

Meniscus

Emma Rummery

YELLOW SAND, white curving waves and a cliff face that looks like a serene, monolithic profile staring out to sea. My grandmother used to linger at Queenscliff beach until her children begged to go home. The sea was her lodestone. Like a tide, she retreated and returned, drawn by the surf, the hot sand, the scent of sunscreen.

I have always been fascinated by stories of selkie skins, legends of siren songs. Myths of obsession, magnetism, the worlds in-between. Even Narcissus was enchanted by the hypnotic, mirror-like effect of light on water. The line dividing the creative and the critical is as slim and changeable as a meniscus, the barrier between light and air.

Instead of swimming, during my childhood lessons I used to hover, belly-up, just beneath the surface of the water, staring at the light that wavered through, moonstone-like. Here and there. Portals and barriers.

If we are what we believe, the wavering border between the creative and the critical is intimately linked to our conceptualisation of our own subjectivity, and each landscape — fantasy and reality — are vital to our constructions of ourselves.

The dawn Nana Joy died, my father went to the beach and took a photograph of the sun rising on the horizon she had watched so often. Oranges and pinks in a dark wooden frame in our front hall. Dad also loves the ocean. Some of my earliest memories are of him taking my brother and I out into the deep

water, lifting us up on his shoulders and throwing us over the waves. Lying in the warm, shallow swells at the edge of the sea, barely suspended, the sand shifting and dense underneath me, imagining I was a mermaid, imagining I was home. Fifteen years later I am in Shanghai and the dark, shifting expanse of the Bund is the first large body of water I've seen for months. I let out a shaky breath and begin to cry. The sea is my backdrop. I don't swim in it very often but when I do, I'm immersed. The pressure of it, on every side. Salty and cool, shifting. Lifting me up, throwing me over waves. The ocean is engulfing, embracing. It suspends your body, emotions, disbelief. You become lighter than air, in tangible contact with the world which surrounds you.

After Nana Joy's funeral I was given a small, half-empty bottle of her perfume, a sample vial of an obscure French scent that spilled all over my jewellery box when I was eight. Now the fragrance I associate with her is mixed with the tang of metal and old velvet, the gold of my Holy Communion necklace, my glass rosary beads. Senses, memory, impressions twirl together and create something new.

Like the ghost of her scent, my love of the ocean, the cleansing rush that sweeps through me with every inhalation, is what I have inherited from her. I have my other nana's widow's peak, her anxiety, her creativity. I have a hint of Grandfather Harold's smile, as well as his sense of humour. I have Grandfather Pete's love for books and solitude.

Our conceptions of ourselves are dependent upon our environments, but we also know that heredities impact upon the characteristics of an individual. Learned traits or inherited genes passing down through the centuries, coiled up inside my ancestors, who each carried within them, myself. A fragment of who I could potentially be. They are my past incarnations. I am a patchwork of chance and everything they were.

The notion of body knowing, a mind infused through the skin, blood and bones, speaks of an ancient, primal knowledge. Sensing violin-string tension in a silent room, the safety of the foetal position, the rocking pressure of waves. When I am underwater, my hair turns rose-gold like my dad's. It always streams away, finds the outgoing tide.

Nana Margaret used to curl up on tree branches, reading, lost in story worlds while her six sisters, all beautiful, according to family lore, played below. Our house in England had a miniature forest of trees in the front yard. I would climb up into the fork of one and sit there for hours, reading, looking out across our neighbour's ornamental pond. Maybe before either of us there was a girl who pored over books in the family library, a priest who illuminated scrolls, an old woman who told stories around a fire.

Australia is one giant, living, breathing border culture. Rabbits find their way through the fences no matter what we do. The long lines of barbed wire (ghostlike, still present in black spiky words on the page) follow the undulations of the earth. The landscape is indifferent to our markings. Borders are by definition changeable, non-places, just a fissure between here and there. Australia, as a colonised space, will forever be a border culture to some. It is riddled with scars and histories that have not yet been purged. Australia is a tropical desert, a dusty, lush, oceanic, arid, cement jungle of real and not real. From the beginning, we were a boat people living on an island of retold histories and forgotten myths.

My great-grandfather on Mum's side was born in 1888. His grandfather, 1840. I am fifth generation Australian, but what does it mean to be Australian? I have no Aboriginal heritage. I cannot claim this land belongs to me, or I to it. Centuries of my family have lived and died on this island, but the roots of my heritage weren't born from it. I feel a deep connection to the landscape, the warm, sun-soaked stones, the

pale cracklings and intricacies of the bush, the blue expanse of sky. Yet my whiteness makes me a blank piece of paper with the same impermanence, possibility and corruptibility, as the empty Word document glowing before me.

Terra nullius. Land belonging to no one. Myself. Girl belonging to no land. I am a flag, planted in the red earth, but suspended above, held taut by the wind. The flagpole can't grow roots. It is not a trunk.

My family can be traced back to Ireland on my dad's side and England on my mother's. I loved England when we lived there, but it never evoked the pull on my bones that Australia has. It was claimed already. Every part had been discovered and rebuilt and ploughed and explored. We barely spent any time in Ireland. All I remember is an ancient, dark tree tied all over with fragile, slender ribbons that pulsed in the wind like seaweed. Wishes, my parents said.

Maybe that is why I love the ocean. Which holds and possesses and reassures, rocks and cradles and belongs fiercely to itself. Humankind can live on its borders, balance on top, float and explore its darkness with pieces of sky strapped to their backs, oxygen hissing in their ears, but it can't ever be theirs. Maybe that is what I am. When my relatives left Europe centuries ago, they became citizens of the ocean. On their never-ending voyage across the sea they became a nomadic people, forever floating and seeking and taking.

Apparently there is Irish nobility on Dad's side. A book in Grandfather Pete's house has a shield, a family crest and a brief history (it might not be our history) that details us being driven out by another clan. Before that perhaps we were Vikings. Maybe we were Celts, covered over with blue tattoos, a trace work of veins made visible, a story printed on the skin. Before that the continents were merged, so does it even matter? These stories inform me, shape me and make me.

The past is a series of knots, a sprawling family tree, the passage of boats across the ocean, planes across the sky, blood spilled in hospital wards. Mysteries, truths embroidered with the verdigris of time. It is an Irish lord with silver plates, a Viking girl singing to her baby, a Strawberry-blond child who is going to become a soldier. It's my grandfather, standing at the front of a minesweeper in the Pacific on a pitch black, freezing night. It's my grandmother, letting the Australian sun turn her golden, listening to the crash of waves. Australia is where I took my first breath and maybe it will be where I draw my last. The land does not care what labels we give to it, the borders we impose on it. Maybe it's all just semantics, words to cover the yearning. We were born on it, will live on it, will die on it. We belong to the earth. Outside, there is zero gravity. The critical and the creative merge and blend on our maps. The archaic here be dragons. Both have meanings, inform our selves. The child in the geography class, the primitive fear of movement in the dark.

I am multilingual, just not in a literal sense. I can read what my brother is feeling, based on the objects he has left strewn around the house. The pace of my friend's speaking, the jumbled spelling and punctuation in a Facebook message, the minute shifts in faces, fingers, folds of arms and legs, reveal nuances decipherable only by blood or close friendship. Everyone is multilingual within their own homes, amongst their own families. Each enclosed human being is their own country, with their own alienations, secret histories and legends of invasion, conquests and defeat.

I have a picture of my great-grandfather looking like a handsome gangster, dressed up in an impeccably tailored suit, smoking a cigarette, with the black hair that runs on Mum's side of the family, and the square jaw that my mother, grandfather and brothers have. He is walking, relaxed and languid, on a broad, cobbled Sydney street. There are elaborate shopfronts

behind him. It's the 1920s. There is also a worn print of my grandmother's mother, carefully posed in a long, Victorian-era gown. She has dark shining hair and is petite, with my nana's delicate features, widow's peak and bird-black eyes.

These are facts, but infused with my fictions, the stories I have read, the people I have met. Like my grandmother, I love watercolours. A touch of pigment that blossoms through the water like fog or flowers. It was clear. It becomes cloudy. The colours are surprisingly vibrant. The tracery of brightness on a blank page. The water takes it where it wants to go. It's a history, a message.

With my pale colouring, long fingers and protruding collarbones, as though the skeleton is too big for the skin, I look German. It's tempting to think of myself as a descendant of those sparse, thorny Nordic fairytales of white snow, tangled woods and craggy mountains. A drift of fantasy, uncertainty, mythology.

The past is undoubtedly written by the victors. Whilst researching my family tree, unwinding it like spool of thread, both my grandfathers' lineages uncoiled seamlessly back to the eighteenth century. The matriarchal line was nearly impossible to decipher. It wasn't a length of thread; it was branches that spiked into the air leaving nothing. Their names dissolved into marriage, their histories merged with their husbands. History is far from certain. Personal history is even more complex, as thick as blood and thrumming with emotion, defensiveness and untold moments. I listen to the stories of the ancestress with too many children, a knitting needle and a bottle of gin, secret adoptions, runaways, the great aunts and uncles who disappeared from the census aged one, six, ten, thanks to influenza, polio, pneumonia.

Looking back is like exploring a hall of mirrors, deciphering dreams. I take from it what I want, I ignore what I don't. I

romanticise and fantasise. My family tree is an anchoring web that I have woven and interpreted myself. Collective identity helps us find our places within the universe, providing history, ancestry and homelands. I am at its centre, plucking the threads that resonate, making my own song and seeing my predecessors, ghostlike, in my own reflection.



Emma Rummery wrote this in 2013 as a university undergraduate student in New South Wales.