

Notes Toward a Theory of Making Joan Fleming

Joan Fleming is the author *The Same as Yes* and *Failed Love Poems* (Victoria University Press). Her third collection is forthcoming with Cordite Books. She holds a PhD in ethnopoetics, a project which arose out of historical family ties and ongoing relationships with Warlpiri people in Central Australia.

(Motupipi, Golden Bay, New Zealand)

For a time, I lived in a kind of treehouse in the South Island with a man named Guy. The steps were spongy wood planks stapled over with chicken wire. A goodly crevice in the limestone with a fitted steel lid made our composting toilet. For a couple of months there, all we ate were buckwheat zucchini fritters cooked on the camp gas burner. They were damp and thick as op shop novels.

Guy once arranged a pile of pine and rata wood offcuts into a six-foot block in the bush, just out of sight of the road. His Cube. His brother might have photographed it, but Guy never did. Never would.

He would take his leave of me to make the better part of one of the Great Walks carrying only a sleeping bag and seven cheap muesli bars. One time, his tramping costume was soft white pants, a pair of Le Coq Sportif tennis shoes, and a daffodil-yellow linen shirt. It might have had him mistaken for an Auckland lawyer were it not for the beard and the garden dirt.

He would come back with his eyes in flash like melting glaciers, having made something that never needed to be titled. Was it the walk itself? Or the thought of a book that was written in an instant, in the wind inside his head, and never needed to be made or measured?

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(Tanami Desert, Central Australia)

You have been in the desert for twenty-four hours, and ten half-moons of dirt feel permanent under your fingernails. The blades of the thighs of your pants are grimed red and black, from the black film the cooking fire leaves on the outside of every pot. After three days, a ring of rust appears at your sock line. This anklet is starker on white skin. The pads of your

palms are tougher, and oxide now marks out the fork of the life line, and the lines of the head and the sun and the heart. The red dirt writes a story on you and when you go back to town, it takes a while, but you will wash it off.

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(Tanami Desert, Central Australia)

A new cooking pot is bought from the shop, and it goes black, and another is bought from the shop, and it goes black, and another is bought from the shop.

We are days out bush and the kids are holding mulberry branches and brushing the red dirt a fair way out from our swags. They are brushing the dirt from the dirt. 'We're sweeping our rooms!' they say.

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(Melbourne)

With the pleasure of an avoidance activity, I assemble a book of photos on my laptop instead of writing the thesis chapter that feels like a chore. I drag squares of colour into their arrangements: faces, caves, dogs, camp spots. The boxes of text are Alice Nampijinpa's words, Ambrose's translations, my selections. I post the photo book and it is exclaimed over and carried for a time, and then it is lost. Lost, or did it get caught in the rain? I make another and post it and it is carried for a time and then it is lost. *You gotta send that photo book, Nungarrayi*. Every time I visit, I take a new photo book.

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(Yuendumu, Central Australia)

My grandmother, a missionary's wife, keeps a diary. Every day from 1950–1975, she washes their things. The red dirt comes reluctant out of the linens, the dresses, my grandfather's black preaching pants. In summer, they crisp in a moment. The big, drained Copper bowls the dry heat and it shimmers, a private sun. Every day the dirt comes back. My grandmother writes this as their story.

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(Tanami Desert, Central Australia)

The desert, for many, is a place of firsts.

One evening, a dog chews the cover off my Kim Scott novel. (My homework.)

Another evening, I haul my suitcase down from the Toyota to get at my notes. There are things tonight I want to capture. Later, I kneel back down to put my notes away, and I see a dog has left a present on the top of the suitcase: a tidy turd.

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(Melbourne)

Round three of a chronic tonsillitis is fattening my throat. When I move, the world is syrup. I haven't managed to think straight in weeks. Stepping from the kitchen with a cup of tea, I stub my toe and suddenly everything boils and I am a mess on the carpet, inconsolable. I will never make anything again. I have never made enough.

I am spending weeks on an application for a modest promotion at the University where I have taught for nine years. A helpful colleague—throat cleared, shiny as a whistle—gives me a little feedback. 'See this part of your CV? Make sure you quantify it.' Quantify it? 'These poetry prizes—in the right-hand column—put a dollar amount.'

My mother, the doctor, the whiz, the qualified *MENSA* member, calls to see how I'm going. Our conversation resembles a verbal report card: '... and I'm onto the third chapter now... several new poems coming out in ...' I build my little popsicle stick city of Things I Have Done. I sing my little song of *worthy, worthy*. The influence is hers; the fault is not.

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(Wellington, New Zealand)

My mother and I go to see a screening of *The Red Shoes*. The city's fellow captives are beguiling. Her white body makes all the correct forms. The shoes dance her and dance her. She can never stop.

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(Tanami Desert, Central Australia)

Red dirt is getting in through the hole in the toes of my hiking boots. These boots are the best I have ever had because the hard spine of them has already been broken, but they do need attention. I peel off the duct tape and a glittering crust of red adheres to the residue. It satisfies, to pull off a new length of the silvery tape—its ripping sound, that is the sound of something being mended—and wrap it round again.