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# Antipodean Inscapes: Reflection of the Land as a Young Man

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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## **Antipodean Inscapes: Reflection of the Land as a Young Man**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Australia: Sustainability and the Environment, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2006

## Abstract

The following paper contains a stand-alone piece of creative travel writing. 'Cloud Juice' is based on my interpretation of the experiences of the Fall 2006 Australia: Sustainability and the Environment semester. As it is my own personal interpretation it should not be placed in the category of non-fiction. Instead I have tried to write a story that presents the tone of my experience as honestly as possible, rather than simply telling the unbiased facts of the semester. My reason for writing this is to experiment with alternative methods of communicating the growth of an ecological ethic. By focusing on the events that have taken me in this direction rather than the resultant theoretical principles I hope to do two things. The first is to explain to the reader the evolution of my own position, as it relates to sense of place, sustainability, and a personal motivation toward a new paradigm. By doing this I hope to contribute, in some small way, to the reader's own experience of these ideas.

'Cloud Juice' is a synthesis and expansion of my academic notes, personal anecdotes, poetry, correspondence with a variety of people in Australia and at home, dialogues with group members, lecturers, local inhabitants, and landscapes. I've spent a month in Tasmania writing daily, attempting to weave these many threads into a cohesive whole that holds the essential flavor of the last three months. In concluding 'Cloud Juice' I realized that my efforts were, above all, about articulating a sense of 'homeness' while abroad. For the deep strength of the environmental movement must be drawn from a sense of where and what our homes are, physically, relationally, and spiritually. It is the desire and will to defend our homes from further degradation that will be the keystone of the movement for a more ecologically stable and healthy world.

### ISP Topic Codes

- Communication and the Arts 101
- English Literature 312
- Geography 514

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## **1. Acknowledgements**

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## **2. Introduction**

### **Statement of Purpose**

I have written a narrative piece synthesizing some of the many conversations I have had in Australia over the course of the semester. This includes poetry, meditations, correspondence with people from home, conversations with other students, workshop teachers, travelers, locals, and landscapes. My project is not to create an entirely non-fictional account of my experiences in Australia, but to build a story around the movement and growth I have engaged in. The focal point is an ecological evolution: how my perception of the environment has deepened, as well as the necessity for action. This is what I most want to relate to others. This manuscript is an experiment in telling a core message. I have developed a stand-alone piece that reads like a travelogue. An evolution of an earlier idea, it incorporates protest poetry, but is a 'protest' on a more encompassing scale.

My reason for engaging in this project stems from a very deep personal desire. This project began as a travel blog of sorts, to a group of family and friends. Over the course of the semester I sent six long emails. These became the framework for this manuscript, which is a fleshing out of the bony outline. I believe strongly in the value of storytelling, its ability to motivate, as well as complicate and expand people's perceptions of the world. By focusing on the context of my experiences I hope to create an emotional framework for the abstract and theoretical morality of the 'green' perspective. Above all, this is an exercise in honesty and the power therein. As such it is often raw and spontaneous. There are passages that I'm sure would be better culled, even exiled to the realm of poor taste, passages that hold no interest for anyone but myself, even passages that bored me while I wrote them. I have no doubt that any English teacher would have a field day with a red pen, or perhaps a machete. I apologize for all of this, even though Raymond Carver cautions against such weakness. 'Cloud Juice', for better or for worse, is the semester that occurred in my mind.

### **Literature Review**

Four examples of poetic travel writing stand out in my mind. None of them are entirely true or false, however they are modeled on actual events. They use travel as a means to create heightened sensation and observation, resulting in a structure that allows deep self-reflection and social critique. The authors form connections with their subjects, yet remain

outsiders, passing only briefly through a landscape. In Motorcycle Diaries, Che Guevara writes that at first he thought the world was changing about him, but then realized that it was he who was changing, as he moved through the world (Guevara, Motorcycle Diaries). His diary becomes a critique of current political and social hierarchies present throughout South America. The reader notices a new revolutionary voice emerging from his daily observations, one that would be recorded in history books and splattered on popular t-shirts.

Peter S. Beagle's I See By My Outfit is more of a personal journey. He travels by motor scooter from New York to California in order to live with his girlfriend. Young and 'innocently hungry,' Beagle records startlingly beautiful yet common experiences in his own country. The style ranges from open and childlike to quiet and introspective. In this spectrum there is room enough to engage in a real narration of human thoughts and emotions. This style is taken to an extreme in Jack Kerouac's On the Road. Kerouac writes in stream-of-consciousness prose that often crosses over into verse, sometimes even disintegrating into babble. Yet throughout the book the reader is struck by an undeniable energy, a passion for plumbing the deepest recesses of the human condition as perceived by one generation. What comes across most clearly is the author's spirit and a need to communicate in the truest form possible.

In Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, a more mature voice (yet no less destructive) records the heartache of the Lost Generation. Emigrates to Europe, uprooted bohemians struggle for meaning in a broadly expanded world. The prose is direct, matter-of-fact. We see what Hemingway sees in vivid detail. These four authors are as stylistically diverse as contemplation and reflection must be. As such, these stories inspire my own writing and thought process.

In addition I have been reading a number of Australian poets and foreign poets visiting Australia. These collections include: Les Murray, The Biplane Houses, Pete Hay, Silently on the Tide, Ed. Helen Gee, River of Verse: A Tasmanian Journey, Paul Kane, A Drowned Land, and Kyla Allon, "Interpreting Nature in Australia Through Poetry." Pete Hay's poetry has been particularly affecting. He writes many environmental protests for Tasmania. In 'White Words' he writes, "when the majesty of life is degraded to resource/ when it is those who defend the lifeworld/ from the privateers of a marauding market/ who are accused of the 'locking up'/ when goodfellows-all are freely chosen/ to ease the small death of wonder today/ and the harder death tomorrow" (Hay 14). These are emotive

reflections upon nature and the harm done to her. In 'Bright Lights on Earth' Les Murray writes, "Human light/ is the building whose walls/ are inside. It bleeds the planet/ but who could be refused/ the glaring milk of earth?" (Murray 79). All of these are styles, ways of telling a story that I wish to explore in my own telling.

In a recent anthology from Lonely Planet called Tales from Nowhere, Tim Cahill writes in the foreword, "Let me tell you what I've learned in my own staggeringly roundabout research" (Cahill 15). The subject of this anthology and the 'research' Cahill refers to is travel. When one is open to experiencing them, unexpected and often enlightening situations occur every day. Travel provides you with an opportunity for endless research, and storytelling provides you with a vehicle for organizing and making sense of life's scattered threads.

During the Independent Study Project (ISP) period I read three books by Tasmanian writers. Pete Hay's Vandemonian Essays is a collection of incredibly lucid and free-flowing reflections on a wide cross-section of the Tasmanian consciousness. His essay on the primacy of home within environmental ethics particularly informs my own conclusions.

Gwen Hardwood's Selected Poems continually reminded me of the power of words to bring renewed significance to the acts, emotions, and landscapes of everyday life. At one point I write in my journal that her poetry has reminded me of the depth and darkness of the void within which our ideas dwell, that we drown in our own longing for answers. In 'New Music' she writes, "Unless, wakeful with questioning, / some mind beats on necessity, / and being unanswered learns to bear / emptiness like a wound that no / word but its own can mend; and finds / a new imperative to summon / a world out of unmeasured darkness / pierced by a brilliant nerve of sound." (Harwood 80).

Richard Flanagan's Death of a River Guide is a medley of Tasmanian stories reaching back to its convict history and beyond to the flickering Aboriginal heritage. His characters are sad, life-beaten souls struggling forward against bleak futures. Yet throughout is instilled the heart blood of an island home, strong and vibrant.

During the same period I read two books that, while not of Tasmanian origin, contributed to my whole stew of thoughts. Jack Kerouac's Desolation Angels is the most honest story I've read. Through his stream-of-consciousness no revision spontaneity he reveals himself struggling with the rootless homelessness that provided the context for his



writing. His lifestyle becomes a sacrifice to his art, the road his muse. Yet he discovers the ultimate unsustainability of this arrangement and this revelation overcomes him in the end.

Fritjof Capra's The Web of Life is a concise exploration of a new direction in scientific thought. He discusses the synthesis of systems theory, the mathematics of complexity, the Gaia theory, and deep ecology. His thesis is an encouraging movement away from biological reductionism toward a new wholism that establishes the necessity of 'ecological literacy'. He writes, "The belief that all these fragments – in ourselves, in our environment, and in our society – are really separate has alienated us from nature and from our fellow human beings and thus has diminished us. To regain our full humanity, we have to regain our experience of connectedness with the entire web of life." (Capra 296).

Alan Close said it best in his poem 'Writing the Book of Love', "These are my men, my women. My mentors, my role models, my history. / These are the people who went before, who were sent to warn me." (Close, public reading).

### **3. Methodology**

My methodology has been a simple one. At the beginning of the ISP period I committed to writing four pages a day (2500 words) until I ran out of story. After an excursion to meet Les Murray in Forster, NSW I traveled to Hobart, Tasmania. I rented a room at the university to have the quiet and privacy in which to write. Every day I woke up and after breakfast began writing. Usually it took me until 3 to 4 PM to get to 2500 words. I always typed on my laptop, although sometimes I would transfer notes from my journal onto the computer. When I was done writing for the day I'd take a walk into town or up into the woods beyond the university. In the evenings I'd read from the stack of books I had scattered across my bed. Twice a week I'd climb indoors at the university climbing club. There I met people who would take me for day hikes in the surrounding area. I also met two logging protesters who invited me to the Upper Florentine for an ongoing protest. About once a week I met with Pete Hay over a delicious meal. He offered support and guidance as a fellow writer. The exception to this routine was the two days I stayed in Coles Bay and hiked down the Freycinet Peninsula with a group of university students. We saw Wineglass Bay and hiked the Hazards.

I chose Hobart for a kind of self-imposed isolation I thought necessary to accomplish the amount of writing I wanted to do. I also felt the most attachment to Tasmania as a landscape that demanded contemplation. It was our previous forays in Tassie that evoked my most emotional responses to place while in Australia. I felt that some type of muse was sitting up on Mt. Wellington, looking down over Hobart. I'll discuss the drawbacks to this writing process in my concluding reflections.

## 4. Cloud Juice

### Cloud Juice

*For Mom and Dad, 'Never stop writing.'*

As of this version of the text the facts and statistics presented have not been verified. They are taken from memory and earlier notes only. Characters, while based on actual people, have been embellished to suit the storytelling. The anecdotes retold here cannot be taken as entirely factual. Quotations, while always attributed to their author, are not referenced. This practice is in keeping with the standards of creative manuscripts.

“This will take time, but there is order here, very faint, very human.”  
- Michael Ondaatje

### -Chapter One-

I first met Peter Brennan in the Brisbane airport. It looked as though he'd been in the middle of trying on a variety of Hawaiian shirts when our group of fifteen boisterous Americans descended upon him triumphantly, finally released from the stale belly of a Qantas jet. Flying over the Pacific and the International Dateline in the middle of the night is an especially dark and surreal experience. You are trapped thousands of feet in the air above a boiling ocean, hurtling into an all too abrupt tomorrow. Our manner of recording time is so convoluted that if you move fast enough in the right direction you will inadvertently vaporize one day of your life and land on a new continent a day into your future. I didn't expend too much energy trying to understand this aberration of chronology as I had a more pressing aberration to negotiate. Just how was I realistically supposed to survive intact among fourteen women for three and a half months? There was not a single other guy to help shoulder all the sexual tension, the giddy screaming, the endless talking, the once-a-month death glares, and the incessant love of boxed wine. I was surely doomed. Peter was outstanding. He immediately put me at ease.

“Wow, you must be the brave bloke!”

As it happens, this particular configuration of male and females occurred twice previously on the program. Neither semester was there a group dynamic that came anywhere close to being stable, healthy, and nurturing. Peter had slapped me across the cheek with his colorfully avian silk gauntlet. The gauge of battle had been set. Either I break the mold of history, or I perish along with my woebegone predecessors.

Perhaps it is time I explain the nature of this endeavor. Why had fifteen boisterous Americans just landed on the east coast of Australia? Why had we met an older man with a penchant for loose clothing? I quickly discovered that this allowed him the freedom to walk by throwing his chest into the air and rotating his shoulders rapidly in order to give his feet time to find their proper placement some distance closer to the horizon. This is a style of ambulation particularly adapted to long uphill slogs at speed, a useful trait for a field ecologist. We were all there at that particular time, fully loaded down with all the worldly possessions we would own for the next few months stuffed into shiny and ingeniously zippered backpacks, because we had all paid a lot of money. More accurately, our parents had paid a lot of money and we would be enjoying the spring of eastern Australia as a result.

The more intellectually optimistic explanation is that we had come to study place, and to do this by being in the field, living our education. This was to be a regional, multidisciplinary study that transcends the specialization of modernity and frees the mind to roam the relationships between people and land and history. We would overcome the boxing in, the pigeonholing of students and inhabitants, visitors and locals. All joking aside, we were to have a startling awakening to the imperative of ecological literacy and the possibility of bold actions driven by a newly energetic self. This was hard science, hopeful philosophy, and true love. I reckon now, there should have been a disclaimer on the receipt. Once you realize yourself as a firm and conscious inhabitant of the world about you, then there is no easy going back to the slumber and complacency of your previous self. You've been recruited for life and transported to the front lines of the war for the world's sanity, World War III.

The first night we stayed at a slick orange and neon green backpacker hostel in Brisbane, a city full of slick orange and neon green backpacker hostels. Ours, I suppose to differentiate itself, sold excessively priced t-shirts with chauvinistic blurbs. These in turn matched the painted wood captions on the walls.

-I don't need to look at your faces. I just want your butts.

This from an aluminum cigarette tray.

-I love skydiving, scuba diving, and muff diving!

And some other rubbish about the various jug sizes one can find at the pub. Despite all the poorly constructed gender slurs it was a comfortable place to stay. A step up from an airplane seat and twelve hours of recycled air. I stayed in a room with four of the girls in my group. Sarah expressed her concern with the formation of cliques and the potentially devastating effect they would have on our group dynamic. As she stripped down to her muff and jugs for a shower, I wondered whether I might not already be a clique unto myself, possessing a slightly less curvaceous and more elongated profile.

I remember our first assignment being some bit of nonsense about our hopes and fears and expectations. My brain was far too addled from jet lag and just generally the feeling of being way in over my head in some penal colony turned sunshine wonderland to have anything close to an insightful thought. And so I did what all fans of stream-of-consciousness prose would have done; I started with the most true and vivid expression of my deconstructed self.

-Where the hell am I and how did I get here?

This is a question I suspect we all encounter at some point in our lives. Some people may struggle with it every morning, until they have their first drink. Regardless of when and where this question becomes the foremost thought in your mind, it is decidedly unpleasant, nearly as much so as receiving a two-inch long pill into your rectum from a large hairy man who keeps repeating,

-Try and relax. I used Vaseline. It should slide in no problem.

Well we all know that Mr. Vaseline with his meaty thumbs toying about your anus is a problem, and so is the metaphysical deconstruction of self brought on by our modern and impulsive spurts of travel. We are, for all intents and purposes, the sperm of a government subsidized airline industry bent on molding our beloved earth into a spatial-temporal pancake. One bloke and fourteen sheilas have been ejaculated onto the nutrient-poor soil of the southern continent, momentarily disoriented, but soon ready to do their bit for the whitefella's colony.

My internal musings were disrupted around 2am by a fellow resident who had drunk the placement of his room straight out of his mind. He was insisting rather aggressively that our room was in fact his room. This we all debated quite heatedly for about five minutes until we grew tired of the whole thing and shoved him into the hall and slammed the door on his feet. This seemed to solve the situation, as he shut up and wandered away.

In the morning we clambered onto a white mini-bus with extra long windows. Our colorful riot of backpacks was tossed unceremoniously into the boxy white trailer behind the bus. Predictably, Willie Nelson's 'on the road again' began scrolling through my head in a scratchy old time way, a drastic indication of my homesickness. But while in Australia, Peter said, we'd listen to Australian music. Part of the whole acculturation process. And so Willie was replaced by a catchy Aboriginal beat, something about 'rising like a mountain, toward the blazing sun.' Now that's the Australia I recognize, an inescapably blazing sun. But we were just coming out of winter so the sun wasn't quite that dramatic.

We rolled down the Pacific Highway, out of Brisbane and into the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. Brisbane and the coastal area directly south are heavily developed, and becoming more so. This is suggestive of a well-known issue for the citizens of Australia. Without simplifying the situation too much we can say that most immigrants to the country in the last 200 years have desired to live within a fishing line's distance of the beach. The internal bit of the country, which is most of it, is sparsely populated. Something about the inescapably blazing sun and a vast desert noticeably lacking in many of the more life-sustaining elements. This geographical equation led Les Murray to describe the lights of his country thus,

Now the streetlights don't  
switch off for wars. The past  
is fuel of glacé continents,  
it rims them in stung salt,  
Australia in her sparsely starred  
flag hammock. Human light  
is the building whose walls  
are inside. It bleeds the planet  
but who could be refused  
the glaring milk of earth?

What happens when all the edges are owned by someone, and the unsteady soils of the coast are washed into the undrinkable ocean, and the rain does not fall? A more disturbing question: what will coastal Australia look like in 50 years? A century? Rising sea levels will wash away current resort villages, beach houses, zoning regulations. 80% of Australia's population is coastal. It may be time to begin the climate change dance.

-Oops can't live here, oops can't live here. We fucked that up, hehe.

In *Landing*, Tim Winton suggests that the white conquest of Australia has not yet reconciled itself to its new home, not yet learned to live comfortably in the landscape. It is easy to live on the coast, the stronghold of colonization, without the necessity of humbling oneself to the culture of unimpeachable distance and time that is truly Australia. Without this acceptance of place, immigrants cannot reestablish their identities. They exist in ecological limbo, often with devastating results to themselves and their environments. It is telling that

Aborigines didn't over-concentrate on the edges of their country, but dispersed throughout the varied lands, creating homes in the many microclimates and niches of this vast island, becoming themselves through the act of living and moving within these spaces.

South of the Gold Coast the land opens up into farming country. This is the predominant area in the world for macadamia growing. Conventional macadamia plantations cover acres and acres of rolling hills with rigid lines of monocrop. They spread herbicides that kill any vegetal growth beneath the trees. As a result the rains wash soil down the hills, leaching the already poor ground of further nutrients and polluting the catchments. At least the macadamia is a beautiful tree, seemingly endless rows of dark green foliage shading the earth, creating tunnels of clear damp air to stroll through. If one forgets the poisons continually being injected into soil, atmosphere, and food, the plantation might easily become the setting for some dreamed childhood romance, some secret garden holding the sacred moments of the soul.

Down from the hills into the coastal lowlands sugarcane becomes the dominant crop. It knits vast swaths of ruddy earth to the sky with green and yellow stalks. If you lay down in a field of sugarcane you will see wild arms in every direction, reaching desperately beyond themselves toward some outer rim, transcendence only inches away. I'm reminded of the Midwestern corn belt, the industrial revolution in food slowly sidling up to the interstate highway system, as if we secretly wish to strangle our own progress before it's too late.

Now beyond the sugarcane we come to large paddocks for the grazing of cattle, sheep, and horses. The majority of cattle raised in Australia are free range. Certainly they look much happier than American cattle. Their coats are roan, cream, and chocolate colored, shaggy and muscled. All this against a backdrop of washed out greens strung together by straight wooden fences reaching into the mottled sky. Looking west I see the rounded heads of the Great Dividing Range, subject to erosion for millennia. They are not now the old grand impositions that once sought the celestial, yet they retain their cloud-cloaked majesty, as well as their power to call the rain up from the ocean.

In the next two months we would be traversing this landscape often, each time delving deeper into its ridges and furrows, uncovering more of its history, its slow work, and its spirit. We would meet people who asked for and received their livelihoods from this place, others who demanded it, and still others who knew some of the ancient stories of how great ancestors, through their blood and toil and love, imbued this land with its structure and meaning. For now, we were heading to a place called Seven Mile Beach for our introduction to Oz.

Among the fields, I recalled a moment of sparks from a faraway July in New York,

To describe a certain moment  
requires a framing  
That all senses are accounted for:  
agreeable storytelling

Can't three unexpected fingers  
hooked in my back pocket,  
thumb and pinky hanging loose,  
frame our moment?  
Your frightened tears

amid the grey approach of May thunder  
give your five year old touch  
a cinematic gravity  
And just before,  
when the late afternoon slantwise lighting  
lit your footsteps over trampled rows of rye

Together we grounded each other  
Safety despite the metal prongs  
of my raised pitchfork  
The small sparks that help the harvest

## **-Chapter Two-**

I had a vision last night of a story that wanted to be told  
It began in the mountains of the world, the sacred heights  
Where man goes to be vulnerable and alive  
The story trickled down from its volcanic forging  
It sought the low places, as it had the physics of a river  
As it ran toward the plains and basins in which our red and yellow electric cities nestle  
It spun off from itself, snagging on a log, pooling about a hill, sifting into the tilled soil  
All these fragments of the story did their slow work, quietly mulling the dew on tongues of  
grass, diffusing through sunlight into cottage windows pulled open for dawn  
The story that wanted to be told joined with all the fluids of the country  
It lay on the moisture of a breeze, in the blood of a rabbit staining the roadside  
And it sought the peopled streets of the city  
As the bay fog lifts at midmorning, so the story lifts the curtains of the red brick tenements  
Rising on a pigeon's wing it knocks upon the dusty glass of skyscrapers, seeking entrance  
into the tightest corners of our lives  
Until at last we wake, each among the world rising to their expected functions, a typical day  
among the grind of time  
Yet we realize a change that has come down from the mountains, no longer ignored  
Our unease grows with the arc of the sun  
By noon we sweat the story from our pores  
By the stillness of approaching dusk we have seen what power this story holds over us  
To become vulnerable and alive once more

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I first toed the Pacific Ocean at Seven Mile Beach. We were up at the north end, just south of the headland. Fine-grained sugar sand stretched out into the mist of rocks and foam beneath our barefoot glee. The only sign of our fellow species lay in the long tire tracks merging with themselves in the distance. Peter warned us against sleeping on the beach for fear of being squashed by drunken fishermen tooling about in four-wheel drives. Once we had set up camp and received our generic Australian safety lecture we came back to the ocean as the sun was dropping over the western ridge. The world had become clearly defined. There was the pale white of the beach reflected by the milky moon and pinprick stars. There was the deep black of the now endless ocean, cold and foreboding from our sandy perch.

And in between there was the frothing surf that crashed with the weight of cinder blocks and then ran up to tag your ankles with a cool feather kiss.

I watched a humpback whale and her calf blow a hundred feet from shore, as if to reassure us that life continued out there and the crushing emptiness I was seeing was of my own manifestation. What manner of sorcery had deposited me on this far and foreign shore? Beside an ocean I had never touched before, beside people I had never known before, under a sweep of stars I had never seen before. This night would become a comfort before long, the lights of the Southern Cross a pleasant reminder of my exact position on a new continent, that the world was larger and more majestic than I had imagined. But *this* night I was awash without anchor, a beached jellyfish that had burst its membrane, oozing out of a skin that no longer fit or made sense.

Liz sidled up to me. She had been in Australia since the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, doing a bit of preliminary reconnaissance, and so the rest of us regarded her as a source of knowledge, a go to person.

“Beautiful, huh?” she asked.

“Look at all the space between us and home. How many miles do you think?”

“Too many to walk. But look at all the freedom we’ve got. This is what I want to do. Backpack from one city to the next. See all this.”

“But there’s so much to learn about home,” I said. “So many layers. And what about your people back there?”

“Yeah, I miss them. I really miss my brother. You’re always meeting new people though.”

Liz is from Nebraska. Small town, she knew everyone, real close with her brother, same college. She recently cut her oily brown hair and couldn’t resist messing with it all the time. It would stick out all over, giving her a wild wind-ruffled look, as if she was continually just stepping off a bicycle after a downhill plunge. She liked to go on walks and smile at people.

We were roused from bed at 5:15. I jumped from my tent right into a field of cane toads that were evidently soaking up the night’s moisture. Tiptoeing our way to the bus we loaded up for a dash to the Cape Byron lighthouse, the easternmost tip of Australia. The plan was to make it there for sunrise. This we just barely did, arriving at the top of the headland in a wheezing mass of now hungry stomachs. Of course it was worth it. A sliver of liquid gold bubbled up from the farthest reaches of the ocean, like a rock star rising through the trap door of a stage billowing smoke and glitter. The color held together for a moment, and then the fire behind it burst through in riotous energy, spilling down into the troughs and furrows of the waves, boiling up over the fist-capped peaks of whitewater, racing toward us like Midas’ touch. It beat against the white stucco lighthouse, the changing of the guard up and down the coastal plain. As we joined the mob of Japanese tourists taking pictures of circadian inevitability, day had once more come to Australia. It was time for breakfast.

In the past decades the humpback whales of this region were hunted almost to extinction. The International Whaling Commission placed a voluntary moratorium on whaling for 50 years. This has allowed their population to come back up to around 5000. But Japan is still taking more than their quota, claiming scientific and cultural justifications. The humpback whales migrate up the eastern coast from Antarctica into the warmer waters of the Great Barrier Reef to give birth. They journey south again between August and



September. We're at the end of prime whale watching season. Pacific bottlenose dolphins also ply these shores, traveling in pods of up to 100. Peter tells us they sleep by switching off half their brains and drifting. A couple years ago down in Mexico I raced these dolphins in the Sea of Cortez. They swam off the bow, inches from my outstretched fingertips. They would beat the water with their flippers to signal a cache of food floating by. Always with a smile and wave to the ungainly humans on the hollowed out fiberglass saucers.

The sun was toasting the sand below our feet. The fifteen of us, decked out in wetsuits that smelled of piss and salt, were going surfing. Cozy Corner, as the name suggests, is a mild little spot of beach wedged up under a sheltering headland, a good place for wobbly Americans like us. Our instructors were named Raz and Cookie. Clearly they spent a fair bit of time at a place called the Happy High Herb Shop just down the street. In Australia you must pronounce the 'h' in herb, otherwise you'll sound dumb and uncultured. Raz addressed the group,

"Ok girls... uh, and Mike."

"Oh boy... guys, is that ok?"

We were having a grand old time getting salt spray up our noses when the lazy blue sky turned to angry charcoal. Without more warning than this it began raining mini coopers, huge wetting moisture bombs that spanked the surf up to indecent proportions. Five minutes of thrashing about on our boards, drowning in the saturated air, and the blue returned lazier than before. As the thundercaps past north of us a fatty rainbow lolled just out of reach. The girls predictably became a loud sucking whoosh of excitement, alternately running for cameras and running for the water to have their picture taken below the rainbow.

On the ride home to Seven Mile Beach we picked up a hitchhiker named Frank. He was an adorable German with long dirty blonde hair, deep amber swimming pool eyes, and a tan muscled physique. He had no prayer.

The following should be read breathlessly, at a tone just slightly below a wail:

-Where are you staying?

-Where are you from?

-Why are you here?

-For how long?

-Do you like it here?

-What do you plan on doing next?

-We're gonna be here for a while. We'll be in Byron two days from now.

There was a pleading, wounded animal look in his swimming pool eyes now. I could tell he was desperately searching for relief, solid ground, a way off the bus. Finally his roving glance caught mine and his face nearly jumped off his skull toward my seat.

"Hey other guy!" he managed in a hoarse yell.

"Do they do the same thing to you?"

I smiled demurely, as if to suggest that I'd long since learned to find quietude and stillness within the eye of this estrogen hurricane. In fact I wanted off the bus about as much as Frank did. My secret weapon, however, was the small detail that I was inexorably stranded here, on this bus with these girls, for the next three and a half months of my life. I could not cut and run, so somehow I had to find the stable seat from which to ride out this storm. My smile turned to a maniacal grin.

"Yup, same thing to me. It gets better though. You'll see."

For this I received several glares and a light jab to the abdomen from my seatmate. Luckily for Frank we'd arrived at his hostel and he departed us with a quick wave and a bound; the gazelle had escaped the hyenas.

Peter suggested a stop at the bottle shop before heading for camp. This was to be the first of many such stops, always with the same result. Boxed wine and/or cheap vodka is for some unknown and god-awful reason, favored nearly universally by females of college age. And I admit, it has its merits. If you don't want to be in any way functional the next day, if instead you want to feel turned inside out and scrubbed raw with a cheese grater, and if you want to feel that way for so little money that you can do it again the next night without pangs of economic conscience, then boxed wine and cheap vodka is the perfect ticket.

I helped myself to a heaping bowl of Fat Tuesday's Bean Chili. Australians like the word 'heaps.' It happens to be an excellent way to describe this meal. Heaps of tomato sauce, heaps of beans, heaps of diced vegetables, heaps of spice, more or less everything good in life that you might wish to put in your stomach. To wash it down I had wisely chosen to forgo the communal wine and grab some James Squire porter. Australians make good beer. Even their shitty beer is much tastier than American beer. I'm sure this comes as no surprise to anyone.

After my third bottle I imagined the thick crisp beer oozing about the slowly digesting bowl of chili in my belly. I lay down on the recycled wood floor of the building on stilts where we met for class in bikinis. The girls were playing pictionary. Peter and his mate Dave, a chain smoking weather-beaten surfer who had at one time been a manager for local bands, sat off to themselves knocking back a couple bottles of their own wine. The dilemma I had met on the beach with Liz irked me. How does one inhabit a place fully? There is so much to learn about your own 40-acre wood. Why then are we rushing off to the far reaches of the globe in search of ourselves? I thought of Bruce Chatwin's description of Aboriginal songlines. Hunter-gatherers and other nomadic tribes don't actually have fixed boundary spaces that circumscribe a place called home. Instead there is a line of motion, a transference of energy through a linked landscape. Here in the deeply rooted past of our species is an example of inhabitants overcoming the contradiction between community living, responsible citizenship, and the pull toward motion. The journey becomes a series of place experiments. My home is the Hudson Valley. Yet the river flows through its heart, defining it and continually changing it. So too we may radiate outward, taking the flesh and blood of home with us, leaving bits of ourselves here and there as our movement contributes to the friction of time, taking into ourselves parts of the places we travel to, bringing that fresh substance home with us. Track all the movements of all the creatures of the world and suddenly the geography of fixed space drops away and you're left staring into an impossibly complex tangle of vapor trails, relationships of motion, the world as a rainbow of dust in a maelstrom, constantly in the process of becoming new and whole. We as organisms are never stable, having to continually ingest more energy in order to maintain ourselves, continually leaving ourselves behind, shedding skins and building new form. Why would land be any different? Or home?

### **-Chapter Three-**

It was the morning of our departure. We were headed to Byron Bay, a friendly and ritzy beach town with many layers, as I would discover shortly. But first one more walk to the ocean. I sat alone upon a spun river of sand, feeling it tickle over the backs of my hands

in the southeastern breeze. I thought about what Peter had told us the other day. 18,000 years ago the sea level was 120 meters lower than it is today. The continental shelf, which sits 30 km out from the current coastline, would have been exposed. Aborigines claim certain areas of the ocean as sacred ancestral sites. And current archeological evidence supports this claim, suggesting they have inhabited the lands of what is now called Australia for over 45,000 years. They may be the oldest continuous culture in the world. They would have witnessed the dramatic rise and fall in sea level and had stories recording the morphing of the landscape. At 6000 years ago the ocean was one meter higher than it is today, and at 4000 years ago it was where it is now. Now it's on the rise again.

Peter drove us into town and turned us loose at the Holiday Central Apartments. This time I was staying with brown Meredith and blonde Meredith as we had come to call them. As I was the token boy, I got the pullout couch downstairs. Located directly between the bathroom and the kitchen I couldn't really complain, except that the bed was designed to have an aluminum rod poking horizontally across your shoulder blades. We had two days here, to relax, to shower for the first time in a week, and theoretically to do a few hundred pages of reading in Tim Flannery's The Future Eaters. I'm struck by Australian academics' openness to using words like 'ninny' and 'dunce' to describe colleagues in their treatises. It's really quite refreshing and leads me to the conclusion that American scientists should probably lighten up, at which point someone might actually read the volume of literature they annually sacrifice to the great and silent ether.

First I had some exploring to do. Byron Bay has been colonized in waves. The Arakwol people are the traditional custodians of the land. They were part of the Bundjalung Nation that inhabits what is now called the northeastern portion of New South Wales. In the 1850's white settlers arrived looking for timber in the sub-tropical rainforest. They were after red cedar, which was made into butter boxes for shipment back to England. Today red cedar is one of the most valuable trees in the world because it has been logged close to extinction. Within 40 years it was gone from this area. The timbergetters, as they were called, were also the first to come into conflict with Aboriginal people. A number of massacres took place very close to where we stood. Later we would visit them, accompanied by a few of the descendents of the survivors. The dairy farmers came next. Between 1890 and 1910 butter and cheese were huge exports from the region. Farmers were enticed by the colonial government to come and till the soil with offers of 130 acres of free land under the Robinson Land Act. The only condition was that they clear and burn every tree from that land. The great settlement was underway. In the 1930s a whaling station was set up on Byron. Whaling continued until the 1960s when they realized they had nearly hunted the humpbacks to extinction. At the same time the surfers first made their appearance. It was at this point that Byron began taking on a different sort of attitude. Of course there was a fair bit of grumbling from the old timers. It wasn't until 1973 when things really changed dramatically. This was the year of the Back to the Earth festival held by university students. As they say in the nearby town of Nimbin, and 'then came the hippies,' the bums and perma-stoned. The next wave was quite different. The posh Sydney crowd came up and built their ocean view mansions in Byron. The rush of new development made living here too expensive for some of the older crowd, who were forced to move inland. Finally in the last decade the international backpackers discovered just how happening this place was. The town was inundated with cheap hostels that seemed to drop from the sky. Enter a group of fifteen Americans, unshowered, unshaven, overdue to get pissed. In Byron, it's not a problem that it's a Wednesday night.

There are four bars in town, and numerous little nightclubs tucked into alleyways and inset into back corners of shopping plazas. Needless to say, we hit all the bars that first night, starting with a place called Cheeky Monkeys. You feel dirty the moment you walk in. It doesn't take long before your initial reaction is absolutely justified. A man stands on a metal table with a microphone, handing out various prizes for the first person or group who can produce random items. It starts rather innocently. A particular configuration of coins that add up to \$5, a left shoe. Then it moves on to a lady's bra. Kelsey Kirkwood, a boisterous and outspoken member of our contingent, presents hers almost immediately. In order to get her bra back and claim her prize she is required to run around the room doing jumping jacks and shooting the occasional basket. This in a very loose and revealing dress without her bra. After this the night simply dissolved into table dancing, random groping, and finally waking up in bed with someone you wish you hadn't woken up in bed next to.

But everything looks better in the post-breakfast sunshine. Mine was an avocado, tomato, and cottage cheese sandwich on rye bread at a chic organic café. Byron is full of these places, and of people looking for healing in the morning waves, the sun-bleached sand, the ritzy cafes and fashion shops, and the pubs. Whatever you're here for, you can find it. You don't need cell phones, simply amble down the street thinking about whomever you want to find and sooner or later they'll turn up. I knew I was in the right restaurant when the waiter asked me,

“Do you want your curry with a side of love?”

That afternoon I sat on a grassy slope overlooking the main beach. It wasn't crowded. There is always more beach. A few people were in the water. Mostly people were lying about, chatting, dissolving into the warmth of mid-afternoon. Beach towns all over the world have this same feel. They're places where people come to move more slowly, to have no particular goal, to find a little of the freedom humans must have felt before they began wearing clothing all the time. But it's a freedom constructed for the few, the disposable incomes, the beautiful people. Tan, muscled, slim, sunglasses with mirrors on the inside. People don't go to the ocean, they go to the beach. Just a few meters offshore the environment changes completely. We become vulnerable, once again, powerless. There is a strict line of demarcation between slow time and the grip of the monstrous, monstrous because the ocean does not conform to human proportions. Byron is a town built upon these layers of tension. The easy life one can find here is a utopia of sorts, a paradise of happy people. Yet utopia has its roots in the word 'nowhere,' and this is also Byron, an anywhere place set beside the glistening sprawl of the ocean. For me this would become a town I enjoyed coming back to, relaxing into, but also a place I was happy to leave. In leaving I became real again, free from the stasis of daydream, able to do the work my hands intended.

In the evening I went to a poetry reading at the café and bookstore around the corner from our apartments. It is described in the following letter to Jack Troutner, a friend and retired English professor.

Dear Jack,

I am currently in Lismore, a small city in New South Wales. I've been traveling with a group of fourteen girls! Can you believe it? Not a single other guy. It has taxed my conversation skills to no end. But they're nice girls and we're becoming good friends. Besides it's fairly easy to get free beer at the pubs with that many girls around you. Not to worry though, I'm learning a tremendous amount all the while. Also I've been writing every

day, both stream of consciousness observation and some poetry. Although I think it is not very good poetry, as I haven't fully settled into my new environment yet. About a week ago I went to a poetry reading in a coastal town called Byron Bay. Nine poets read. There was heaps of free wine and crackers with attendant dips of the light purple, mottled green, and sunset orange variety. The poetry was excellent. It was fascinating to hear different reading styles, from nervous and hurried to sweeping and tumultuous. One woman particularly captivated me. Tall and bony with a large silver cowboy belt, she had her poems memorized and delivered them with a practiced vehemence. I watched her walk away after the event, long drifting strides down a full-moon street. Her blonde hair lifted in the Pacific breeze as she rounded the corner, and I wondered again, what exactly is it that poets do between poems. One of my English professors at Vassar suggested that poets work between poems. Maybe the sane ones do. This one, I believe, simply wandered over the cool night beach disturbing sandy couples with her sacred intonations.

Anyhow, I'm currently reading a collection of poems by Jim Harrison (not the one from the Fellowship, he's a northern Michigan native). If you haven't read any of his poetry I would strongly recommend it. I'll read you some when I come home in December. I read a little to Chelsea one evening before I left. It moves you right out of your skin as you sit there in bed, and finally you lie down and close your eyes and the dark, lonely spirits drift about the room, tugging at your soulstrings.

I miss you very much and hope you are feeling well. Remember that prune juice is only a momentary discomfort! See you in December.

Love,  
Mike

Friday, last day in Byron, Carly and I thought it would be a fabulous idea to take our weighty reading to the beach with us... The beach! The sun! The surf rolling up endlessly in front of me, a moon and wind powered conveyor belt of diamond nets. The verdant excess of bitou bush clawed at the dunes to my left. Bitou bush is an aggressive invasive species from Africa, something that by all rights may have come straight from a Dr. Seuss book. I was lost somewhere between my pupils and the magnetic distance of open space without fences or roads or lifeguard stations intervening. Carly and I decided upon a walk, a short constitutional to prepare ourselves for the settled act of reading. We walked, took pictures, and walked some more. Barefoot and smiling, glowing actually, radiating, wondering at my incredible good fortune to find myself in this near empty paradise. I chortled my contentment to the few people we did see, mostly European nudists with a penchant for oiling their boobs. This particular section of Australian coast is remarkably underrepresented by beach towels and umbrellas. We were just coming out of the winter months here, but this weather shouldn't really count for winter.

Time passed and 8 km later we found ourselves among a small colony of middle-aged gay nude sunbathers who did this trick where they smiled from both ends. Carly and I decided to head inland at last, our water rations severely depleted. Before we did however, we found an echidna. Echidnas are blown up hedgehogs with long black fleshy snouts used for rooting around in the sand and sucking up insects. This amused us to no end, as it seemed totally unconcerned that two American tourists were sneaking up to take pictures. Finally we headed west, away from paradise and dead smack into the realization that the choking dust road we were on took 4 km to reach the main highway. At that point we would still be a fair

distance north of Byron Bay. More importantly, it was way past lunchtime. So we did what all responsible foreigners would do, we stood in the middle of the road until someone took pity on us and gave us a lift back into town. The couple who picked us up happened to be from Lismore, the town we'd be heading to next.

"Lismore, it's shit, they said. Nothing to do at all."

"Say, you came from the gay nudie beach. You see those old guys behind the dunes? If you watch from the beach every now and then you'll see their heads pop up and swivel around, like kangaroos looking for danger. Then they'll disappear again, back to business."

Sex on the beach never sounded all that appealing to me. Later in the trip my feelings were justified. One unnamed member of our group did a field test. Her report,

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. It only really hurt for one day after."

And by the way, hay bales splinter. So don't try the ol' tumble in the hay either.

Adventure a splendid success, reading an unmitigated failure. That night the girls bought four liters of boxed wine. I sighed and fixed myself a dinner of rice and beans with an onion and capsicum garnish. While I ate my rather uninspired meal I allowed my mind to wander over the past week.

-How easily longing  
sidles up on a crowded crosswalk  
as she turns away-

-The unnamed bird calls at dawn,  
at dusk remains unknown  
yet gratefully remembered-

-the black and white crow-like birds are magpies  
the colorful parrot birds are eastern rosellas  
the scleromorphic tree with the orange electric ring flowers is a banksias-

-She cocks her head eastward  
as my camera brushes her skin,  
tongue poking at the seriousness in my eyes  
footsteps lost to the breeze-

My mother cocked her head at my father and stuck her tongue out. My dad took a picture and they've lived together since. Riding down a hill in Poughkeepsie toward the river with Kelly reminded me of that. The way her short black hair drifted behind her without effort, and I trailing on my bike, already nostalgic. In Australia I walk with Carly. She cocks her head at me as I take a picture. Carly is a rock climber from Milwaukee. When she laughs her eyes go squinty and she doubles over at the waist, clearly enjoying herself more than anyone could ever know. Shoulder-length brown hair frames eyes you could skate across. We continue walking and I am reminded of the desire for possession. Is it possession to see a crooked smile through a photograph and want to see more?

I loved that walk, every step and shift of sand, amazed to be alive and in that time and place in the world. Aware of the already sadness of the walk's end and the fear that it might not mean as much to Carly as it does to me, that it might not come again, as all such moments are subject to fall back into the mill of common rut. Then what revelation is left? All times

and places end, all footsteps fade, consciousness returns from where it came. The terrible spaciousness of waves is so immediate here; the bright tangled possibilities of life are worn like beads around the neck. Artful adornment can choke so quickly, an afternoon thundershower. It is good to look at the grilled salmon on the dinner table and remind yourself how much you need to enjoy it, otherwise you are lost.

-One-lane roads drape over hills  
We disappear in the mist  
because it's easier than filling the floodplain-

-This is my fourth cup of tea today  
It's been raining hard  
My clothes stay wet on the line-

“Barren fields will grow again. Summer's bounty will fade. Lovers turn toward and away from each other, in and out of love, on a spinning planet circling a flaming sun hurtling through space.”

-Art Busse

#### **-Chapter Four-**

-How do you get from one place to another?

-Well, you stand up, put on your shoes, walk out the door, keep breathing all the while, point yourself in the appropriate direction or really any direction at all, since you will always arrive somewhere, and if you want you can even put yourself on a bus, or in a car, a plane. The options are quite limitless.

-No, I mean in a story. How do you bring someone with you from one place to another?

-Oh, that. Use a verb to explain the motion. Mention the weather, any feelings you might have about leaving and/or arriving. Finally, make sure to describe the new place you've come to.

-That's it?

The next two weeks we'd be doing something called a homestay. We would all separate and move in with accommodating families, in order to get a real taste of the local culture. In the morning we left Byron on our trusty bus. The 40-minute drive to Lismore was a blur as I was rather hungover and roads in this part of the country are small, twisty and hilly affairs. I felt like I was on one of those annoyingly batman themed rollercoasters that turns your head into a ping-pong ball. But finally we arrived at a city park with train tracks and a mini train station for the kids to play on. We were ushered over to a group of picnic tables where all of our host families were assembled, waiting to collect their newly acquired Americans. They had our pictures and so had the element of surprise, whereas we simply milled about like lost sheep until we were plucked from the pack by some sweet little girl with a chocolate bar saying,

“You're my new sister. My name's Amelia. You get to sleep next to the dog.”

Thank god that wasn't me. In the end I hopped into the back of a white Mercedes with the Hodson family. Jim and Fran were both Catholic school teachers with slightly stuffy

but sincere English accents. Ellen, their ten-year old, sat quietly beside me. She didn't play any sports, she didn't like boys yet, and she never finished her dinner, as I would soon discover. My initial string of introductory questions depleted, I too sat quietly, awaiting my first view of the house that I would call home for the next two weeks.

It was a cottage colonial with blue wooden siding and a white fence. More spacious on the inside than it had appeared from the road, the decoration was restrained, whatever that means. Kitchen appliances were newish, all shiny and silver and semi-automatic. Apparently I was taking over Adrian's room. Adrian is a sixteen-year old who immediately reminded me of young Hades from the cartoon Hercules movie. I recently ran into him in Byron Bay where he was working in the deli section at Woolworth's. I never figured out what exactly he was doing with his life while I was there. He didn't go to high school, although he was doing some kind of distance learning program (he always seemed to be waiting on a new assignment that might or might not arrive). He was dodgy about what he did for entertainment. Tennis occasionally, also he watched other kids at the skate park. Mostly I figured he spent a lot of time doing yard work around the house. Thankfully this included picking mulberries from the neighbor's tree in order to make mulberry flavored ice cream.

Adrian's room had windows all along both outer walls, the better for me to watch the rain. It rained for four days. Lismore is situated in a basin carved out by the Richmond River. As such it is subject to severe flooding. One of the first things you notice are the little blue signs with white letters: 1974 flood level. These are affixed at varying heights to the telephone poles along the road. In some places they are at least ten feet above street level. But apparently they had just installed a new system of levies so there was nothing to worry about.

It was a delicious feeling, being able to unload my backpack. I hung up my small assemblage of shirts, folded my boxers, and laid my books out on the desk. Then what? This wasn't really my house. I perused Adrian's bookcase. A couple of political treatises by Whitlam, a book titled 'Green Fire' with a man on the front cover in a dinghy behind a huge steel-hulled cargo ship, some Nirvana albums, and two oversized hardcover books on adoption. I later learned that Jim had been adopted. Drifting through someone else's home made me feel like an intruder. It was a foreign environment yet familiar all at once. I wished it were my little Maltese licking my toes instead of their golden retriever that woke the neighborhood every morning at 6 am, demanding to be let in the house. What could I do with myself? I could make a sandwich and eat it very slowly. That would take some time. The after-dinner routine was to turn on the TV and fall asleep. I retired to my room early and read Flannery until I couldn't stand any more longwinded explications on the demise of Australia's megafauna.

My enthusiasm returned like dynamite in a poorly directed quarry site. We were on our way to the Border Ranges National Park, part of a World Heritage site that includes portions of sub-tropical and temperate rainforest along the east coast of Australia. We were tooling along on the Nimbin Road, through an area that I would later learn was a post-volcanic river valley. The lowland rolled up into hill country where spires of red rock burst through the green and absolutely begged to be climbed. As it happened they were called Nimbin Rocks, and it was an Aboriginal dreaming site. I'd like to take a minute to point out that the US highway system consists of a jumble of numbers that in some convoluted way designate north-south, east-west, thru or circumscribing a major city, business route



(whatever that means). Anyway I think it would be a brilliant idea if we named our roads based upon where they led. That way you'd know you were on the right track without having to peruse a map chock full of fuzzy little numbers too small to read.

We stopped for five minutes in Nimbin. I assume Peter picked five minutes because it's enough time to take a piss or buy an ounce of pot, an eighth of mushrooms, and six hits of acid, but not enough time to do both. Nimbin is a miraculous town, miraculous in that it still functions. It is a relic of the communes that cropped up after the Back to the Earth festival. As such, it is incredibly easy to buy just about any kind of drug you could want. The highly decorative telephone poles, sidewalks, and shop windows suggest nothing less than a full time psychedelic safari. They even have a museum, which carefully documents the town's formation, replete with a slot machine that drops fully stocked dime bags. Alas, we left Nimbin bladders empty and wallets full.

The Border Ranges form part of the largest erosion caldera in the world. A sheer ridgeline in the shape of a crescent moon looks out toward Mt. Warning, a place I would later know as Wollumbin. Mt. Warning forms the central plug of a severely eroded shield volcano 20 million years old. The Tweed and other smaller rivers helped hollow out the area between Mt. Warning and where we stood on the Border Ranges. The same was true on the other side toward the east where the Nightcap Range stood. We were on one of two commas that framed the famous mountain and the fertile plains in between. Mt. Warning got its new name from Captain Cook, who shortly after passing north up the coast from the mountain ran aground on a reef.

The volcano produced three primary lava flows. The first and third were types of basalt, the second was rhyolite. The basalt formed nutrient-rich soils throughout the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. The rhyolite, more resistant to erosion, formed the red rock spires we'd seen earlier. Australia's soil is generally extremely nutrient poor. This is due to relatively stable geologic conditions. Few volcanoes and the absence of glaciers means the rocks here are very old, bleached by sun and time. We were standing on one of the exceptions. The basalt lava flows had spread new soils throughout the region. Today it is one of the most productive agricultural centers in Australia. Unfortunately it is also being quickly developed as it is close to prime oceanfront real estate.

We got off the bus at a clearing formerly used by military helicopters. The surrounding area had been an army training ground for jungle warfare. We were here for a slightly different purpose, to walk among the most northern outlier of temperate rainforest in Australia. The backside of the ridge created a microclimate suitable to colder rainforest species. The first indicator species Peter pointed out was Antarctic Beech. An imposing tree, it grows in clumps of three to five trunks, all connected to the same root system. Small tribes gathered in stillness around the campfire, ancient backs hunched over, telling stories a thousand years old. This is one of the floral species that proves Australia was once attached to Antarctica, millions of years ago when it was not so goddamn cold. Unfortunately this range of temperate rainforest has no chance of surviving the coming climate warming. I felt as though I was already standing amongst ghosts, hulking shells splintering before the rising fumes of the artificially efficient network of supply and conquer, the gilded meritocracy where blame is spun about in shadows, like a child's blindfold game. The Antarctic Beech, the walking stick palms, the primeval tree ferns, the buttressed grandfather canopies, the strangler figs, this mosaic of light and dark, patches of disturbance and regrowth, what voice have they to speak against American kings elected through patriotic euphemism, against the privileged narrative of progress? I stop a moment, before the altar hearth of this moss-hewn

cathedral, where an old fire bites the captive eye with dreams of what might yet be saved, rebuilt, renewed. Rachel Carson wrote,

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.

What then of our children? What strength will they have when the beauty of the earth exists behind glass cages? Or will it even matter, a whole future lost beneath the weight of chronic asthma and lung cancer, the smog-riven air a bubbling cauldron of industry too blasted to see through. The blatant externalities of a civilization built on the backs of its children cannot long stand.

Dinner that night consisted of giant stuffed mushrooms and a bottle of Shiraz from the Hunter Valley. Jim is an excellent cook and during my stay he was on holiday from his teaching job, so he had plenty of time each day to prepare the evening's meal. Although just that day he had his review meeting with the school board. It must have gone well because as I was getting up to clear he demanded I sit down and help him with another bottle of wine. Both he and I had had two beers pre-dinner, so after two more bottles of wine we were well on our way to being completely sloshed. We sat at the table for a couple hours chatting among the residue of our meal.

When the conversation turned to theology Jim opened up a homemade bottle of lemon liquor. The warning lights were going around in the back of my head like a fire engine, but the siren had been turned off so they were relatively easy to ignore. Discussing theology with a Catholic school teacher who is also your host for two weeks is maybe not the most diplomatic of positions to be in, especially when one of your favorite jokes concerns the appalling number of priests that have seduced little boys. After my second glass of liquor the lights weren't even flashing anymore. Somehow we got around to the importance of water in religious imagery and mythology. This was a subject for which I was relatively equipped to contribute a worthwhile comment, something about the earliest religious laws in the Middle East having to do with the sharing of water from wells. Thank you geography paper on water conflict. From there we moved on to the cathedrals of gothic Europe and the construction of spaces that served as a tangible link between earth and heaven. But like many of civilization's architectural wonders, the realm of the majestic and sacred is achieved through social injustice, slave labor, and conquest. Cathedrals use stained glass to modify the sun's light, filtering out the common day and creating an atmosphere of spiritual incandescence. Stone spires stretch out from their base foundations, sculpted toward God. Naturally we assume he is above us.

I make the point that the forest possesses all these traits inherently, without needing the tainted finances of man. Thousand-year-old trees meet the sky halfway, forming a bridge between the pulsing sun and the dark loam of earth. These ancients succeed where the aspirations of Christian kings failed. They bind their low roots upon which we tread to the energy of heavens, growing within that middle plane. Their canopies create a mottled patchwork of light and shadow, under which all manner of life may find their place according to their need. Even the flying buttresses of the gothic cathedrals exist here among the roots of the rainforest, arching limbs project from the main trunks, steadying these living pillars in the moist ground. As the Christianity of Europe once merged with the native pagan rituals, so it may return to them one day. We may again celebrate the solstice and the equinox, the

turnings of the moon, the ancestor spirits of our country. When we lose our obsession with the arrow of time, our epidemic of tunnel vision, and remember to praise the circles in which we live, then perhaps we may return to the open-air cathedrals of the forest to pray for our harvests and health. Then of a summer evening we may build fires in our temples and dance about under the stars, running through the woods at night chasing phantoms and lovers. Unlike straw and sand, moss makes an excellent bed for lovemaking. We talked late that night, opened up by drink and good food. Jim is on the far left of Catholic politics and I avoided the jokes so it was an amiable exchange. The TV never went on, and finally I stumbled to bed thoroughly satiated and soon to be hungover.

We weren't having class or touring fabulous wilderness areas the next day, so I decided on a walk into town. It had finally decided to quit raining and the world felt rather beautiful in the fresh air. Walking down the main street I ran into two of my compatriots outside a corner café. I ordered a vegetable quiche and joined them. Quickly we became immersed in a rather silly discussion concerning the Australian word for redneck. Laur (she insists upon Laur rather than Lauren) actually took the trouble to get up and go into the café to ask someone. The first couple people she asked were Germans and they didn't have a clue, go figure. I can't remember what the outcome happened to be, just that it is intimately connected with the state of Queensland. We had each had a beverage and so our table was littered with mugs and teapots and the like. At one point in the meal, after the whole nonsense about rednecks, a cute waiter came out. He marched straight up to us and asked, "Mind if I pinch your jugs?"

Now I thought this an excellent idea, but I was also intrigued at the seeming casualness with which Australians use the term 'jugs'. The two girls were slightly taken aback however. After an awkward pause it became apparent that all he really wanted to do was clear the table. This was acceptable, if a little less exciting. The three of us agreed to meet back at that spot in the evening for a rousing night on the town.

This coincided with the arrival of two of Fran's sisters. They were up from Sydney for a few days of shopping and drunken evenings away from the family. I timed my own arrival back from town impeccably. They had just opened the first bottle of champagne and a glass was dutifully placed in my hand as I walked through the door. After this prerequisite was accomplished introductions were made. Both sisters talked incessantly but along as there was crackers and dip accompanied by alcohol it was all great fun. I soon discovered another reason to be glad for their visit. It was a chance for Fran to show off Jim's wonderful culinary expertise. We ate like kings. Three course meals with the requisite three courses of booze. I excused myself in order to meet my friends downtown. By the time I reached the Goanna Café and found a seat next to Julie, Meredith, and Devorah I was good and tipsy. Now girls have a funny habit of asking random and though provoking questions that males are typically unprepared for. More on that later. This time all they wanted was a good story. It is a good idea to always have a 'good story' in reserve for occasions such as this. You come off as a quick-thinking and entertaining companion. It so happened that I had such a story, and I whipped it out and slammed it down on the table perhaps more forcefully than was necessary. But I was drunk on champagne so it was excusable.

"This past summer, as you know, I worked on an organic farm. This same summer we had a slight problem with yellow jackets in the house. Now yellow jackets in the house is admittedly not a very good situation as they are rather nasty and aggressive buggers. Not at all good-natured like the honeybee. My dad asked me to stop at the store on my way home

one evening and buy two canisters of Raid. I had never thought much about Raid before, and I didn't think much about it then, until I picked up a bottle. Their advertising slogan is: Kills Bugs Dead!!! On the back it mentions that the poison contained within the bottle you are holding is rather toxic and should not be used anywhere near food, water, or unprotected humans. So it's shitty stuff. And I was not too impressed with their apparent lack of respect for the insect population. I went home in a towering holier-than-thou greenpeace fury. If you can run an entire farm without deadly poisons then why can't you deal with a small yellow jacket nest without them? I asked this accusingly of my parents. They told me to piss off. I was not deterred. I told them I would deal with the situation in a non-lethal and constructive manner, Raid be damned. My initial approach of simply spraying the hive out from under the eaves failed miserably and all I managed to do was remove some of the new paint from the house. My mom told me I was an idiot for making such a big deal over the damn thing. My dad figured I was gonna kill myself on the ladder. I returned the next day with a new and even bolder solution, having borrowed a beekeeper's suit from the farm."

At this point in the story I had gotten really worked up. The climax was nearing and my voice was getting louder and my hand gestures were increasing in width until they encompassed the entire table. Neighboring tables were beginning to take interest. Forks were lowered and chairs shifted in my direction. I was in the groove now.

"As dusk approached I called a friend to help me. My parents wanted nothing to do with the whole endeavor. I then outfitted myself with heavy jeans, knee high rubber waders, a thick sweater, a long fleece bathrobe, a wool hat, and my new and trusty bee suit. Fully encased in my space cadet outfit, all structurally weak areas duct taped shut, gloved and helmeted, I could barely see and was sweating profusely. I collected my tools: one industrial strength flashlight, one aluminum ladder, one large cooking pot with lid, and one oversized spatula. My friend held the ladder and worked the flashlight; it was now full night and much too dark for me to see anything I was doing through the mesh facemask. I clambered up the ladder with my pot and spatula, making all sorts of racket. Positioned inches away from the hive I took a moment to gather my nerves and study their habits. A few scouts had of course been awoken by my preparations and they perched protectively atop their hive, staring down at me in what I imagined to be a sinister and deadly way. Jay, down below, was entirely unprotected and begged me not to drop the hive on him. If this happened he would have to run very quickly and I would be left dangling above a very angry yellow jacket swarm on a very wobbly ladder."

By now the whole restaurant was waiting to see whether I dropped the goddamn yellow jacket's nest. I had worked myself up into a frenzy, swinging my arms about dangerously. The girls were all giggling hysterically, I'm sure because I was making such a scene and not because my story was actually that funny.

"The moment of action had come and I realized that handling three cooking utensils with two hands would be quite a feat. This was an undertaking requiring more dexterity than I initially realized. I would have to hold the pot directly under the hive with one hand while with the other I held the spatula and pot lid. I practiced the scrape and twist motion I would need to use a few times, in the process banging metal together and waking more angry stinging insects."

I was up on my feet now, demonstrating to everyone the scrape and twist motion. It really was a very complicated procedure.

"Now the important thing to remember was that I needed to drop the spatula in my right hand, not the pot in my left. By now Jay was yelling at me to get on with it and stop

being a ninny about the whole venture. Fine! Woosh. Scrape and twist! The hive fell straight down plop into the pot, the spatula fell from my right hand and the lid came down clank squarely on the pot, which was now buzzing furiously. Safely on the ground again Jay and I congratulated each other vigorously on a job well done. We then trundled through my neighbor's yard into the woods beyond in order to deliver the hive back into a natural setting. These the same neighbor's who had a habit of calling the cops on our previous trespassing behaviors. I can just imagine their little beady eyes poking out from behind the living room curtains. If they had been looking they would have seen something resembling a poorly stuffed white clown desperately clutching a covered pot while he crashed through the woods colliding with trees."

I acted out the final scene of my story for those still interested. The girls congratulated me on my successful mission and then we all left the now stifflingly quiet café for the louder Irish pub across the street.

At the pub we fell in with a small older man from Amsterdam. He told us of the old bad days when the bars never closed and the nights kept on rolling long into the day. He had very clearly turned his bloodstream into a veritable beer garden. Unfortunately this bar was closing and we left him for the seedy nightclub across the street. There was live music at the front stage, but it was shit and everyone was crowded into the back room where the strobe lights were sparkling on skimpy clothing and a sweating mass of youth with nothing better to do than jump around to the song 'I like big butts and I cannot lie.' I did the same for a while, until a man came up and began dancing next to me. Soon he was touching my shoulder and whispering in my ear. Initially I figured he was just trying to get close to the three girls I was with, but he just kept looking at me. Finally I figured I'd do the polite thing and ask him about himself. Turned out he was an off-duty cop, his name I can't remember. Later I went to the bathroom and realized he had wandered in as well. At that point I decided it was an appropriate time to call it a night.

During the homestay period I had time to send letters to people back home, assuring them that I hadn't forgotten and wasn't really having all that much fun in Australia.

Dear Chris,

Thank you for keeping me updated with the work on the farm. It's nice to know things are moving forward. There have been many moments since I've left where I've longed to get down on my knees and weed for hours, unraveling myself in the simplicity and significance of the act. Traveling far from home confuses things, as well as relationships. This seems to be predominantly a positive response, as the confusion usually develops due to a wider perspective, an expanded world. But it can be uncomfortable to feel yourself pulled in so many directions, to be away from reassuringly familiar surroundings. Growing pains I suppose. In a roundabout way I'm saying that the longer I'm away from the farm work the more I realize just how much it steadied me, physically and spiritually. In pulling weeds you know what you are doing and your success (or failure) is easily substantiated. Traveling is much more nebulous. Had an interesting conversation with someone today about how it seems as though your metabolism changes while traveling in order to deal with the increased stresses of being in unknown environments. All that said, I'm really happy with the discussions we're having in the course, and not only the content, but the method of learning is exciting. Classes aren't divided up into subjects or specific hours of the day. We're in class everywhere we go, more accurately, we are observing, processing, and learning all the time.

It's also exciting to see fourteen other people from all over the country, with very diverse backgrounds, all passionate about a sustainable future. A lot of ideas are floating around, infecting all of us I think. The gears are turning, I've been writing almost every day, trying to make sense of all the stimuli. I've also been really pleased to be able to share a lot of the thoughts we've had this summer on the farm with other people here. In almost every conversation I realize there is a bit of experience from this summer I can contribute. As limited as my knowledge is, it's cool to have people come up to me and say, "So tell me about organic farming vs. chemical agriculture." I pause, gathering my thoughts, take a big breath, and launch right into everything you've shared with me in the past few months.

Please give my love to Jack and feel free to share the above letter with him. I'll write a short note in addition. I would appreciate it if you would read it to him, otherwise he might misplace it and not get a chance to read it. Thanks so much.

Mike

I read the following poem to Chris on hazy late afternoon in August. We sat on a stump watching the herd graze in the pasture. Three calves had been born over the summer months. Now they were romping together and taking turns pulling on all the old girls' teats. Chris had a jar of fresh unpasteurized milk he was sharing with Marley, his dog and bosom friend of nine years.

Suntide

The passage of work  
from one hand to another's  
is accomplished in the dark  
The straw hat with the brow flop  
reveals a face,  
shorn by headwind,  
and a man  
who holds himself so close  
to the fragile compass  
that he moves the needle  
with the beat of his heart

In the dark his progress  
fulfills his intention  
as one more stalk rises  
from the earthworm sea  
And I note the position  
of the suntide  
by the amount of loam  
beneath his fingernails

Have you succeeded? I ask  
knowing he has with me  
The courage of the question

seeks an answer from the dark centers  
of his 'I'm all out there' eyes

Back in a windowless conference room in Lismore:

"You are a locus of identity," she says.

"I am located somewhere, therefore I am," she smiles.

In Aboriginal culture the introduction protocol is very important, human relations are primary.

"My mother's people are from Michigan," I say, "up in great lake country. My father's people are from New York, out on Long Island. I have a younger brother. My home is the Hudson Valley, from Sleepy Hollow up to Poughkeepsie and Clarkstown in between. This is my story:

"There was a little boy who lived in a town snuggled up against the east side of a great river. Seen from afar it looked as though a long silver thread had been laid down north to south and fitted between high rock outcroppings. The boy lived with his father and mother in Sleepy Hollow, just down the road from the old Philipsburg Manor. When he was too young to walk any real distance the boy's father would carry him on his back. They would go for hikes around a beautiful frozen lake in the dead of winter. The blanket of snow thrown down by the silver sky would silence what at the time seemed like all the world to the little boy. The only sound below the stubborn green of the pines was the crunch of boots and the soft cooing of the boy in his father's ear. As the boy grew older he would walk beside his father, and every now and then run ahead to climb a boulder or scout out the other side of a hill. They still walked around the lake, but they also trekked through the old pastures and reclaimed forests of the Rockefeller lands. But the boy's favorite spot was an ancient cemetery. In some imperceptible way the moss-cloaked gravestones and marble mausoleums cast a calm energy that clung to the scarred oaks and stonewalls, the bridged stream and planted grass rows. Time travel was possible; he read the chiseled names aloud as mantras, conjuring a buried history that lay dormant, waiting for the right footsteps. A quiet peace reigned that could never be broken.

The boy started school and played with neighborhood friends. He and two other boys would play hide and seek in the woods behind his house. When that got boring they would make up stories to scare themselves. A dilapidated shack became the home of a witch, the sour smell her potions brewing beneath the floorboards. A rotten tree riddled with woodpecker holes was the sign that a Civil War skirmish had taken place right at that very spot. But their favorite story was the legend of the headless horseman. Every Halloween they would dare each other to walk through the cemetery, terrified and hopeful at the same time of seeing a black cloaked rider on a black steed with a burning pumpkin in place of his head.

Now the boy was in high school, and he lived on the other side of the great river. It was not so magical and foreign as it had looked from the park behind the hospital when the sun had become ensnared in fisherman's nets, revealing the diamond raiment hidden just below murky waves. He read James Joyce in English class and his teacher told him he too could fly by those nets that held Joyce for so long. The boy pondered this with his new friend while they skipped school to lie on the baked concrete by his neighbor's swimming pool. After this the water felt like refrigerated yogurt on their skin. The boys explored new stretches of woods, pole-vaulting over quick streams, calling it a physics experiment in

projectile motion. They were at an in-between place in their lives, aching for the wild at heart, not yet aware of the consequences of swinging through trees in a loincloth, as Peter Beagle put it. The woods became that place for them, where they were not limited to preconstructed roadways and traffic laws, to correct grammatical structures or dress codes. Leaving shoes at home, they'd cut their feet in Demarest Kill, returning irrevocably mud-stained. In the woods the sun was the only time that mattered, and poison ivy the only policeman.

It was the height of summer, the free boredom of unplanned weeks stretched on in shimmering heat. The boy decided to pack a bag and head off for a familiar trail to spend the night beside. He was alone, and soon lonely. Standing above his town on the graffiti crown of High Tor, stark figure on the ridgeline, a chill soul in another world. Night came late, and then the gallery of familiar lights down below. There were the steel towers of the gravel pit framing shapeless heaps of deconstructed earth, the tightly packed houselights of prepackaged developments clinging to the edges of the now dark country club, the swaying mast lights of boats with names like 'Second Wind' or 'Mid-life Crisis' in the Haverstraw Marina, and the lone electric star hoisted up above the red-rock gloom of the blasted cliffs. The boy thought he might know what Odysseus had felt, lashed to the mast, victim of the siren song. Why this melancholy? 'Ain't I carefree?' the boy asked himself. But night oppressed him, and he retired to a cold sleeping bag and a lukewarm can of soup. He woke frequently, unfamiliar noises crawling up the skin of his back, humbling his courage and the adventurer spirit he'd read about so often.

Day finally broke through a restless sleep, in the hour just before the rising sun warms the knolls and valleys and upturned faces. He crawled, stiff, from his sleeping bag and ate his trail mix. He tied his shoes and returned to the vantage point where just last night he'd watched an alien civilization go through its motions without him. Slowly, the vast clouded underbelly of the sky traversed the margins of color; the purple and blue drowned land molted, leaving the clear opulence of renewal. The night shadows were gone, swept astern in a current of stout possibility that only those who witness the birth of day are privy to. So the boy asked aloud again, 'Ain't I carefree?' And he imagined the world answering in the shrill voice of the hawk, the distant honk and hum of hurried vehicles, the whisper of grass parting beneath his feet, and the cell phone buzzing in his pocket, the worried mother.

He was in college now, and he thought of himself as a man. One day the boy was walking quietly with himself, deep in the Ramble of New York's Central Park. He was admiring the effectiveness of an artificial construction of a natural landscape, the ability to bring the wild into the center of the American city, and in the very same place where, three and a half centuries ago, Dutch farmers cleared their fields of the same oak and pine species now replanted to give urban-dwellers a green respite from concrete and glass. Coming to a lake he saw a girl sitting, her arms drawn out behind her and her feet dangling over the water. In a moment of unscripted gratitude he sat down beside her, mimicking her repose. The boy and the girl began a conversation that lasted till twilight. They both had much to say, and on a sun-drenched afternoon, plenty of time to listen. From time to time the boy would throw pebbles at a floating leaf. When he finally landed one the leaf carried it off toward the opposite shore on some unexplained and fanciful journey of exploration. Now the boy contented himself with throwing his leftover pretzels to the patient geese and ducks that swam in lazy circles about his feet. When the sun retired from the sky the boy and girl stood and went their separate ways, both marveling at a magic they recognized from folk songs, a justification in the hope of the unexpected in each new day.



The boy went home one weekend to visit his family and have a home cooked meal. His mother made chicken pot pie, which he would take back to school with him and eat for lunch. His dad suggested a hike. They picked Hook Mountain and set off. It was a steady uphill slog through trampled snow. The sun was strong for a winter day and they shed layers quickly. After about an hour they reached the top, one of those rocky outcroppings the boy had lived below since childhood. He sat and breathed deeply the crystal air one finds only in the high places of the world. The wind traveled over the peak in a southeast direction; the boy noted the permanent cant of the hardy winter grasses. A red-tailed hawk wondered the thermals below them, a magnificently unhurried creature, confident of its watchful place above the patchwork earth of the continent.

His dad handed the boy a pair of binoculars and pointed at a tugboat thundering up the river ever so slowly, the wide wake rocking a lone sailboat. The boy laughed at the immensity of this thing that had lived beside him all his life. The Hudson River was a constant churning unimpeachable presence. It was the naturalist Loren Eiseley who said, 'If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.' And the boy understood now that this river would remain with him all his life, attached at some elemental place within himself, a steward governing his charge with subtle reminders and suggestions. If the wild was to exist, it must be cultivated, and to do that one must throw oneself down and set up a home upon the landscape of one's birth. Reach back to the valley stories, the battlements of West Point, the steamship days; learn the meaning of Irving's thunder way up in the Catskills, and you will have the recipe for wisdom."

Mary Graham was a big lady with a hairy chin and throat. She wore a simple black dress with a black throw over her shoulders. She was giving us an introduction to the Aboriginal worldview. She was a member of the Bundjalung Nation, whose land we were currently standing on. Quietly she explained their way of storytelling. They tell of the Dreaming, a combination of genesis, identity, sacred code, geography, and history. No one is allowed to tell another's dreamtime story without permission. Every tribe is thus a guardian of a particular piece of country. Way back in the Dreaming spirit beings awoke from underground. They served as archetypes for all the current creatures of the world. For a time they traveled, fought, danced, and loved across the country, in the process forming the landscape we see today. They also helped create humans, giving us the Law of the land. Every Aborigine has their own dreamtime ancestor or totem. In this way they are responsible for part of the story, part of the Law. As you grow and mature the elders reveal the secrets of your dreaming, the ancient knowledge of how to live properly with the land. Aborigines have lived in Australia for over 45,000 years, forming and being formed by this continent. They have had time to evolve a sustainable society based on the specific context of their home, something the whitefella has not thought about for very long at all.

"We are all poor fellas," she says, "all vulnerable and sentimental beings. All feelings are valid. You can't judge good and bad feelings. Our belief system is not based on faith, rather it's a psychology of life, a way of facing the world, a system of logic. It is easy to lose religion; it is hard to lose culture. Do you know what I mean?"

She paused to scratch her chin.

"There is no perfectability in this system, no philosophy of ethics. Instead there is simply a compassion for mankind. Our actions are what are important. You might say we follow a custodial ethic. We look after the land because it's our identity. Do you know what I mean?"

What struck me was that there seemed to be no need for progress. Time was cyclical. There was no numerical linear record. And so there was no desperate need to reach into the future, pulling oneself toward a better place. There was no better place. Individuals acquired wisdom over the course of their lives, but society was governed by an ancient code that had come straight out of the land itself. What better source of stability and morality? Land, like feelings, could not be judged good or bad. It was not something to improve upon. So if your society was adapted to your land, then what more could you want?

“And all perspectives are valid and reasonable. There are many different dreamings, and thus different laws and truths. It all depends on where you come from. The most important question is how do you lessen the possibility of conflict? Ideology stops the world; it’s a very solid thing. Do you know what I mean?”

There are 480,000 Aborigines in Australia. Two thirds of them are under 25. Australia is the only English commonwealth that doesn’t have a treaty with the indigenous people. Aboriginal rights are never mentioned in the constitution.

Mary Graham ended the day by asking us about our ideas for a sustainable future, environmentally and socially. Well, I thought, I suppose I could write a book. It would have to be funny though, otherwise no one would read it. That’s the problem with communicating issues of sustainability. The material isn’t funny. It’s scary as hell.

Tim Flannery presents an ecological perspective of Aboriginal society. He describes the practice of firestick farming, a phrase coined by Rhys Jones. “By lighting many small, low intensity fires the Aborigines prevented the establishment of the vast fires that stripped soil and nutrients most dramatically.” Firestick farming created a forest mosaic allowing middle-sized animals places to seek shelter as well as open areas to collect food. Since the Aboriginal burning practices ended 23 mammal species became extinct.

Most Aboriginal tribes maintained a population level around 500, the minimum for a healthy gene pool. At this level they utilized 20-30% of available resources and had a great deal of leisure time during the typical season. In this societal structure codified ecological wisdom was more important than advances in technology due to the surplus in resources. The dreaming stories provided this, tens of thousands of years of recorded knowledge. The stories also created off limit ‘story places’ that acted as preserved breeding grounds for hunted species. Due to the variability in climate caused by the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) they refrained from agriculture and were often nomadic, following their food sources. In a land of climatic uncertainty cooperation is selected for over competition. Aborigines had vast social networks stretching across the continent. Later in his book, Flannery points out that hunter-gatherer societies across the world seemed to live by the golden rule of rarely exceeding 20-30% of their land’s carrying capacity. This gave them flexibility in times of scarcity. It also made them ecologically sustainable societies. For modern Australia that would mean a population between six and twelve million. In 1992 the population was already 17.5 million.

That night I sat at Adrian’s desk, dreaming of the open world.

Poor Fellas

The scratchy wool hat my mother made  
reminds me that she’s there

waking up in New York  
Here the night gives me my reflection  
in black windows,  
dispassionate observers of a billion genitals  
of lingerie's evolution and the Model T  
This is the proportion of our mirrors

But for the dark holdfasts  
of monstrous emptiness

- the sky, the sea, the soil -

we would have no vessels in which  
to hold the sway of lovers in the surf  
the worn railing of the widow's walk  
or the headstones of our subsidized violence

### **-Chapter Five-**

We left Lismore for a two day eco-philosophy workshop at a Buddhist forest retreat center. My excitement built as we left the low river valley and climbed up into the wooded hills. The bus whirred around sharp curvatures of asphalt on a one-lane road wide enough for one and a half standard sized cars. We hung out over the turns like the stomach rolls of those women who shouldn't be allowed to squeeze into tank tops but keep trying. Finally the pavement disintegrated into dust and rocks and downed branches. We were almost there. Time to get out and trudge the rest of the way up. Peter handed me a large water container to carry, our clean water rations for two days. The great old eucalypts, survivors of past logging, stood high and straight above the emerging rainforest understory. We walked carefully amid the leaf-littered path, wary of brown snakes. Moss-hung walls and aluminum roofs appeared in clusters down side trails. There was a rudimentary kitchen with brownish tap water and cages to lock your food up at night, lest it wander off with some pleased possum. Hard wooden floors passed as beds and doors did not exist. The bathroom was a composting toilet, non-flush. Ticks and leeches were epiphenomena of movement. If one walked to the kitchen for a snack one gathered critters. Now imagine that humans hadn't killed off nearly all the large predators in Australia. Imagine we still had to concern ourselves with giant goannas, land crocodiles, and marsupial lions. I would have slept very poorly indeed. There were no hot showers, no luxurious bubble baths, no soft beds with down comforters, no stereos, no electric lights, no chairs, and no screens to keep out mosquitoes. And so I thought to myself as I lay in bed (sleeping bag over one inch of closed-cell foam over mercilessly unforgiving wood panels), would I be willing to live this way? If that were what it took to live sustainably, would I voluntarily give up what I have and move in with the ticks and leeches? I suppose I could adjust, but I don't really know. I don't know what kind of soul-shift is required to move between those two lifestyles. Luckily nothing that gargantuan is required of us.

A woman named Cat led our workshop. She was one of those obnoxious cheery people who smiles all the time and likes to play silly games that involve continually embarrassing yourself. I think about half the group had a fantastic time over the next two

days. These were the people with bundles of energy roaming ceaselessly through their brains. We call it ADD. Every twenty minutes or so Cat would stop whatever less than stimulating philosophical discussion we were having to check in on our fun level. We actually had people who were given the task of making sure we were having enough fun. When our fun levels got dangerously low we would all get up and play some ridiculous game designed for five year olds.

That said there were moments of extreme compassion and emotion despite all the nonsense. We met in the meditation hall, a beautiful wooden structure with open walls looking out into the surrounding forest. A continuum of songbirds accompanied our conversations. The light would filter through the leaves to dot the smooth floor with nuggets of gold. We partnered up and closed our eyes. For five minutes the only contact we had was through our hands. I suggest everyone try this immediately. See what your partner's hand becomes in your hand. Imagine the world that hand has touched. Take turns running your fingers around the other's hand. Make fists, open your palms together. Feel the warmth, or the chill, the pulsing veins. It's incredibly sensual without being sexual. If you do it with a stranger you'll have a new and immediate bond. Imagine we did this at every new meeting. Maybe we'd do a better job of remembering people's names.

The truth mandala is a valuable and painful exercise, one I'd like to do with certain people when I come home, so beware. The group sits in a circle, creating a space for one person at a time to enter the middle and share a deeply negative emotion. It can be fear, anger, sorrow, emptiness, or confusion. Our truth mandala focused on environmental concerns. The goal is to experience a sense of despair followed by empowerment, to realize and give voice to the things that pain you the most, as they are the things you care most deeply about. I felt like I'd been kicked in the face when the usually boisterous Cat entered the circle and slumped down with tears on her cheeks.

"I am sorry for all the children born in the world today, for what are we giving them to live with? I don't want to have a child of my own because I'm afraid of what we've done to our homes."

And right there I see very clearly our unconditional imperative to quit fucking around, to quit putting it off. I will not be the generation that sunk the world's greatest cities, that destroyed hundreds of species, that killed hundreds of thousands through drought and fire and hurricane. The debate over global warming is over. We now have less than ten years to set things right. My gut tells me we have the ability to make the necessary changes. We don't need to wait for future research; we don't need more conclusive data. No more bullshit.

The ride home was making me feel incredibly nauseous. I decided to close my eyes and pray for a smooth road, but just before I did I looked to my right and saw the most beautiful spot in the world. Two rounded hills collapsed into each other and careened down the ridge into smooth river valley. In the vein where the hills met two small lakes held themselves up to the red sun setting directly out over the valley. They grew out of themselves in light-drenched tendrils of evaporation, waving to the ruminants resting on the hillsides. The cattle themselves awaited evaporation, but theirs would be one of blood and straw. Distance pulled the green from the pasture grass like litmus paper out toward the horizon where it sank into milky white. Then I gagged and closed my eyes, speculating instead on how many ticks I'd have to pull out of my scalp when I got home.

A letter to everyone on my last day in Lismore. From here we spend three days camping at Minyamai, a site owned by the traditional Aboriginal inhabitants. After that it's a whirlwind tour of environmental conflict in Tasmania. It will be at least two weeks before I'm back in touch.

Dear People I've left behind,

Today was a steamy day and I had two letters to mail. So I wandered down to the post office in a zigzag pattern, attempting to maximize my shade to brutal sun ratio (I'd forgotten to apply sunscreen). In so doing I walked into three spider webs, a cute brunette who I'm fairly sure was over 18, and a sign saying 'Have a nice day dude!' I was having such a nice day that I decided to go a little out of my way and buy a pea and potato pie for the walk back. So here I was, in the middle of suburban Australia, wearing my strawberry shortcake t-shirt (that's for you mom) and holding this big old steaming hot pea and potato pie. Of course I had no fork, no plate. Chelsea, I've proven once and for all my theory. The most sensible response when you have mashed potato and flaky pastry coating your fingers and burning them to smithereens is to stick the hot gooey mass into your mouth. The tongue is simply not as heat sensitive as the finger pads, and it therefore makes perfect logical (and evolutionary) sense to transfer the pain from fingers to tongue in the hope that the tongue is up to the challenge. So not another word out of you Chelsea! And this I did with tremendous success and enthusiasm.

Now I've deliberately failed to mention much about my host family as I feel it would be a breach of trust to discuss their quirky mannerisms and bathroom habits. Let's just say they have excellent taste in wine and my host mother's sisters are out of this world. Well they're from Sydney, but they can speak faster than most lawyers, and might have more expensive taste. That said, they're really lovely people. One of their favorite activities is trying to imitate the French while making fun of American accents. Understand that Australians are descendants of some of the most cultured people in the world, convicts and such. On a different note, I'd like everyone to put their left hand up in the air, arm's length from their face, and spread their fingers wide. Now pretend that your hand is a multi-colored spider with sharp pointy teeth and you're standing at the toilet debating whether to finish your pee or book a flight home immediately. I was fine with the leeches but Jesus!

Cheers and Love,  
Mike

Response from Kelly:

hey mike,

how's it? thought i'd send a line down your way. i'm watching the streets of poughkeepsie. i'm watching the stillness of an autumn evening, sunday evening even stiller still. cool air, a man across the street asks me in spanish about my solitude up here on this second story porch with my laptop. muchacha... tan sola alli? i don't respond.

i am days away from the decision to leave vassar and fly to malaysia.  
oh, my computer is running out of batteries.

take care, kelly

As I pack my backpack once more, vacating the Hodson's lives, I wonder if I'll ever see Kelly again. She was the girl in Central Park. The last night I spent with her over the summer it had poured. One of those warm thundershowers that raise the earthworms to the roadside and then vanishes, leaving mist and wet grass clippings. In her farm-stained jeans and brown tank top Kelly twirled herself into the rain, wrapping her arms together, as if highlighting her treasured solitude, her comfortable aloneness. We left it at that. I'd see her two years later, when I had long since returned from Australia and she'd returned from China. But she was never convinced of the merits of standing still for a while.

On the road to Minyamai I read a page from my notebook on the four primary ecological principles elucidated by Jim Ife in Community Development.

**Holism** – 'you can never do only one thing', interdependence, integration, synthesis, generalist approaches

**Sustainability** – no growth approach to economics, minimum consumption, sustainable development hoax

**Diversity** – plurality of solutions, plurality of species, attribute of stability, decentralization of control and culture, horizontal communication

**Equilibrium** – balance in relationships, consensus, peace, cooperation over competition

Without additional concepts of social justice, an eco-fascist system could emerge.

## -Chapter Six-

We rolled into Minyamai, which turned out to be a large fenced-in clearing within a national park. Doug and Simone were there to meet us, along with a couple children. I never did get it sorted out whom they belonged to. Also a full-bellied Scotsman with a red tinsel beard lingered in the back. What the hell was a giant Scotsman doing here? We set up our tents, hopped into our bathing suits, and right back onto the bus. Doug took us straight to the beach for a look at the coffee rock. Coffee rock is a beautiful amalgamation of compacted sand and organic matter. It has a dark chocolate color and is very soft. You can break off pieces of it or carve your initials with your finger. On the beach it forms small cliffs where you typically find the foredunes. Here the wind sculpted out small honeycombed caves in its surface. Sand from up top runs down in small channels, as if they were rivers in slow motion. Doug tells us of his ancestors and how they came to this land. He seems eager to show off more of its small grand places.

The next stop is a swimming hole. Downstream a well-hung paperbark tree sports a rope swing and limbs that look as though they've knelt to sip from the river and never bothered to straighten up. The water is tea-colored from the tannins leaching into it and feels smooth on the skin. One by one we climb from the water up into the tree until all fifteen of us are perched in its arms, sunning ourselves. The skin of the paperbark flakes off into the air and peppers us with white. Aborigines use the bark of this tree for building canoes, baskets, and shelters when they're out hunting or camping in a temporary spot. It's a soft and accommodating tree. For Halloween I would tape torn bits of newspaper all over myself and call myself a paperbark. Then I'd spend the rest of the night picking up my slough.

At camp that night Simone showed us how to make damper, a self-rising bread you can simply kneed and toss in the fire. A few of the girls became obsessed with the stuff and would make it many more times before the end of the semester. After a meal of hot damper smothered with honey and a bowl of pasta salad we all pulled up stumps around the fire circle. Simone began slowly, quietly, as if she were talking to each of us individually. She told us how every place in this vast country has a story attached to it, every place a song that maintains it. And there are spirits everywhere. If you know how to listen, there are many good spirits, departed family members for example, who watch over you and warn you of danger. How close is this to the Apache definition of wisdom? One is wise if they have cultivated a smooth mind. A characteristic of a smooth mind is the ability to foresee danger and avoid it. Think of your own lives, those moments where you listened to the warning in the back of your head, or the sudden impulse to drive a different way to work. There are bad spirits as well. You feel a sudden chill below your skin and start looking behind you, expecting something. These stories give new meaning to a night below the stars in a country with more history than could ever be recorded in a history book. And so the true histories are written like sediment layers upon the landscape, the shape and path of each footprint captured in the telling, the language of naming the world about you.

The fire popped and smoked about us. We took turns telling stories, conjuring ghosts. The night seemed to shift and swell. Simone put names to the wails we heard, the child lost in the swamp, the lovers parted by jealousy. Every camp, she told us, would plant a carry pine nearby, for this tree collected all the lost souls of their people. It was very bad to cut it down. Finally the talking stopped and we all sat quietly, taking comfort from the warmth of the circle, but gone somewhere else, in the flames maybe, where humanity has always gathered to share the inner darkness that at times guides us and other times terrifies us. It seems appropriate that we've always been drawn to fire. It has a way of pulling the individual psyche into an open space and supporting it. The group gathers to heal each other at day's end, and there is great strength in that, even if it is accomplished in silence. That night I reflected on moments in my past, those brief flashes where you know someone else is with you but cannot see them. I remembered standing at the railing beside the stairs in the house where Cousin Steve hung himself. He was really my dad's cousin, but I always called him cousin as well. Roz, his wife, came down the hall and looked up at me with the worst kind of terror on her face. I never forgot what it felt like to be standing in his last footprints.

The morning was as bright and solid as the night had been cool and shapeless. We had more honey-drenched damper and set off on a bushwalk to visit the old summer camp of Doug and Simone's tribe. They showed us the Wedding Tree, where they're people were married, and the midden by the cooking site. You could see bleached shells, thousands of years old sticking out of the bottom layers. Up the hill amid young eucalypts and squiggly gums Doug stopped in a small clearing. This was the sleeping area, he said. And then he got real quiet and stared deep into his hands. No one moved, everyone uncertain. Finally he looked up.

"This is a massacre site. My people."

As he finished the sentence the sadness drained from his eyes and he smiled again. Turning, he grabbed a handful of thin silvery leaves from a bush and rubbed them together between his hands.

"This is how we washed," he said.

The leaves turned soapy and smelled of citrus air freshener. We walked on, towards sandwiches and watermelon, and a place called Chinamen's Beach where I would see the best photograph of the three and a half months but not have my camera to take it.

Chinamen's is a beach quite similar to every other one we'd seen in Australia so far. It was wide and long and the sand made squeaky noises between your toes. It wasn't at all crowded. What made it incredible was the worn sandstone headland just to the south. From a distance I saw the potential for some dangerous bouldering in the surf and set out immediately. Carly, Laur, and Kelsey came along. On the walk Kelsey asked me to explain myself. Unsure of what exactly she wanted I asked for clarification. Apparently she wanted me to tell her all about my life in approximately twenty minutes.

"You're too quiet," she said. "I don't really know who you are. Just tell me about yourself."

And so I tried to explain why I am the way I am. Luckily we became distracted by the giant slabs of pink and red, yellow and orange we were clambering over. Veins of blue ran across the cut out cliff face rising to our right. Aquamarine waves broke on our left, shattering into a bubbling white and running up between the boulders to wet our feet. As we climbed the wind leapt through tunnels of salt-scoured rock. It was a cloudless sky and the ocean looked more inviting than I'd ever seen it, passing endlessly off the edge of vision, enough sheer space to swallow all the hubris of man, or so it seemed. We made our way up onto the grassy tuft crowning sculpted cliffs below. Megan met us there. At this point I knew Megan primarily as an avid practitioner of yoga and a hypochondriac who believes she has cured herself of being a hypochondriac. We also once shared a quiet conversation about hot dogs and grandmothers below a purple flowered tree in the middle of the night. So there we stood, the five of us, really very beautiful people in our own ways. And out before us stretched this ocean that I've tried to explain numerous times but have always, and necessarily, fallen short. I stood back to take it in, and that's when I saw the perfect photo. Megan was doing a headstand in order to reverse the location of the ocean and the sky in her mind. Laur was lying flat on her back eyes pointed heavenward. Carly was stretching her arms out as if she were about to hug the world, and right then I believed she could. Kelsey was twirling about just feet from the edge of the cliff, seemingly in full possession of the knowledge that absolutely nothing in this world could hurt her at that moment. And I stared in simple and joyous awe, gushing gratitude for being right there right then with that light and those people. My heart passed straight through my eyes and I immediately fell in love with each of them. We all felt it, the overwhelming energy exploding outward from ourselves, the force of our dreams upon the earth. The ground beat slowly through our feet, breathing in breathing out. And I saw our roots stretching out behind us, through the dust of our movements, as though we had just sprung from the world's womb. We all felt it, but I was the only one who saw it all just that way, in that second that stopped on its sharp edge, giving us one glimpse of the infinite, before spilling over into the future.

Back at camp I was reminded of an earlier question. What the hell was a Scotsman doing here? I never got a clear answer despite the time I spent with him chopping down trees for a traditional style shelter. I did find out that he had trouble with authority when he was younger, that he had no driver's license even though he enjoyed tooling around in a four-wheel drive truck, and that he was full of witticisms.

"If we were meant to fly," he said, "we'd have wings under our arms rather than hair."



This explained why he'd never been in an airplane and never intended to. I anticipated the usual question: what's it like being with all these girls? Weeks ago I learned to realize the expected answer, based upon whether the question was asked with commiseration, mirth, or outrageous jealousy. This was a big man with a large machete, proud of the sweat in his beard, somewhat of an outcast. What a delightful change of pace, I liked him. So I assuaged his fear that he'd missed out on one of life's most exciting opportunities. No, traveling with fourteen women who all PMS at different times of the month is not the be all and end all adventure in the modern world. It's somewhat like stepping on eggshells with an anvil in your backpack. Smile and apologize. Well I guess the Scotsman liked me too, because later he poked me with his big machete and I knocked him on the head with the pointy end of one of the trees we'd cut and we both had a good chuckle, much to the consternation of the girls who simply don't understand the art of male preening.

Now as I was a male I got to go off in the bush with Doug for some boomerang hunting training. This created much jealousy and another round of damper making. Boomerangs, I discovered, fly much farther than a frisbee and with less effort. The striking power is enormous and they are relatively easy to release accurately. Sometimes you could even get two or three birds with one throw. Doug had learned the traditional language from his father, who had walked every inch of the land we were staying in. His job was to teach others about his people, to continue the stories, and to adapt without losing himself. This they were doing with a silent grace, a quiet acknowledgement of the massacre site upon which we stood, coupled with the will to move forward. Today, we are all faced with changes that need to be made if we wish to live sustainable lives. Many of these changes are not difficult. The most difficult will be to shift our mindsets, readjusting our values and methods for assessing them. We have it much easier than Doug and Simone. We are the cause of the current necessity for change. Let's look at how we can do it gracefully.

## **-Chapter Seven-**

We said our goodbyes to Doug and Simone and the children and once again boarded our bus, which was starting to look a little worse for wear. Up the coast again, past the sugarcane and macadamias we'd come to know so well. The Pacific Highway lulled us all to that slobbering, neck lurching place we call sleep in uncomfortable vehicles. Arriving at the Brisbane airport was a strange sensation. This was where we'd first entered the continent just weeks before. It felt like a very long time ago, like we'd traveled a great distance already. Knives and other sharp implements of destruction safely stowed in our checked baggage we boarded a plane bound for Hobart, the capital city of Tasmania.

Tasmania is a small heart-shaped island off the southeast corner of the mainland. With latitude being roughly the southerly equivalent to New York it was somewhat colder than our previous haunts. As it was the tail end of September they were just embarking upon spring. We arrived on a day of drizzle and whipping winds. The bloke at the bottle shop told me that this was typical for Hobart.

“It's not unusual to get all four seasons in a day.”

This I would become intimately familiar with come November. In fact Tasmania, after being a prison colony, became known as the holiday isle (this still appears on many license plates) because it reminded the English of home. It was also referred to as a 'sleepy hollow' by early literary chaps. I found this particularly appealing since I'd been born in a

village called Sleepy Hollow, a little slice of home in the land down under the land down under.

Hobart is a small city with its business district occupying a low-lying basin alongside the Derwent River. Initially a major port, Hobart still has a thriving main wharf and the banks of the Derwent are dotted with recreational marinas. The districts of North and South Hobart and Sandy Bay are strung out into the hills like rows of Christmas tree lights, red and green roofs suggesting a cheeriness that disappears as your eye continues up toward the ring of higher hills and Mt. Wellington in the middle, dolerite skull speared by an ugly communications tower. But here I already felt the radiant intimation of wide and trackless spaces, creeping over the thunderstruck peak with the rain clouds down on Hobart Town. And in this stern host was time itself, reminding the people of this 'sleepy hollow' that brick and cement would wear away in the end, timber would rot, and the shapeshift sky would again be the roof of the world. In the meantime we visitors were welcome to come and lay a hand upon the still hot and wild sap of this island and find what wisdom we might in its lonely chambers.

We still had a couple days before we set off for the boundless places. In this time we were forced to amuse ourselves among the cafes, bookshops, galleries, and markets of this creative capital. As any traveler to Hobart will hear, it is imperative to stop at the Salamanca market on Saturday morning. Salamanca is a wide tree-topped avenue flanked by an old and stately façade of pubs, cafes and galleries. Nestled between the glass and concrete high-rises to the north and the park and garden meanderings of Battery Point to the south Salamanca is a natural gathering place for those with a little cash to burn. On market day the street is closed and craft and food tents fill every available space. If you are looking for either rare and expensive wood products or thick and potent honey then this is the place to come. I've never seen a larger selection of cutting boards, candle holders, salt and pepper shakes, eating utensils, salad bowls, wine stands, and carven pens, all from some of the most expensive trees in the world. This is not a place of thrift. But I'm on a tight budget, if you discount my weekly purchases of organic food and delicious Australian beer. So I head up into Battery Point's hill-strewn lanes. Down every one are lines of white fence cradling what must be very expensive cottages with their secret gardens. Without exception every lot has a patch of living color exploding in its stall, painting the walls and trellises and alluring stone walkways. This is a place of quiet wealth and subtle joy. I wandered here for hours, always startled by the sweep of blue as the streets gravitate toward sea level, revealing the flush Derwent skating past, and back behind, always the attentive flutes of Mt. Wellington reminding its peopled skirts of the unassailable wealth hidden in its secret voice. I had long since put my camera away, hopelessly aware of the impossibility of capturing this many angles of sunlit color. Arriving below the steepled bell tower of an Anglican church, I had the intention of finagling my way to the top for a view, but they had recently suffered a theft and all the doors and windows were shut tight. It was time to head back into town and meet Geoff Mosley, our guide for the next week.

Mosley strolls into the conference room of the Macquarie Motor Inn. He's a full-set man with a crop of white fluffy hair and wide-rimmed glasses. He sets down his array of maps protruding from his arms like guns on a battleship and introduces himself.

"I've hiked many of the world's snowy peaks, and now I am one."

He has also been a major figure in Australian conservation for many years. His doctoral thesis was on the impact of wilderness tourism in Tasmania, and so he is the ideal

person to weave the story of the battle for conservation in Tasmania, the struggle against the Hydroelectric Commission and corporate logging interests. He proceeds to introduce the natural history of the land we are about to cover.

“You will need particularly good socks for this excursion,” he laughs softly. His many-pocketed vest and heavy woolen sweater suggest that he knows what he’s talking about, as do his dozen or so pages of notes dutifully photocopied for all of us.

On our last night in Hobart I go to see ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ with Liz and Devorah. I recommend it to everyone, for it does a clear and vivid job of laying out the current global warming crisis. For those who know little about the issues it’s an important introduction. For those who are familiar it’s an excellent resource for ways to creatively communicate the issues. I sat through most of the film hazy-eyed, never suspecting that Al Gore’s voice would move me to tears. But the message is gut-wrenchingly powerful, and doubly so because of its urgency. Despair and empowerment. I do suggest you leave yourselves a little more time to get to the theater than we did. That way you won’t be forced to run barefoot through the streets of a major city with a bubbling beer dripping down your arm.

The rough outline of our trip is this: break our time up between chugging along in our bus and stopping for rousing bushwalks into some of Tasmania’s most beautiful and important landscapes. Geoff wants to cover the history of the conservation movement, including the formative experiences fighting for the preservation of Lake Pedder, further battles against the damming of Tasmania, and the ongoing struggle against logging of the old-growth forests. He also has notes on the effect of wilderness tourism, the national park’s management plan, as well as contextual information on the natural history of the environments we’re going to visit. Our itinerary defines the concept of a ‘whirlwind tour.’ I spend the week floored and breathless, writing little except in the moments of pre-dinner warmth at rough tables in a kaleidoscope of wood stove cabins, sixteen other people whirring about me in the frenzy of small spaces. In that time I write a mediation of sorts, an on-the-spot explanation of the churning up effect this island is having upon me, the truest way I know of preserving the moments of small explosions in my head, as we pass from one watercolor world to the next. Even now, looking back, I can’t seem to unravel the barbed chronology. It has fastened in upon itself, the way a four hour rock climb becomes the moment your feet leave the ground and the moment they return, all else is your blood-tipped fingers and the sun pillowed at your back, breathing toward the inscape of self.

So I won’t try and unravel this phantom world, but instead give it up in chunks, the way I was first able. From Hobart we travel on thin and winding single-lane roads that take us disappearing into the expanse surrounding them. Geoff is continually toying with the microphone that works only intermittently. The usual technique of kicking the appliance doesn’t seem to solve the problem. Geoff has a few metric tons of information to impart to us, attentive and perky in the bouncing back, and so he forgets the mic and instead tries to yell above the whistling world passing by our windows. We learn more about Geoff as the trip progresses. He is seventy-five, and kind of a big deal. A major environmental activist, he’s met with prime ministers, participated in dam blockades, lived in some of the world’s tallest trees. The guy is sharp and passionate, rough and tumble yet cuddly at the end of the day, and at times loveably senile. My favorite moment, and there were many fabulous ones, was when he finally realized one of the lenses from his glasses was missing. He’d been wearing them all day and hadn’t noticed. Another time, at a lunch break one day, I asked him about the piece of potato chip stuck in the bottom rim well of his glasses.

“Oh I know it’s there. I just haven’t gotten around to eating it yet. I will though.”

With that he continues munching on his tuna fish sandwich. I believe the potato chip stayed lodged just below his eye for the rest of the day. One thing Geoff had no problem with was hiking. He was certainly no pansy about setting a grueling pace. Occasionally though he would become lost. I suspect he felt a certain affinity towards me, as I was, besides Peter, the only other male around. And so he would ask me which way I reckoned we should head. Of course I had no idea, but not wishing to disappoint him I’d pick a direction and off we’d go. Invariably we made it to our destination, mud splattered and excited. Geoff loved Tasmania, and I believe that secretly, in his heart of hearts, he was tickled to pieces at the prospect of dragging fourteen American girls and one bloke through the mud and guts of his adopted land, regaling us with little hard-won wisdoms, and slurping down a bottle of wine with Peter every evening.

We traveled northwest out of Hobart to the old logging town of Maydena. Maydena sits on the eastern edge of a huge swath of land preserved as the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and a bewildering number of long-winded National Parks. From here we made forays to the Lake Pedder and Gordon impoundment. Lake Pedder had been the site of the first great battle between the Tasmanian Hydroelectric Commission and the conservationists. In the end the rivers had been dammed and the lakes flooded. I had to admit, the results were aesthetically beautiful. The washed out light of the sun seen through misty quilts illumined the now-islands that had once been hills. We stood on the edge of a drowned land, in the stillness and solitude befitting a cemetery, watching rain-furrowed banks blow towards our cameras. In their PR campaign, the Hydro suggested this flooded region would become a holiday site for myriad boaters and hikers. The moon-colored lakes below us were conspicuously empty of floating vessels. I would come to realize later that this is just one example of Tasmania’s psychological rift with their home. It is a small island at the edge of a great storm-swept ocean, first colonized as a prison. The indigenous inhabitants have been all but annihilated. Mining, logging, and damming have been Tasmania’s foremost industries. Yet this sparsely populated land has license plates that read: Holiday Isle, and The Natural State. The rest of the world knows very little about Tasmania, yet it is one of the most awe-inspiring places on earth. But one need only observe the temper of its weather and the nature of its history to understand that it is a place to go for lean wisdom, not carefree holiday.

We walked among the great grandfather eucalypts of the Styx Valley. With names like Gandalf’s Staff and Icarus Dream they are icons of the fight to end logging in old-growth forests. After these thousand year old ecosystems are cut down they are replaced by plantations of invasive species and poisons are sprayed to kill possums from clawing the bark of the saplings. These artificial forests are cleared every 70 years, not nearly enough time for the trees to reach maturity. Only 20-30% of timber in the clear-fell is actually used; the rest is burnt. Logging protesters took turns winching themselves into the trees in order to stop the logging companies. They’d set up camps on the forest floor, even hollow out the stumps of already logged giants to live in. One such stump fit two beds, a storage loft, bookcase, table, wood burning stove, and sported a window. Some of these trees reached over 85 meters tall (255 feet).

We saw Russell Falls in Mt. Field National Park and stopped at Lake St. Clair as we trundled over the tablelands west toward Strahan and Macquarie Harbor. Along this road we paused many times, spilling out of the bus to suck fresh air and stretch our legs. We were in the high country and mountains loomed to the north and south. At Donaghys Hill Lookout I

fell in love with Frenchman's Cap, a cloud-strapped peak glistening in the southern distance. Geoff told me it was a four-day hike with nasty weather and soggy boots. Entranced, I began planning my return to Tasmania. The lookout sported an interpretive sign with a quote by John Muir,

I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.

We drove on, through the dismantled mining operations surrounding Queenstown, a place that now looked to be slowly dismantling itself. The blasted half-hills were naked and cracked remnants of themselves. Stripped of vegetation by the poisonous yet valuable metals, it was a skeleton landscape, a skinless creature left to smoke and bleach in the sun's pale glow. Strahan, on the other hand, was a small and pleasant tourist port about halfway up the west coast. As though to reward us for all still being fully accounted for and in good working condition Peter took us out for a fantastic dinner. All seventeen of us sat at a long stretch of table and ate like it was the Last Supper. Those of us who weren't vegetarians ordered the smoked wallaby smothered in some exotically spiced barbeque sauce. Those of us who were vegetarians ordered pasta or seafood and pilfered tiny bites of wallaby from the owners. The wine, as usual, flowed freely, as did the desserts with French names I cannot even begin to remember, and if I could I wouldn't be able to spell them so it doesn't matter. Entirely satiated, we began a game of telephone among the seventeen of us. When it was my turn to start I used a quote from *Invictus* that I'd memorized for 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class. When it finally got back to me it had mutated into some monstrous alien line about a dog jumping the gate to catch a roll, his master struck by fate no longer has a soul. Red-faced and showing off, I stood up to recite the actual quote loudly for the room. Geoff and I began a conversation about Henley while Peter looked to be contemplating his escape route. Full, drunk, and damp we walked back to the hostel in the rain, dragging our bellies behind us up the hill.

Macquarie Harbor in the glint of morning is a site designed to pull at the traveler's purse strings. Two overbearing triple-decker catamarans are docked, awaiting only your ticket before whisking you away up the Gordon River, site of slow purifying transcendence. As we had tickets, we joined the throng, feeling more like aged tourists traveling on a cushy savings than ever before. Nevertheless the ocean wind played crashing symphonies in our ears, and the sun lit the usual fireworks upon the water. If you stayed on the top deck you had a chance of forgetting the twin diesel engines burning beneath you. But it was impossible to forget the hundred or so other passengers when we all crammed onto a boardwalk loop through the 'pristine' forest. Sarah Island was more transfixing. Our first brush with the artifacts of the convict history Australia tries so hard to forget, the buried foundations of cells now imagined exist on through stories, the common and the legend. For a nation so new to have such a deep chasm of forgotten myths is itself arresting, sparking questions yet unanswered. In *Vandemonian Essays*, Pete Hay writes, "But *what* did he mean? I don't know, and the quest for it is life's purpose. I almost certainly won't find it. My children might. Or their children. To them I would offer a solitary piece of advice. Start at Port Arthur." This final statement is in response to an earlier comment made by Barry Lopez, who suggested that, "Tasmania was the custodian of an important truth; one of which, in due course, the wider world would have need." If Sarah Island is the farthest outlier of

convict history, then Port Arthur is its centerpiece. We would not be stopping at Port Arthur on this trip, but I had already decided to come back, if only to unravel more questions.

We made a beeline up the west coast, through brittle mining towns and haggard roadside cemeteries half buried by gorse, a knotty yellow flowered invasive. Cradle Mountain was our last major stop; tomorrow would be a six-hour hike to its summit and back.

October 3 – Cradle Mt. NP

I'm going stir-crazy. Cabin fever's setting in. There's all this wide open air and I'm not getting any of it. Too many people around, too many girls. Always talking, asking dumb questions. Sitting on the bus trying not to listen:

"If you had to spend the rest of life in a prom dress or a bum's torn and smelly clothes which would you wear?"

"If you had to give up either your husband or your child which one would it be?"

"Describe your perfect guy."

"High heels or tennis shoes?"

I began losing the questions, hearing only words, punctuation now and then.

"Worst....life....embarrassed? favorite...food coloring...place...love. One type....makeup....hairstyle? Most....emotion? Passion!"

For fuck sake. Can't you be quiet already and just watch the world go by? Last night Kelsey stuck her finger in a possum's face, expecting I don't know what, maybe Lassie. Anyhow the thing chomped her hand and she jumped back screaming and that set off a stick of dynamite blowing all the girls up against the rafters shrieking like the rats escaping fire in the catacombs from the third Indiana Jones. After that I had to ferry Sarah back and forth between the kitchen and her room because an army of possums with sharp pointy teeth waited in the dark Tasmanian night. This after she pissed herself laughing too hard and spent all day sitting on the bus with three layers of stinking pants. Now she's walking around in her rain gear; it's the only thing not wet. Erin, quiet Erin, spent a week in one room with Roosevelt's grandson, the motionless stamina of sex and drugs. Megan, cured hypochondriac,

"My body feels out of whack right now. I think my body's telling me it needs to lay down. My body hurts."

The hell does that mean? What was she like before? Now Liz is poking bumps in her arm and complaining of blood clots. The eight onions we've chopped for dinner have us all crying hysterically in this too-small kitchen and the wood stove is boiling dank socks making it smell worse than a locker room urinal. I'm going for a walk.

Megan followed me out, walking silently behind me for a time. I followed the moon-brush track down toward the black gurgle of water. The track is raised boardwalk above the clumped buttongrass and stubby trees. The land folds inward toward the river, and the track follows, slowly swallowed by the arching eucalypts that crowd the banks. Jupiter, I think it is, sparkles red blue yellow as the world turns ever slowly, grating against stardust and abandoned satellites. Wombats, pademelons, and wallabies graze over the plains, some brushing up against my feet as I pass. These complacent herbivores are concerned neither with us nor the shifting heavens. My frustration is not something I can long hold in this silent oblivion, the foothills of crisp night. I'm reminded of one of Les Murray's stanzas,

Tired from understanding  
life, the animals approach man  
to be mystified.

Megan comes up beside me and asks me about life. What do I make of this quiet? We talk over auras and energy, the wise people in our lives, the thin lines of elusive spirit we sometimes see in daydreams, the many paths trodden below foreign constellations, and the search for guideposts, the welcome fairytale streetlight on a snow-swept boulevard, Christmas wreath hanging from its crossbeam. I returned to the cabins empty of the pent-up scrawling at my chest I'd felt earlier, glad to have had a real if fleeting conversation.

The hike to Cradle Mountain takes you on a steep track past glacial lakes and up onto the exposed Central Plateau. Here we trudge through the first snow of our semester, against knuckle-biting wind. At 1545 meters (4635 feet) Cradle Mt. is not considerably high, but in this climate it is an alpine wonderland of ice and bluster. It is not a simple mountain either. Classified as a nunatak, it forms characteristic sharp, jagged lines where it protruded from the ice that swept across the plateau. There is no one exclusive peak, but many separated by deep gorges and talus slopes. The steep vegetated ascent abruptly becomes near vertical columns of grainy dolerite that stand fluted and incut against the sky. Imagine the ten most majestic gothic cathedrals of Europe crumpled together and racked to many times their manmade prowess.

The trail leads diagonally to the tallest peak on the far right edge of the cradle. This I had no way of knowing, nor was I aware of the summit topography. At the point of the trail where it cuts off sharply to the right in a more gradual ascent, I saw only the possibility of a blood-pumping direct route. Calling down to Peter I asked permission to wander off and up by myself. He asked the logical question,

“Where will you meet up with the trail?”

“I think it's just there around that outcrop, maybe a few hundred feet up.” Why I said this with such conviction I have no idea, because in reality I had no idea.

Peter looked at me and said, “Yeah...”. It was one of those drawn out ‘yeahs’ that are always followed by an ‘I don't think that's such a good idea.’ But fortunately for me the wind picked up right then and carried off the rest of the sentence and all I heard was “Yeah.”

Apparently, as I found out later, Peter turned to Erin who was standing next to him and said, “You heard me *not* give permission to Mike?”

Erin had, but I had not, and that's what mattered. And so I climbed away from the group. Alone and thrilled to be grappling with this gorgeous rock, avoiding snow drifts and loose boulders. Soon it turned from rock scrambling to gentle rock climbing. Never have I climbed with that kind of exposure before. Look back over your shoulder at the plateau a thousand feet below, and below that the glacial lakes and valleys all quietly awaiting the next great movement of earth and ice. It is an undeniable fact that mountains have spirits. They whisper to you as you climb, soaking in through your red scratched hands, encouraging you to find out about yourself. Admit the fear in your chest, but separate it from your mind. The quiet of great distances and strata of air mirror the growing stillness in your own body. You are climbing through your fear, toward a new quality of breath. Climbing is accepting vulnerability; it's feeling that you have a place on the earth but you are not master of it, you

are simply allowed to be. Mountains are the great teachers of the world. As you climb, you are becoming.

Unfortunately I became two peaks to the left of the trail and my group. Such is the danger of assumption. Another half hour of down climb up climb down climb up climb and we were all reunited. But first I sat a moment, entirely alone, upon the highest rock of my summit. I could think of nothing to do but dance a little jig, with the howling wind as accompaniment. And so there I was, bopping and grooving over Tasmania, this land that had lodged itself in my innards and wouldn't let go.

Back in Hobart I led the group in this meditation:

Find a comfortable position and close your eyes

You're sitting in a tent beside Lake Pedder with a cup of tea between your hands  
It's early dawn and the sun is rising over the eastern shore, dispelling the cold in your cheeks,  
and casting diamond webs across the still water  
Listen to the stillness  
Notice your footprints - the exact weight of your presence in this world  
But now you need to leave  
The water is rising, lapping at your sandy toes  
You begin to drift upwards, over the lake that's drowning  
You feel lighter, having left your footsteps behind, for a time you are free to see without  
effecting

You're traveling through a folded land, mist-soaked, dolerite peaks loom in the dim half-light  
of primordial memory  
You shiver as the ghosts of a previous story, a previous struggle, reach for your eyes, wishing  
you to see  
The mountains are grand ashes, reminders of an ancient fire ritual, a dance between earth and  
sky  
You look down below your feet, to the rolling sedgeland, the burned peat marshes where the  
tea-colored rain drips from the buttongrass, taking on the colors of plant and soil as it passes  
to the free-flowing Gordon, and from the river past the fishermen, past the suicides of Sarah  
Island, and out into the Southern Ocean

Look upwards, toward the fretted skyline, carved by ice and time  
Thousands of cirque lakes nest like giants' marbles in folds of land  
You ask yourself: how deep is this place?  
How far can we go?

Go higher  
Now you can see down into a valley of emerald green, the world's tallest hardwoods  
But look harder, there is a smoke shroud  
Your eyes burn, a silent morning burial for the clear-cut  
You sit in a helicopter, releasing napalm in searing lines  
Below possums walk poison death tracks  
You participate in the proud production of paper



The universal industry of progress

Drift upward through the smoke, toward the clear midlands  
You see yellow plains of endless buttongrass, interspersed with copses of smooth white  
gums, frozen dancers in the act of praying to their muse the sun  
The stage is backed by purple ranges, capped in white, glazed in vestments of mist and  
distance  
These are the living strata of watercolor we as a species have always been trying to paint, to  
photograph, to sing into becoming  
Here they are before you in careless majesty, unencumbered by the need to explain  
themselves

You head north, into night's darkness  
Below Cradle Mountain the landscape is all form  
Details fade in the white moonlight  
Your eyes pick out spirits gathering by the river, and the comforting space below the stars,  
space for all the passions and despairs of our lives  
These are not the stars you are accustomed to, but here the firmament is larger and more  
welcoming than you imagined or hoped for  
Take a moment to settle into the rhythm of wombats  
Feel the lumbering pleasure of nocturnal meandering  
Walk the distance it takes to share yourself with someone else

Morning, the rising sun drains the complacency from the sky  
You are rising again, over the old glacial claws of the central plateau  
Moraines ring crystal alpine lakes like fortifications in an ancient war of titans  
The jagged cradle stretches before you, demanding respect from all the multi-colored hikers  
trudging its fluted spires  
Climb above the snowy summit, higher than feet can take you  
You are as Icarus, the whisper of the sun growing in your mind  
Higher, higher, above the mosaic earth, the famous decisions of man, the smog-riven cities  
and steel-lined highways, the growth of dominion and the great motivator: progress  
You see all this laid out below  
You ask once more: how far can we go?  
The sun's whisper surrounds you, answering, sheltering, returning you to your footsteps, to  
your need, to the calling of the world

Open your eyes when you are ready

### **-Chapter Eight-**

While I was traveling in Tasmania my mail accumulated. With internet access again,  
I turned my attention homeward with a lingering longing.

Benjamin Holmes <bh0085@gmail.com>

To: [mikantor@gmail.com](mailto:mikantor@gmail.com)

Hey Buddy,

You say "There are bad spirits as well. You feel a sudden chill below your skin and start looking behind you, expecting something. " and I think of 'Fear of the Dark'. Heh.

In your last email you say that you made love to scotsman. At least that was the gist of it (so far I've mostly skimmed the 4th email because I just got to it, I'm going to come back to it later). I think that maybe there are immigration laws on the books that will make it difficult for you to get back in the country. Thanks to a pedophile republican congressman I think that those fellows may be safely booted from washington and so you will be allowed back in. Woo!

You mention an inconvenient truth. Isn't it weird that six years after we tossed al gore aside, we environmentally conserved liberals herald him as a sort of saviour of the democratic party? As great as his film is, I think we're setting ourselves up for disappointment.

I talked to Hari yesterday and we're agreed. You're having a wonderful time. Thanks for sharing with me (us). I hope that you can retain it all and that you can teach me all of it when you get hme.

But but but! (as Dr. Marchatell would say) Cornell is pretty "cool" too. I learned this week the reasons for the rotation of Venus' atmosphere and a few other things but they are not as poetic as exploring austra'lia (where the " ' " indicates a long 'a' like in an australian accent). Stars, I've found are allowed to burn hydrogen, planets are allowed to form from clouds of dust in the early solar nebula and coolest of all: little bugs roam around our DNA: they allow for its replication.

I'll tell you all about it when you get home.. Right now I'm throwing a birthday party for a kid who knits chain mail and we're listening to 'pirate hip hop'. Keep up the good work, researching the 'humanities' whatever that means. Do some math you bum!

-Ben

Also: I've found a girlfriend (you'll meet her over break if I'm lucky). I'm also speaking with jenna alot too- I think that we're in good shape. She's just as excited to hear about your adventures as I am and I think that she's getting saner. She and Mark are no longer exactly scheduled to be married, maybe?

Again,  
-Ben

Jenna Trostle <jennast@gmail.com>  
To: [mikantor@gmail.com](mailto:mikantor@gmail.com)

oh mike, i miss you more than you can imagine.

lets see... right now I can hear the girl next door from me being gone down on by her girlfriend (she's a sighing moaner, in case you cared), people outside howling (everyone's elated that midterms are over) and still more people running up and down upstairs. Your Hobart and mine are as opposite as one name can be-- my hobart is a machine in my co-op that cleans dishes with mechanical efficiency. Yours actually sounds like something worthwhile.

Your letters make me really happy. I was actually thinking about you tonight, and wondering when you'd next send a note, and wondering what I'd tell you... I don't want to write anything too long, because everyone probably replies to all of your e-mails and it's a lot of reading for you to do at a computer when you could be out in the world experiencing something.

The girls weren't allowed to hunt with a boomerang? I'd like to learn if you'd teach me... I just started talking to Ben again, we both agreed that we're fiercely jealous of you and your trip and we wish we were there. Or at least, i wish I was there. I'd still like a real letter someday if you've got the time to write one...

...I'm pretty sure Mark and I are going to break up at some point... right now it seems pretty much inevitable. the only question is when. We're probably going to stay together this year, because i'm all he's got at Oberlin, but i fully expect us to end next year. He's still talking to Nicole a lot, and I refuse to make him choose between us because I will not be stephanie, but it's definitely hurting our relationship, and he knows it. I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing though... I'm not willing to force her out of his life because I think he might very well end up with her in the end, and it might be a better match for all involved than he and I. see how far we've gotten from marriage? Honestly though, at some point he will probably have to choose between us, but i don't think it has to happen this year. If we're all out of college, he and I are somehow still together, and she's still hurting our relationship, then he knows at some point one of us has to go, but i don't think those types of ultimatums are necessary right now, and that's a good thing.

But I'm plodding along, and reading a lot, and painting more than I have been in a while, which is good because it helps me calm my mind.... I don't remember if I told you, I'm painting a self portrait of me as Galatea, the statue that Pygmalion fell in love with and begged Venus (Aphrodite?) to make flesh... in the picture my arm is turning white, and there's a marble pedestal behind me that's bare but there's a shadow of a woman on the wall. I mostly liked it until I tried to fix my lips on friday, and now the whole piece is kind of falling apart to me, but i'll fix it somehow. Sometimes things have to get a lot worse before they can get better.

well geez, this is a lot longer than I meant to write. Sorry for bogging you down. I'll send a shorter update next time.

I love you mike. Thanks for being a really wonderful friend.

Peace,  
Jenna

Jay Gitlin <artfreakydude@yahoo.com>  
To: [mikantor@gmail.com](mailto:mikantor@gmail.com)

Mike,

Don't really know where to start this email, so I guess i'll start it with this. I'm going to Israel! I don't have official confirmation yet, but when i did the over the phone interview i asked what were my chances of getting in (since i applied late) and she said that there would be a spot for me, but it was just a matter of getting everyone their first choice trip dates. So depending which trip i get, i'll either be embarking mid december, or the end of december/early january. The sponsor im going with is called Israel Outdoors, and i'm trying to get on the "Israel by Foot" program. Here's a quick blurb which pretty much summarizes all that up <http://www.israeloutdoors.com/page.asp?p=7> All in all, i'm pretty damn excited, and i have this renewed spirit of adventure (which is making it difficult for me to finish my 2d animations)

I dont think i've mentioned this yet, but I'm also working on this collaborative project with University of Maryland, called Biodiesel University. The univesity of maryland had this project started with the idea of converting a bus, into a traveling musume to teach people about alternate fuel sources. How does an art college get involved with something like this you ask? Well, once university of maryland got the ball rolling they realized that they would need lots of funding to actually get this thing built. This is when they decided to come to MICA, and propose a collaborative, to help them with all their visual and "identity" concerns. With sleek stylish marketing tools, Dan (the guy in charge of the whole shebang) hopes to be bale to reel in some of the bigger fish. So MICA rouded up a top notch team of students from all departments to help Dan's vision come to life. From our side we've got about 5 graphic designers, 1 animator, 1 illustrator, 2 environmental designers, and 1 video student. Working together with all of them is interesting enough, but then you add in all the people from University of Maryland, which includes but is not limted to, geography majors, poly sci, international poly sci, mechanical engineering, business, a man dubbed "The Brewmaster," and more who i have yet to meet. It's pretty cool being on a production team like this, and it feels good to finally be able to do something with my work that flows towards a common good.

Well asides from all that life is fairly simple. I've gotten myself into a plesant cycle of waking up early, doing an incremental number of crunches, having my morning tea while cooking breakfast, and then sitting and relaxing for about 45 min before i head off to class. Classes have been pretty good. I've been putting out some good work in my animation classes that im happy with. I'm excited as i get to see my Koto take form (still in construction though) for my japansese mucis and performing arts class...

... Most of my nights are spent animating with my case of Yuengling not too far away. A social life in MICA is actually fairly difficult. During the week everyone's working, and the weekends are only so small a window to interact in (while getting work done). I find it incredibly difficult to form a meaningful relationship with anyone here, but such is life. All in all i can't complain, there's a lot of exciting stuff i'm involved in, but i also feel as if im in between larger events in my life. Never the less, thing be good mon'.

Take care,  
Jason

Response to Benjamin Holmes  
<bh0085@gmail.com>

Thanks for the update from Cornell. Can't wait for you to explain all that stuff in person over winter break. Looking forward to climbing some mountains with you also. Didn't we say at one point we should climb a mountain every time we were both home again? What's your girl's name? Does she like to climb rocks? I don't know what you're reading right now but you might be interested in "The Web of Life" by Frijof Capra. If you do read it I'd be interested in your input. It's all about systems theory, the mathematics of complexity, and a new understanding of living systems through relationships, structure, and process. Done any reading on Lovelock's Gaia Theory? Have any opinions on it? Keep in touch buddy. Glad you're still reading my ramblings. Maybe they'll be a silly little book at the end of all this.

Mike

To: Chelsea Hoel <moinna@hotmail.com>

Chelsea,

I had a dream about you the other night. You came into my room, twirling in your pink and grey skirt. But you were followed by someone I'd never seen before, and he spoke for you. Mute, you lay beside me as he told me all about your dreams and passions and longings. As he left I thanked him, because you had never spoken of those things to me before. Later I saw you in a hall full of people, radiant and smiling, a girl becoming. The chill air of morning in Tasmania hardened your dream image to statue, a meditation on the seasons of our lives.

This summer we lay together and I shared my dreams with you. Yet you never spoke yours, perhaps it was because I didn't ask. Well I'd like to know, now if you want, or when we're both home again, or together somewhere.

Love,  
Mike

### **-Chapter Nine-**

We'd come back to our cushy apartments in Byron Bay once more. This time I was living with Liz and brown Meredith. For the next twelve days we'd be settled, living out of a closet, cooking meals in our own kitchen, coming back to the same bed each night (except when the Rugby teams came to town, then no one was in their right bed). During this time we had a number of small projects and papers to do, reflections on our travels thus far, and a couple day trips and workshops to attend. Aside from that it was a time to relax, mix with the local flavors, and explore this small dominion of ours. As I've mentioned before, Byron has an odd energy about it, a creative undercurrent that's infectious. One of the boys Meredith

brought home told me that this area was an old meeting ground, a crossroads; and for that matter, it still is. Humming, slow beat in the ocean night...humming till dawn, the town wakes and throws out its dread-headed bums whose brains have been fucked by decades of failed seeking...they ponder the streets, still awaiting healing and answers...shops open lavish displays, sun-dyed raiment, organic produce, the Orgasmic Café...internet cafes peddle their connections, the world for \$3 an hour...every painted microbus stops for pedestrians here...throbbing, pubs open on thronged corners...shopping accomplished, golden boys and girls glide to the beach behind oversized sunnies, throbbing heat, dogs to the waves nudes to the sand...you can meet anyone here, for whatever reason...sun drops to the banded desert beyond the Dividing Range...pulsing night, quick tempo of the street performers, an unfound Santana wailing electric strings, he can't sing but he smiles so we dance a little...pulsing, twirling star-riddled night, pilgrimage to the waves, to the stomping bars...what do you wanna listen to what's out tonight?

I walk naked along the beach at night with four beautiful girls. We swim in the shallow surf and notice how similar the wispy clouds look to the bubbles of Pacific seawater about our toes. Everything is lit by a plump moon. The pile of clothing half buried by blowing sand, five bodies dripping (one decidedly more hairy than the rest), modesty misplaced in the sub-tropical night, the dead bird lying crumpled and peeling, a small prayer, and then twirling away, arms stretched to dry hair tangled salt sand kicked on bodies wet collapse into glowing eyes smiling. Caught in a moment I can't get enough of, one brief flirtation with guileless living.

Liz, Meredith, and I sit in front of Legend Pizza on the main drag. We've just gotten our vegetarian delight when a middle-aged Aboriginal man sits down on the bench. He's got a 40 of VB and is asking for a smoke. He slurs his words and I have to ask him a couple times for his name. Frank, I think it is. At least that's what I call him.

"You don't understand," he says, out of bloodshot eyes lids drooping halfway to his cheeks. No we don't, but we're here now, trying as best we can. He pulls up his shirt and spits on his chest.

"It's all part of my body. Just water," he says, without wiping his face. "Why don't you spit on yourself? Don't believe me?" He stretches out his hand and I shake it. He asks me what I study. Sustainability, geography, the environment, we're trying to save the world, what the fuck. I run out of answers as he asks me again and again. Out of nowhere another man walks up with a smoke for Frank. He also has a bag of fresh prawns and chicken wings that he dumps onto our thankfully now empty pizza box.

"Straight from the ocean, help yourself." His hands shake along with his voice. And then he trots off, and Frank looks back to us.

"What do you study?"

"Frank we need to go now."

"Bah, get away then. You don't understand. You come here and you never understand."

I put out my hand again but he won't take it this time.

"Get away!" We do, silently, back toward the street music.

A Latin band plays at the Beach Hotel. It's Sunday night and the place is spilling out into the warm swimming streets. We get up close so the girls can offer the band tequila

shots. The singer is jumping up and down pulling out sounds from somewhere deep inside his gut. And we're jumping, swaying, into some mesmerizing and loose step dance. Even Julie is moving, with the ace bandage around her swollen ankle, and that seventy some guy with leathery skin and silky hair down to his nipples. He dances harder than anyone, he's practically on stage facing the crowd, throwing his hips into the air and twirling his hands toward the stars. The night gets closer as the band can't stop now, they keep vibrating the sweat-stained air. It's hard to breath. Emily passes me a glass of water, I breath that. I've never danced harder, except maybe in the moshpit at an Iced Earth concert years ago. Finally we all collapse in a soggy heap as the band stumbles from the stage amid cheers and shattered glass.

Early morning. Kelsey, Laur, Megan and I are hiking Mt. Warning, originally named Wollumbin by the Nganduwal clan. It's an Aboriginal dreaming site. Some say the mountain is a wounded turkey, the rocky peak is the spear lodged in the turkey's back. Wollumbin also means "fighting chief of the mountain." The thunder and lighting storms that strike its lofty flanks are evidence of the battles that take place here. It is a testing ground of men, to climb it is an initiation ceremony. It's also referred to as "cloud catcher" as it is a focal point for the precipitation of the region. It's final name, Mt. Warning, was given to it by Captain Cook in 1770 as he sailed up the east coast of Australia. Further north he ran the Endeavor aground upon a large reef. The mountain was to serve as a warning to future expeditions. A warning of changes soon to come over all the lands of Australia. Yet as we hike it seems some things haven't changed. The day is overcast and moist, the rainforest makes it moister still. We climb into clouds, a formless haze that surrounds us and stifles noise. Our voices cut off and disappear immediately after our mouths. At the summit I can see nothing of the normally spectacular view stretching for miles to the ocean, across river plains and caldera ranges. We are soaked in sweat and cloud juice, lost in a sea of white tendrils, drifting in the past. There are only two sources of color here. A lone turkey wanders about among the underbrush, waiting for handouts of trail mix. She is black with a red beak and a yellow ring of loose skin about her neck. Her presence seems appropriate. A flowering tree with purple petals stretches in the space granted it. The purple hangs suspended among white mist. Occasionally a petal is disturbed by the weight of water droplets and it settles gracefully to the ground. The clouds brake slightly and I can see a forest of trees far below, an intimation of our height and the great space that usually clings to a mountain like a dreamcoat. On our way down we participate in an experiment I have long wanted to do. Kerouac claims as one of the great epiphanies that it is impossible to fall off of a mountain. This seems reasonable, within bounds. Not all mountains take kindly to being trammed upon, so pick a generous mountain. Wollumbin is such a one. And so we run, bounding down the rock steps three four at a time, gliding in between trees and dripping streams, our arms stretched out at our sides like rotating wings, modulating our controlled surrender to gravity. We slide and tumble, laughing as we collide with the bottom of the mountain. I stumble away breathing heavy and nauseated, but inestimably pleased with myself, with Wollumbin, and with our two Canadian friends who have brought us here in their 17-year-old yellow van.

Meredith has ADD, but she knows how to sit around a table and talk quietly. Sarah says she figured Meredith and I would get along best. We don't at first, but then we learn each other's pace. She loves my music, and laughing loudly without fully explaining herself.

We share an interest in exquisite food and preservative-free wine. Home from Wollumbin, I find that she's picked up an Australian with Singapore Indian heritage named Josh. Josh tells me how Aboriginal boys would climb Wollumbin after their circumcision in order to become men and learn of war. He asks what my talent is. I tell him this is a hard question, that poetry is a passion. He tells me to spend more time with myself, that climbing Wollumbin was a good thing for me. His talent is people and Bonsai trees. I read Josh a poem by Pete Hay and then one of my own, about the death of Hari's dad from a brain tumor. He likes it, and goes upstairs to make Meredith giggle.

Liz comes in at some small hour of the morning with a boy. Meredith comes downstairs and sleeps with me on the foldout couch. For an hour all we hear is the rustling of sheets and

“Ohh fuck...”

“Shh!” that's Liz.

“Fuck.”

“Shhh!”

“I can't help it! Fuck! You're so good...”

Meredith and I watch each other's smiles turn to amused despair. In the morning we both wake up at the same time to

“Fuck.”

This is too much. We burst into laughter. I tease Liz for the rest of the week about the boy with the extensive vocabulary.

I picked a table in the corner to be forgotten, to disappear in the context. I did, and was. Yet when I reemerged as customer, hungry and pre-paid, the almond croissant was still warm, the all black waitress apologetic (tall, confident, ocean eyes) but the minced almond paste under the crisp exterior was a surprise – pliable on fingertips, tongue - She saw I was enjoying myself, I think, by the buttery flakes on my chin and offered me free white jasmine tea, hand rolled by Buddhist monks in a temple workshop. The economy of spirit has no better provenance. Remember this, she said, when you're in the twilight of Frenchman's solitude, gaiter deep in snow, mud, whatever. As if she could read the new hunger in my lingering stance, the cant of my eyes through the room.

Sarah comes in asking for a hug. The preponderance of females on this trip is affecting others aside from myself. She misses the way her guy friends back home snuggle with her and fold her up in their arms. I try and fill this void for her, deeply touched to be needed in this way. We hold each other tightly for a long time. Sarah is one of the most boisterous people I've ever met. She is the quintessential extrovert. In that first hostel room in Brisbane I thought I'd never be able to get close to her, that she was just too loud. If the past month had been doing anything, it had been proving me absolutely wrong about people. Forced to spend an inordinate amount of time with everyone on this trip, I was observing my shallow first impressions, my personality typing, being given the breath of life and turned into real people. Forced to continually interact with people who I did not immediately mesh with made me create less obvious connections. And so it was with Sarah. Her mom died when she was thirteen. She loves her father intensely, but can't get along with her older brother. If she could do anything with her life it would be to make people smile. It took me some time to realize that her overabundance of energy was actually genuine, that her heart



was actually as big as her mouth, bigger I'd say. That night she'd fall asleep curled up in my lap as we watched her favorite movie, 'The Notebook'. From that point on I'd make it a point to hug her every chance I got.

I should have realized this weeks ago when Megan quietly asked for a hug while we were making dinner. I had been seeing only my own reaction to being in such an odd social dynamic, ignoring the other side of the coin. The next day I hugged everyone and something shifted dramatically between all of us. I wasn't just the 'only boy.' I was 'the boy.' I'd been seeing the obvious sexual tension without realizing the simple and universal desire for friendly physical contact.

With this bridge crossed I immediately become more comfortable with everyone. I believe it had to do with me finally seeing my place within the group, as opposed to distinguishing myself from the group. Kelsey noticed this shift and commented on it. She said she saw how much I'd grown in my ability to interact with each of them. This affirmation was huge for me, and it opened up a potential I'd not been previously aware of. Pretty soon I was spooning with Julie and Kelsey in addition to Sarah. I'd hug people at random moments throughout the day. It was like an injection of Vitamin C to the immune system. It had taken a while, but a fundamental difference between genders had been overcome. I hadn't become one of the girls, and they hadn't become a group of guys, but it felt something like that, like it didn't really matter as much anymore.

## **-Chapter Ten-**

Peter Cuming led our two-day sustainability workshop in our old stomping grounds down by Seven Mile Beach. Peter was soft-spoken, energetic, and clearly passionate about his life. We all fell a little in love with him almost immediately. He had a roundabout way of getting us in touch with what he considered sustainability to be. It quickly became apparent that our subject was not by any means a nailed-down or stable entity. Even the definition of sustainability is a shape shifter, a wet cardboard box that won't hold anything heavy unless it's cradled lovingly with both arms.

I'm going to stop for a moment. I've just come back from a much-needed walk. This is what it told me: At this moment, while I am wrestling with how best to present the topic of sustainability, I realize that I need to attend to my own personal sustainability. Perched in a small university dorm room overlooking Hobart, alone, I wake up tired of sitting at my keyboard every day, four pages closer to completion. Of what? I pretend I'm locked in an epic battle within my head, clawing for purchase, for the right words to tell this story. All the while possessed by doubt, the critic's voice. That's not what really gets to me though. It's the loneliness. And that's why I came back to Tasmania in the first place, for this self-imposed isolation. Time to think, time to write. I knew when I booked the ticket that being alone is the demon in the closet I'm most petrified of. Yes, my pulse quickens to all those folk-rock songs of the man (always) who stands alone before the world, with only his passion to shield and comfort him. The wise rogue who walks off into the night and cultivates laughter in the mountains. Han Shan, who knew Cold Mountain like no one else. This is not I. Often I wish it were, on a fitful evening before the fire, but it is not.

My most self-honest dream is that of a summer afternoon years down the road. We're all there. My family, my friends (old and new), my partner (in whatever form she happen to take). At the house for the weekend. There only need be one house, and the weekend may

continue well beyond the bounds of the literal weekend. We've all gone off; we've all come back. There is no doubt among us, and we've all long since had that introductory conversation that we're always having over and over in a thousand different languages. Beer in the backyard under the oak tree (it's always an oak tree, a white oak), vegetables on the grill. These are vegetables straight from the garden, and they feed us all. The house is small and open to the world. Recycled building materials, composting toilet, rainwater bins, solar roofing, wind turbine, natural finishing products. It's all there, in my dream, straight out of the Healthy House book. At night we gather around the fire circle to celebrate the solstice. Someone plays an instrument and we dance. We sit quietly and tell stories, read poetry and offer it up to the friendly spirits watching over our small tribe. We sleep together under the stars that night, pointing out the constellations to our children. In the morning we wake and share our dreams over breakfast and tea. This dream is not bounded to one place, but it drifts slowly skyward. In its flight it encompasses my neighbors down the trail, the villages all up and down the great Hudson River, center for commerce once again. The sail barges spread this dream to all the islands of the world. We live now in a steady-state society. Accumulation does not rule. We have realized before it was too late, that unlimited growth was not the equal opportunity meritocracy it claimed to be. Instead we've found a balance with our environments, we've learned to live within our landscapes, thus reinvesting the home with new meaning. Nature is no longer the violent struggle, the monstrous sublimity that it was to Kant and the Romantics, nor is it the path to enlightenment espoused by the verbose Transcendentalists. It is not the resource to be plundered, this suggested by the great capitalist spirits of the machine age. Instead we return, in a lazy circle, to a new and quiet wisdom.

"Ideology is a very solid thing. It stops the world," said Mary Graham. "Do you know what I mean?"

And so we lower ourselves to the earth once more, and stand, feet firmly planted in the soil of our birth, rooted by what grows around us, what we cultivate with our hands and hearts.

Roundabout, I return from this day dream to where I began, back from my walk. It's time I address the reason for writing all of this. It may be odd that I choose this point to do it, but I find that going on with a story that I've already lived feels hollow without my purpose clear. I have tried to use, more than anything, a voice that is honest. I don't mean honest to the facts, and it should not be read thus. I mean honest to the spirit of the thing, the blood and guts, the why and the how I've come to where I am now. In the end it may all just be a bit of youthful self-indulgent batting at the outlines of my form, a brief explanation for my future conduct, a classic coming of age exercise in acting like one has something to say. But that's all honest and real to me now, here in Tasmania, which for me is somewhere close to the edge of the world. This story has become my companion, my proof to everyone and myself that I came here with a purpose, and I saw that purpose out.

Beyond that selfish motive, this is about the small steps we can take to reach a dream. We are in a place now that is most certainly unsustainable. We simply cannot go on accumulating in the manner we have been. The majority of the world's material wealth is concentrated in the hands of a very small and powerful minority. This is not a system of equal opportunity. It is a system of artificial birthright, a geography of status. If we accept that global climate change is occurring, and we must for the sake of our children, then we admit that the consumption patterns of countries like the United States and Australia are directly and negatively affecting the well being of poor 'undeveloped' nations the world over.

Rising sea levels, increasing drought, more powerful hurricanes, do not threaten only the culprits. This is an era of global environmental consequence. This is not simply a battle for the rights of endangered species and natural landscapes that cannot speak for themselves in our political and economic forums, this is a battle for social justice the world over, for the rights of a man from India, a woman from Ghana, a street child from Brazil, be held equal to those of George Bush, to John Howard, to you and I. Furthermore, it is a plea for the still voiceless generations to come, our children and their children on down the line, that we leave them the opportunities to see the things we've seen, to breathe clean air, to live in a world that's not choking on itself.

This story, is about how I got to this point, how I decided this dream is what I need to dedicate my life to accomplishing; and in a small way, I hope that it's a step in the right direction. Not only is this possible, it is readily achievable. We need to do many small things at first, and then watch the world shift under our feet.

If we all did the following we'd be well on our way to stopping global warming and that much closer to a sustainable society...

1. commit to being carbon neutral by offsetting your carbon expenditures with donations to alternative energy projects
2. take short showers
3. turn off water faucets when not using the water directly
4. recycle everything you can, it saves you money
5. compost, it's waste not going to the landfill and it reinvigorates the soil
6. avoid pesticides and herbicides, they kill microorganisms that contribute to healthy soils and healthy food
7. buy organic food as much as possible, it is less damaging to the land
8. buy organic clothing if possible
9. unplug power cords when not in use, appliances continue using power even when not actively engaged
10. buy compact fluorescent bulbs, they use far less energy than standard light bulbs and last longer
11. walk or bike whenever possible
12. eat local food, the transportation and storage of food over long distances is one of the primary causes of fossil fuel expenditure
13. line dry clothing, drying machines use a lot of power when the sun can do it for you
14. bring shopping bags from home, plastic bags you use once and throw away have huge environmental impacts
15. use Tupperware instead of brown bags
16. ask your power company about switching to green alternatives, they are required by law to accommodate you
17. consider alternative energy options (solar, wind, geothermal, biomass)
18. if you must drive, buy a hybrid car or convert existing diesel cars to biodiesel
19. turn off lights when you're not in the room

Most of these practices will save you money as well as bring us closer to halting global warming.

Disembodied conversation:

“Oh my god, the footprints are huge!”

“The line between a culture of sustainability and the spirit of sustainability becomes habit and you don’t have to think about it anymore. It frees up energy for other things.”

“Live off the interest, not the capital of our planet’s ecosystem.”

“When you have an affinity with ignorance you can understand it, and you can do something about it.”

“You must develop a more funky language for it.”

“We’ve all got a little bit of the truth.”

“Become really good at what you know, effervescent, and enthusiastic.”

“Use water logic, not rock logic. Envision the end, go to it in your mind, and then come back to where you are and find the means.”

“It’s a small world awash with the waste products of humanity.”

“Listen to the wisdom of the oppressed.”

“The world is only one, and it’s for all of us”

Tim Flannery manifests himself in his leather banded canvas bush hat, “If we can change our ways before we have consumed all of the future that we are capable of, then we will have achieved something very precious.”

Last word to A.D. Hope,

And her five cities, like five teaming sores  
each drains her: a vast parasite robber state  
where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
timidly on the edge of alien shores.

## **-Chapter Eleven-**

Dear all,

I thumb through my sandy black notebook. Indecipherable scribbles – I think that was the rollercoaster bus ride up the coast to Brisbane. Something about spiral cemeteries and organic farming paradise. Half-thought daydreams as we whirled off the highways and back into national park, towards a whole week of daydreams. In Brisbane we became a convoy of four 4x4 trucks and met the famous John Sinclair, Russel, and Dave. This triumvirate of larger than life cowboy environmentalists (John Howard, Australian PM, would refer to them as rabid environmentalists) would be responsible for our wellbeing and education in the coming week.

John is a big man with exceptionally large calves, presumably from spending the majority of his life tramping about his beloved sand island. Let me back up. Fraser is the largest continuous sandmass in the world. Prevailing Southeastern winds create what's called a zeta curve, pulling sand up the eastern coast of Australia and depositing it where Fraser now sits. Some years ago sand mining companies descended upon the island like steel vultures with dynamite beaks and bank accounts instead of air sac lungs. The goal: to run as much sand as inhumanly possible through huge sifters that withdraw the valuable minerals, redeposit the sand back into the gaping holes from whence it came, replant the desiccated dune, and finally wage a brilliant PR campaign convincing the public that the island was just as ecologically stable as when they began. All this would have worked splendidly if a pair of

newlyweds back in the 1930s hadn't decided to honeymoon on the very same island. From this union, John Sinclair was born, as was his love for Fraser. He would go on to dedicate his life to protecting Fraser Island, from sand miners and loggers alike. In the process he was bankrupted by corrupt governments multiple times, his first marriage was shattered, he was threatened by plainclothes policeman that if he didn't leave the area never to return heroine would be 'discovered' in his car. In those days heroine carried a mandatory life sentence. Despite all this, he beat the sand miners and loggers in court and had Fraser established as a national park, today one of the biggest tourist attractions on the east coast of Australia. Tell anyone you're going to Fraser and they'll say, "Oh its just beautiful there. You're going to love it." It was, and we did.

Dave is a middle-aged chain smoking surfer who is biannually employed by SIT to spend a week tooling around in a 4x4 on a beach with a group of raucous Americans snapping photos and having singalongs over the two way radio between trucks. Not a bad gig. He used to be a manager for local bands. When his son graduated college Dave took him on a four-month surfing expedition up and down the coast. All the girls love Dave, almost as much as they loved that doe-eyed German named Frank we picked up way back when.

Russel's people come from up north in the Townsville area. He has never seen Fraser before. He's never driven on sand, although he did spend a length of time as an army driver. He has more to teach us than anyone on this trip, for he knows a great deal about the old ways, how to live in the bush, the stories of his ancestors. Russel is soft-spoken and unassuming. He could not possibly be more different than John Sinclair. John's always got to have the last word. Yet the two got along famously. Blackfella and whitefella sitting together swapping stories of their lands. It was clear they both shared the closest possible connection with their country, and that made them brothers whether they had arrived at that point from the same direction or not. One day we visited Camp K'gari, an area reserved for the traditional inhabitants of Fraser Island the Badtjala (Batchalla) people. Russel was demonstrating the art of spear throwing and John leaned over to one of the Badtjala men and said, "This guy's the real deal, he carries on many of the old ways, real knowledgeable about country." This statement may have been somewhat superfluous because in the next instant Russel released a spear that whistled through the air to skewer a Foster's box 40 ft away. By the way this was the first sign of Foster's I'd seen since arriving in Australia. More on the Camp K'gari experience later.

Tires screech off the ferry as it splashes into shallow water. Sand and salt spray coat the windshield as we zoom off steel, through ocean, and onto gloriously white beach. This is not my first time driving on sand, but it's certainly my fastest. John and Dave have much experience and tear off at blistering speed, free from traditional traffic constraints. Russel follows a little more cautiously until he gets his sea legs. When he feels comfortable he lets us know with a cautionary chortle of glee before slamming the gas pedal into the floor and shifting into overdrive. We crank the windows down and fling our heads into the gritty air. Every time we plow through a bump in the sand we can't help laughing hysterically, arms and legs coming into contact with torsos, windows, ceilings. Its fabulous that we've all had a day to get over our initial hangovers upon leaving Byron, because this is an altogether new style of transportation / classroom. Despite the seeming abandon with which we

embarked upon beach cruising there are dangers and obstacles to be aware of. First, the sand is not smooth and it is not stationary. Second, other 4x4's are heading the opposite way, including giant tour vehicles that look like a cross between a PT cruiser and a monster truck, except bigger. Third, driftwood placed strategically at various intervals of high traffic and thin beach will really ruin your day if approached from the wrong angle. Fourth, inland streams cut trenches in the sand and are often deeper than they appear when you are gunning for them in high gear. Fifth, the tide moves quickly and with a vengeance. It's important to know the highs and lows each day, otherwise to put it simply, you're screwed. Finally, silly little people in giant waders stand in the surf for hours on end with long poles and windswept hair, grizzled beards and keen eyes. Add all of this up and you quickly lose any semblance of reality and find yourself immersed in a Need for Speed type video game where the only control you have is the big red button called "Russel go faster, you've got to catch Dave!" That and the positive reinforcement of cheering every time we fly over a trench way too fast. All this excitement would be compounded later in the week as we drove inland, on tracks carved out of forest and deeper sand. This type of driving requires a fair bit of momentum to carry you over the real sloshy stuff. We quickly realized that we could slow down just enough to get the car behind us stalled in the muck, at which point their passengers would have to get out and push and then run up and jump back in the car as it surged forward Little Miss Sunshine style. What fun!

What could be more fitting after a day of bombing around sand dunes then sitting back and relaxing behind a large perimeter fence and enjoying a three course meal. You see Fraser is home to a large dingo population. Dingoes are nothing to be real concerned about, unless you're walking alone in the evening or if you're a small unattended child. And so it's best to sleep in heavily fortified compounds. On a lighter note, John is a fantastic camp cook. Every night he provided us with a different soup starter, followed by a gourmet main dish, and concluded by a rot-your-teeth delicious dessert. While we were waiting for dinner there was a box labeled happy hour to amuse ourselves with. The contents of this box varied but always contained mixed nuts, boxed wine, smoked mussels, and sparklers. It appeared that these were the key ingredients necessary for a full experience of the natural wonder of Fraser Island. Fine by me.

At this point I've got a notebook full of little anecdotes and small conclusions as to the nature of true happiness based upon my observations of dune succession and alternating vegetation paradigms, but I'll cut it down to just a couple for the sake of patience. Don't worry, writing the full version is my job for the next month's research project. I'll tell you how I happened into that at the end of the email.

Sand receives its color from fungal nutrients that bind to the silica particles. As sand ages the nutrients drop deeper and deeper, culminating in two separate horizons or layers. The top layer is the white sand the nutrients have leached out of. The B-horizon, or second layer, is the nutrient concentrate. The depth and concentration of this layer determines the vegetation pattern on the surface of the dune. Fraser Island has six dune systems, or dominant vegetation groups. Depending upon the type of nutrients, the sand appears a different color. This creates a spectrum ranging from pearl white to amber to blood red to coffee rock brown. Where the wind has carved out pinnacles and hollows in the dune these colors display themselves in majestic abandon.

The Badtjala people tell of Wuru, a young girl promised to Winyer, an older man. Instead Wuru falls in love with Wiberigan, the rainbow. Winyer sees Wuru and Wiberigan walking on the beach one day and his jealousy turns to rage. He throws his boomerang at Wuru, intent on killing her. Just in time Wiberigan steps in front of Wuru and is shattered by the boomerang. His colors spread through all the sands of K'gari (Fraser). From that moment the colored sands become a sacred site, a place of good luck for women.

Love abounds on this island, often hidden under thick exteriors. The fungi in the sand guard their nutrients jealously, holding them close. But they have no access to glucose. The photosynthesizing plants have plenty of glucose and are willing to share. In exchange the fungi release a bit of their bonded nutrients upwards into the plant roots. It is this relationship that makes Fraser possible, that gives rise to semi-tropical rainforest and some of the tallest trees in the world. It is perhaps the greatest love affair on the island. John Sinclair might be the second. Sarah asked him one day what his favorite spot on Fraser was. He paused a moment and replied, "Asking me for my favorite place is like saying you can only love one person." John has given his life's energy to protecting this place and he knows it better than any other living person. He owns Fraser as much as anyone can own any piece of earth. He is still fighting for his island. We asked him later if he ever feels tired, ever gets burnt out. He didn't understand what burnout was; he's never felt it, never wanted to do anything else with his life.

The rainforest on Fraser (dune system 4) is as obvious as it is abrupt. Within ten feet the entire floral scheme shifts. Satinay and tallwood are the dominant species here. Tall straight trees with vines and ferns running along the streams. Every forest has its colors. Some are subtle and require quiet contemplation to pick out. Some are as blatant as a rhinoceros tap dancing on your toes. Ben and I noticed the purple and yellow of winter woods in the Hudson Valley. Here it is deep sawdust red and brilliant green. The red bark of the satinays seems to extend and penetrate the dust filtered light. It is as if the ancient trees were still recovering from the scars of logging, the blood pulp lingering in the understory. We breathe it in silently as we walk, aware of the great girth of history witnessed here. Some of these trees have lived for thousands of years, time enough to see the changing regimes of man, legends of fall and renewal, the hero myths of Arthur, Wallace, Shakespeare. The water in the silent creeks (there are no rocks to make noise) is the purest anywhere. We stop to sip rejuvenation from the roots of the island, before hightailing it down the beach in front of rising tides and the approaching rainsquall, sea foam blowing into the windshield wipers.

Peter's daughter, Carmen, has come to Fraser with us. Ten years old, she hangs on all the girls, and occasionally when her courage is up, she comes to me for a game of 'steal my beanie'. Today she is wearing a bright pink dress and lime green pants. We're exploring a huge sandblow. By exploring I mean running around and rolling down huge slopes of golden powder. I am the only one with a camera today, which is a shocking occurrence. Generally the girls are wild about photos. Designated the official photographer, I lie at the bottom of a monster dune as the girls climb it. Once they have summited, they turn, and in a line, bound downward towards me. The slope is such that they can actually become airborne for a short

period of time, falling more than running. They're moving too quickly for me to get more than three pictures before they level off at the bottom. I manage, however, to snap a photo of Carmen as she has both feet off the ground, sand flying up behind her, golden hair and pink dress bustling in the wake of her momentum, arms out like wings, and a tremendous smile wrapped across her face. She is, momentarily, every child who has ever run laughing amongst the world, and her joy is the best thing we can offer.

My favorite moment of the trip was our time spent at Camp K'gari with Joe, Smiley, and Travis. They performed a traditional welcoming dance and told stories of their people. Then they allowed Russel to demonstrate his spear throwing, boomerang throwing, and fire making. These guys were all younger than Russel and trying to relearn the old knowledge, having been driven off K'gari years before. They invited Russel back to share more with them and he was delighted. As a parting gift Russel gave them his six homemade spears, a spear thrower, and his fire starter. Smiley, the guy who'd been throwing spears with me all afternoon lived up to his name and beamed at us, waving wildly as we drove off. A spear thrower is a piece of carved hardwood, in this case wattle, a little longer than one's forearm with a hard tip affixed to the top with beeswax. To throw the spear you fit the hollow bamboo end into the tip of the spear thrower and lay it over the length of the thrower. You grip the thrower and rotate your arm overhand as you would if you were throwing a baseball. The thrower acts as an extension of your arm and so you get increased distance and velocity with less effort. Smiley and I spent a couple of hours trying to hit the Foster's target that Russel had nailed. We'd cheer each other whenever we got real close and then run out to collect the spears and try again. Meanwhile Smiley told me what the colors of the Aboriginal flag stood for. Black for the people of the land, yellow for the life-giving sun, and red for the suffering and blood of colonization. Finally John whooped his typical "all aboard!" so I turned for one more go at the infamous Foster's. Whamoo!

"Right through its guts!" yelled Smiley. We won't go hungry tonight. As I was leaving, Smiley turned to me and said, "It was a pleasure throwing spears with you mate, good travels." I think I glowed the rest of the day.

And now that I've run up a giant email again and totally discredited my earlier commitment to only give you a couple anecdotes, I'll conclude with an outline of my plan for the coming month. We have four and a half weeks for our independent study project (ISP), during which we are entirely on our own. My project will be to fly back to Hobart, Tasmania and combine these loosely chronological emails with other conversations, stories, events, tragedies, moments of contemplation, and poetry into some kind of creative piece resembling a travel memoir. Meanwhile I recently discovered that Hobart has two climbing gyms. As I have not climbed in two months my fingers are like putty, my pull up count is in disrepute, my "sexy back muscles" have wilted, and my soul is crying out for vertical therapy. All this I mean to remedy with a strict regimen of furious morning writing, frequent café reading breaks, long romantic walks in the beautiful parks and suburbs of Hobart, relaxed dinners over a glass of scotch, followed by nightly forays to the climbing gym. In five weeks I will be back on my way to peak fitness and theoretically I'll have a good piece of writing to submit for academic review.

I hope you all reply with updates from the home front. Ben, be thinking about which mountain you'd like to climb around about the Xmas time. Chelsea, you still alive? Mr.



Kane, thanks for setting me up with Les Murray. I've contacted him and arranged a meeting for Sunday, November 5th. He's taking me out for breakfast. Joel, climb anything lately? Kelly, Jesus are you really in Malaysia? Jenna, I keep hearing how Oberlin is such a shining example of sustainability research. Have you taken any classes with David Orr? Jay, still keeping keeping on? Chris, fruitful autumn harvest? And how's Jack? Mom and Dad, I'm being very safe, not to worry. Also, my range in cooking has expanded ten fold. I may even purchase a cookbook. Everyone else, if you want your name in the email send me a goddamn message.

Love,  
Mike

Joel Dashnaw <joel.dashnaw@gmail.com>  
To: mikantor@gmail.com

Mike,

I must keep this short, as it is late, and I have to be a teacher tomorrow. But...

...god bless you and god bless your emails. Seriously.

The weather's been a bit iffy up here in the ol' northland, so most of my climbing forays have been inside, but I'm feeling pretty strong and seeing some gains in my strength. A couple of weeks ago I was down at New Paltz for the annual climbing film fest, and well, climbing. I wanted to do routes but the only partner I could find was Kyle's friend Alex, and he only wanted to boulder...so we bouldered. It was okay, but partly frustrating. I did send "Anticipation", finally, but I had really been jonesing for some crazy adventures in multipitch scariness, and Alex is a big pussy when it comes to heights, so, no dice. Sigh. But, I'm feeling strong and psyched for the trip, and eagerly awaiting your return. Seriously...I miss you bro. I think, however, a five month cross country climbing extravaganza might put the kabosh on that.

Until then, I await your next email, like your return, with baited breath.

hmmm, I'm going to break from tradition and end with something a little less southern hemisphere than my usual "cheers"...

Much love and respect,  
joel

And to augment my usual parting quote, I give you one of the finest sentences ever crafted...

"That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet." -Emily Dickinson

**-Chapter Twelve-**

We return from Fraser to the very same hostel we inhabited the first night of our Australian adventure. The man behind the counter takes one look at me and says,

“You’re a legend around here mate, with your traveling harem.”

“Oh,” I say, “I don’t like to brag about it really. It was none of my doing.” This in a tone that suggested it really was all my doing. Despite this welcome I got stuck in a room with three other guys, one of whom spoke not a word of English. He chose instead to communicate by staring intently at me from the moment I walked in the door to the moment I turned out the light. It was an uncomfortable situation to say the least. In the morning we reconvened for our bus back to Byron. Other than my freakish roommate and Carly complaining of a bit of the cold buggerage (she’d been sickish for a while now), everything seemed to be in order.

We were scheduled for one stop that afternoon, at the home of a sustainable architect. Kelsey had previously done a bit of flirting with said architect’s son, and so she was slightly nervous about the encounter. The house was lovely, perched upon the sloping terraces of a rainforest river valley. It reminded me very much of the Swiss Family Robinson home. But it was the paintings that made me take out my notebook. They hung in large dusty frames in a studio looking over the river below and on toward hook-nosed Wollumbin, cloud-catcher, dreamgiver.

“You’ve used your knowledge,” said the architect, spreading his arms to encompass his four walls, “and this is just another way of scribbling.”

The scribbles, I realized, contained some hidden code, a brushstroke voice, the rainbow Wiberigan. There were still scenes, the slow curve of sand dune, toes tickling the window lakes. There were grand streaming scenes, motion writ upon the faces of thousands of marchers on Sorry Day, crossing the Sydney Harbor Bridge waving the Aboriginal flag. There, in the back, nestled in behind stacks of unframed work was the scene that took me back to Fraser.

Driving south along the beach, rush of insistence, strain in John’s face keeping the jeep in line with thread marks. Coming back from forest of the giants,

-Red is the bloodmulch of trees  
Dust settles for a thousand years  
after logging-

-Ringbarked, we try to stand  
despite the fluid pouring from our stomachs  
the venom injected into nervous systems-

The dull purple of cloud masses backlit with the orange of an afterglow sun, wedging up as if to cleave the bubbling ocean. The rain is a few hundred meters offshore, fit to scour the sand. Out to the darkening east the ocean feels deadly tonight, as if it were set to reveal its churning dead, the sea-swallowed drifting along underwater currents, a catalog of nautical evolution – bark canoes to nuclear submarines. And then the rain breaks on tired sand. We skid through a turn toward our campground John thrusts the stick into low gear engine groaning against the boggy weight shifting now a downed jeep beached in the way. He’s an Indian man visiting from Cali with his two daughters. Night’s come along with the rain. We try and dig

him out; wet sand sticks to our faces. Finally someone with a winch comes along and pulls him ass backwards back toward the beach. He'll park in the dunes tonight.

After dinner we sit huddled around the table. Russell has promised dreamtime stories. The world is cold and wet tonight. Carly folds herself into my shoulder and closes her eyes. We sit in the quiet of full bellies. Tell us about the seven sisters. The Milky Way comes down to swallow us. Old man becomes evening star. Crow turns black forever. I don't have permission to tell these stories, but I don't need to. They wing and bank in the air, drift and call themselves into being. In this land that reaches the stars, to get lost in the heavens is easier than we first suspected. Time is understood as the telling of a story, a calling up of spirits. Everything is new, and dances. Russell names us. I am Manara, the kangaroo. Because you're quiet, he says, and you look around a lot. Yeah, that's you. Manara. And the honeyeaters probe their fine curved bills right into the flowers' honeyed hearts.

-Footsteps light in the dreamfield  
A child tiptoes on newpack snow  
gnarled branches wreathed in winter's moisture-

I'm not sure if I'm sleeping now or still listening to the stories. Russell continues. He's telling of the deeptime now. 'Gulbu' means older brother, 'gulmbu' younger. He's standing now in front of us, holding in this vision the flag of his people. From the black come small figures dancing into the space between our eyelids. They ring us now, chanting a slow birth song. From the yellow sun comes the spark of life to the soil. From the red comes this plague, bad spirits that kill and plunder, 200 years of violence. They are chanting still, now for healing, stepping through the sun's portrait. Drumming, drumming, calling, stomping one foot down red dust rises, drumming, one foot rising red dust, calling, chanting, for healing healing healing.

Carly and I are holding each other below the sky, looking for a constellation we recognize. The clouds are passing. On their way they are rearranging the darkness. There is still room for all the passions and despairs of the world. And we may find one day, that we are indeed much closer to the stars than we had believed in our simple rationalizations.

I wake up in Byron. We are here for the last time. The next few days are structured around our ISP proposals. The independent study project is a one-month period in which we all wander off separately in pursuit of some research relating in some way to the environment, or sustainability, or Aboriginal culture. The guidelines are few, the possibilities broad. We can go anyway within Australia. We're all nervous. Sarah is approaching the level of headless chicken scampering up and down the street blood spewing from its neck cavity. I'm more philosophical about it, as I've devised a project to my exact liking. I'd previously disposed of the following ideas: soil comparison between organic and conventional farming methods, comparison of methods between organic, biodynamic, and permaculture, swimming holes and the creation of landscapes of play, and possible links between Gaia and systems theory and psychedelic imagery and drug use (shamanism, vision quests and so forth). Instead I decided on ecological storytelling. The question of how you communicate an environmental imperative had been provoking me all semester. I aimed to synthesize my recent travel experiences with bits of poetry, photography, conversations, and other sentence fragments all with the hope of developing some 'funky language', a story that

evoked an increased sense of place and homeness, and with that the moral and physical responsibility of stewardship. My somewhat rash and idealistic plan, which Peter approved, was to travel down the east coast by train, stopping in Forster to meet with Les Murray (thanks to an introduction by Paul Kane), and then continuing on to Hobart. Tasmania seemed like the natural place to hide away and ponder my ecological muse, and it had been calling me back since our short week back in September. It all made perfect sense. So I relaxed and went out for a delicious and expensive dinner while others panicked.

Brown Meredith and I share an economic sense that says it is no crime to occasionally spend generous sums of money for outstanding food. We sat at a street-side table, watching people gearing up for another night of bar hopping. The musicians on the corner regaled us with some 'indigenous' beats, of which I am no acceptable judge. The restaurant was Byron Fresh and we'd heard excellent reviews. Sarah, Julie, Devorah, and Erin had decided to join us. I ordered a trout fettuccine and Meredith ordered an even more delectable swordfish platter. As per tradition I ordered calamari for an appetizer. To accompany the fish, we brought two bottles of preservative-free chardonnay. The evening passed freely, in the unmeasured way of fine rich food and smooth booze. Peter Cuming stopped by for a glass of wine. We talked of small things and he wished us luck on our ISPs.

"I'd forgotten how much I like nice restaurants," I said to Meredith.

"You have no idea." She grinned and let out one of those unnecessary but delightful laughs.

I proceeded to discuss the merits of preservative-free wine based upon my experiences in a Tuscan farmhouse the previous spring. Meredith listening intently while Sarah rolled her eyes and told me to shut up as I was being too snobbish. Her general complaint of me throughout the trip was that I had a way of sounding academically elitist. And I always thought I just liked discussing ideas. After a bottle of wine I was prepared to bow to her opinion and give her a hug instead.

'This is Halloween, this is Halloween, Halloween, Halloween.' I think we all felt a little like Tim Burton's Jack in Christmastown. Halloween is not so big in Australia. We felt it our responsibility and privilege to carry on with the freewheeling tradition even here on foreign shores. Erin wanted me to be Frodo as I have hairy feet and brown curly hair, which at this point in the semester is rather outlandishly uncontrollable. I decide instead upon a paperbark tree. Recycled newspaper, duct tape, and Megan's green pants atop my head does not make for an expensive and time-consuming costume. Simple yet effective, I was an enormous hit, until everyone had to start picking up after my peeling bark.

After consuming a table full of the sweetest things we could buy or bake we went out to the town park with a boombox, intent upon creating a scene. This we did. Fifteen Americans with their accompaniment of Australian boys dancing in makeshift costumes to teenage monster mash songs. We gathered all sorts of other revelers about us, fellow celebrators, the curious and drunk. As I was a tree I experimented with specific tree-like dances, swaying techniques, fluttering finger-leaves, the dip and flap, all very tribal, if I can use an adjective that has long been stolen from its original context.

Megan had pulled off a startling imitation of a kookaburra and I was enjoying messing with her beak. Enraged, she chased me about ripping bark from my back. Eventually I was forced to climb a lamppost for refuge. Here I am at the tippy top of this lamppost in the middle of town with a crazed kookaburra flapping about below me and some drunk of the female persuasion wanders over and shouts up,

“You’ve climbed the wrong tree! Look the coconuts are over there.” She points, expecting me to immediately see the reasoning of her argument, climb down from my haven, and climb up the palm tree in pursuit of coconuts. There certainly are some strange people out there.

Later in the evening, exhausted and sweating through my newspapers, I strolled back toward the apartments with Emily. She had been a Mexican, outfitted with the typical poncho, sombrero, mustache, and bottle of tequila. Everyone loved Emily. She’d done a previous SIT semester in Ecuador and had a habit of calling everyone ‘snitch’. With silky brown hair and a ski jump nose she is rather adorable and cuddly, albeit in a different way than Geoff Mosley.

We rounded the corner to see someone lying on the ground holding his head. A woman sat next to him, and a third man was pacing back and forth in front of them. A boy named Justin, the second and more talkative of the men Liz brought home, was standing on our side of the street. We walked up and asked what happened. Apparently the guy standing had head-butted the guy lying down and busted open the skin over his eye. They were supposedly friends, but both appeared well beyond intoxicated. The guy lying down was bitching loudly to everyone. The guy standing was suggesting they go to the hospital. We stood and talked quietly about the situation from across the street. Befuddled and complacent by our rather bizarre evening, I had no expectation of trouble. In retrospect, it should have been a little more obvious. What Justin hadn’t told us was that he had a few words with the guy now lying down and apparently the guy had not been entirely polite. Justin was agitated. After a certain amount of gawking on our part the guy stood up and directed his attention toward us. Tall, angry, drunk, bleeding from the head, and full of testosterone he walks towards us yelling something about not eyeing his woman, and just because he was crying now didn’t mean he wasn’t a man. In order to prove this point he transfers the momentum of his legs into a fist and slams it into Justin’s face, all without breaking stride. Emily and I leap backwards as Justin reels against a storefront window. I am now fully aware of the aggressiveness of the situation, a little late for preventive action. With this guy still fuming in front of us and itching for further bone on bone contact Emily and I grab Justin and back away quickly, hands in front of us. We make it to our apartments and slowly try and calm Justin, who is at this point livid. Eventually he decides against going back and starting an all out brawl.

This craziness was of course not something I expected, more to the point, it was something I was entirely unprepared for. Even in Byron, there is an element of the dangerous and unpredictable. Not everyone offers love and accommodation. This was a lesson I don’t think any of us had learned. Instead, I believe we were all too dazzled by the warmth of strangers and unsuspecting of any less than honest intentions. All part of a sheltered childhood, ivory tower universities, and of course the fruity cocktails on the beach. This incident was something to remember, to take with me on my future travels.

After a short but potent final exam the next day, Laur and I decided to make a celebratory dinner. The ‘class’ section of our semester was over, and the independent scariness was about to begin. We decided upon baked pumpkin with a cinnamon, nutmeg, and brown sugar topping. This was followed by a pesto linguine adorned with pine nuts and sliced tomatoes, accompanied by homemade garlic bread. The meal would not have been complete without a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label. Very shortly I was roaring (I

wouldn't call it singing) along to the exquisite Man of La Mancha Broadway cast recording. Now at home my shame is usually covered over by the equally scandalous voices of my friends, who all know the words by heart. But here I was a solo performer and my rendition, or rather my bloody slaying of the original, was an ugly nude thing. I remedied this later in the evening by stripping down and jumping in the apartment pool, I suppose with the hopes of cleansing my guilty vocal chords. Alas, these things are never so easy, nor quickly forgotten.

The morning came, and I woozy, read this email:

Chelsea writes: All I hear from you is what you're doing for your school stuff and about Australia. I truly love the stories, but it would be nice to hear a little about you as well. How is Mike doing? Do you miss home, do you never want to come back? The porridge was cold tonight, or maybe a cramp in your left toe? Anything will suffice.

To: Chelsea Hoel <moinna@hotmail.com>

I miss home. I miss you. I'll be happy when I'm back by the Hudson, I'm happy now. Well except for the fact that I may be getting sick. The timing would be unfortunate. I'm about to head out on my own for my ISP. Back to Tasmania and a month of writing. It's a scary proposition for me. In the meantime, I've become much closer to this wild bunch of females I travel with. They've taught me a lot about women. You could say I've been getting in touch with my feminine side I suppose. Hehe. I'm sure you're thrilled. But it's a really big thing for me, I've been able to open up and become comfortable with most of them. I've gotten a lot of feedback saying I've grown so much in my ability to communicate, and just generally be "the boy." They ask about you often. And I tell them what it was like to be with you this summer, to weed together, bopping and grooving, simply laying together and watching the sky. I've learned to loosen up a little and dance to cheesy Halloween songs in a park in the middle of town. I still want to learn to tango with you when I come home. If you're still interested :) I've been going through some significant growth, in how I see myself, in how I see others, in my vision for the future.

I want to continue sharing all that with you. I want you to open up to me more. You never need an invitation. I want to hear who you are right now, because I haven't heard your voice for two months. Are you still excited about Brazil? What is your dream right now? For yourself, for us. I wish you could see the excitement in my eyes right now, in my hands. There is so much to do in this world, for this world, and we have the rest of our lives to do it. This is the first time in my life that I'm taking time to do exactly what I need to be doing, rather than what I'm supposed to be doing. There is so much energy in that, so much boldness and power in motion. In what ways are you moving now? Where do you see yourself?

I want to touch you again, kiss you. I want to read you poetry, tell you stories. I want you to do the same for me. I want to be frank, bare, unprotected and open, quixotic. Distance changes perception. New places form new people from old. Since arriving in Australia I've had to constantly reexamine who I am, who I want to be, and how I can get there. Every day

I'm learning a little about how to take notes on life, how I work inside, what makes me happy, content, sad. I see a little more deeply into the evolution of relationships, with people, with places. I see how many connections I still need to make, how many I've never considered before. I see that time truly is 'an invention' of spirit. And there are infinite varieties and measures of time. I'm struggling to define my time. I feel a need, a rush to accomplish, to become, to create, to give back. But I need to slow down too, to be comfortable alone, with myself, with everyone else. To be still and bold at the same time, different time.

This is what I'm feeling right now. What are you feeling?

Love,  
Mike

### **-Chapter Thirteen-**

The rain fell steadily as I packed hurriedly. We all had to be out of the apartments by 10am. A few of the girls had already departed for the Brisbane airport. Seven of us were going to Sydney, two to Perth on the west coast, one back to Lismore, four were staying in the general Byron area, and I to Tasmania. My bus didn't come until 11pm so I had the day to kill, once again homeless. Liz was staying in Byron so we wandered the wet streets together. We waited with everyone else for their buses. Erin's bus took off as she was till saying goodbye to us and she had to catch a later one. An Aboriginal woman walks up in a tight lime green t-shirt and black jeans. She is skinny and walks in a sort of half-crouch. When she is positioned in front of the bus stop, so we can all see her, she crouches real low to the ground and then springs up straight. She sweeps her hand over us, bony pointer extended.

"Whitefella's lease on our land is up! In 2008." She's not yelling but her voice holds the taught pitch of menace.

"It's up! And then war. See what happens. War in 2008!"

With that she's gone, strutting down the street, accusing finger lingering in the now silent crowd. We look at each other uneasily, not sure if we should smile and shrug it off or stay quiet. There was nothing to do but focus again on our goodbyes and goodlucks, now with a new specter hanging over this dreary day.

I board the greyhound with the prospect of an all-night drive ahead of me. The long clean interior is quiet. We're underway and the driver turns off the lights. I am now alone with my thoughts, feeling like I've just left everything I grew comfortable with over the past two months, like I'm entering a new and secret country whose borders appear only at a certain time of night, under a certain absence of light and company.

Great bodies of water by moonlight could be great bodies of water anywhere. I could be traveling in any direction, to any unmapped space. Once the lights are off the bus becomes a hollowed out stage for the passing half-seen landscapes, decomposing into geometric planes that reflect the racket of dreams from a pinball brain. The tinge of surreal that always accompanies the blue black of lunar distance deepens at the scarred fluorescent truck stops, selling savage bliss condoms above the urinals. A neon underlit spaceship cab plays 'Down with the Sickness' at one am timeless rest areas. The only motive in this drift-state is to cover ground, to transport from one day into the next. I wake up in a new town with no reality to step down from, my time on the road being nothing solid or sure.

7am in Forster, a coastal town four hours north of Sydney. It's still raining. My worldly possessions for three and a half months are strapped to my back and getting soaked. I'm here to meet Les Murray, renowned Australian poet. Vassar professor Paul Kane has arranged a meeting. I make my way, with a fair bit of luck, to our selected meeting spot outside of a newsagent on Wharf Street, stopping at Gloria Jean's Coffee for a hot chai tea. The girls behind the counter discuss the merits of their town, which are apparently substantial, as long as it's not raining. For now I'm just glad something's open, warm and dry.

Les Murray is a great big fellow with a childlike laugh and deep opinions.

"You look like a Michael Kantor," he says, strolling out from behind his car. I suppose I do. Full to the seams red backpack, jeans that if they were washed would be perfectly acceptable in decent company, green L.L.Bean fleece with small holes from where campfire embers burnt through, and a shiny rain jacket the color of Vitamin C piss. The fish and chips shop is still closed so we go next door to a café specializing in pancakes.

Let me step back for a minute and share Paul's introduction and cautionary email about Les Murray.

Paul Kane <kane@warwick.net>

To: [mikantor@gmail.com](mailto:mikantor@gmail.com)

Mike,

Great to get your missive. Keep them coming. It's good news, too, that you'll be shaping all your notes into some whole. A great idea.

Don't visit Les Murray without reading some of his poems and a couple of essays. Bear in mind that his wife, Valerie, is every bit as much of a genius as he is (so don't underestimate her if you meet her). They're very laid back and have their own view of things. Les abhors conformity, both of the Right and the Left, and he's very egalitarian-minded. He might shock you. But he loves a yarn, so be sure to tell him a few. He's one of my favorite people, so I hope you have a good time with him. Let me know how it goes.

Goodness, what an adventure you're having!

I order the apple and cinnamon pancakes. Les orders a coffee. The pancakes are fairly bland, uneventful things. He has a direct, knowing way of speaking. He is, for some reason, very pleased that I was born in Sleepy Hollow, on the banks of the Hudson. As I finish my breakfast he gets up to pay.

"Allow me to corrupt our relationship with money," he says to the waitress. Clearly he's a poet.

We drive to a green cathedral on the edge of Wallace Lake. Palm trees ring a row of benches and a pulpit; now they sprinkle rainwater over our heads. We stand within the space of this prayer ground gazing out over the lake. Les mentions the indigenous issues in Australia. After a moment of silence he says simply,



“There is no solution.”

I considered the reality of that statement. In the US the ‘issue’ is hardly discussed. It has become just another page in a dark human narrative, to be placed on the dusty shelf and forgotten for fear of allergies. Meanwhile the slow grind of the world continues. We discuss the now vacant highway of rivers that run like veins throughout his home, the imagined timbergetters, shipwrights, fishermen, and masons up and down the banks. In a poem he calls this region the ‘domain of the octopus’.

Conversation turns to family. He fondly mentions his psychic daughter who speaks to spirits with the help of Buddhism and crystals. I ask about his early experiences with poetry and reading.

“The best advice I ever received was this: learn to project. Speak to the row in the back that doesn’t exist. As for the rest, don’t ever be afraid of them, and don’t try to charm them.”

There seemed little else to be said on the subject. He sticks to poetry now, because essays make him too argumentative. I reckon we could use a few more argumentative poets in the world these days. He doesn’t figure he’s smart enough to teach, although I’d suggest otherwise. After a while Les drops me off at my hostel and drives back to the guests he’s left at home with his wife. It’s time to begin looking toward Tasmania and this bit of writing I said I’d do.

#### **-Chapter Fourteen-**

I met Phil this morning under rather peculiar circumstances. As I haven’t yet received my kitchen set from accommodation I’m fixing myself peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with my pocketknife. I’m walking down the hall toward the bathroom with my strawberry jelly coated knife in my hand and this guy comes around the corner, apparently with designs on the same bathroom. He looks down and sees the knife, stops, raises his hands palms outward and backs up into his room. I clean my knife in the bathroom and mosey over to see if he’s still there. As I enter his room he turns with a ten inch serrated army knife in his hand. At this moment I figure it would be the diplomatic thing to do to introduce myself. He accepts my strawberry jelly story and shakes my hand.

Phil is from Adelaide. He mumbles and has the most pronounced Australian accent I’ve yet heard. This combination makes him close to impossible to understand. Obstacles aside, he takes me down to the casino at Wrest Point and after a few mid-afternoon drinks we’re betting on horses in the Melbourne Cup. Phil’s friend Fatty has come along as well. He’s an Egyptian Canadian who’s somehow found his way down to Tassie for uni.

That night, at the climbing gym, I meet two logging protesters who offer to take me to the Upper Florentine with them in order to live in trees. One of them is actually the guy who built the giant stump house with the two beds and stove that we toured earlier in the semester.

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The uni stands atop one of Hobart’s ring hills. From this academic aerie I sit with a cup of green jasmine tea, looking down on the red and yellow night lights of a city at rest. An Eagles song lodges in my mind – learn to be still. Back at Vassar Ryan and I had spent so much time searching for our sacred quietude, in off-limit grandfather trees and dorm rooftops. Here it blankets my feet like unsullied snow falling in orange gloaming. I am afraid of it.

I also feel the possibility that survives in the space behind fear. This is when I have my vision of the story. And I know that it is not utopian; it is everywhere. We are its sentences, its dialogue, its climax; yet it's always beginning and we are always becoming fresh voices in its thrall.

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The hill extends up beyond the walls and parking lots. I walk up a track into open woodland. It is one of those rare days in Hobart when the sun has no competition for our skyward gaze. For some reason I think of Surya, and wonder if he's still prancing about his pasture or if he's already grown too old for that. When he was born on the hottest day this summer he came out with one leg bent backwards. Chris and I had to splint his forelegs so he could stand and nurse, until he found his own strength. The bush where I now walk has burned a few weeks ago in a fire that threatened the outskirts of Hobart. I can still smell the charcoal in the air, like a campfire that's just been extinguished. The trees are charred about their bases and all the small scrub has burnt back to the blackened earth. Already there are verdant shoots rising like a well-watered chia pet from the light brown soil.

I stop by a fence overlooking a blasted out quarry pit. Beyond the quarry a road chugs slowly uphill as if it is great work to escape the gravity of Hobart's basin, beyond which there is only the rising momentum of the opened up sky. Warm light drips onto my face, filling an emptiness that's been troubling me. Remember the winter morning Ben, Hari, and I sat by a clear stream in the woods. It was warm enough for t-shirts and we marveled at everything, as though this spring in January was a magical aberration in the calendar and for this one day, this hour, the world might be remade into anything. I sat with my back to the fence, meditating on an ant colony to my right. I could see the importance of enthusiasm. Realized Kelsey had been teaching us this lesson in spades. Seemed like every day she came back with a new story about how she met some new person and invariably they told her what a beautiful spirit she had. After two months I could see what everyone else was seeing. It came down to a simple and uncontained enthusiasm for life and all that it entailed. What I find so addicting about the Beat writers is their absolute, uncompromising enthusiasm for living in moments, for soaking it all up. In order to make people see and feel the things you do it's necessary to be wide-eyed and shout it from the mountains. Ben's infecting charisma comes from his tireless willingness to run off and lose himself in some poorly planned and brilliantly executed adventure. This is not me, I admit. I am here on my own, and the only voice that will answer my questions is my own. It tells me I am cautious; I need order. Usually I need to know why I am doing something, although I'm slowly learning to give this up. I try and make sense of things, yet it's the view that cannot be contained or explained that draws me back to it, as though there is some mystery to be solved. That this life is, in the end, irreducible to our philosophy, our science, our very rationality that at first sets us apart, is for me all the evidence I need for a faith in the power of myth, of spirit, of the flowing beneath the surface.

My clothes and arms are streaked black from the soot of shriveled bark. I climb up a fallen trunk for a view of the Derwent and all the church steeples prickling its underbelly. Cars following the ridgeline below me, and one lone cyclist slowly breathing his way up the endless incline. The urge to cheer him on is overwhelming. I raise up my arms and begin yelling incomprehensible syllables of excitement. If he looked up he would have seen what I had seen years ago when I scored my first goal on the hockey team, my dad standing on the bleachers ape-like and hysterical. But I don't think he heard me, the wind spread my voice

thinly over the husked hillside. I clambered down, retreating to my room at the uni. A few days later a poison-ivyish rash broke out over my arms, quickly spreading to my back, legs, and feet. It itched for a week and then slowly dissipated. In the meantime I worried that I was somehow allergic to the sheets of my bed and slept very poorly.

-Mocking me up Battery Point  
when I peak through white slats  
into snowglobe gardens  
as though they were women  
undressing for an afternoon shower-

-I smile at everyone,  
hoping for dinner and  
a fireside chat-

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I sit in Princes Park up Battery Point. I put down Gwen Harwood's poetry to watch three dogs play and a fourth watch silently from a nearby balcony. They are husky-like, but smaller, sheep dogs. Beautiful black and white coats, like this woman's clothing. She half-smiles as she walks by. The dogs run everywhere and lie panting in the grass, clearly (to my eyes anyway) enjoying this cloudy wind-ruffled afternoon. Or all of life maybe. Grizzled Rosa runs up to me and then away before I can put down my pen. Maybe they have not given any thought to the trouble in describing a seagull's arc, or loneliness. Maybe they have. My raspberry and white chocolate muffin is exactly what I want. I am, in a small way, immensely glad I have it. From my bench I see the Derwent. It really is just like the Hudson from this angle. The ripple grey waters reveal nothing of their depth. It will hold the marine science vessel, 300 meters long. I know this. This ship will leave its birth in mid-January with a full contingent of scientists (60 some) plus 30 crew. Its time in the Southern Ocean will be four months. My muffin is long gone and the mercury clouds outflank the remaining blue. Dinner time soon. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. But as we are one day ahead of the US it really won't be Thanksgiving until early Friday. In 20 years, it is my first away from home.

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After napping, I recall a dream and realize that one of the things I most want to do is wrestle someone. Simple boyish roughhousing. The girls had not provided me the opportunity.

Here at Midnight

I, godless, pace the longtimbered  
halls of myth  
Heeled echoes champion my silence,  
my prayer for dawn's winged ships  
to carry me, salted stowaway,  
on Pacific's homeward thrust

What began night-squired  
and milky mooned,  
down from lavish crossroads  
This greyhounded stranger to the  
Octopus territories, and further still  
to the isle lit by over-mountain thunder,  
the peel of scree-topped men  
and the lean wisdom of  
souls adrift, first chained,  
unchained by plough and cattle fence  
A fleck in the gnashing Southern Sea  
is now outsearching freedom's whip  
flanked by mortal doubt,  
the itch of sterile sheets

A question of persistence,  
on-trudging lust shakes  
rainsung days from sighing fingertips  
glued, trap shut and set,  
to a future's bleak keyboard  
and nights hewn to plotline voices  
unanswered in the white mind

'I'm still here,' the tired angel  
chants low and lunny from the bedpost  
'Aye,' and I, godless, pace the  
longtimbered halls of myth,  
lapping at the draughts of distance

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I travel to Coles Bay up in Freycinet National Park with a crew of uni boys. Phil, Tommy, Fatty, Skinny, Clarkie. Who comes up with these names? The Hazards remind me of the Sea of Cortez down in Mexico. Sapphire waters crowding up against a red granite hill of boulders, the gritty sand of Wineglass Bay. I walk the long crescent by myself. For some reason I desire to feel the sadness of being alone in a paradise. Stingrays glide a couple meters offshore. Beyond that the bay opens up and home is a million miles distant, over the secret life of an ocean.

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Reading Gwen Hardwood I am returned to a dangerous love for poetry. It is an all-consuming love that burns at your throat and stings your eyes. Nietzsche would call it the opening up of the void, the tearing of the shroud of maya. I'm here to accomplish a bit of writing, and then what? What revelations? The slow march of time. To delve into this void world again, that I'd not felt fully since Hesse in high school. How far have I come since then? Who will jump with me? Who will stand on the shore and fish me out when I've gone too deep and lost myself? For now, it is just me answering myself.

This is the famous understanding of  
Pessimism and jumping in a cold lake naked  
– watch out for snapping turtles –  
to hear your own vigor  
resounding off the high places of the world  
and mixing with the sublime

### Boxcar Romance

Hunched excitedly over himself,  
legs tucked below crossed  
as if to intimate some magnificent intimate narrative  
The receiving space, however, empty frank marbled wall  
Where was the daffodil left on the sill? To cultivate  
what? Of course, gone with the squirrels  
They played all day now, leaving fat winter  
on the ground to find again come autumn  
He grasped his glazed tea mug, to watch  
loose pigment swirls in cylinder space  
The cheap (ten pack) pen lay sticky,  
perspiring on raped paper after climax  
It was over now, the violence, he thought so anyway  
He'd probably never touch the thing again  
The brightness wilted noticeably,  
Squirrels came to investigate as the man  
covered himself with his elbows  
and dreamed of sages traveling in boxcars  
with a preaching drunk Hesse

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To: Chelsea Hoel <moinna@hotmail.com>

Chelsea,

i'm in a weird mental place these days. so focused on my writing, so  
driven, but also letting go, giving up control in a way. i may reach the  
end of my time here and  
realize i havent told the end of my story. and its all still  
happening, im experiencing more things i need to add. meanwhile im  
looking forward to coming home, a warm holiday house with delicious  
pies mom has promised me, being next to you again. my bed is cold  
here, and i think about you often. writing is a lonely process by  
definition, i spend a good part of each day in my own head, struggling  
with doubts and a thousand different threads. each new paragraph is a  
new world, but also one i've already lived. one of the things that  
keeps me working is the thought of being done, of coming home

triumphant i guess, knowing ive taken every thing i could from my time here, having this manuscript to give to people, being able to say i know what its like to go through that, ive been there and ive come back from that place, which is always the best part. time also is strange. my schedule is absolutely my own. weekends don't mean anything to me. every day i wake up and start writing. i make myself breakfast, lunch, dinner. those are my breaks, and often they come all too quickly. im hungry before ive accomplished the necessary bit of writing. on a good day ill have time and energy to go out for a walk, through the woods or down into the city, to the climbing gym. its monotonous and freeing at the same time, to be doing this work.

love,  
mike

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November 27, Sandy Bay Cafe

Have I over characterized these places? What is the interchange btwn person and place? Looking up at Wellington now, in the summer afternoon light, it doesn't look so menacing. No, but it is still stern and serious, it is good to remember that about mountains. Yet that feature is a result of human interaction. Those who climb mountains must negotiate this sternness, or ignore it at their peril. In describing a place, you are really describing the reflection of it in the people who live there.

Evening, after finishing Fritjof Capra's Web of Life:

If it is our process of cognition that has 'brought forth a world', the one in which we dwell, then looking outward is really looking in. For answers, we seek ourselves. This is consciousness. Yet there is no independent self, autonomous yes, but in a constant flux of energy. I revisit John Muir's quote: ...for going out, I found, was really going in. Yet here I am again, I've already said it. Describing a place is really describing the reflection of its inhabitants. The arrow runs both ways. We share a common world through language. We create the image of a place, which is us, its citizens.

I can feel the implications that I cannot see. Juggling an infinitude of puzzle pieces – the unsolvable quest – yet it's all there, out there, in here. I feel the potential. Threads weaving themselves subconsciously. Ahh, trust the voice. Follow the words that come alive in your hands. You're still on the trail. The void swirls again, but this time it's not self-destructive, as Hesse would have it. Because there is opportunity, and a job to do. 'My work done my way', and Wendell Berry's value of work. More pieces, all together. The night comes apart underfoot and is replaced by this understanding.

What's Left  
*for Gwen Harwood*

Reader, can you tell when she writes  
for the writing of it,  
each word a firebrand in a pale dream

irreducible to symbol or language,  
and when she writes for an idea?

‘Words we use to represent the world,  
to communicate this chaos of form,’  
the instructor plays philosopher.

Yes, but

    have you seen time stop on  
    its sharp edge  
    between the in-breath and out-breath  
    of the earth?

A child jumps as a glass elevator  
comes to a stop, and flies

Death withdraws as a woman  
hides her lover within the folds  
    of herself

In time we exchange the fullness of our body,  
left holding the juice of its husk,  
and I ask

    what form?

Songbirds of every tongue  
eat from the mulberry tree,  
taking the sun’s seed into velvet throats  
and sing to the corn’s wild thrust,  
that summer-colored skin should  
open to absorb the sky’s dew breath

### **-Chapter Fifteen-**

Over a pot of Darjeeling tea and parmesan, caramelized onion, and spinach pancakes with a tomato relish sauce I realize I’ve come to the end of my story. The narrative is fizzling out in the unprocessed thoughts of the past couple weeks. I feel adrift, and my writing reflects that. I’m waiting for something that is slow in coming, a closure of sorts. Pete Hay sits across from me. He generously agreed to be my advisor through this process. A poet, essayist, and professor of environmental studies, he has spent years articulating the issues I have now begun to struggle with.

“There is a great deal of hubris involved in writing,” he says. “You have to explain why you’ve spent all your time telling this, and why the reader should spend her time reading it.”

“What does it mean?” he asks.

I began to answer this question earlier, when I felt I could go no further without addressing it. Now I’d like to add some final thoughts. I suspect that if you’ve gotten this far, then either you had to read it or you’ve found your own meaning here. For me, it begins with the search for ‘homeness’ abroad. I’ve pilfered the term from one of Pete’s essays. Of home, he writes, “it is no mere cultural ‘add-on’, but primary and fundamental, and the rootless, itinerant character of modern existence is a pathological condition – no matter how

romantically adorned the ‘wild rover’s’ way of life may be.” Here I return to that early night on Seven Mile Beach and my conversation with Liz. It is clear now that my initial misgivings were not displaced by my beer-induced musings over the characteristic flux of both the physical body and the geography of home. This is a question that has persisted throughout my three months of travel, and my retelling of those various stories is, I suppose, my way of unpacking all the tangled tangents in an attempt to impose some structure, or at least some logic, in the distance I have traversed. Here is my ordered nature imposing itself again, and if it is an act of hubris, I’ll own it as my own small pathology. However, the search for meaning and structure is the fundamental goal of science and philosophy. It is our innate rationality as a species that at first sets us apart from our environments, and its final and assured failure to encompass the infinite scope of life that places us back in the dust of our so called progress.

Before I attempt to draw my own misguided conclusions on a subject that many have already boldly elucidated, I would like to comment on a different lesson. I have found in the writing of this, that there are at least two distinct voices. One is a descriptive voice that trudges along the timeline of events, hoping to tie together a series of experiences that occurred over a range of landscapes with a variety of people and weather patterns. Often it was the sensation of trudging that I felt while writing these passages. I know these narrations are the weakest points in my story, as they require more patience and fine brushwork than maybe I’m capable of at this point. The other voice is one of breathless and childish rapture. This is, as Pete says, “writing for the sake of writing.” These are the passages I look back on and read with a grin on my face, because they are the raw, gut observations of an animal who is, above all, an animal with language. These are also the moments I most care to remember, those that transcend the need to unpack them and instead reach straight through our logic armor to a pulse that exists in the unnamed regions of the earth. It is part of the tragedy art has always struggled with that these are the very experiences that can never be fully communicated, as they must remain unnamed for their power to manifest. This is their essential mystery, as it is ours that we forever attempt this impossible translation. It is this persistence with which we inhabit our lives that gives the meaning to our endeavors. It is no wonder that Don Quixote is the most popular novel in history.

Fine then, where does that leave my search for home? It is common to desire the comfort of home when abroad, and the aliveness you feel when leaving it while home. So it was that I first became consciously aware of this crisis of place when I left for college. At this time I felt the need to articulate a more robust conception of where and who I was from, in order to carry that with me wherever I went. As many social scientists and philosophers have pointed out, without a home we are hopelessly adrift in a quickly globalizing world that values the un-definition of place and abhors the discrimination of culture. Within this recent personal history, this story may just be the most recent and longest in a series of essays and vignettes that attempt to establish my rootedness in the world, a struggle for geographic self-definition.

There is at least one new and shining thread among all that repetition however. Pete concludes his own essay thus, “I don’t want to wake up one morning and look around and wonder where my home went. To resist vandalism of one’s home is not only justifiable, it is the only moral course of action. Our home, Heidegger tells us, is a field of care, and ‘care’ entails a steward’s responsibility of protection.” The more I see and the more I read, the more convinced I am of this necessity. It is no surprise that the conclusion I draw from these three months is that we need this stewardship now more than ever. Our studies were, after



all, geared toward this very realization. But we all have to come to it in our own meandering way. This also is something I've realized, that people resist being forced toward one conclusion. The evidence is there, but there are many directions we might take from that point. It is with this in mind that I squirreled myself away in a dorm room down here in Tasmania for a month. I wanted to experiment with ways of communicating the process I'm currently engaged in. And it is meandering, at times hopelessly backward, desperate, misinformed, but no less passionate for all this. My hope is that, by focusing on the journey rather than my own particular moral conclusions, it may contribute in some small way to your own travels, at home or abroad.

Whether I was successful in this or not, is for everyone but me to say. Last word, though. As I write this I remain torn by the emotions that travel entails. My position from this place of which I am only superficially a part affords me the perspective to see what it is I most care for and love. As well it has provided me with the substance for this story. Had I stayed home I never would have written it. Yet I am decidedly homesick. This is something that only time can cure. I mean this in two ways. Either I return home to the Hudson Valley, which is my intention, or I dig in and spread out here. Time is the fundamental ingredient in each possibility. It takes time to get home from distant lands; it takes time to build a new home upon a new shore. One month is not enough. I am one of those 'wild rovers', temporarily uprooted and uncomfortable on my own. Some people thrive on this while the majority does not. This is probably a good thing, as it will take many people who are steadfastly committed to the protection of their own stomping grounds to disengage the current regime of single-minded 'progress'. History has it that the most desperate odds may be overcome by a people backed up upon their own doorsteps, people fighting for their families, their stories, their homes. Having come a little closer to understanding the power of this motivation gives me tremendous hope in what we might accomplish in the coming years.

## 5. Conclusion

### Reflections

Writing is a lonely activity. To spend a month writing in a foreign city is at times terrifying. There is a fine balance between finding a schedule and setting that allows you to focus on the project and finding an environment that offers the support and interaction you need. The next time I begin something of this nature I'd like to do it in a place I'm more familiar with. The people I met in Hobart were a tremendous help, whether they offered advice, encouragement, or simply a distraction. But one month is not enough time (when so much of the day is devoted to writing) to make really deep friendships, the kind where you can really lean on someone. And often, at the end of the day, I had the desire to lean.

Writing 2500 words a day is more or less equivalent to throwing up on the paper. As it turns out I didn't need to write this much per day because I finished with about a week to spare. But already I was feeling like my system was not long sustainable. I needed a break, or at least more variety. As I discussed with Pete Hay, prolific writers do hold themselves to a regular work schedule, whether it be a standard 40-hour week or a morning of writing every day. A professional writer has the option of establishing his own hours, but it is hard to be successful without any schedule at all. That said it's important to find a pace that suits you, preferably something in between procrastination and burnout.

Whether I accomplished this or not I believe captivating storytelling requires an element of the breathless, of childlike vision and enthusiasm. The enthusiasm of the writer must bridge the gap between the abstraction of the page and the reader. I wrote the following in my journal after concluding 'Cloud Juice',

The trick, I might have said, is merging both voices until the everyday description embodies the mythic. There are spirits and angels and ten thousand billion single-celled bacteria in every scene and movement. Depict it thus, with eyes encompassing the entire timeline. Breathless breathing. Allow the visions to come all times because they're there waiting to be picked up by the tip of a pen-sparkling eye.

In telling a story the writer is juggling at least two emotional landscapes, the one in which the action takes place and the one she is currently experiencing. These are chronologically separate but interwoven through the act of telling. For example, you are

writing about a scene of incredible beauty and power but you've woken up in a foul mood. Which emotion has more power? This is not something that I've answered for myself yet. I don't have enough distance from my own writing yet to be able to interrogate it with that level of detail. It will be interesting to see, after more time has elapsed, whether I can go back and pick out where my writer's mood comes into conflict with the mood of the scene.

This brings up another important point. It is near impossible to objectively critique your own work right after you've written it. Pete Hay suggests leaving at least a month to allow a fresh work to lie fallow. In this time you need to forget about it and move on to something else. Only after you've moved on are you able to return to the original piece with the clarity of distance.

Where does this leave me? If I had the whole thing to do over, I'd probably write it a differently. How exactly I can't say. It's a more intuitive thought than a rational one. As it stands, I don't have the time to go back and change it significantly, nor do I have the time to be able to judge it critically. At this point all I know is that I've written something about a period that has had profound effects upon my personal motivations and philosophies. It is necessarily raw and relatively uncensored, at times perhaps even inappropriate, in so far as the truth can be inappropriate. I'll leave it at that.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

Perhaps the most important thing is to pay attention to dialogue. The best writers can recreate the emotions, inflections, and quirky dialects of real conversations. It is through dialogue that characters reveal themselves. Toward the second half of the semester I began recording interesting conversations and phrases as soon as possible after they occurred. I could have been much more successful in this area. If you are going to write a story take the time to figure out how your characters speak.

Set yourself a schedule and hang on for the ride. The hardest thing to do is start. Write anything at first. If you get stuck take a walk; get out of your own way. If you do, you'll always write the words you need to write whether you knew it or not. Read a lot, it will remind you why you're writing. Back up your work often; it will make you feel like you're accomplishing something. Separate the voice of critic from your desire to put words on paper. The critic comes later. When it does, it will haunt you day and night. And as my

brother wisely suggested, take breaks to listen to good music. Other people's heartache makes your own floundering more bearable.

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