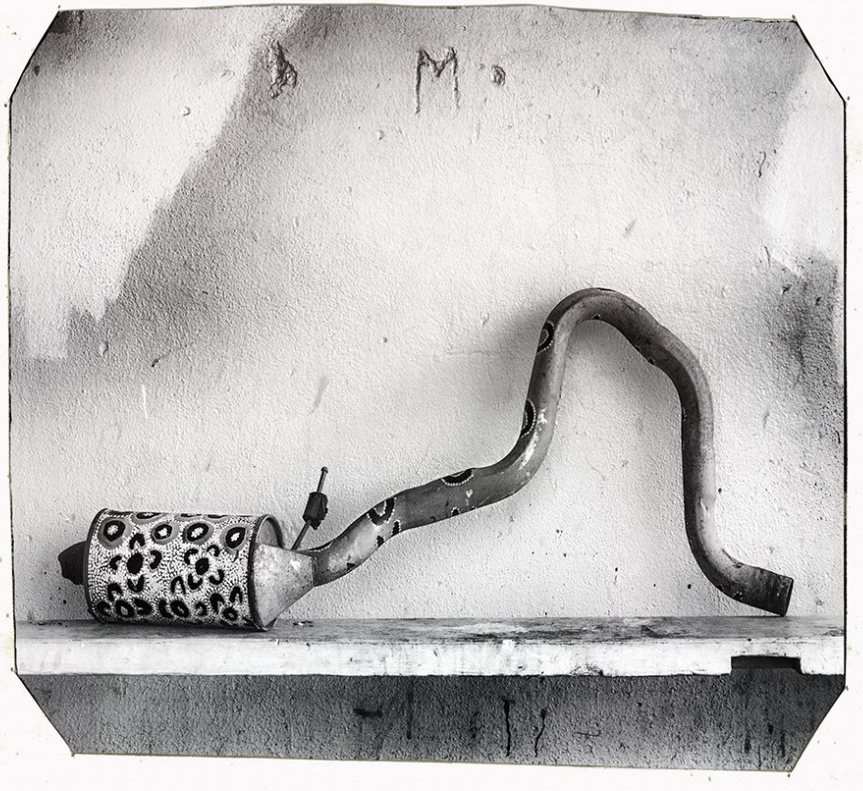
**Sonya Napaljarri Cook Painting** (Warnayaka Arts Centre, Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

**Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali Jurrah-Hargraves Painting** (Warnayaka Arts Centre, Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

Without the connection between the land and the person, the individual is lost, empty inside, not connected to anyone or anything or the land. If the connection is lost, they won't survive and their identity no longer exists. *Jukurrpa* is our life first. *Jukurrpa* connects us to our country. It is Law that makes it our right to our country. We can't be sent away.

This art center [Warnayaka Arts Center] is for the young people to learn their culture and Law. It is important for our youth to learn the knowledge held by the Ngaliya and Warnayaka peoples. The art center is for the survival of culture from the grandfathers' and grandmothers' country. The children are getting lost, and there are not many old men left, some women but few men. Some of our important Dreaming sites are hundreds of kilometers from Lajamanu. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren who live in Lajamanu need to know their *Jukurrpa*; otherwise they will lose their inheritance to this really important country. They need to know the Warlpiri *Ngalia* Laws so they can go onto their great-grandfathers' and ancestors' land, especially where these important Dreaming sites are, like at Mina Mina, belonging to the Kana-kurlangu clan. This is why the art center is so important to the people of Lajamanu. At any time, children can see the works of the elders telling them the Kurdiji, the Law, and all that is tied into the *Jukurrpa* paintings.

(Warnayaka Art elders, recorded by Arts Center manager Louisa Erglis)



Sacred Object #1

Muffler painted by Warlpiri artists

**Warlpiri Girl in a Troopie** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)

**Tabra Nakamarra's Puppy**
(Lajamanu Community NT,
June 2015)

Sacred Object #2

Abandoned doll found in Lajamanu Park

**Three Warlpiri Girls** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)


**The Holy Ground** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)

Lajamanu has two churches, both led by Warlpiri Law man and Baptist minister Jerry Jangala. The night church is the painted wall of a tin shed on a football field. The congregation sits on folding chairs, leaving wooden picnic tables for dogs to lie on. There are as many dogs in Lajamanu as there are people. Before the sermon, local women sing gospel music accompanied by a karaoke machine. The prayers are ecstatic, evangelistic. Leaving his signature Akubra hat on the bench, Jerry Jangala is a striking figure. He strides across the oval, Bible in hand. His voice is surprisingly gentle, with a soft lisp. And as he reads, straining to make out the English words through cataracts, he slips occasionally into Warlpiri. Sometimes he pauses to explain how a biblical concept parallels some aspect of Warlpiri culture.

**Cleaning Up 1** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)

Firestick farming, which is practiced by Warlpiri people, consists of regular controlled burns to encourage the regrowth of native plants. Eucalypt populations differ from European and tropical forests in that they depend on fire for regeneration. The release of seeds from eucalyptus trees is triggered by fire. Robust seedpods open after the burn to release their nutrient-rich contents into a postfire environment where new saplings will not need to compete for light and water. Saplings also benefit from a reduced population of plant-eating insects and a short absence of grazing animals. The ash from eucalypt fires serves as fertilizer for young trees. Firestick farming can also be used to encourage kangaroos and other prey onto new edible grasses that appear after fire. Across the country, fire is traditionally used to flush prey animals out of thick scrub, for clearing bush tracks and discouraging snakes. Many mysteries surround the control of fires by Aboriginal elders. Without the equipment and resources available to urban fire brigades, Warlpiri and other indigenous tribes achieve much greater control over their burns. Just outside Alice Springs, I've watched barefoot Arrente men "move a fire" without any clear means of doing so—no water, no wind.

**Cleaning Up 2** (Lajamanu Community NT, June 2015)

**Elders Preparing for Ceremony** (Lajamanu Community NT, November 2013)

Milpirri is a Warlpiri festival held every couple of years by Lajamanu community, Wanta Jampijinpa, and Tracks Dance Company. It aims to increase self-esteem among young Warlpiri people and to bridge the cultural divide between indigenous (*yapa*) and nonindigenous (Kardiya) communities.

*Milpirri* [“cloud”] is really a metaphor for bringing Kardiya and *yapa* together. It is the hot air rising and cold air falling that makes the thunderhead or ceremony cloud so full of rage and lightning thrashing; a cumulonimbus cloud that is full of fury. The moment where these two different knowledges clash: “How can you understand me, you are so different?” These two, the cold air and the hot air, are trying to adjust to each other, and it isn’t easy. When the hot air rises, and cold air falls, it’s about adjusting to one another; a disagreement and then an agreement after. But after the big storm, when the hot air and cold air meet, after it settles down, that’s when it gives birth to this cloud called *Milpirri*. Then we can recognise the ground-up duty of care, a responsibility for the country’s knowledge. This is *yapa* people’s responsibility, and when the clouds go really smooth at the top of that ceremony thunderhead, we call that in Warlpiri *mukardi* [or “ceremonial head-dress”].

The cold air is Kardiya knowledge. The rain rejuvenates the possibilities for two different kinds of knowledge coming to an agreement. A better understanding of each other on both sides occurs; this is the rain and the relief that comes. When it rains, the nourishment of country occurs. Once the lightning settles, the rain comes, which is this country’s understanding of how we should work together and how achieving this can, sometimes, be a bit rough. This is what the *Milpirri* clouds represent.

(Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu)[1]

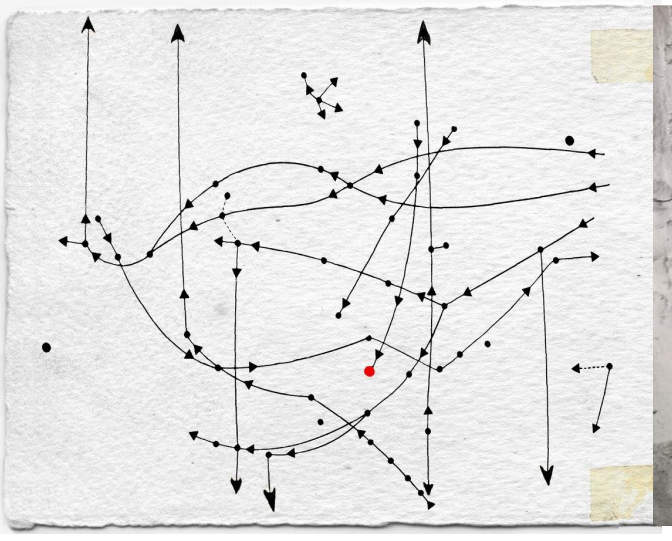
1 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, “Pulya-ranyi: Winds of Change,” *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (March 2015).

**Beth Nungarrayi at Jdbrille Waterhole** (Jdbrille Waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, June 2015)

This area here, no river. It's the same deal in this country, and so—what do you call it? Soak?[1] You know . . . I'm trying to get that word there. Soak, yeah, you take all right down to find that water, that water make. Sometimes no water, like this time when it's dry. Look for the water tree. That's what my father, my grandpa, my great-grandpa, grandmother, they all look for that water tree. Rock holes down. That's in our country. We can say it today in a Kardiya way, you know? We can say "Lajamanu is my country." But that not true. It's not true . . . *yuwayi*, Nangala. My country is back there . . . my area is back there.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 A soakage, or soak, also called a native well, is a source of water in the Australian desert. These wells, formed by water seeping into sand to create ephemeral creeks, are generally found only by Aboriginal people. Warlpiri use coolamons or woomeras to remove sand and mud, often to depths of several meters, to access the clean water underneath.



**Henry Jackamarra and Jukurrpa Tracks** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

The *Jukurrpa*, or Dreaming, is a dimension rather than a time. For Warlpiri people, all time exists simultaneously—there are layers of time, and the *Jukurrpa* is the deepest of these. Stories of the *Jukurrpa*, many of which involve migration or nomadic paths, unfold continuously. They are the past, in the sense of creation stories, but they are also unfolding now and into the future—they are linear but unbound by linear time. Every nation or tribe has the responsibility to keep the *Jukurrpa* stories for future generations. This drawing depicts *Jukurrpa* tracks of the Warlpiri people. Lajamanu elders have used this diagram, itself based on an older drawing, to demonstrate the location of Henry Jackamarra's sacred site at The Granites.

This is *yapa* country. I'm saying . . . sorry . . . there's another region, like between two people now. That's our people, Aboriginal people, you know? But this is another one what we talking, I'm saying, we're talking about that government. That's the one that took everyone from Granite area, from right center here, that's Warlpiri country there. Jackamarra's Granite is right in the middle. We call it Buridji. White fella call it Granite. Buridji, *yapa* name. That's Wirliyatjarrayi, that's *yapa* name. The Granites.

You know what Wirliyatjarrayi mean? One people used to walk around in that country—each track, till there. That's what it mean, that Wirliyatjarrayi. And the Kardiya call it Willowra, no? Once they been born, they grow up here, walking there for many years, years and years. No one, no Kardiya people, will come, nobody will come this way.

But in middle of the maybe second big war . . . first war? . . . maybe second war, people dead.[1] Yes someone traveling . . . taken guns this way. And that would drive them dead. In a place called Jangankulargu, we call Jarrliku, that mean where the floodway come to the river . . . and all the children, all the people dead. Because of some entertainment they invented and Kardiya people, nothing more than that.

Something maybe more, something. That's the one, there may have been that other bloke, no? Who came back to brand something, to brand. This is an old people, Kardiya people, maybe from this way. They just want to travel through the country and killing people . . . sorry to say, Nangala . . . it's terrible for my people. That's the name he [Jackamarra] calls him, Morton—killing all the people, that stockman bloke. Cattle trader. Bringing cattle through there . . . yes, my country. Bullocks taken through this country to Willowra. That's where he killed all the people.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 Jerry is referring to the Coniston massacres, which took place August 14–18, 1928, the last known legally sanctioned murder of indigenous people in Australia. As many as 120 people were killed.

***Wirntali-Jarra*** [Friends] (near Emu waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

Henry Jackamarra and Jerry Jangala have known each other since they were small children. More than a decade his senior, Henry treats Jerry like a little brother—still lecturing him on what he eats and wears, although both men are now respected elders.

**Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu on Country** (near Emu waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

*Ngurra-kurlu* is all about our place and sense of home. It consists of Family, Law, Land, Language, and Ceremony. Once we lose these five elements, we become homeless people—people without the ability to understand our own home. We become feral in our own land.

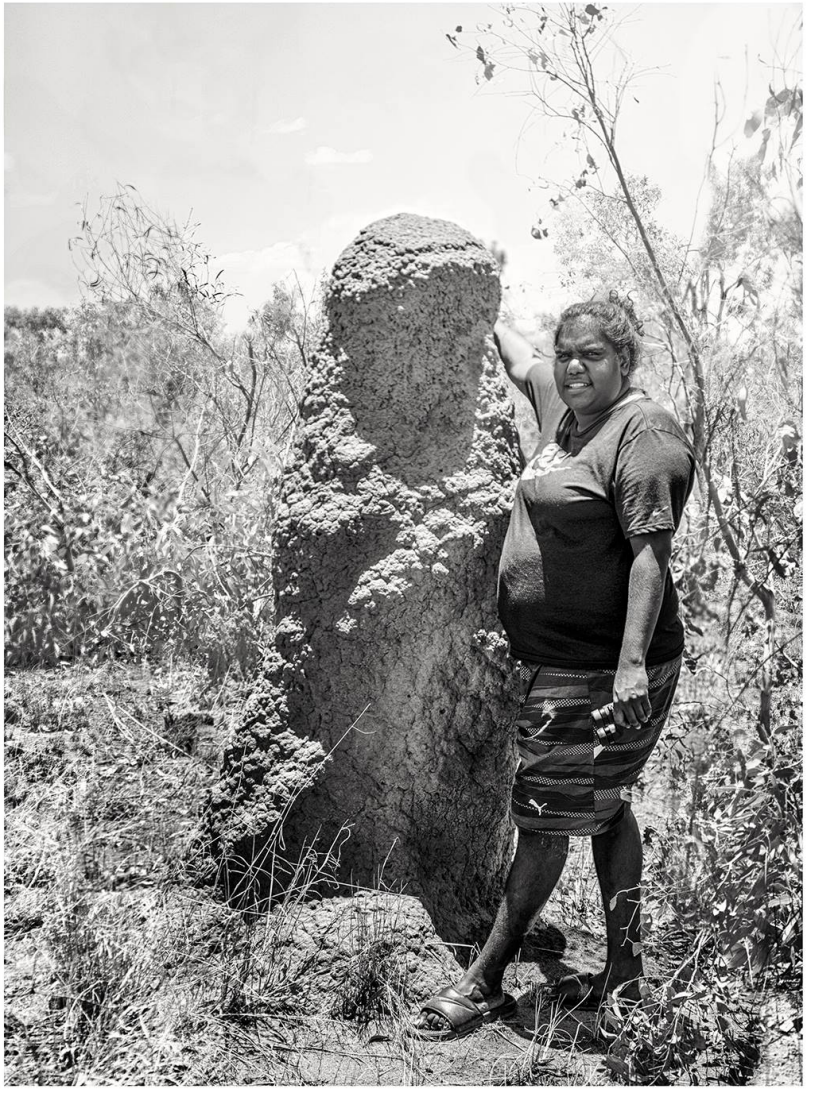
*Ngurra-kurlu* is the five pillars of the way this land has always been, and indigenous people have always looked at this country—how it is written in everything around us and even embedded within ourselves.

Yes, every day we have to express *Ngurra-kurlu*. Even when we are walking and talking, we must still use our bodies to express *Ngurra-kurlu* to move like the wind and, with our sounds, make it talk.

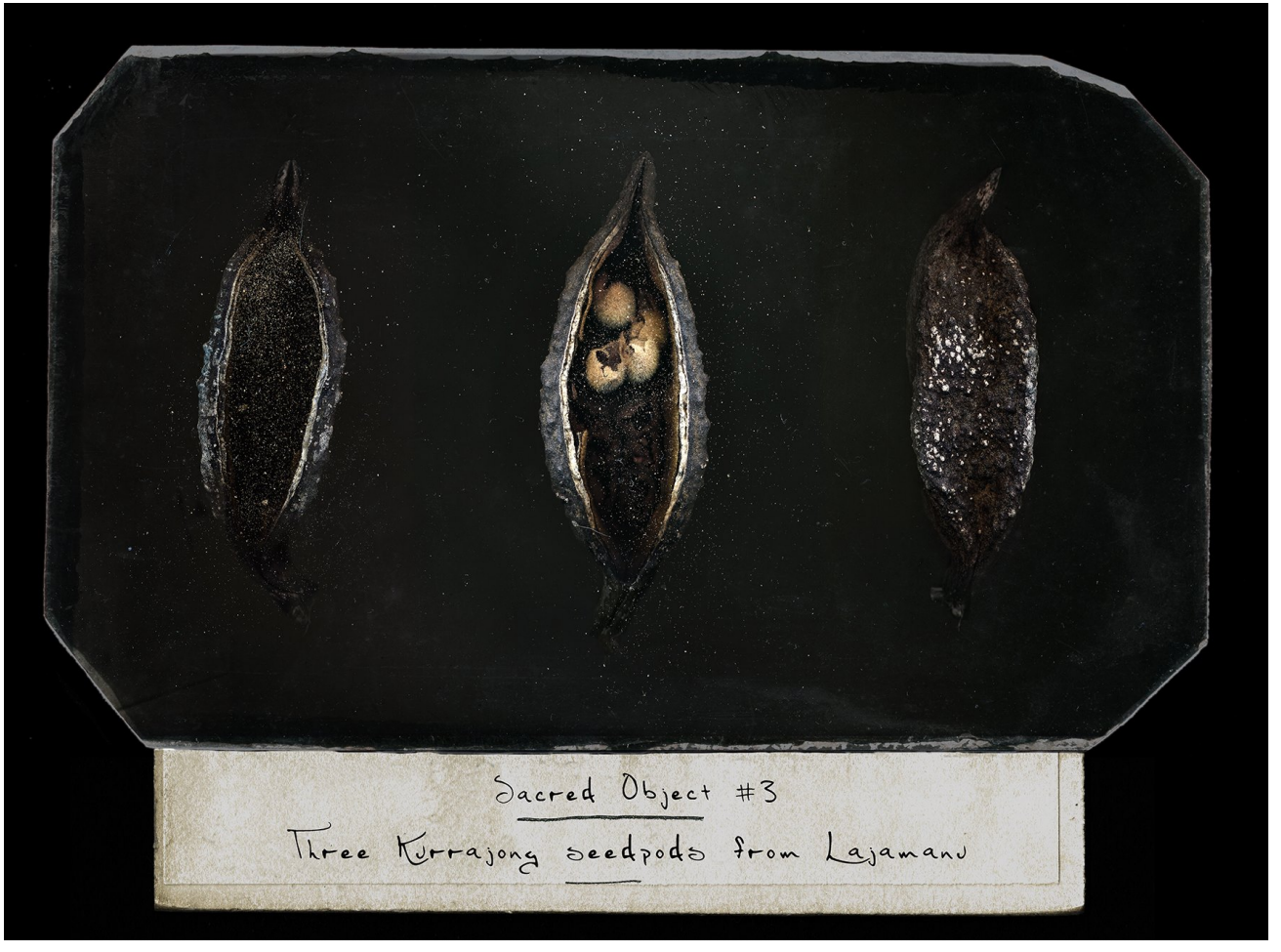
Speak to the land and the land will speak back.

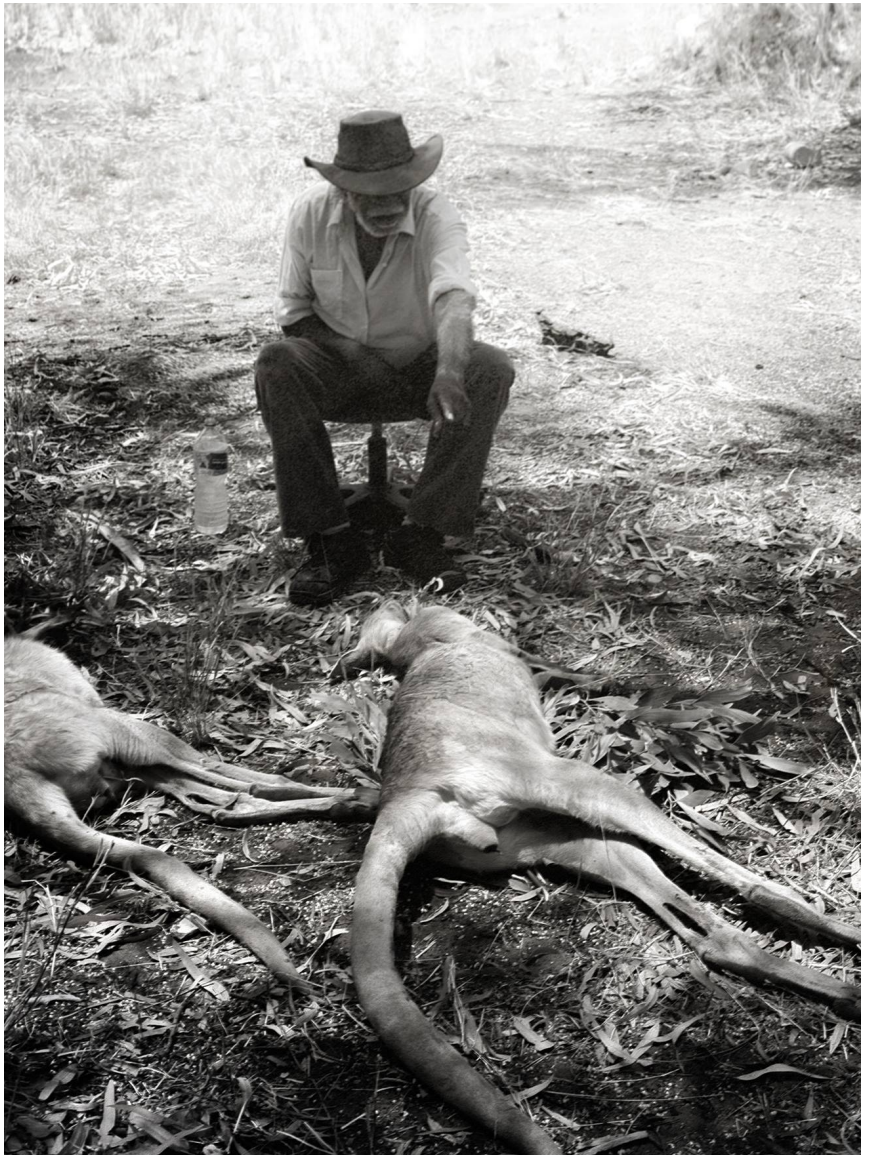
(Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu)[1]

1 Wanta Jampijinpa, "Pulya-ranyi: Winds of Change."



**Likatiya's Termite Mound** (near Emu waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)


Sacred Object #3
Three Kurrajong seedpods from Lajamanu



**Jerry Jangala Oversees Kangaroo Ceremony** (Tanami Desert Outpost NT, November 2014)

The animal is honored by sprinkling handfuls of dirt over its fur before it is prepared for cooking in the traditional way. Jerry explains that in the old days the punishment for getting this ceremony wrong was death. In modern times, the penalty for making mistakes in this ceremony is exile. Wanta Jampijinpa, Jerry's son, reassured me that exile did not necessarily mean death in the Tanami desert. A person could earn his or her place back in the community by accomplishing a special task. The exile must find the way to catch a wedge-tailed eagle and bring its soft underbelly feathers back to Lajamanu as proof. Wanta explained to me how such a seemingly impossible task could be accomplished, but I do not have permission to reproduce that here.

We're all white man, Jackamarra say,[1] we are large old men now. Nobody lives in our sacred country now. Nothing, nobody, it just lives by itself now.

(Jerry Jangala Patrick)

1 Jerry is referring to his old friend Henry Jackamarra Cook.

**Henry Jackamarra Cook, Last Kangaroo Dancer** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

## Light Trails of Henry Jackamarra Cook

Law is a gray kangaroo dancing
the thin landscape of Henry Cook into being,
somewhere in the Tanami,
where knucklebone winds scrape bare rock
and Henry stands marsupial
in firelight's weird.

In Lajamanu, tin houses edge the street.
No one is outside,
no one.

In the arts center, old ladies paint seed-dreaming.
Breeze lifts the hem of a curtain,
then stillness.
It is still.

Henry doesn't paint anymore. He sits alone,
watching ceremony from the 1970s.
Everyone in the videos is dead now, except him.
And the dead are in the desert,
faceless as the desert is,
and as remote.

Ten years ago it seemed nothing to walk
three days to his sacred country,
granite country,
where great salt lakes exhale their thirst
over spinifex and sand,
the rattling sun.

But arthritis and cataracts have caged him.
Inside the arts center,
the lights are switched off.

We drag chairs across a concrete porch
to watch the Tanami darken, shelf clouds
seal the crater at Wolfe Creek.

Rain wakens on his tongue
the angular syllables of displacement.

And home is the desert breathing over itself by night,
erasing tracks of all who walk there—
night's emu rising savage in the Milky Way,
and eyes, eyes in the granite mines.

One day, he tells me, I'll walk out
to my country and never come back.

At town's edge, a kangaroo left by poachers.
Red dust thickens its pelt, as the red dust lies thick
on Henry's Ray-Bans,
stiffening his white hair to wires.

I photograph him disemboweling the buck,
its intestines knotted to ritual marks—
Henry and his flayed brother, backlit
against chained ridges,
and the last sun rearing.

Law is an old man dancing
the gray kangaroo into being,

sewing him back into the desert's body,
into his own body, ochre and growl,
a hunting boomerang beaten on the ground.

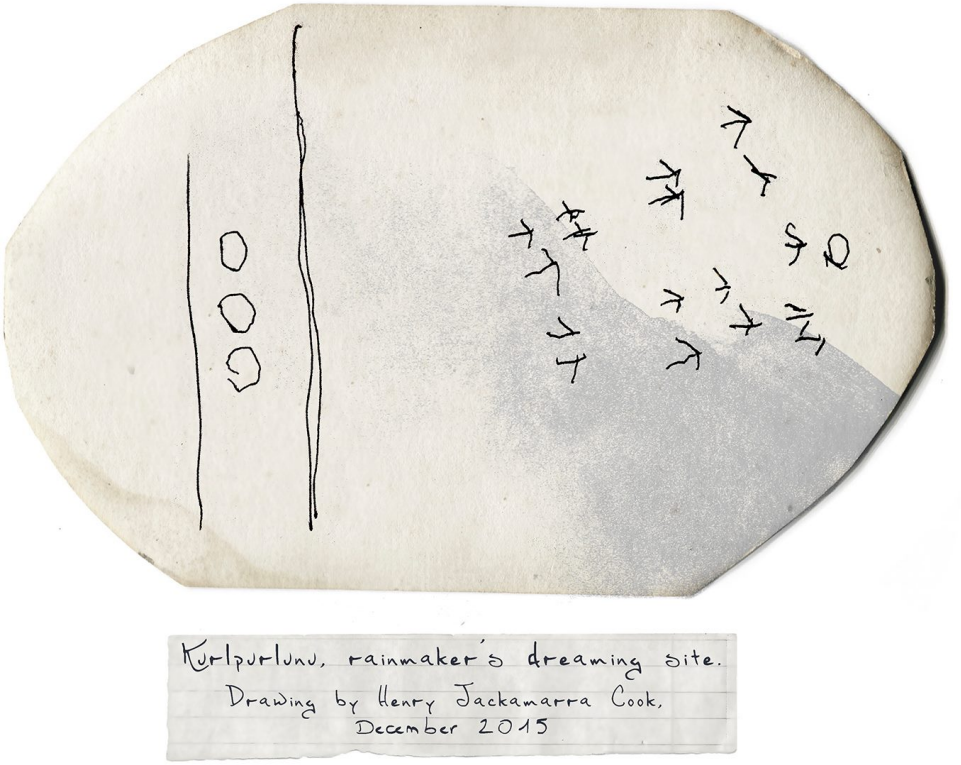
Night erases this landscape—
slow trees, sand,
the saltbush has gone.

Just Henry's heels rising and falling
along a wind-scored track,
utterances of a language which belongs to him
and to which he belongs.

Tomorrow, the Catfish Waterhole
will stretch his white hair out elastic,
as telephone wires vanishing into the Tanami.

Mud returns to him,
the cool slow memories of country
before the missions, before diabetes and grog
shrank his ancestors down so small
he holds them in a single cupped hand
like fireflies, tiny comets
crossing in the black.

Tomorrow he'll thread gumleaves
through the hole in his nose,
and say, photo me like this Nangala
I am a beautiful man.




**Drawing of Kurlpurlunu by Henry Jackamarra Cook** (Lajamanu Community NT, December 2015)

Kurlpurlunu is a sacred rainmaking site which was lost for seventy years following the forced relocation of Warlpiri people. It was rediscovered in 2015 by elders with the help of local officials and helicopters. This drawing by Henry shows the careful approach of emus near water at Kurlpurlunu.

But Kurlpurlunu country what we talk about. Yeah it make me real sad and cry for my country. Because God bin put me there, God put my people there. Why someone could move us, because of his power, because of his idea? Cutting off God's power, God's idea here, God's word, God's light . . . and that is the true. Cut off like this electric wire, if you cut him off, like that.[1]

(Jerry Jangala)

1 Warlpiri people believe that a vital force, which is drawn from the exact country of a person's birth, enters into a person only when he or she is physically on that land.

**Henry Jackamarra Dancing** (Emu Waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

Emu Waterhole is one of several important water sites around Lajamanu Community, along with Jdbrille Waterhole and Catfish Waterhole. Some of these sites are frequented by Warnayarra snakes and the Mirlalypa, or sacred people, who may or may not be incorporeal. Their role is to protect the country and to ensure that traditional laws are followed. They are one step further removed from Warlpiri society than the Karadji—who are said to have entered into an agreement with star people who give them magic in return for ensuring that Warlpiri people honor their responsibilities to the landscape. Karadji men are said to wear "magic shoes" made from emu feathers and human blood that enable them to travel vast distances instantly. Neither Mirlalya nor Karadji remain in mainstream Warlpiri society after their transformation. It is believed that white people, children, and dogs can sometimes see these "sacred people," but Aboriginal people can't.

> This is a true, Nangala. Hurting our lives, hurting our country, hurting our ideas and what we want to turn into. When we going to move somewhere now, we got no way to talk about our camp or our wind-break. They bin making another place—like this place here. Only government got to do that all the time, forcing us again to do that—tell us what to do. I'm sorry I have to say all this strong . . . because I'm not happy with all that . . . all really, really make me sick.
>
> (Jerry Jangala)

**Jerry Jangala** (Emu Waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

Jerry is Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu's father and a Law man at Lajamanu. He also moonlights as the local Baptist minister. When Jerry speaks of God, which he does often, he looks out over the mulga trees and salt bush. "It's just a white person's name for the same thing," he tells me.

## Five poems for Jerry Jangala, who, like the sparrowhawk, conceals within himself another self

### I

Sometimes a traveler,
stopping on the Tanami road by night,
or before a storm,
when ridges lie anthracite
in the ancient houses of rain,
will glimpse someone dancing—way out,
where termite mounds diminish
to watching salt.
And the traveler will know him
from his moving,
as we know a python
or a whirlwind hidden in a fire.
Storm breaks
and his skin iridesces with the colors
of rainbow and lightning.
He is the rain itself.
He opens his mouth
and from his shining body,
more snakes dart.

### II

As a child, Jerry Jangala walked north
with his family,
collecting *yipirntiri* berries.
And delaying too long at one spindly branch
found himself alone,
ears buzzing
and the movement of his hands slower
than a drunk uncle.
And that's when the Karadji man lifted him
onto scarred shoulders
and in that whistling language, spoke
of thunder fields poisoned
by British bombs,
of landscapes scarred
by mines the size of Belgium.
There are certain wild stones,
he told him, carried under the skin,
like organs.

III

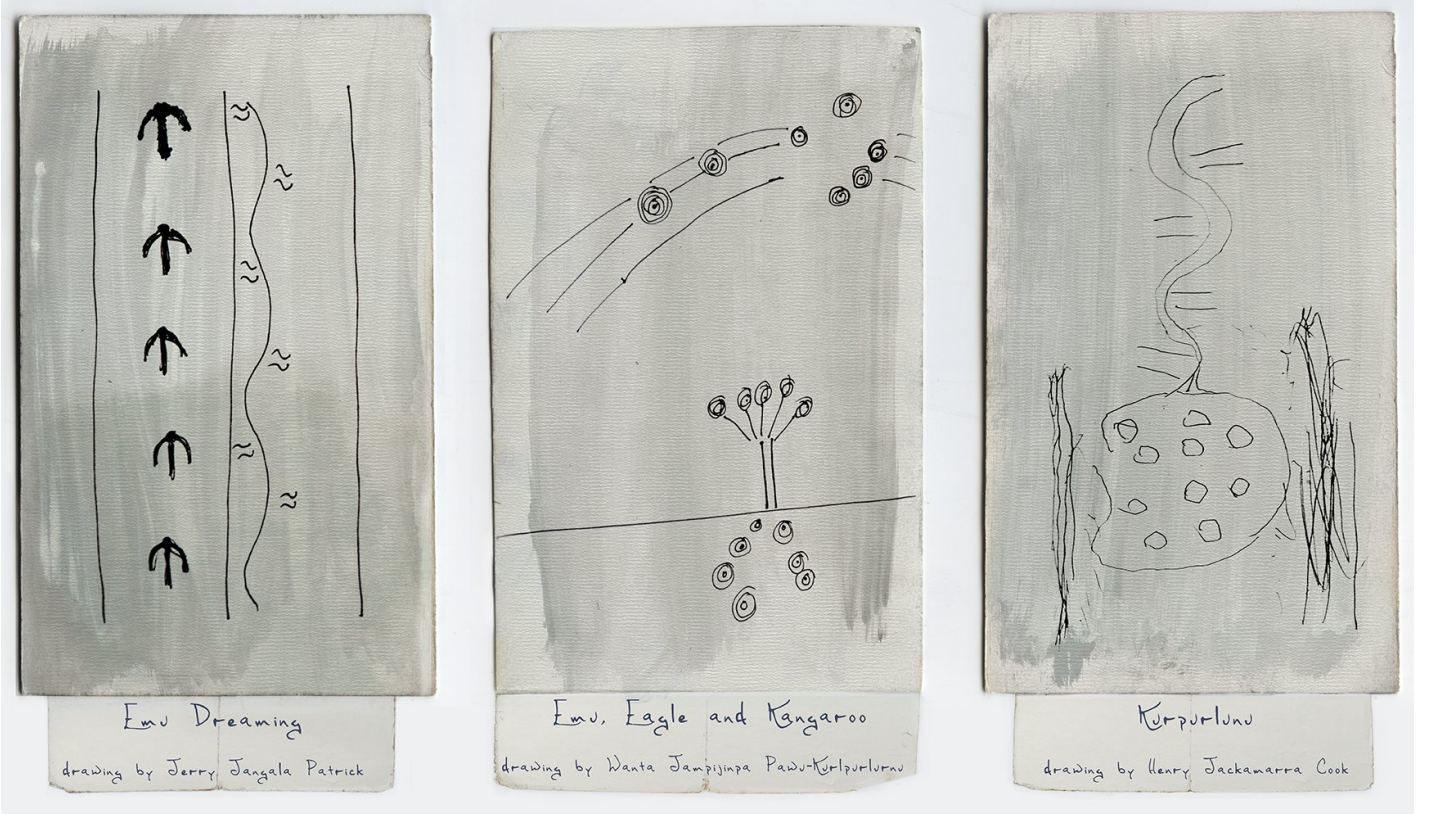
Lajamanu's night church
is a tin shed on a football field,
whose painted wall
declares, "This is the Holy Ground."
Fairy lights brighten goalposts
where Jerry Jangala
delivers a sermon on Noah,
to a congregation of dogs
and Warlpiri elders.
Out here, his crucifix
is the Southern Cross, its pointers
lying past our anxious houses,
the waste of community cars
where a road transfigures itself
in dust squalls. And gray
in a traveler's headlights,
camels are running.
But on this oval, quietly
an old man affirms God's covenant
in light-threaded rain.

IV

You'll know them
from their black Toyotas, he told me,
and how their tracks leave traces
of feathers, blood, and human hair.
On the periphery of family occasions—
weddings, funerals, or when,
during theological studies,
uncertainty perched in his breast
like a sparrowhawk,
Jerry spied that Karadji man
waiting
in the outer circle of firelight—
or as a window presence in the deserted
houses of Yuendumu.
At service stations
or along the highway,
he'll ask you for a cigarette,
then vanish, transformed to trees
or white nocturnal moths. And later,
when you try to speak of the stranger,
your words will tangle,
as if overwritten by another,
and a cold wind lifting
from bloodwood trees will thrum
with unexpected owls.

**V**

One by one, they slip
from the Holy Ground
until only dogs and I remain
and the coal-sack spreads mustard seeds
through the Milky Way.
Jerry brushes the rain's first drops
from his Bible.
We watch him slide,
emu-footed,
over storm drains to the road
and the black water follows him.
In just a few hours,
dawn.
We'll sit together in the Arts Center yard
on paint-speckled chairs,
first light
reaching through *Milpirri* clouds—
this daily miracle of world creation
and world maintenance.
But when the lion sun spills golden
on the service station roof,
Jerry will turn to me
and whisper, "Christ light,
do you know what that is, Nangala?
It's the beginning of love."


Emu Dreaming
drawing by Jerry Jangala Patrick
Emu, Eagle and Kangaroo
drawing by Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu
Kurpurlunu
drawing by Henry Jackamarra Cook

**Three Warlpiri Drawings** (Jerry Jangala, Wanta Jampijinpa, and Henry Jackamarra. Warnayaka Arts Centre, Lajamanu Community, December 2015)

I asked three Warlpiri friends, Jerry, Henry, and Wanta, to draw a self-portrait for me. I told them they could represent themselves however they wished, but the drawing should convey to a stranger something essential about them as individuals. The men did not collaborate or consult with each other. The first drawing, by Jerry Jangala, whose skin name means "rainmaker," explains the relationship between emus and the rain. The vertical lines represent the stripes of blue feathers found on either side of an emu's face—*wullede*, in Warlpiri language. The wavy line represents rain, and the twinned wavy lines are clouds. The emu's footprints are parallel to the rain. Wanta's drawing describes the relationship of the Southern Cross and the ground, mediated by trees. The Southern Cross is thought of as the emu's crown, as it lies often across the head of the emu figure created by the Milky Way's dark nebula. The tree, which mediates the earth and sky, is also thought of as an eagle. The ground is also the kangaroo. Wanta explained to me, "If you want to live in the land of the kangaroo, you have to learn to listen to the emu, who will teach you to soar like the eagle." Henry Jackamarra drew a diagram of the correct way for emus to approach the water at the once lost, now rediscovered, rainmaking site Kurlpurlunu. Although all three men drew a number of preliminary sketches, at no stage did any of them consider a self-portrait resembling a human face.

> That's what I understand myself too. I'm a pastor too, in the Baptist church, that's what I'm saying, Nangala, I might be take you wrong way, little bit, but that's what He work. In *Milpirri*,[1] my son bin taught . . . yes, you can say something—but I'm going back in that sacred site too. Because old people learn me . . . one day he took it quietly, even in the Bible they say that, old people, you know? Go quietly. And one woman got up in the front and make big noise, this way (hums) . . . exactly what they do. That mean, make it clear for everybody to go . . . and take that water and cut the tree to make a windbreak, and put a fire, make a fire there.[2]
>
> Saying that a leader, we call Kurdu Ngulu, bird one, and Kirea—this one talk with that area, and this one is a working man there. That's all got to talk first. Two old men then, they know everything, talk to that country . . . "I got my people here, you mob." We bin bringing first time, like our friends, like Kardiya people—we ask them, "You bin here before?" you know? Well, she or he say, "No, I'm first time". . . well, same thing, introduce to that country. Even to that water and that rocks and the whole everything because it's a special one there, somehow.
>
> (Jerry Jangala)

1 *Milpirri*, which means "cloud" in Warlpiri, is a festival held every two years in Lajamanu. This local initiative is designed to teach traditional custom, including ceremony, to young Warlpiri people—and to any interested Kardiya (white people).

2 The Warlpiri believe the landscape is sentient and can be safely crossed only if the traveler is introduced (or introduces himself or herself) to country in the language spoken by indigenous people there.

**Catfish Waterhole** (Tanami Desert NT, December 2015)

**Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

I was told Lily, when she was young, was in love with a Karadji man but couldn't be with him because she didn't want to leave her community. Her arms reveal the parallel ritual marks of someone on a "sacred path." Now, despite caring relationships with her family, friends, and fourteen adopted dogs, somehow Lily is always alone. When, together with Molly and Rosie, Lily took me to see Catfish Waterhole, she explained that we were going to see her "mother." I carried Lily, too frail to descend the bank, to the edge of the water. There she turned water over her palms, the traditional way of greeting the waterhole and avoiding surprising any Warnayarra who might be there. The deep love that Warlpiri people have for the landscape, its mountains and waterholes, is almost incomprehensible for white people. Here Lily sings quietly to Catfish Waterhole—not for any ceremonial or traditional reason, I'm told, but just because it makes the waterhole feel loved.

## Levi's Daughters

Two firebirds egress from the back of a Land Cruiser,
mantis-thin,
and the wild color of their sundresses
variegates this light, holy
intelligent light.

And old Lily, stooping in the hatch,
twig-dark, and brittle
as the shells of yesterday's cicada, reaches out
from that dark place, one sunlit arm,
wandered by scabies and initiation scars.

I rest her child-weight a moment on my hip
while she finds the ground.

The day is heavy.
Too hot for snakes, she says, only spirit snakes about now.

From behind, they appear as a single moving column of color,
turning back three faces like Shiva,
pointing long fingers out to show me
sacred relics of the Tanami:
boat-shaped seedpods
and the fibrous roots of plants.

They approach the waterhole like their mother's table,
like Levi's daughter giving Moses to the reeds.

And later, Lily shuffles forward in the dust,
her arms curled to little wings, she dances
the crying diamond dove.

Hey Kardiya girl, we cryin'
like this fella for you—who don't remember,
who only talks and don't remember.

When her sisters sleep kitten-spooned,
under shadeless mulgas, Lily traces her family tree in the dirt
but brushes it away because it's a secret,
like how she sings the snake into her paintings
on canvas and bark, old exhausts, jerry cans . . .

They sold her work in Paris
but she was never invited to the openings.

And maybe love is like this,
just a secret written in the country's skin
or something hidden in a coffee jar: a photograph
of a woman standing in the street with her best gloves on,
wing mirrors of a retreating government car.

Just another daughter losing her child
to the black cars of history,
over and over, without end.

**Molly Napurrula and Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali at Catfish Waterhole**
(Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

**Rosie Murnkumarnku Napurrurla at Catfish Waterhole**
(Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

**Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali Swims** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

That *Kuradja* are Warnayarra too, that's the snake.[1] Little ones live in the rain but the big ones are in the water.[2] *Yuwayi*, when Warnayarra was coming from that way, from that place—cold water, that's the Warnayarra where they live—he jumping up, he jumping up. First time in this place because we bin in different country . . . we still in different country. And we building up all these house, building up everything now, everything—but not really for us, *Kurdiji*.[3] But one of the first rain, little one like this, Warnayarra will come here and hurt my people . . . here, when I got my hunting with broken leg. *Yuwayi*, first time was that one.

(Jerry Jangala)

1 The Warnayarra are spirit snakes thought to live underground and in the waterways. The covenant between Aboriginal people and the Warnayarra is said to have resulted in the birth of language. The Warnayarra are understood by Warlpiri to have come from comets landing at Wolfe Creek and other impact sites across the country. Jerry Jangala says they have the same nature as pythons, and hence can't be reasoned with, but that Warnayarra do recognize kinship and honor agreements. The Warnayarra occupy a role in Warlpiri cosmology that has many similarities with the apocryphal angels of Christianity.

2 The Warlpiri word for a hatchling snake also means "fallen rain." Jerry Jangala has said that baby Warnayarra are "threaded into the rain." The connection between snakes, rain, and the Milky Way underpins much Warlpiri spiritual thought. The emu, the shape of which can be seen in the dark nebula of the Milky Way, has come to represent this connection, and it is said that "emu" people, who are traditionally rainmakers, have their spiritual origins in the Milky Way. The position of the emu dark nebula in relation to the pointers of the Southern Cross constellation determines the seasons for Warlpiri people. When, for example, the pointers appear close to the claw of the emu, Warlpiri call those stars the "digging stick" and know it is time to dig for bush potatoes. As with so many Warlpiri customs, the season for digging operates on both philosophical and practical levels, as it is also time for "digging up knowledge" left by past elders and ancestors.

3 *Kuridji* means "shield," and it refers to guardians of traditional Law and culture, of the Law itself. Such guardians can take the form of ceremonies, people, ideas, etc.

**Molly's Flame-Tree Seed-pods** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

**Neil Jupurrurla Cooke at Catfish Waterhole** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

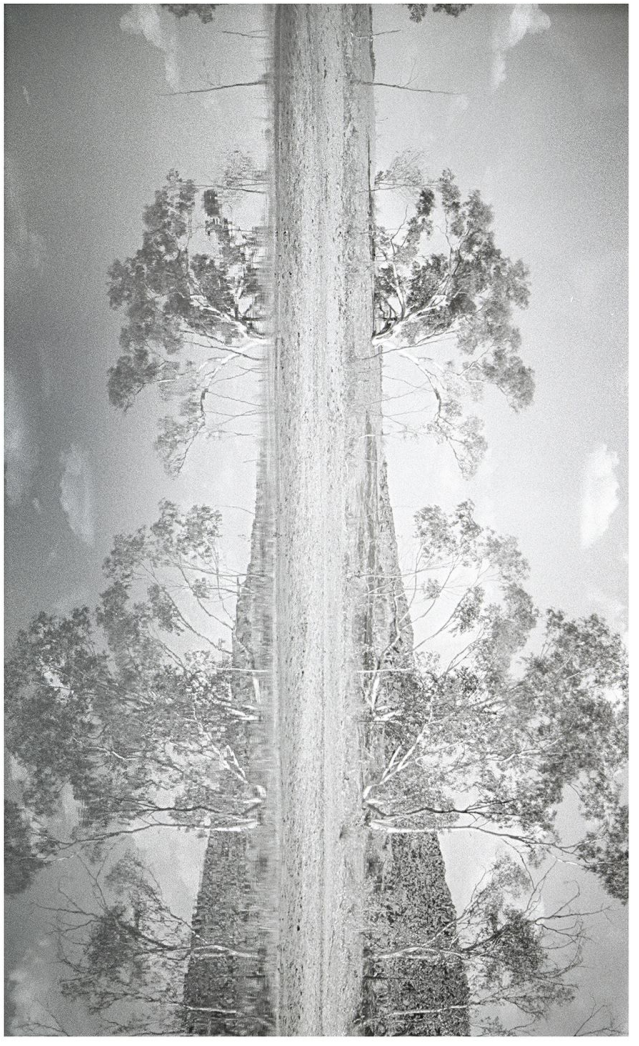
**Molly Napurrula Sifts Wattleseed** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

Warlpiri people still supplement their diet with bush food. Ground wattleseed is mixed with oil and baked into a kind of flat bread. The older ladies took me out “hunting” for wattleseed and kurrajong seedpods. In a township with only one shop, where a head of broccoli costs more than a takeaway meal for a family, it is vitally important to supplement the community’s diet with “bush food.” White Australians have almost no idea of the variety of native fruits and vegetables that grow in the apparent desert—bush potatoes, bush tomatoes, bush bananas, honey ants, land crabs, wattleseeds, etc., can be gathered throughout the Tanami.


Sacred Object #4
Tiny bird's skull from three angles

**Rosie Murnkumarnku Napurrurla Sleeps at Catfish Waterhole** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)

**Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali** (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)



**Catfish** (Tanami Desert
NT, November 2014)

I didn't see him . . . I'll answer you two questions with that one. I'm in story a little bit. My uncle was here first in my country, you know? He had one of them like big mob, big storm we got, what do you call that? Big billabong, you know? Water . . . in a billabong way. You know waterhole? And that old man start picking stones, like that one, yeah little ones, true, *yuwayi*, true a story and true a person. And he's a clever one too, that old man, picking stones and chuck them to that water. "Are you there, Warnayarra?" You know, talking with his language—he throw that stone in the water. First one, and again—"Oh, *lawa mayi*"—that mean, "Still nothing?" Picking another stone and chucking at that Warnayarra . . . and getting really in the middle of water. Second time he sing out, *"Warnayarra, wily bireibya"*—that mean, "Warnayarra, come out!" And he bin come out alright!!

That old man had to drop everything and run right up to sandy hill country! And that Warnayarra would chuck water all over him and the water up insides of him too. The water chased him and the Warnayarra would just get up in the middle of water. I'm talking about Jampijinpa, my stepfather uncle or my stepfather. He run right up there in the sandy hill and look back, "Oh! That water gone back now, that water in the billabong, water is quiet again, that Warnayarra gone back again."

(Jerry Jangala)

**Them Old Men Who Watch** (Tanami Track, near Kununurra WA, June 2015)

Jerry Jangala explained that in Warlpiri language, trees are referred to as “those who watch.” These are dry river trees, found throughout the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

We got a sand hill—big one, like a eel—in our country, place called Yinapaka. Yinapaka called in a English word is Lake Surprise. I have to go there for long time, maybe for years and years, live in that sand hill country. I know all bin going through there, all that, no vehicles.

*Kurdaja* in that country—it can kill you. Night, night can kill you. Some kind of evil thing—*Kurdaja*, we call, *Kurdaja*, it can kill you, seem like *Kurdaja* . . . one more name, yes? It could kill someone to make him sick. To talk about this idea. Change my mind. I'm going back on that same idea. Because the people learn to live there. Because I heard they have charm for that . . . singing charm and ceremony grow them up, you know?

It's like that water—rain comes in and grow them up more trees, more grass. That song is the same. Sing the song and you see the same thing like water. My father and land too. What I'm saying that, maybe with that singing too, rain when he come, comes new what you call plant like this one, yes?

(Jerry Jangala)

**Leaf in the Stone** (MacDonnell Ranges NT, December 2015)

Rock painting shown to me at Alice Springs by Arrernte elders, 2014.

**Wolfe Creek Crater** (Tanami Track WA, June 2015)

Wolfe Creek meteorite crater in northeastern Western Australia, called Kandimalal or Gandimalal, in local language, is attributed to a cosmic impact more than three hundred thousand years ago. Many important Dreaming stories are associated with this site, including one that tells of a pair of subterranean Warnayarra, or rainbow snakes, who emerged from the crashed meteor. One turned in a circle as it came out of the ground, creating Kandimalal's shape, and the other continued underground to form Sturt Creek. Western desert stories tell how a pair of ancestral snakes came out of the ground to form rivers, rock holes, and claypans. Some stories explain the slight depression in the crater's rim as being the place where one of the snakes laid its head as it came out of the ground. There are also a number of local stories that describe the site as a meteorite crater. Jaru elder Jack Jugarie recounted that the moon and the evening star once passed too close to each other, causing the star to overheat and crash to Earth.

> A star bin fall down. It was a small star, not so big. It fell straight down and hit the ground. It fell straight down and made that hole round, a very deep hole. The earth shook when that star fell down.[1]

Jugarie uses the word *coolungmurru* to describe the sound of the meteorite impact and the shaking it caused underground. In Jaru culture, the star is associated with the Warnayarra snakes. Some Aboriginal people see Kandimalal as the navel of the earth, the place where human life began.

1 Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Aboriginal Paintings of the Wolfe Creek Crater: Track of the Rainbow Serpent* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 26.

## The Lumen Seed

I saw your world begin
in the splitting of a seed,
he said, his voice snatched
from the crater's lip, by wind
hollow and rasping as a Taipan.

Two snakes hidden in a seed,
lumen seed
in the white seed of storm,
traveling high like tailed stars,
star-blur and the whole night descending
in ice and plummeting birds.

Imagine ice settling
in the desert, as red dust settles
on the surface of things, on stones,
a paperbark's ovate leaves
and this erasure of line and word,
like a phone ringing in the middle of the night,
disquiets.

Snake seed fell down at Wolfe Creek,
at fifteen kilometers a second,
like a battleship grounding, pulverizing
sandstone to shale, it flung iron shards
into the Tanami.

And in that exogenesis
wind dissipates shifting planes of dust
from a new crater's mouth,
this garden of forking paths,
of snake lines, in the wet season,
the ground is soft and hungry—
people sink here.

Long time ago and now,
a black star is falling with a sound
like *coolungmurru*.

He's telling you something in that star language.
Singing Stick.

And it dawned on me, I'd no memory of the track
from car park to vertiginous edge,
or the timbre of his voice, no more
than wind-thrum on a rocky trail.
Hush now,

it's earlier than it was before.
And time is a coiled thing, like a galaxy,
or the tracks of clever animals,
it won't conform to expectation.

What would it mean to wake in the desert's arms?
To wake and see sparks climb
from the dark line of night, cigar shaped
and silver, igniting spinifex.

"Surely," he says, pointing out
into a thousand kilometers of savannah and salt,
"you must realize there's nowhere left to go?
These tracks lead only to places
already known."

But sometimes, if
when the desert lies glassy under rain,
you go alone,
where streetlights drown themselves
in night grasslands,
the communion of night finches
and the Tanami opens like a mystery,
half-formed on your tongue,

you can see those two snakes hovering like lights
in the middle of water.

And this truth of water and of space
is not a stable reality.
All worlds beginning with a sound
like *coolungmurru*.

He's telling us something in that star language
but his voice, snatched
from the crater's lip,
Singing Stick,
hollow and rasping,
is the Taipan's.

**Dust on the Tanami** (Tanami Track near Wolfe Creek Crater WA, June 2015)

This is a reminder that I have found the rope which was severed
and I have knotted it
(Coffin Texts)