

## Grey Matters (Conspiracies of Light)

*Verity Oswin*

On Tuesday I refuse to get out of bed. I pull the covers up under my chin. ‘I am grieving the loss of my beauty,’ I tell my lover. Suddenly, overnight, the honey of my skin, of my hair, has faded to grey. My lover looks at me patiently – asks if I would like a cup of tea. The tea he brings is the colour of a milky river. My mind floats right away.

\* \* \*

The Riverina is a cacophony of greys: dirt, gums, saltbush, sheep. When you drive through the country the greys all run together in the middle distance. It can feel like you are adrift. It can feel like a lesser planet. There are acres and acres of nothing. This is the palette I swam out of. The farm where I grew up sits on a little river. The river is milky grey.

\* \* \*

A woman is a state. I want to conserve my sovereignty. The blonde flag of my kingdom is tattered and frayed. I make an appointment with my mother’s hairdresser. When I walk into the salon she says,

‘You don’t need me to tell me anything, I know everything about you.’

She sits me in front of a mirror and runs her fingers across my scalp.

‘I will do my best to cover up these tiny flecks of grey.’

She shows me swatches of silky fake hair. We agree on a half-crown of ‘Manna’ and ‘Flax’. Her assistant serves me peppermint tea.

\* \* \*

*Colour is a wily thing: literally in the eye of the beholder. Light assails things, besets them. The eye and brain conspire to translate the light into colour (Waldman). There is no inherent ‘greenness’ in grass. It just looks that way to us when light falls upon it in a certain way. The light you see depends on where you are ‘seeing’ from. At night, light forsakes grass – forsakes everything. Colours go to sleep. We see the grass as black or at best grey.*

*Synaesthesia is the scrambling of the senses. Nabokov was a synesthete; 'had a fine case of coloured hearing', could see sounds, saw colours in letters (Nabokov 312). 'A' he saw as the tone of 'weathered wood' (34). Newton dreamed up the spectrum but thought each colour corresponded to a note on the scale (Taylor np). The thinkers of old were fanciful; sung rainbows – no one knew if their theories were poetries or truths.*

\* \* \*

The assistant passes me a wad of shiny magazines. They wash my hair; put me back in front of the mirror. I am presented to myself. I don't make eye contact, but there is nowhere else to look. I'm not wearing make-up. The smock buttoned around my neck is both surgical and monastic – the face looking back at me old but somehow young.

\* \* \*

*Eigenraum is the name scientists give to the grey we see when the brain is free of stimuli, what the eye sees in 'perfect darkness' – in the absence of light. It's noise in the retina, our holding pattern, the brain's default. In English we call it 'own grey': the screen that appears in the mind when we press reset (Pulapaka np).*

\* \* \*

I flick through the magazines. The advertisements sell diamonds, leather goods, furs. The models' own pelts are monotone, golden. I don't make eye contact with them. As I rifle through the pages something turns my stomach. I begin to question the legitimacy of these women's sovereignty; over their bodies – over me. I get up out of the chair and unbutton the smock. My mother's hairdresser is very understanding; won't accept my offer to pay. I press reset – grab my handbag, walk out onto the street.

The next day after work I go shopping; buy grey sheets, a grey quilt, a grey jumper. I don't think about it; only discover the colour of my thoughts when I get back and throw the contents on the bed. That week I wear my hair up to accentuate the grey at my temples. I apply grey eye shadow – paint little storm clouds on my lids.

My lover phones – says he’s coming to visit. I put the sheets on my bed. He lives on the other side of a steel blue ocean. Despite, or because of that, everything between us is all still glistening and silver. It’s a long way to bring a cup of tea.

My daughter reads my dog-eared childhood copy of *The Silver Brumby* in her bedroom upstairs. Later she sits and tinkles at the piano, composes a song called *Silver Horse, Silver Horse*.

That night I look at myself in the mirror – assess the state of the nation. On my body the bruise of time blooms grey. I muse on, riff on the colour; read about it, plumb its depths. To not have seen grey in the world is, and has been, a strategic yet unconscious decision. Now I see it everywhere, am thrilled by it, cannot look away. Grey is sober, it is moderation, used to connote shades and degrees. Grey matter is the stuff I think with. Grey is something I should think more about.

I am a white girl grown tall in grey country. The prerogative of white people has been not to perceive colour. The outline of my childhood was pen and ink settler. I want to go back; begin to colour it in.

\* \* \*

I phone my lover, tell him I won’t be home. He accuses me of solving problems by movements of sudden lateral displacement. I tell him he’s right. I get a better purchase on things if I change perspective – remove myself from the fray.

I’m on the road by seven. The freeway out of the city runs fast. As I get further north, I turn off onto the backroads. By Bridgewater the landscape is brown – the children asleep.

The road is as flat as it is straight. I get to thinking; thinking about the physics of color – the physics of desire; what light loves, what light forsakes. I begin to think the things I see in my lover are things that can only be seen from where I stand, things that I can only see because of who I am. At the same time, he’s the only one who really ‘sees’ me. I begin to think everything is all about surfaces; our love affair nothing more than a conspiracy of light.

I buy a bad coffee at the roadhouse in Serpentine, banter with the attendant about the drought. I turn on the radio. They are putting hay on boats and shipping it around the ragged hem of the continent. The Prime Minister quotes poetry; invoking ‘flooding rains’ (Mackellar). The talkback host takes calls from Those Doing it Hard, Those Worst Hit.

I feel guilty for being removed; for not having called my brother; for not even knowing how many of our crops have died and how many are still dying. The way a crop fails can turn your stomach. Sometimes you just wish it could be quick. All green ‘inherent’ or apparent, leaches out of it, bleaches to dirty white.

It’s dusk by the time I get to Swan Hill. I cross the bridge into New South, pass the pub, Wemba Wemba, the truck depot, the silos. After Murray Downs the grey opens up all around. I slow down. The children stir. Roos weave in elegant jeopardy back and forth across the road. The emus are on the move too; trotting balletically across singed paddocks, clearing out of the bush looking for food. The drought trips the circuit. People and animals move across the Earth in unfamiliar ways.

It’s dark when we pull into the front gate; the children explode from the car. I find my father on the verandah pruning the mop top shrubs that shade his tin house. His arms are flecked with bloody scratches. In the months since I have seen him his shock of black hair has turned almost white. He looks like a seafaring version of himself. He’s seventy; the season has been unforgiving. I don’t know why I’m surprised to find the colour leached from him too. I say,

‘Dad you’ve gone grey.’

He does not or pretends not to hear me. I don’t mention the Manna or the Flax. He opens a bottle of wine and we sit out on the verandah. His red kelpie curls across my boots. He starts to talk about the river. It’s a ritual. We each know what the other will say.

His voice follows the watercourse of history: the ’56 flood; the Vinifera forest; new growth; old growth; the Barmah choke. He is enraged by Melbourne: its manicured lawns; its whipper snippers; Labour; the Greens.

The people in my family move grey water across grey soil. They’ve lived in the district for over a hundred years. They grow food and sell the surplus. The surplus is often figurative, metaphorical. It is difficult to explain. My great-grandfather had a butter factory in this desert; lived off the fat of the land.

A metre from the house the riverbank falls away. I can’t see the river but I know it is there. It is there and that is why we are here; it is why and how we grow food in a desert. The Edward is an anabranch of the Murray. It forms the boundary of our farm, our lives, bends seven times before it leaves us (horseshoes and hairpins) – in search of the center of the Earth.

People are hydrophilic – cluster round bodies of water. As the Murray snakes through the interior, life clings to its sides. It empties into the sea at Lake Alexandrina; an imperious, estuarine lagoon. The mouth of a river is a beginning and an ending. The river disgorges into a lake named after a princess. That princess would later become queen.

\* \* \*

*Queen Victoria had a predilection for cakes and butter; the appetite of an entire empire; whilst ruling the world her body politic got fat.*

\* \* \*

My father asks me to write a letter to the Minister; believes I have a purchase on words. He wishes to respectfully complain about the lack of water allocation to irrigators in the Murray Darling Basin. He wishes to respectfully submit that conserving environmental flows is a lot of bullshit.

Water now is worth more than land. I want to tell him that the debate about the river is a debate about the administration of plenty, about how to feed the queen. I say nothing. He's afraid – feels the butter melting, running through his fingers, running out to sea.

There are as many shades of grey to the argument as there are tributaries of the river. I lie back on the milky grey water, float; suspend my judgement, let the current take me right away. Lacustrine, riparian, delta, estuary – hydrology is poetry. Someone Greek said beauty was symmetry checked by restraint. I see the beauty in grey; in the notion of moderation, in Keats' 'negative capability', the ability to be content with 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' (Keats in Monckton 93). But I understand my father – precisions and convictions are seductive – absolute truth is a difficult thing to forsake.

\* \* \*

Grey matters. I Google what I drive right past. The Wemba Wemba are the people who lived here before. Today they have a community centre and a small reserve. The internet tells me their language is 'extinct'. 'Before' is an inadequate term. A hundred kilometres away from the butter factory Mungo Man was found; the oldest human skeleton ever found on the continent. He was floating in a dry lake – he'd been there for 42,000 years (Pickrell np).

Murray Downs is a stone's throw from the community centre. The station was the first in the district. The homestead has a garrison – a turret with those little slits for guns. The castle was built to defend the settlers. Today there is a golf course, a luxury housing estate, a club with poker machines, raffles, buffets. I was a bridesmaid there once in a wedding. I wore an ashes-of-roses dress.

\* \* \*

*The rivers were scenes of battle in the Frontier Wars (Evershed np). The taxonomy of a massacre has been the subject of some debate. How should it be defined? All we can do is count the bodies. Some say five bodies suffice, some say it should be eight.*

\* \* \*

That night I sleep in my old bed. The cousins dream in a tangle of kinship on the floor. Outside the window the jacaranda quivers in the faint breeze blowing along the water. Possums scuttle over the roof. I dream of one of those ghost summers: we are children; our bodies jostle like logs as we float downstream. The river is thick with snags; an underwater forest. Trees that have lived before, trees which have flowered, seeded, died. When we bump against them they are slick with slime. Our skin is bisque, off white, sun kissed – white. I see the colour of us only because it is framed against the grey.

\* \* \*

At dawn my father and I go 'round the water. His ute is strewn with shotgun shells, cheque books, iced coffee cartons, crumpled pages of *The Stock & Land*. There is red dust on the dash, grey mud on the floor.

The paddock sports a fuzz of electric green. The sky is a searing blue. Water courses obediently down the thirsty bays. The smell of chlorophyll is in the air. As we drive around, I jump out to plug plastic bungs in the pipes. My father complains about levels, that my brother spent too much lasering the paddock – alternately, that he didn't spend enough. They live in perfect bucolic discord. My father is not a man to appreciate the grey.

As I climb back in he turns on me. 'Is this it? What happens afterwards? After you die is there just nothing? Is this all there is?'

‘I don’t know Dad,’ I say. ‘How should I know? Just keep driving. I have to get back. The kids will want their breakfast.’

He growls, ‘Sometimes you just wish it could be quick.’

He exasperates me. I’m impatient with his morbidness. For these most important of questions I do not have time.

We drive past the canoe tree on the other side of the river. Not long ago someone lived here, someone who could hew a boat from bark. The scar on the big gum is in the form of an elongated eye.

\* \* \*

*There were ‘qualifying’ massacres around here. Major Mitchell ‘discovered’ Swan Hill; named it after a flock of black swans. One hundred and fifty kilometres away, on the same expedition, the party was ‘followed’ (Mitchell 59). Mitchell’s men opened fire:*

Numbers were shot in swimming across the Murray, and some even after they had reached the opposite shore, [...] Amongst those shot in the water was the Chief (recognised by a particular kind of cloak he wore, which floated after he went down). (59)

*At a homestead downstream from Murray Downs, the whites ‘settled’ the blacks by giving them poisoned flour (Ryan et al np).*

Who knows what happened here on our milky river. We like our truth in rations – we are too scared (there’s no one left) to ask.

\* \* \*

When we pull up at the house, my sister-in-law is cutting up nectarines on the bench. She is stewing them in syrup, making preserves. Some are windfalls – too ripe. The kitchen smells of sugar metabolising – decay. The children eat the bruises – this flesh is sweeter still. The juice is running down their chins.

\* \* \*

Back in the city the pall of the street lights clamours in my ears. Night is the complete extinction of light; there is no night here. The colours cannot sleep. The green of my lawn prevails, is miraculous, accusatorial – an exhibit in my father’s case.

He calls to ask if I have written the letter. I promise I will. In his voice on the phone I hear myself; hear its colour; hear his indignation. We hadn't been aware of the colour of power. We had thought it was 'inherent' to being us.

I kneel on the floor and sort the clothes. My rudimentary chromatography – I separate the colours; the uniforms, darks and lights. My mind is heavy with thinking, with a bark canoe sitting low in the water laden with poisoned rations, grey sheets, nectarines – a cloak.

\* \* \*

A meditation on vanity ends in one on power. Blonde is a colour of power is the colour of butter – wealth. We eat the bruises. I can't tell the whole story; the expediency of it all; the fact that we asked no questions when it fell into our hands. From where I'm standing, light falls in different, unreliable ways. All I can say is that I have driven some way into the interior, off the bitumen, down the backroads; tried to understand.

Sometimes it seems to me that time will slough out beauty, difference, power; that in the end we will all, it will all... fade to grey. More often, it seems to me that it will not – that there is no *eigengrau*. Light hits my past and my geography; reveals the colours my brain and eye have conspired not to see.

**Verity Oswin** is a poet and documentary producer. She is completing her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide and lives with her twin daughters on a remote property in the Riverina.

## Works Cited

- Barker, Bryce. "Massacre, Frontier Conflict and Australian Archaeology." *Australian Archaeology*, vol. 1, no. 64, 2007, pp. 9–14.
- Burke, Heather, et al. "The Space of Conflict: Aboriginal/European Interactions and Frontier Violence on the Western Central Murray, South Australia, 1830–41." *Aboriginal History*, vol. 40, 2016, pp. 145–179.
- Elder, Bruce. *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines Since 1788*. National Book Distributors, 1992.
- Evershed, Nick. "Frontier Massacres: role of Australia's Colonial Government Forces Revealed", *The Guardian*, 4 March 2019.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/05/frontier-massacres-role-of-australias-colonial-government-forces-revealed-datablog>
- Fahey, Charles. "Agricultural Settlement in Victoria's Last Frontier: The Mallee, 1890–1951." *Agricultural History*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2017, pp. 187–214.
- Harrison, John, and Simon Baron-Cohen. "Synaesthesia: An Account of Coloured Hearing." *Leonardo*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1994, pp. 343–346.
- Holmes, Katie. "Making Masculinity: Land, Body, Image in Australia's Mallee Country." *RCC Perspectives*, no. 2, 2017, pp. 39–48.
- Lethbridge, Lucy, "The Greedy Queen" *The Guardian*, 28 May 2017.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/28/the-greedy-queen-eating-with-victoria-annie-gray-review-queen-victoria>
- Mackellar, Dorothea. *My Country – A Centenary Celebration*. Murdoch Books, 2008.

Mitchell, Elyne. *The Silver Brumby*. Dutton, 1959.

Mitchell, Thomas. "Government Gazette Notices." *New South Wales Government Gazette (Sydney, NSW: 1832 - 1900)*, 21 January 1837.  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article230669245>

Monckton, Richard. *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*. E-book, 2013.

Munich, Adrienne Auslander. "Queen Victoria, Empire, and Excess." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1987, pp. 265–281.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory – An Autobiography Revisited*. Paragon, 1979.

O'Brien, Anne. "Hunger and the Humanitarian Frontier." *Aboriginal History*, vol. 39, 2015, pp. 109–134.

Ou, Li. *Keats and Negative Capability*. Continuum, 2009.

Pesic, Peter. *Music and the Making of Modern Science*. MIT Press, 2014.

Pickrell, John. "Mungo Man Heads back to Country." *Australian Geographic*, Nov 7 2017.  
<https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2017/11/mungo-man-heads-back-to-country/>

Pulapaka, Venkat "Eigengrau is the dark color most people see in the absence of light."  
*stsworld.com*, 10 August 2019.  
<https://www.ststworld.com/eigengrau-dark-gray-colour/>

Ryan, Edward. "Water for Country, Words for Water: Indigenous Placenames of North-West Victoria and South-West New South Wales." *Indigenous and Minority Placenames:*

*Australian and International Perspectives*, edited by Ian D. Clark et al., ANU Press, 2014, pp. 293–304.

Ryan, Lyndall, and Philip G. Dwyer. “Settler Massacres on the Australian Colonial Frontier, 1836–1851.” *Theatres of Violence: Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity throughout History*, Berghahn Books, 2012, pp. 94–109.

Ryan, Lyndall, William Pascoe, Jennifer Debenham, Stephanie Gilbert, Jonathan Richards, Robyn Smith, Chris Owen, Robert J Anders, Mark Brown, Daniel Price, Jack Newley, and Kaine Usher. *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia Newcastle*, University of Newcastle, 2017-2020.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1340762>

Shellam, Tiffany, et al. *Brokers and Boundaries: Colonial Exploration in Indigenous Territory*. ANU Press, 2016.

Taylor Ashley, P. “Newton’s Color Theory.” *The Scientist*, 1 March 2017.  
<https://www.the-scientist.com/foundations/newtons-color-theory-ca-1665-31931>

Waldmen, Gary. *Introduction to Light – The Theory of Light, Vision and Color*. Dover, 2002.

Wilson, Eric G. “Negative Capability.” *How to Make a Soul: The Wisdom of John Keats*, Northwestern University Press, 2016, pp. 29–38.