

Black Lines on Almost Yellow Paper by Thomas Cleary

Black lines on almost yellow paper. The smooth texture of it against his hand was comforting. The only thing that would listen to him.

The dirt underneath his fingernails showed his hard work. Day by day he would wake up before the sun rose and he would force himself out of his home. He wouldn't think of a better life because he knew it would not come and if it were possible, it would have come already.

He had stayed on his farm for years now. Only ever leaving to gather the newspaper from the post office forty kilometres away. He would drive his truck and every day would ignore the world progressing around him, like the dirt beneath his house; never changing, never moving but forever present. The people of Gundaroo judged him maybe too harshly. They didn't know him. Nobody did.

Into the post office he trudged, heavy-footed. The paper only cost one dollar and that was what he would place on the counter. The woman behind the desk wouldn't touch it until he left. She thought he was diseased or that something was wrong with him. They all did. The only person who didn't was a little boy.

He didn't know him more than anyone else did, but he didn't understand why they treated him like this. "Why is he so weird Daddy?" he asked his father. "He just is. He's Abo and he's old and doesn't talk to anyone. I don't know what he expects." The boy listened but was still too naive to understand what he just had been told.

The man heard the words. He heard all the comments. He heard everyone telling their own families about what an outcast he was. The way they talked about him made him not want to care. So, he didn't. It became the norm for him.

He had worn and tough skin. His hands were covered in calluses, blisters, and scars. He worked all day to distract his mind. He burnt his land to stop the bushfires and managed his animals. The only thing he cared for was his land.

Even his pen was ordinary. He didn't want to be anything more than ordinary. He just wished to be another of the crowd as all his life he had been ridiculed as an Aboriginal. An outlier. One at the front of the crowd. Every job interview he had to tick the box asking,

"Are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?" and every day he grew more and more sick of his treatment until it drove him out of the city and into somewhere he hoped he could be "normal". But nowhere could fulfil this man's wishes. From the day he was born he wished he was white or anything other than what he was. He wished that he was just another Staedtler on the table. He wished his skin was lighter so he wouldn't be called a "darkie" or "petrol sniffer". He wanted the torment to end but it didn't. He endured it all throughout his school. With only his mother and sister to support him.

His only freedom was his book. The ink and paper allowed him an escape to his label. A way to free himself from his skin colour or how he looks. The paper would not judge him. It wouldn't laugh or think about what he said. It would just listen.

And in the book, he wrote:

A darker cloud in the endless blue expanse.

He was not one of them, he was different, he didn't feel like them.

He had gasses inside him poisoning him and those clouds around him.

They all left him.

Alone.

The gas was always with him

It poisoned him.

It held him back,

It slowed him and weakened him.

It brewed in his blood until he had suffered enough.

He expelled it.

But without the gas the cloud had no colour.

He was not dark nor light.

It was empty,

Unnoticeable.

But now the gas had come back,

It was not in the cloud but surrounding it.

Only the gas could be seen and nothing beneath it.

Blue Ghosts by Tom Roche

“Hey, I think I know that guy from somewhere, Michael do you remember him?”

Michael drifted over to the TV and squinted at the small, rounded screen. Moving closer he flinched at the familiar look of accusation behind the rimless glasses. “Yeah, we might have gone to school with him, I think, Wittenoom isn’t a very big place. His name was David or something.” He replied in a low raspy voice. David Neville’s hair had greyed, and the once chubby face had chiselled, but the eyes and the voice of the man triggered a dizzying guilt that made Michael’s stomach churn...

“Mad monkey, mad monkey we’re going to get you, mad monkey mad monkey we’ll put you in the Zoo!” The chanting began as Michael edged back from the rock, gripping onto the thick braided rope swing. Michael took a running leap and flung himself into the water, “Geronimo!”, he yelled spectacularly, his voice rang out across the gorge. The azure water reflected the dazzling midday sun when the pristine stillness erupted in a spectacular splash. The frenzy began as the boys started to tackle and drag each other under to see who would give in first.

A friendly voice sounded from the top of the rock. “C’mon guys get out of the water! Seriously I heard someone on the radio, they said factories dump their waste and mud along the river. It may look great but the slippery slurry at the bottom is just muddy asbestos tailings.”, The soft, insistent voice of the local nerd and science prodigy David Neville whispered across the water. “Oh, shut up you boring nerd, how would you know? I bet you can’t even swim”, Michael yelled back, to the amusement of the boys round him. “Yeah, hurry up to Granny’s house and listen to your stupid radio, loser!”, James chimed in. David skulked away, disheartened as Michael and his friends continued to cannonball into the warm, blue water.

As the sun set, the red cliff faces were illuminated in the heat and the boys lay on the rocks burying each other in the asbestos tailings. “We look like blue ghosts” Steve laughed.

“When David comes back this way, let’s teach him a lesson!” James told the group emphatically. James’ Earle’s father was the boss of Boyes Terre mines, and he did not take kindly to people criticising his father’s work. The boys squeezed themselves into a rock crevasse. They heard the light, nervous footsteps and with the synchronised stealth of a pride of lions, they pounced, surrounding the boy.

“We like swimming in the water here thanks David, hopefully you do too,” Michael said flatly and as David turned, he gave him an almighty shove into the deep blue water. David splashed and flailed around for a few seconds, then turned his back and ran away. They didn’t see him at school the next day or the following one and within a week, the news had spread that they had left town.

On the television, David Neville’s adenoïdal voice droned on... “All it takes is one microscopic blue fibre to get into your lungs and it could kill you...” Like blue ghosts Michael thought grimly. He thought of his James, in hospital, hooked up to a ventilator. He always said to Michael “It’s like breathing through a straw, Mate.” If he was honest Michael wasn’t feeling too great himself either. He was always tired and short of breath. David didn’t swim with them in the gorge, he didn’t play in the tailings at school and at the bottom of the street and he left the town altogether. If only they heeded his warnings. He will never become one of the blue ghosts of Wittenoom.

Dreams by Cooper Anderson

I had a dream. That after we fought and died as equals, we may live as equals too. That dream died a long time ago. The bus depot is void of life, the news from Montgomery being the main culprit. The whispers of the whining wind echo through the empty bench, bringing the freezing stings of snow with it. My bus groans to a stop, flooding the bus stop with light. I hand my money to the driver; his bloodshot eyes sullenly glare back at me before returning his gaze to the road. Even though I am not like them, why do I still get that glance?

I had a dream of a time when I would not feel the shame of sitting in the coloured section. That dream died a long time ago. All my other passengers sit at the front, avoiding the toxic radiation that radiates from the back. An elderly lady that sits at the front in desperate prayer, like how I once was, maybe hers will be heard. Beside her is a young man who shot me down with his eagle eyes, before checking his coat buttons to avoid the awkward air. I am used to it, but it still hurts.

I had a dream, that one day a white man could look me in the eyes and not feel the need to hastily look away. That dream died a long time ago. A well-mannered man walks onto the bus, yet he does not feel the need to look away when his eyes meet mine, but instead he smiles. His smile reminds me of Rob. Time seems to slow down as he walks past the rows of empty seats, pausing slightly before taking a courageous step into the land of the unknown, to join me in the coloured section. Silence sits between us until he offers me a cigarette.

The echo of distant bombs serenades the rolling plains. My company sits near the banks of the Seine, unpackaging gifts from home. It is while I am replying to my mother's letter that my buddy Robert, displays his loot. A pack of cigarettes.

"Look at this beauty! You want one?" he asks. His beaming grin spreads across his pale sunburnt face. I cannot say no. Smoke collects above us as we simply talk. Without the constant rattling of distant machine gun fire, it would not be hard to understand why I called this freedom.

I awake from my daydream, wondering how long it has been since my mind wandered off. However, my acquaintance still looks at me with a grin. With Robert's grin. I accept his gift graciously.

"May I ask sir, why are you sitting in the coloured section?" I ask politely as he hands me the cigarette. When our eyes meet, I am the one to dart away to the window. I want to look into his warm blue eyes. Yet I find it impossible.

"White's still a colour, ain't it?" He answers. Time flashes before my eyes, and before I know it, it is his stop. He bids me farewell and leaves. I am left alone, wishing I could've asked for his name, to have talked longer, to have spent more time together. Yet he disappears just like Robert, and I am left dreaming if I will ever see him again.

My Shark by Luke Sissons

“Be back before the sun’s last breath, we are expecting natures worst come nightfall.”

My grandfather was an experienced fisherman, popular among the towns people. He could read the weather like historians read the past.

“I will return before supper. We will eat what I catch. It will be substantial and wholesome!”

“Your confidence is a truly admirable virtue, but don’t let it consume you”

He told me not go out today because the weather would be treacherous. As a matter of fact, he begged. He was old and often forgetful. Probably, not the best person whose advice one would heed. I grab my notebook and pen from the bedside table, a journal holding my fishing log, holding my endeavours, a collection of my glories.

The coast of Puerto Lopez is always beautiful this time of morning. The time just before the sun creeps over the Machlilla Mountains. A true spectacle of Mother Earth. Alone, I had the day to enjoy its beauty, its exquisite allurements.

I journey to the docks to pick up my skiff. It was old and not very durable, but it was the best- looking boat I have owned. This wooden vessel has brought nothing but fortune for me and my family. Once my grandfather’s, now mine. It will be the origin of my legacy, best fisherman on the South side of the Equator. A challenge at that, but certainly achievable.

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Ten miles off Puerto Lopez. My reinforced copolymer line ninety fathoms down. Around midday I had caught several tunas, big enough bait for any large creature that swims by. The sun seems closer to the horizon, the sky now orange. The morning is marvellous, but the moment before the dark is truly my favourite sight. Appreciation of the golden rays will not be possible today though, my line has increasing tension. It is abrasion resistant, it will tighten, but never break. I look over the skiff, yet nothing is seen. Beyond the surface, there is a ghost within the darkness. An almost black figure slithering about the bottom of the ocean. I put more pressure on the rod.

If I am to catch him, it will have to be now. I pull on the line, but no release in tension. If anything, there is more. The boat now moving in the direction of this distressed, yet powerful fish. The compass reading West. The line is floating towards the surface, the fish clearly trying to reach the ocean current above it, helping it travel faster. The creature now showing a fin breaking the ocean ceiling. A shark.

If I am to catch him, he will be my shark. No one else’s! A true testimony to my fishing acumen. But the deed is not yet done. The fish has now lost his endurance, nothing but the current carrying it. I begin reeling it in. Its capacity to continue now fading.

“A bit closer, a bit closer, a bit, CLOSER!”

I reach for the harpoon and complete the fight. This aquatic giant, now the latest victim in my collection. The shark is too big to hold in the skiff. I jump overboard along with the fishing line. I tie him to the side, finally able to appreciate the beauty of this awe-inspiring cartilaginous predator. The sun now touching the horizon. I clamber back into the boat, still shaken from my accomplishment. I record the catch, adding to my ever- growing memoir. Newspapers ought to be hearing about this. I should start writing the story for them, it’s only polite.

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Nightfall has swiftly approached and here I remain writing my legacy. The formation of the clouds is unsettling, but nothing of concern. The flicker of my flashlight guides the formation of my

handwritten sentences as I testify and fantasise about my grandeur. The boat is swaying slowly, a meditative movement that enhances my pensive reflection. The rocking soon develops into choppiness knocking a few objects off balance, but here I remain. A heavy gust of wind...

“We can conclude that his achievement is nothing short of extraord...”

Beyond the gaps of my boat’s wooden planks, water begins to seep through. This dark liquid rises from the floor, consuming my ankles. Then my shins. Then my hips. My journal is now soaking wet. The skiff is a passenger in these rough waters, being thrown around like a doll. The ocean in all its glory has turned against me. I scurry for the oars and attempt a rapid escape, but as a mountainous wave approaches, it may be too late.

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The Puerto Lopez coast is always beautiful in the morning, the sun creeping over the Machlilla Mountains. Not my favourite time of day, but a sight I will cherish. The skiff returns to its sand filled home, but no adjacent shark. Lost to the ocean. The fishing line now only holds my imagination. No objects to show the strain of what I endured on that final night. I return to town and head straight for the newspaper, knowing what I have to offer will be scintillating conversation for a few months. They don’t believe me. I head home. They don’t believe me.

“Confidence is a good virtue grandson, but now you tell tall tales. I am sure you had a great story, but if you held a shark that big, you would’ve protected it and brought it home.”

They Would Welcome Us by Cameron Masters

The wind sped through the trees like a pack of wolves, reverberating dull, metallic echoes off the camouflaged tanks. We were just starting to enter Ukrainian territory now, for what were doubtfully training missions, the brainwashing lie superiors drilled into us.

We were told they would welcome us.

Two months ago, many young men including myself were ripped from our small villages and transported deep into Siberia, where we trained in freezing temperatures in the day and slept in a cold, leaky barracks at night. Now, as my battalion crosses the border, leaving our homes and families behind, the tanks grind to a slow stop. CRACK! A snipe came out of the shadows, as loud as a whip, missing my comrades head by an inch. CRACK! CRACK! I fall to the sloshy ground, pulling out my AK-74M and taking aim at the ghosts in the trees, my gun spitting bullets at random. A man falls to the ground, my bullet pierced through his neck, and as I reach him, with white eyes writhing in his face, he departs this world. A Ukrainian soldier's corpse lies in front of me, a father, uncle, husband, son, now a lifeless mess for the wolves.

We were told they would welcome us.

After awakening on the soggy snow, to a messenger delivering my mission details, my blood boiled as I read my assignment was to forcibly take surrounding houses, killing any and all civilians. Infuriation builds up inside me and spreads like a wildfire, my conscience set alight by these atrocious, immoral acts that I have been asked to commit. Nevertheless, we set off at dawn, my fury seeped deep into my mind, however, after hours of searching and finding no civilians, I was starting to feel hopeful. That soon drastically changed. As we came to the last house, a shot rings out from the upper window, sinking deep into my comrade's knee, falling to the ground, he stains the pale, white snow, deep red. We drag him through the sodden ground to the brick wall, as, SNAP! Another shot rings out, this time striking another man in the heart, and before he hits the ground, he is dead, with blood gargling from his blue-tinged lips. The last man loses his nerve, grabbing a grenade from his belt and flinging it into the open window, taking the lives of all inside as quickly as a candle is snuffed out. As we make our way up the carpet stairs, the walls splattered red with blood, the sight of a grandfather, mother and her two sons lying dead on the ground awaits us, the price of war.

We were told they would welcome us.

We trudge through the squelchy snow, with the wounded man flung over our shoulders, carrying him back to camp as darkness begins to gather over the horizon. As we reach camp, storm clouds start to amass above us, thunder as loud as a missile crack overhead, and lightning lights up the sky like a lantern. Walking into camp, I quickly receive my next mission, to plant a bomb in a busy Kyiv train station. Anger amasses inside me, scrunching up in my mind like a paper ball, destroying all hope I had left about our country's morals. How could I live with myself if I did this? How could I return to my mother and tell her what I did? I have to desert tonight.

We were told they would welcome us.

Heavy snow replaces the deafening thunder, and the wind begins to pick up as I fling my rifle over my shivering shoulders. I crawl out of camp through the deep snow, saturating the insides of my boots, numbing my blue-tinged toes. The snow gets heavier and the wind stronger, the climate becoming more perilous by the second, and as I finally drag myself up the steep hill bordering our camp, I reach a mesmerizing sight that reminds me of my home. In the distance, the moon reflects off the frozen rivers, the wolves howl in the night, the oaks sway in the wind and the deer gallop to their resting places. So calm, so peaceful, almost as if an army doesn't sit on the other side of this hill, as if their only problems were the never-ending snowfall and the hunting packs of wolves. CRACK! CRACK! Two shots ring out from either side of me, one from the Ukrainians and one from

the Russians, penetrating my chest and abdomen. As blood seeps from my bullet holes and the life is sucked from my body, I fall to the ground, suffocating on the snow. Guttering, choking, drowning, I die a traitor to one and an enemy to another, however I am still at ease with my conscience, and I pass to the next life, a free man.

We were promised they would welcome us.