

## University of Wollongong and Bond University

**Tara Goedjen and Caroline Graham**

### **Thin Top End**

#### Statement:

In September 2011, the two authors embarked on a critical and creative exploration of one of Australia's 'thinnest' places – the Top End, a space full of history and crocodiles and misunderstanding. The resulting creative nonfiction article is a journey through the contemporary and mythical elements of the region's landscape – from boabs to curlews, gorges, highways and UFOs. Integrating history, myth and conversation, the writers investigate the relationship between story and place, past and present, fact and fiction. The notion of boundaries is central to this exploration – physical, cultural and historical boundaries are warped, contested and rearranged throughout the essay, as the writers ask difficult questions about one of Australia's most beautiful and lonely spaces. In co-authoring the essay, the writers also investigate the act of shared storytelling and the influence of perspective, place, and position when constructing stories.

#### Biographical notes:

Tara Goedjen is a PhD candidate in Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, where she teaches and lectures in creative writing. Her fiction and essays have appeared in North American and Australian journals such as *AGNI*, *New England review*, *Overland*, *Kenyon review online* and *JASAL*. She has a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Alabama, and currently works as Editor of *Momentum*, Pan Macmillan's digital-only publisher.

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They say there are thin places. Places where the membrane between reality and your imagination is fragile. More permeable. Or just plain non-existent.

The space between midnight and 4am is one of those places. The distance between the light switch and the bed. Old churches. Sunset. The moment before it rains.

The Top End is among the thinnest of places. Wild and red and full of history and crocodiles and misunderstandings. The boundaries are paper-thin. Pin-thin. Story-thin. So thin, it's hard to tell the difference between one dream and another.

At Darwin airport you notice a crocodile and a UFO on the front page of the paper. A good thing, since you've come to find out if the tales about the Australia's Top End are true. Standing in line for the rental car, stories emerge in fragments.

*A friend-of-a-friend was bitten by a croc on the neck, someone says. There's a big fish in the harbour, too, biting people.*

*A man in blue shorts moves out of the glare of the window. When I was a boy they'd run from us, he says. But now that they're protected they've become dominant. Less fish, more crocs. No wonder they're biting.*

Outside it's the heat that bites. The car is tinny, because it's cheap, and because in a city you aren't worried about needing four-wheel drive, or about roos flying through the windscreen.

In the rest of the Australia, a cold winter has set in. But here you won't need the orange jacket you brought, or the boots.

The Top End isn't a State. Where its boundaries are depend on who you're asking: some draw a line around the upper half of the Northern Territory, others include Western Australia's Kimberley plateau and the tip of Queensland's Cape York. Everyone agrees that there's only one city.

Darwin is a place of transients, semi-temporary strangers who come to experience the laidback lifestyle for a year, or two, or twenty. Here there are two seasons: the wet and the dry. The in-between is called the build-up, when the earth swelters and the humidity increases until you're breathing water. People get aggressive, crazy – they call it going troppo.

Darwin's seaside apartments form their own landscape. They've got big balconies and collections of desert roses. Below, a path winds over the dry grass along the coast. The ocean is aqua and forbidden; the sand is pockmarked. Desert and water, slammed together.

You set down a bag full of all the wrong things and shower off sweat and dust. The bathroom is papered with more newspaper headlines: *Woman Fends Off Horny Emu. Dog Mauled By Yowie. Croc-Attack Survivor Killed By Snake.*

From the balcony, the beach looks lunar – with its cracked surface, its craters. Broken shells litter the scrub. You trade jeans for shorts, then look for your friend's address. They say it's easy to get lost up here.

*We're the house with Indiana Jones spray-painted on the mailbox, your friend says. Oh, and don't walk too close to the water.*

The world's most poisonous sea-creature is the Australian Box Jellyfish. It's not a true jellyfish but looks like one, though you never see it coming. Clusters of eyes line its cubic body, thousands of stinging cells lace pale blue tentacles. Some say it's an opportunist, floating along until immobilizing a shellfish, or a human. But others – because of its speed and sight – call it a hunter.

You park downtown to buy provisions for the drive inland. Across the street a park overlooks the bay and the noisy flight path to the airport. A sunworn man asks to share your picnic table.

*Just visiting?* He has a slight accent.

You nod.

*It's time for me to move on, go back to Europe, he says. Just got to wait for the visa. He wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. Feels isolated after awhile, living here. Besides, Darwin's got a lot of crazies.*

*So the UFO stories aren't true?*

He laughs. *Pure rubbish. You only see them in the papers. One lunatic keeps claiming he sees them. How long you here for?*

*Leaving today, actually.*

*Where you headed?*

*Kununurra.*

*Today?*

*Why not?*

*Today?* He looks worried. *But it's already afternoon, he says. I wouldn't start driving to Kununurra now. The worst is sun up, sun down. He says, leaning forward. You'll be driving along and then BAM! He claps his hands. The next thing you know you got a roo through your windshield. No, I wouldn't be on those roads at night. You better wait.*

You tell him you plan to camp halfway.

*Got a stove for morning tea? I got all that shit if you want to borrow it.*

*Thanks, but I'm set.*

*You sure? My house isn't far from here. I got everything you need. Cookware, sleeping bags, a hammer...*

You've already got what you need.

*Well, he says, I wouldn't be driving there tonight. Not on my life.*

It's anthill country. Amid the scrub they're tall and thin and appear in hundreds, memorials to something inhuman. Plaques on the side of the highway describe how they are formed, the layers inside, the task of each ant in that long and sandy universe.

During the day, the Great Northern Highway is full of road-trains speeding 130 kilometers an hour through the isolation, and grey nomads in caravans sight-seeing their way through retirement. But at night, there's no one.

It's late when you finally reach the campsite, so you pitch the tent in darkness, wishing for that hammer. When you're finished, the rainguard is upside down and the window flaps are impossible to open.

A chill creeps in. The tent's canvas feels thin against the night's terrors – rasping possums, a curlew's screams, unknown scratchings.

Waterfalls leave black streaks as they journey down the cliff. The rain is soaked up by the swamp on top, then seeps through the rock, naturally filtered. When it drips out the bottom, it's cool and pure. Safe enough to drink.

There are about 20 tourists on the Katherine Gorge boat tour, all wearing sunglasses to peer into the hard blue sky. It's led by an Aboriginal man from the Jawoyn mob who has lived here – in what his people call Nitmiluk – his entire life. He tells you the gorge was formed by Nabilil, a dragon-creature from the Dreamtime. Since the country was dry, Nabilil brought a dilly bag to drink from, but the other animals speared him and all his water leaked out into the gorge.

*Some of the rock paintings date back 70,000 years, the guide calls out.*

The boat passes by a shaded cliff so high you can't look at its top without swaying. Sky and earth, slammed together.

Another traveler introduces himself. *My name means 'enlightenment', like Buddha.* He pats his belly. *I was born in Alexandria, the oldest city in Egypt. Cleopatra's city. I'm sure you know her story?*

He's a dental surgeon by day and a philosopher by night. *I use etymology*, he says. *The human psyche reveals itself through words.*

At a natural rock barrier, the group boards the next boat. The thinner vessel maneuvers around rocks jutting out of the deep blue. The guide shuts off the motor.

*We always throw some fish back in*, he says. *For Bolung, the rainbow serpent who lives here. I shut off the engine in the same place every time, to pay respect.*

A moment of silence – the place speaks in the hush. Here the earth is carved up on all sides, slicing into the sky. The colors clash: red rock, blue river, yellow flowers. Grey sandy beaches where crocodiles lay their eggs.

*One of the most spiritual places*, the enlightened one whispers. He has travelled the world looking for God. *That's why I come here*, he says. *I never felt the holiness of a church. But here, God is in the rock and the water and the crocodile. It's a secular sort of spirituality.* The philosopher smiles with perfect teeth. *This was here before Buddha, before Mohammed, before Christ. It's like a baby.*

*Untouched but ancient.*

*Timeless.*

The guide starts the boat again and tells more of the river's stories: he narrates the kangaroo head in the crocodile traps, the toothmarks in the buoys, the medicine of the silver leaf tree, the depths of water, the shade of the cliffs, the five seasons, the voices, the birdcalls, the smell of bats, the silence lingering underneath the engine as the boat pulls up to dock.

The tour is over.

Walking out under the eucalyptus, the enlightened dentist offers up a parting gift. *In Latin*, he says, *persona, or person, comes from mask. And spirit? Spirit means volatile.*

The route to the Kimberley has a moderately-high risk of crashes. With high speeds and the long distances between hospitals, the fatality rate is high. Drivers should watch for kangaroos and wedge-tailed eagles, slow to move after feeding.

On the road again, halfway there. The sun drops, late and dramatic – like it's setting a million years of history, not a single day. You count the cars and trucks. There aren't many.

A rusty sign indicates the only petrol station for 240km: *Timber Creek, Population 650*. It's been hours since the last pee, coffee or half-bar of phone reception. But Timber Creek is no desert oasis. Instead of streetlights, a bulb hovers above two petrol bowsers. Fenced in by chicken wire is a caravan park and beside it the kind of hotel you'd lie awake in. A few miners in reflective shirts are eating at a tiny restaurant.

It's hard not to think about the news reports on Ivan Milat, who murdered half a dozen travelers and dumped them in a lonely New South Wales forest. Or the Kimberley Killer, a tourist who shot other tourists. Police found him camouflaged in bushland and shot him back.

The car idles while you calculate how much petrol you have left and how far you need to go. Eventually, you lock the doors and keep driving.

On the side of the road: A dead cow. Two birds like pelicans with no beaks, the size of large children. A sign frayed by bullets. *Warning: PRESCRIBED AREA. No Liquor. No Pornography.*

The West Australian border is a fluorescent beacon manned by a lone uniformed guard. *Anything to declare?*

There's some spinach in the boot, a couple of oranges.

*You'll have to hand them over.*

He searches the car. The oranges and spinach are confiscated to protect the state's agricultural industry from pests. When you drive across the imaginary line in the sand you gain two-and-a-half hours as a result of the time difference. It seems like a good trade.

Kununurra has 50 years of white history, and a much longer past. It's a land of extreme juxtaposition. A café on the river serves forty-dollar meals while its patrons watch a sluggish crocodile float past breadcrumbs and fish. But across town, thin dogs wander untended though crowded reserves.

A day after arriving, you volunteer with the weekly mobile kindergarten and ride in the back of a van full of children's toys. The temporary playhouse is set up in a small park. You can't help but notice the rubbish. Empty plastic bottles smashed flat. Shiny circles of aluminum cans in the dust.

A block away, a toddler holds a baby's hand as they cross the street together. One of them has snot running down his nose. They sit on a mat and start gluing feathers onto paper, and painting with their hands, their arms. Nearby, a mother watches, quietly playing with her children. Another volunteer gets out her guitar and starts to sing and the kids join in. The oldest girl is quick and confident. She pinches her brother's cheeks, the snotty ones. A dog wanders over to sit in the shade. *Houses need to breathe, to let the spirits move*, someone tells you. *That's why we smash all the windows. And people call it vandalism.*

They named the boab the upside-down-tree because its branches look like roots. Some have been around for 1,500 years, which makes them the oldest living Australians. They rise above the scrub, alone or in pairs, and their bulbous postures seem human: dancing in the wind and bending to tend baby boabs. Their fruit has a pelt of fine hair; their seeds are shaped like kidneys.

Every night, a youth group opens its doors to keep kids from walking the streets. When it's time to close, volunteers from the town drop them home.

The last boy is 15, but looks 12. The van has already stopped at two houses – places the driver has left him before. Both houses are dark. There's talk of an uncle, or maybe a friend.

*Is there somewhere else I can take you, buddy?*

The boy shakes his head.

*What about your grandma's? Can I take you there?*

Again, a headshake. The van loops around town, checking to see if someone's home. The driver's not allowed to leave the kid by himself.

*Thing is, if we can't find somewhere, I'm gonna have to put you into care for the night, and I really don't want to do that.*

Someone mentions the shelter outside town.

*I don't think you want that, either, do you?*

He doesn't.

*Is there anyone else you can think of?*

There isn't.

So the van drives around and around town, while you fill the minutes with small talk and false cheer.

Later, you retell this story. Someone should do something, everyone agrees. It's just hard to figure out what that something is.

*What can you do?* a burned-out social worker says. He shrugs. *You can't make people love their children.*

You take another sip of your drink without knowing what to say.

At what history books call white settlement there were 270 languages and more than 600 dialects in Australia but now less than a hundred survive. The mob here speak Kriol, a kind of hybrid. We're told they don't have words for drugs, alcohol or crime – they borrow the English to supplement.

Your friend parks his jeep next to a tourist bus. Outside, foreigners are snapping pictures on a cliff overlooking Lake Argyle, Australia's largest artificial lake. The guide doesn't mention that the damming of the Ord River in 1970 for irrigation buried sacred land. He speaks instead about the new ecosystem, full of fish and freshwater crocodiles and birds, like the blue-throated Kookaburra perched high above the picnic tables. Out here, everything seems to have more than one story, depending on who's doing the telling.

*Close by there's a forest, someone says. It's part of Mirima National Park, Hidden Valley. It's men's country traditionally, women aren't allowed to go there. If they do, they get nits. There's a sign out the front, but people go in anyway. I know someone who did and she had headlice for a year. I wouldn't go in there.*

You've heard the legends of the Minmin, who might have taught the local Aborigines how to hunt. It's said they could disappear into crevasses, but no one knows the truth. And there are stories about a car full of kids that went off the road just out of town, because reception suddenly kicked in and they all checked their phones at the same time. You've heard about streetwalkers who go wandering at night, because they have nowhere else to go. *The pubs ban bare feet and certain kinds of shoes, someone tells you, but really they're banning certain kinds of people.*

*The other day, a kid asked me to explain a suicide, your friend says. He was six years old, and I didn't know what to tell him.*

Out here, there are stories upon stories. Some are told very quietly – or not at all. Some you can't write down because they're not yours to tell.

Kelly's Knob is a scrubby hill that looks over Kununurra's main drag, all the way across the land to the lake and into the hazy distance. From this height, there's a distinct line of irrigated green against brown desert rock. The wet and the dry, slammed together.

In the heart of the Kimberley there's a million-acre land reserve, mysteriously called El Questro. You can only get there by four-wheel drive, and you pass the time inventing stories.

*It's named after a Spanish bullfighter, someone suggests.*

*Or after a slave ship.*

*Or a vengeful god.*

*No, a lover's suicide.*

And then you're forging a river and the water slaps against your window – thin glass the only thing between you and a flood. The jeep makes it across before sputtering and, then, dying.



Ahead, it's all desert and shrubby hills, probably snake country, and the rushing water behind looks like a good place for a croc to get a meal. The boot should be loaded with water, food, fuel, a communication device, but it's not. There hasn't been another car for hours. You start sweating and not just because of the heat.

Fate intervenes. A moment later a red truck appears, easily towing a camper across the high water. It pulls up next to the jeep.

*Slow and steady*, a tall man says as he climbs out. *You got to take it slow and steady. Otherwise you get the undercurrent from going too fast.*

*How do you like those drinking laws in Kununurra?* his wife asks.

You shrug, grateful they can fix the jeep's engine. Once it dries, you can go onward to hot springs and a leafy prehistoric forest in the midst of red-rock desert. The contrast magnifies the beauty, they say.

*Those drinking laws.* The woman shakes her head. *We gotta buy our beers outside town.* She climbs back into her truck. *It's discrimination against the whites,* she says.

The crocodile is the oldest surviving creature from prehistoric times. A sophisticated predator, it bites with a thousand times more force than any other animal: a rottweiler, a shark, a hyena. Crocodiles swallow stones for balance; they have a four-chambered heart.

You are sitting among travelers. Friends of friends who all happened to find their way to outback Western Australia. You become temporary companions. Friends-in-passing. For one night, the space between you narrows and you forge a kinship open only to strangers, fellow travelers in a distant land. Across the dinner table is a judge from Europe and an actor from the UK, and to your left, a researcher from the USA. You talk about what it means to leave home, what it means to travel.

*It's just the now*, the judge says. *There's no time, no schedules, no phone.*

Empty glasses fill the table. Someone says shots are called shots because in the Wild West a bullet was traded for a small glass of liquor once upon a time. You talk about the history of the place, about its secrets. About your own secrets. Tongues grow loose, made brave by the impermanence of the moment.

It's a noisy night, and a long one. You talk about how a good actor needs another actor to play with. About your worst moments, your biggest fear, whether it's fair to call and say goodbye to loved ones if you're dying. You talk about the dying languages of Australia. The judge says, *If they die, they are meant to die*, and then is flogged with protests.

Then it's first memories, and how the bible is open to interpretation, and ghost stories, and the hoax of Charles Kingsford Smith. *A rescue plane crashed trying to find his fake plane crash*, someone says. You ask how it feels to leave the country you were born in.

*Family isn't about bloodlines, it's about connections, the actor says. Family are the people who take you into their home and treat you like a son.*

*When I'm in Germany, the judge says, I become Herr. I switch into that.*

*We throw ourselves into uncomfortable situations to find something we're missing.*

*Everytime we travel, we add to the narration in our head.*

The judge is the first to say goodnight. It's quiet for a moment after he's gone.

*I still can't believe he said that about languages, the researcher says.*

The eerie wailing that fills the north at night is the bush stone-curlew. It's loud and desolate – like an echo of a past lament. Sometimes tourists hear it and call the police to report a woman in the bush, screaming. There are legends, told in hushed voices, about how it wails with guilt, how it's the harbinger of death.

The road back is long. It sweats and stretches under the sun's glare. Shadows follow the car. There is no one, only you and another friend, flying through space trying not to hit any roos.

The first landmark should be the border but it's open sky and miles and miles of nothing. There's no crossing, not on the way back, because there are only restrictions on produce going out of the Northern Territory, not into it. That's all the crossing is there for. To keep out oranges. And spinach.

Without the border it's hard to say when it happens, but at some point that two-and-a-half-hours they gave you gets taken away too – or given back. Time jumps forward. You barely feel it going. Gone.

And after that it's just more red earth and towering rocks, places that look familiar and strange altogether, until the sagging roof of the Timber Creek petrol station appears on the horizon. This time, you go inside.

The station owner, between pouring milk in cups with too-big lids, casually mentions the suicide rate around here. *It's high*, he reckons. *People from Darwin come out here to do it.*

*Why?* You reach for the coffee.

*It's always worse in the wet*, he says, adding up the bill. *Everything's worse in the wet. Places flood and roads get cut off and there's nowhere to go. But it's bad in the build-up too – it's unbearable. It's just bad.*

A long walk back to the car. The sun exposes you. Sticky hands and there's nowhere to wash them. The engine turns over and you turn the radio up to hide the strangeness inside.

As the stereo blares you sing and sing and sing for eternity until you start to wonder whether maybe you took a long turn. Wrong turn. Everything's strange. Muddled. Your friend points out a vulture, picking at a carcass on the side of the road. The sun shifts erratically. It's odd because there aren't any vultures in Australia and there's a question hanging in the air. *What do you do?* Flood plain in the desert. *What do you do?* Boab bent over, praying. *It's not like you can make people love their children.*

A road train hurtles past and everything shudders. *The crocodile opens its mouth so that its brain can breathe.* The heat gets inside you. Heaven and hell, slammed together. It's the wrong question anyway. Everyone loves their children.

You know where you are but it's too long, too far, and you're lost on a straight, dusty highway with no stencil of Indiana Jones to guide you home.

The sun sinks into the wilderness and at first it's a relief. The heat drains from the air and the sky is awash with red. But when the last of the light is gone, panic begins to set in. Silhouettes leer, threatening, and the old man's warning returns: *I sure wouldn't be driving there. Not on my life.*

Between towns, you pass the time telling ghost stories, which in retrospect is unwise – everyone knows ghosts inhabit lonely highways and target unwitting travelers, and this road is certainly lonely. There's a dead kangaroo sprawled on the dirt and time stretches the highway. It's endless. You grip the steering wheel tight as you watch for roos, road trains and the ghosts of your own creation.