

Pulling Up the Walls¹

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Contact is crisis.² In 2020, people in cities all over the world learned how not to touch one another. But touch – whether physical or moral, emotional or imaginary – has always been a challenge to the idea of the fixed boundaries of the self.

In my life, I have lived in Melbourne, Madrid, Wellington, Denver, Toronto, and Dunedin. Life in these cities is engineered to keep us apart from one another. You may not feel this on the bus or the subway, but we have houses and apartments. We have wardrobes and faucets. We have walls.

In camp life, in Aboriginal Australia, I have felt the boundaries of the self start to shimmer and give. Contact has stung, irritated, and confounded. It has made me sick. It has also made me smaller, and larger. Made me see myself as a part, not a whole.

As a whitefella (*Kardiya*) spending time in the desert, I used to worry a lot about how to achieve the position of someone touchable. How could I overcome the (warranted) distrust of those who continually receive the message that they, themselves, are untouchable: physically, psychically, emotionally, culturally? Come to school, say the *Kardiya*, but we won't teach 'language' (*Warlpiri*). Come and buy petrol at the roadhouse, but stay out of

1 Note: This essay has been read for cultural sensitivity by Ned Vaughan Hargraves at Pintubi Anmatjere Walrpiri Media (PAW Media) and approved for publication. Of the essay, Ned said: 'It was to the point. It was hard. Sad and hard. But she had to tell it. It is good to tell that from *Kardiya* point of view. I felt things, many things.'

2 'Dirt and Desire: The Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,' in *Men in the Off Hours* by Anne Carson, Cape Poetry, 2000.

the restaurant. What does it mean to become someone touchable? For me, it has meant sharing to the point of risk. Giving away the last of the petrol money. Using the spoon after it's been cleaned by licking.

The last winter I was up in the desert, in 2018, we were carting round a grandmother's painting-in-progress in the back of the Toyota. The paint went everywhere. My borrowed swag and my travel backpack got clouded blue. I didn't mind. I also didn't mind anymore saying *no* sometimes to the Warlpiri family I travel with – a word that, five years ago, I struggled to get out of my mouth. My time up in the desert consists of a strange oscillation between making myself touchable, and withdrawing from the risks of touch. Holding boundaries, letting them slip. I miss the desert. I don't think I can live there.

Touch

Nangali must have been six or seven in 2016. Maybe five. 'She's mad one,' the family say – with affection – because of her sweet private fairy-tale sing-songing at the world. She has huge wet eyes that send light back, and framed in the window of a donga at the nature reserve where her mob do Indigenous Ranger work, or on her back in the middle of the sweeps of a snow-angel she's made in the red dirt, she is as photogenic as a cliché National Geographic cover child. The family go off for their day of Ranger work and Nangali and I stay back at camp, both scribbling in our way. As a child, I was fey like that. In the afternoon, I insist she have a shower and, lacking flannels, I get the crud off her behind with my hands. A clean shirt is a relatively clean *something* from the family pile inside the donga. We'll do a wash tomorrow. There are washing machines in the shed, next to the box freezer whose lid is difficult to close on its overflow of frozen feral cats. It took me a while to work out who Nangali's 'real' mum was. She must be in her late 20s, but she has a restless, trapped-in teenager vibe. Dark tattoo lines radiate from the edges of her eyes like makeup. She's smart, sharp. Now she's living down near Adelaide somewhere.

In 2018, Nangali is a little taller, and not much less fey. We are staying at the nature reserve again. Her grandma and auntie do a food run back to the community – we have root vegetables and long-life milk, but no bread, no fresh meat – leaving me and Faustina, a friend from Melbourne, to distract Nangali from her lonely-crying. I show her photos on my phone of Kuala

Lumpur, Portugal, Madrid. 'Magic,' she whispers, squeaky-breathless, at a photo of a temple mural, a seven-headed statue of Krishna. 'Magic' is a medieval relic, 'magic' is a Lisbon street art stencil of an anatomical heart. Grandma and auntie come back well after dark and growl her for crying. 'Why you lonely!' they say. 'They're kin for you! That's family!' They've built some new shower blocks for the reserve's volunteers, and walking on the fresh-mopped lino feels unearned after only three days in the bush. Even the sawdust for the composting toilets is weirdly scented. I am singing out, 'Shower time! Shower time, Nangali!' I am trying not to feel like my missionary grandmother who bathed the children at Yuendumu every Sunday before church in the big copper. In a lot of books, I have seen the same photograph of her, young, in a starched white dress, bathing the children who have lined up so nicely. That white dress would have been smeared red mere minutes after they put away the cameras. I share most things with this mob but I usually refuse to share my towel. I am often feeling like my grandmother and often trying not to feel like my grandmother.

Risks

Faustina manages to keep whatever it is at bay until we hit the Alice Springs town limits, and she becomes suddenly exhausted and asks me to take the wheel. We had planned to cook an enormous veggie stir fry and go out drinking and complain about town life with its billboards and its car dealerships and mourn that the trip was over – only ten days! what possessed us to think that would be 'enough' time? – but she goes straight to bed and doesn't leave until the diarrhoea starts around midnight. I take her temperature every few hours, try to make her drink tea. It's not the gastro symptoms that worry me, it's the shivering, the full body aches, the collapsing in the bathroom. It was her first time going bush with me, though we'd talked about it for years. The next day she seems a little better, and then much, much worse. In the clinic waiting room she can't sit on the chair for the pain in her stomach. I won't forget how she writhed on the doctor's examining table, her feet in borrowed crocs making a sad triangle as she pumped her legs and the doctor depressed her stomach, feeling for I don't know what. She couldn't stifle her cries. Contact is crisis.

A mate of my uncle's who lives near the hospital drops off a bag of fast food. A godsend. I growl a plucky Yapa (*Central Desert Aboriginal*) woman who

tries to nick it off the window ledge outside the triage of the emergency ward, where I leave it while I help my friend inside. I had not eaten McDonalds in something like eight years. Desperate measures. 'I'm hungry!' she mimes through the thick glass. 'Leave it!' I mime back. 'I'm hungry too!' When we finally get her into emergency, things move swiftly. Morphine, an IV. Fluid drip after drip. Blood tests every six hours. Endless days in a windowless isolation ward, plugging and unplugging the drip machine every half an hour to drag it squeaking to the bathroom. My friend has something the doctors diagnose as shigella. It is a dysentery bug, a nasty one, and highly infectious. In the end, she shat blood for four days because she touched something – a piece of food – that had *matter* on it, that had the virus on it. *In* it. Almost three months later, she's finally feeling normal again.

I have been sick too. One year at a sports' weekend in a neighbouring community, a fastidious after-hours nurse paged through her dog-eared manual and told me it would be best if I went back to town for some tests because there was a risk I had *heart fever*, although the internet tells me that heart fever is not a thing. Did she think I had rheumatic fever? Maybe I had the flu. Maybe it was culture shock.

When the boundaries of the built self get soft, there is a letting in, and sometimes it shows itself as sickness. Every time I get back to Alice Springs after a trip, I buy a tube of scabies cream and a lice comb. I no longer need the viscous white stuff they call 'barrier cream' to stop out the sun and wind. Instead, I start wearing the cosmetic armours of my gender: *mascara*, from the nineteenth-century Italian for *mask*. I wash my clothes, hang them out to dry. Wet things dry fast in the desert. I crave the exquisite, risky porousness that camp life and the bush can give, then I get back to town and I smear back on my boundaries, comb out the creatures that communal life lets nest there. This is a conflict I never feel easy with. I am a whitefella. I can move between these worlds as I like. And though the walls feel bad at first, I pull them back up around me, because I can.

Cleanliness

My missionary grandmother Pat's diaries detail a life of porous intercultural penetration. She and my grandfather went 'to live among the natives' and teach them to worship. Over twenty-five years she cultivated huge affection, but hated every grain of dirt. Her diaries relate her efforts to keep home

and hearth in proper order. Civilized. Acceptable. *Clean*. To keep the walls pulled up. And yet, every day and everywhere were the hazards of touch.

How did my grandmother touch, and what did she do with her recoiling? I could say that Pat privately castigates the Yapa for their smells and their habits, and I privately castigate myself. I could say that living with the dirt is an initiation for me, and for her it was a battle. I could say that she wished to teach, and I wish to be taught. All of this is true, and none of it is sufficient.

In her diary for the year 1950, Tom and Pat's first year at Yuendumu, the word 'clean' appears 34 times. Ten years later, in 1960, the word 'clean' appears zero times. Did she acclimatise? Did the rigidity of her boundaries soften somewhat? The entries for the year 1950 narrate a literal pulling-up of walls, as she and my grandfather Tom toiled to make the tin shack they landed in liveable, and to come around to the isolation and the weathering and the thousand subtle Warlpiri refusals and the red dust. Entry after entry is about cleaning the sheets, the clothes, the house, the dog, my father's gluey eye, the 'natives.' But looking at the 1960 diary, the text is spare. She was busy. She records in extreme brevity a flood of people coming and going over her threshold, a constant visitation of bodies and personalities and community dramas in which she was intimately implicated. The preoccupation with cleanliness does not disappear. After visiting friends in town, she writes, 'Nice house they have here, needs me to keep it shining.' However – and this is a relief for me to say – the names and cares of the people who bound her to the desert take narrative and psychic precedence over the habits of the dust and grease. People, it seems, began to matter more than cleanliness.

Brutalities

I am cross-legged at the edge of Nyirрпи, enjoying a sliver of cat meat. Cat meat, fresh from the earth oven, and some incongruous avocado and tuna on rice cracker which the kids crowd round to say 'manda' for (*gimme*). After tasting it, they make a 'yuck' face. Some animal welfare types a few years ago got stirred up after reading that the Indigenous Rangers kill the cats with a crowbar. I suppose it sounds cruel? The word itself – *crowbar*. *Trap* sounds more scientific, I suppose. More Western. But it is precision crowbar work these women do. It is very swift. There is a target, they hit it. A single blow to the head.

A restaurateur at a roadhouse between Alice Springs and Yuendumu once told me his off-season side-hustle was culling camels (another pest) from helicopters. They cull them with machine guns. I imagined a yahoo slaughter: panicked herds of sweetly eyelashed camels sprayed with bullets and collapsing into mangled piles. In reality, the helicopter circles the herd and they cluster together, bothered by the curious noise. Then they string out into their natural line, and start walking again. The helicopter, flying low, picks them off one by one with a bullet to the back of the head.

I have needed to flick my desert preconceptions out the window like ash – my romanticisations and my nightmare images both. The brutalities of the desert are less *Apocalypse Now*, more *Brazil*. It's the bureaucratic obfuscations, where Yapa needs meet whitefella systems, that are so hard to swallow. That, and the treatable diseases, the high suicide rates, the deaths in custody, the familial traumas that get handed on, that 'deepen like a coastal shelf.'³

The cat is good. It tastes like chicken. The day is cool and bright. All contradiction is in cohabitation here. This is a hard and good life, in a place that early maps of Australia marked 'useless.' What grows here? Mulberry, bush coconut, spinifex, she-oaks, and all things human.

No

I get a phone call every few months asking me for a credit card transfer to help with a grocery shop. Usually I can afford it. When the requests ramp up around Christmas time, with phone calls coming every week, I start saying no. When I visit, too, it's give and take. Everyone pitches in for food, fuel, meat, and, sure, tobacco, though I know it's a curse.

We've talked about splitting the royalties for the forthcoming poetry book, but these are poetry royalties, I say, not mining ones. There's a bit of a difference in scale. If something I write about the desert wins a prize, we agree, we'll split the winnings. If it's a big prize, it could buy them a Toyota.

The dance of request and pushback is what family do among themselves, all the time. But requests from the family towards us, the whitefellas, seem to ramp up towards the end of a trip. The women in particular are master hunter-gatherers. They hunt and gather lizards, witchetty grubs, bush

3 Phillip Larkin, 'This be the verse,' from *Phillip Larkin Poems: Selected by Martin Amis*, Faber & Faber, 2012.

tomatoes, kangaroo, bush turkeys. They also hunt-and-gather warm clothes, car tools, billies, cooking wires, and money. The men, though, have the strangest requests: 'Nungarrayi (*my skin name*), you gotta send a gold watch. And one of those big blankets, the ones you wear.' *A poncho?* 'Yeah, and that big hat too.' *You want a poncho and a sombrero?* 'Yeah, then I'll be sitting in my own shade!'

I'm not going to send a gold watch, given my poet-teacher's salary, and this mob's loose relationship with the notion of time. I'll send a warm jumper, long skirts for the women, sometimes tobacco, photos, and a \$50 note in a card, telling my news. Being able to send money, what I can, from Melbourne, is a way of keeping in touch – something I don't want to lose.

Home

I am in my uncle's house in Alice Springs, cradling the trembling heap of a little brown camp dog who is experiencing his first-ever trip to town as terror, confusion, and crisis. I am virus-sick with the unnamed thing after the sports' weekend, and I have driven back to town with this little dog in tow, at the family's insistence, because little dogs are popular and get 'lost' (taken) and this one belongs to an anthropologist friend who is on holiday, and besides, 'You need company, Nungarrayi.' His name is Brownie. Because he is brown.

Some camp dogs have names, and some don't. In some Indigenous communities, the dogs with names are kin in a way that designates them as children; in other communities, the kin names designate them as parents. Some belong to people and families and are beloved and fed and taken on trips, and some creep and rally round the boundaries of the communities of Nyirrpi and Yuendumu, nameless and belonging to no-one. But they all seem to run together. It is common to see camp dogs attempting to eat the least probable 'food' items, like the feathers of a freshly plucked turkey. Once, on Territory weekend, I saw a dog running with a lit firecracker in its mouth. There might be a broader dog pecking order on the communities' fringes, with secret periphery dog bosses. But within the world of the camp, the hierarchy is ordered by human affection, and at the top of the hierarchy are the little dogs. In a Toyota crammed with mountains of blankets and bulky paintings and human bodies and their belongings, little dogs can squeeze in without burden. They also keep you warm at night. Though

I sometimes failed to shove off the family dogs who amassed on top of my swag of an evening, Brownie is the only dog I ever let transgress the boundary from *outside* to *inside*. That trip, he started sleeping inside my swag with me. Other whitefellas, like the Ranger Coordinators, found this level of intimacy distasteful, but I was grateful for it. So was Brownie. He could move from lap to camp periphery and back with total freedom and total protection. Lucky dog.

Now, however, we are sleeping inside a whitefella house, and the rules are bewildering. My uncle's glossy, stocky, overfed yellow-lab cross, named Missy, is frighteningly territorial. My uncle is worried for Brownie. A few years ago, a fight over a bone in the back garden resulted in Missy giving my uncle's older dog what can most accurately be described as a 'braining.' I say to my uncle, Brownie is a camp dog. He can handle himself. But we are not out in open country here. We are inside, and this is Missy's world. The dogs are suspiciously acquainting themselves with each other in the living room, when Brownie does a strange thing. With his teeth, he takes hold of the corner of a white doily that has fallen to the floor – a doily surely belonging to my late Grandmother – and, with great delicacy, he pulls it over the top of Missy's half-full food bowl. It is odd boundary work, a type of burying. Missy pounces – it happens suddenly – and Brownie gives off a high-pitched alarm squeal. I find I am growling in my lowest, loudest voice, the voice the women have taught me to use to scare off the cheeky dogs. I scoop Brownie up and carry him from the room.

For the next few days of my convalescence, I coddle Brownie in a cloistered world of walls and shut doors and I watch him become fretful and shivery and refuse his food. After he runs across a busy intersection, I start keeping him on a leash. I give him his first-ever bath. It's a bind: here I am, bathing a camp dog called 'Brownie' and freighting him with whitefella-world anxieties in order to keep him from being brained. To keep him safe from risks, I have made him into a creature at odds with himself.

Waste

It's Territory Weekend, the only weekend of the year when fireworks are sold in the shop. We're camped at Emu Bore, waiting for the rest of the family to hurry up and get back from whatever tasks of knotted family negotiations have delayed them in Nyirrpri. We want to set off the fireworks.

Faustina and I and the grandmother make dinner on the fire, dispensing totally with the polite formulations that order the rituals of dinner in my own culture: 'Could you please pass me the butter?' and 'Would anyone like to split the last sausage?' Those politenesses don't work out here. The tools and fixings of dinner are strewn all round the fire and everyone's in reach of something essential. So it's '*Manda* butter' or '*Manda* that knife.' The gimmes used to strike my ears, they used to feel rude, gruff. Now, I see, it's just easy. I used to haul my body right up off the ground when I needed something on the other side of the fire. I used to drink in the smoke, cough it back out again. Now I just say *manda*.

After dinner, they still haven't returned, and we don't want to wait. The night is still. The quiet water tower and the granddaddy ghost gum, nothing but murmuring land for miles. So we light a fuse and send up the dangerous light that shouts as it touches the sky. Nangali's eyes are silver with fear and pleasure. We are whooping, our faces upturned.

For some reason, though, I insist we ration ourselves. It's a box of twenty, but 'just two' I say. 'We should save the rest.' Why? What perfect time was I insisting we wait for? The others return too late, we are already asleep, and the next day they leave on a Ranger trip, and there is a scramble about where to stash the remaining fireworks.

Faustina and I take a couple with us on our drive back to town. We find a camp spot off the dirt highway on the road between Papunya and Ormiston, a place with a soft feeling in the dusk, a *held* sort of feeling. It's our last night in the beautiful open. But when we set off a firework, it feels wrong. The dark is too dark. We don't have the family with us, for protection and company. The festivity feels misplaced. Visions of danger and threat implanted by images from slasher films fill our imaginations, and we do not want to announce ourselves.

That other night at Emu Bore, we ought to have wasted the fireworks. We ought to have set off six, a dozen, the whole bang lot. Without restrictions, and without counting, we might have indulged our thirst for the moment, and let the sky be filled with colour. At this moment, on our way back to town, halfway between worlds, we want to be unseen, unfound, untouched. In fact, we wish we had walls right now.