

# **Landscape memoir: a portrait of the writer as a half-a-dozen places**

**Mark Tredinnick**

## **One**

For almost 50 years, I've been coming to Canberra. Forty-six years, to be precise. I've been coming to Canberra, and leaving, and coming back again my whole life long. And I'm not finished yet. Past Collector and Gundaroo, where Mum's people came from; past Crookwell, where Dad spent some of the days of his childhood. These were names and places that we grew up with in our household—along with Kempsey and Oberon and Helensburg and Wentworthville—without ever really knowing or ever asking what they meant to the people who told us short stories about them: my parents. Whose union turned 50 last weekend.

In the mid Sixties, mum's sister and her family moved to Canberra, where my Uncle Robert went to work at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, and every other school holidays we came and went. When I think of my childhood, I'm more likely to be walking up the Cotter River than running round Epping Oval. Then I studied briefly in Canberra, and then I published books, many of them by the thinkers at The Australian National University, and then I met a girl who worked at the War Memorial, and then we lived in Canberra a while together, and now I go down a few times a year from our home halfway between Canberra and Sydney to work and teach and speak and read and study. I live now right where I began, close to where my parents or their parents began, close to places whose names on my parents' tongues were part of the language in which my childhood was spoken, part of the geography of my youth.

I think of the landscape of the Great Divide on the road to Canberra, which I love, as my original country. In Buddhism, one speaks of one's original face—the face you had before your parents were born—as a very old and riddling liturgy puts it. Your true and given self. Somehow it is my self—among other things—I travel through

when I drive south by south-west and back again across the Great Divide through those stands of forlorn and eternal snow gums, past the Cullarin Range and the parsimonious and godly Lake George: this is the country I had—this is the country, somehow, I *was*—before my parents came into it.

I was, perhaps, specifically, the ruined chapel on Stillwater Road, near Wollogorang, or the ground it stands on yet, eroding into landscape again.

But it is way too late in history now to have that one dear perpetual place that Yeats wished upon his daughter. And I have thought I recognised other landscapes of my self—the homelands of my other selves, of my former lives—on the far side of the earth. On a loch in Ireland once and by a creek in Wyoming.

## **Two**

Jim Galvin was sitting in Prairie Lights Bookshop when he said it to me: ‘If I could draw you a picture of my soul, it would be the Snowy Range.’ He meant the Snowy Range within the Medicine Bows, Wyoming, a quartzite-crowned range he’s looked at most of his life from his father’s house on Boulder Ridge, which is now his house. Prairie Lights is in Iowa City, Iowa. And Jim, when he’s not at home with his range, teaches poetry at the Iowa Writers Centre and has done for 20 years. Jim Galvin may well be the finest contemporary American poet you’ve never heard of and the best poet never to have won the Pulitzer—yet. He is also the author of a book for which he is more widely known than for any of his five or six volumes of poetry and justly famous: *The Meadow*, a landscape memoir, a lyric essay, about the country, some grasslands along Sheep Creek, high in the Medicine Bows, from which he has looked out for so long at the Snowy Range that it’s hard to say where it starts and he stops.

*The Meadow* is a memoir in which the memoirist hardly mentions himself, in which he tells stories about a meadow and tribe of ranges and a few people who lived and died there, but it is a book more like a portrait of a man’s deep self, the ground of his being, than any other I could name.

‘If I could draw you a picture of my soul,’ he says, ‘it would be the Snowy Range.’ And so I think a man, or a woman, may write a memoir by telling you where they live.

And I look out the north-east-facing windows of a shed that was for 80 years a dairy and for seven years a painter's studio and which is now my writing house; I look out at elms and the floodplain of the Wingecarribee, a former swamp that still dreams mistily of being a swamp most of the nights of winter, and I wonder what country I would draw now if I were to sketch the geography of my self. I have lived in and loved and sometimes hated too many places to know what Jim knows about just one, and of how it has taught him who he is, and a little of what it is. I wish I had a meadow, but I don't. For seven years, I had a plateau and I thought that might be it. I wrote a book there that I thought of not only as a study of the place and much more than a reflection on coming to belong in it, but as a memoir of the place as it revealed itself to me, and of many human lives lived and sometimes lost there, each an essay in belonging, mine among them. But the book wasn't so much a book as a practice. It was a kind of lyric, vernacular participation in that place. But if it was meant to bring me home there, I think it finally, like nearly everything one essays, fell short. And now I live there no longer.

### **Three**

Annie Dillard thinks that when she has forgotten everything else about her life, what she will be left with is topography—the way, as she puts it, the land lies this way and that. She writes that in *An American Childhood*, and she means the country of her childhood: Pittsburgh, as it happens. I'd like to think she's right, but I know that if I'm left with topography it won't be that of my suburban childhood. I think it may be that of my grandfather's country parishes, or the Brindabellas behind Canberra, or Mt Majura or Lake George, or the Colorado Plateau or Jackson Hole or the Sawtooths or Sitka Sound; it may be the Hawkesbury River at the Brooklyn Bridge; it may be North Avoca or the Channel Country or the deserts of central Australia, the Flinders Ranges—places I visited as a child. And never seem to have left. Who knows, it may be the canyons of the Blue Mountains. It may be the chapel on Stillwater Road. It may be the Wingecarribee Swamp.

Home is not always where you start from; home is where you arrive. Home is the country that, whenever and wherever you find it, won't leave you. Perhaps it is many such places, an impossible tectonic collage.

Wallace Stevens, who ventured epithets he didn't always believe in, wrote once, in *Theory*: 'I am what surrounds me / these are merely instances.'

I think I know what he means by that, and sometimes I almost believe that who I am is not, or not merely, who the Australian Tax Office tells me I am, or what I say in my bio note, or the sum of some minor accomplishments, or this body inside its clothing. Sometimes I feel that most of me lies all about in the places that I love, that sometimes seem to love me back, and the animals and trees and grasses, and, of course, the people to whom I have grown attached, some of them now gone. Who I am is what I read and where I live and what I love there. Or did. At my best in my best moments, I feel like a piece of something older and longer and smarter than myself. I feel like a bit of the landscape: a piece of plateau, a piece of harbour, a piece of lapsed swamp, a paddock and its flocks. I feel like the bit that doesn't belong but wants to and whose wanting to belong is suffered gently. And it's almost enough.

'Think of your life in place, not time,' I wrote in a poem recently, trying to think my way beyond death and into country. If I am part of a place, not a span of years, I will go on and on. But 'we are creation's anchorites', I also wrote in that poem, admitting that we are, in the end, exquisitely exiled from nature. We are outsiders, moored here, witnessing. We don't quite believe we're part of it all, and yet we'd like nothing better. Sometime before the polar ice melts and the game is up.

I believe there's a kind of memoir one can write of oneself as an aspect of a place; and of a place itself, in which one sometimes features. I've read such books: *The Meadow*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres*. And I've written one. My attempt. It's a book about a famous dissected sandstone plateau, and it's a portrait of my soul expressed as a picture of a place through time. Let me share a couple of passages from it, to give you an idea of how such a thing might go.

My book is called what the geologist Griffith Taylor called the place: *The Blue Plateau*. It comes out late next year. Now that I look at them, these few passages read like a rapid history of my coming and going; there's almost as much of me in these pieces as there is in the entire book. The book itself is mostly country: fire and falling water, escarpment and heath and eucalypt forest and black cockatoo.

I had this fancy idea that something of the ecology of the place would play also in the ecology of my paragraphs. Its weather might haunt my section breaks. Its deep structures of making and unmaking, its birdsong and silence and the blackness of its nights might have got into my voice and onto the paper. But I doubt it, now. What you hear, as ever, is an anchorite—this one—at his particular and awkward choreography of witness. His forlorn hope for eternal life.

## **Four**

### **Some of the parts**

I am made of pieces and of the spaces between them where other pieces used to be. I am a landscape of loss. Most of me is the memory of where else, and who else, and with whom, I have been and no longer am.

And so it is with the plateau; she, too, is a landscape of loss.

We are not—none of us, not I and not this place—ever whole; we are never of a piece. Who we are is how what's left of us falls back toward some kind of coherence much older than we are.

The real book is the one you do not write, the one that orders the pieces that remain; and the real plateau is the work to which all the pieces almost amount, the order they all imply—the heath and the ironstone, the escarpment and the late afternoon light, the valley wind and the early summer fire, the way the plateau came in and the way it's going out again, the first peoples and the second, the time before men and the time of men and the time of no men to come, the falling water and the deepening drought, the sandstone and the black cockatoo and the grey kangaroo and the horse and the rider and the fifteen hundred kinds of plant and the birds that know the difference, and the valley's turns of phrase in the mouths of the women and the men, most of them now gone.

All we can ever know is some of the parts, and here some of them are, each an allusion to the same kind of truth, most of it eroded long ago and borne away east by slim and persistent streams.

### **What is essential is invisible to the eyes**

Les wakes before dawn and walks outside.

It's hard to say just when day comes to the Kedumba, for the valley is deep and it grows light long before the sun makes it up over the valley's eastern rim. But if morning dawns slowly on the valley, it dawns all at once on Les, and he rises without question into the blue tailings of the night and the crying of the kookaburras and leaves the house as though he knows that morning will not come unless he gets up and goes on out and walks the morning down.

Though the house has an inside toilet, Les never could kick the habit of going outside to pee. It isn't just for that, though, that he leaves the house and walks across the paddock to the creek or down the two-wheel track toward the woolshed or over east to his grandfather's grave through the frost or the rising fog or the tepid blue-grey silence.

Les goes outside to remember who he is. He leaves the house to become the place again—no longer just the lean old wreck of a man who's slept all night on the kitchen floor, or sometimes in the narrow bed, where he fell after midnight saturated with sherry. Every morning, as another man might dress, Les puts on the valley again.

So this particular morning, Norm is not surprised to see Les in overalls and gumboots walking in the predawn like some condemned man across the paddock, making for the sheoaks on Waterfall Creek. A dozen roos and some Bennett's wallabies closer to the crossing have their heads down grazing, and when Les walks through them none of them raises its head. None of them shifts or shoots him a glance, and Les passes through them like a ghost, like an understanding they share, an aspect of the morning's ritual. Norm watches from the window of the front room as Les walks on down to the river to check on its height and to splash his face and wet his hair and to drink in that sweet water, and then Norm watches the old man come back the way he went out straight through the animals as though he were no one at all. At the top of the stairs Les kicks off his boots and comes on into the house in his socks and clears his throat.

'You'se'd better rouse yourselves before the day's half gone,' Les calls out from the hall. 'Thought you said you wanted to catch some fish.' This is for Norm's son Ross and the woman he's brought here this time, and for Ross's goodfornothing mate who's snoring down the back. Then Norm walks into the kitchen in his shorts and a jumper and Les sees him and winks. 'Morning boy,' he says.

While his stepfather fixes tea and cuts slabs of bacon and drops them in the pan upon the stove, Norm decides to test a notion. He goes out to the hall where Les hangs his overalls and he pulls some on and rolls up their grey legs and arms and buttons them; he pulls on Les's boots and he shuffles down two steps from the porch to the drive. He hitches up the overalls and straddles the top rail and follows Les's trail across the paddock. Ten feet along, a dozen roos and nine or ten wallabies raise their heads and freeze. Norm slows and tries to shuffle in Les's way, but he's fooling no one. Three more strides and twenty-one animals turn and bound away. Not panicked; more disappointed than anything. Norm's been coming to the valley since Les cut the road in, but Norm isn't what the valley is and he knows he never will be. He's a part-time predator in some ill-fitting pieces of the morning's clothing.

The roos disappear into the timber, and Norm turns for home. 'They can see you, boy. They can smell the big smoke on you,' says Les, when Norm tells him what's happened. 'You gotta come from here like they do, before they stop actually seein' you.'

### **Why I came and when**

I came to the plateau in the winter of ninety-eight. A place a thousand metres in the air and a hundred ks west of the city. Not far west, but far enough. A world of sandstone and eucalypt and unregenerate weather, a place just fallen from the sky. The pitch of the night and the closeness of the stars within it and the sky asleep in the valleys at dawn: I came for that, and I came for the faces of the vermilion stone that no one would ever own, and I stayed because there was real estate here, nonetheless, in all this inalienable wilderness, that even I could afford.

I came to leave the city behind, a place that never wanted as much of me as I had wanted of it; I came to live with a woman I loved in a landscape that never ended, and I thought I'd like to be here yet if it did.

The house we found in May and moved into in August was a plain timber cottage, caught somewhere between Federation and California Bungalow, and it stood on the south side of Katoomba, and since 1911, when the allotment was cut from woodland near the cliff's edge, it had sat without pretension through all the years in all the wind above the valley of the Kedumba. A stand of trees, peppermints and silvertop ash, geebung and banksias, kept the house from the valley and the valley from the house, but most days I took the path through those assembled and restless trees to the edge of the scarp and looked down to where the plateau had once been and where now only the valley remained.

To live in the plateau is not to live high, but deep; it is to cleave to a landscape most of which is gone and most of which is space and most of which is down below you. To live in the plateau is to live inside something, not upon it. Katoomba sits on a narrow ridge, and canyons gape all about. They surround you; they are where your eye wanders and your mind falls. The valleys are the larger part of what the plateau is, and they are what it will all one day become, and down in the deepest, the one below my place, Les Maxwell got up and went to work most of the days of his life.

But Les had been dead two years already by the time I learned that the clearing I looked down upon each morning at the end of the track through the trees had been almost his entire life.

I'm going to tell some stories here, and most of them are Les's, and some of them are Jim's, and some of them are Henryk's, and then there are some others still, and one or two of those are mine, and some of them aren't even stories at all, and what connects them is my living for a time among them on a piece of ground where they all meet. And if I tell them, these broken pieces of a broken plateau, you might hear the place as I heard it now and then, telling me who it really was for as long as I stayed. Which wasn't long enough.

### **The valley is a fallen woman**

The Kedumba River, having fallen off the escarpment, tries to shake the township by making a bunch of sudden moves among weathered hills that look like mullock heaps down there in the valley, all of them teeming with gums. She cuts down into tough old Devonian stone, the folded bedrock of the plateau. She starts looking for a way around Mount Solitary. And when she finds it, the little river turns south, still making out she's lost, and just before she picks up Waterfall Creek, she broadens and slows and runs her finger between two breasts.

These hills have no names on the maps. Les, who lived here longer than anyone, used to call the more easterly of them Sunset Hill because its tip caught the last of the sun, when shadow had inundated the rest of the valley. The other was Sunrise Hill, because it caught the morning before anything else on the valley floor.

Those are good names. But let's face it, these are breasts, and their form is lovely, and Les, for one, never weaned himself off them. And you'd like to rest your head where Les spent his childhood—here among these hills, which are unlike any place else in the valley. They belong to another gender altogether than the angular and unforgiving scarps between which they lie. They are flesh scantily clad in timber, and a river runs between them.

And just beneath the valley's breasts, until the next big fire carries it off, stand the remains of the hut where Les Maxwell was once a child. North of them, the head of the valley lolls to the west, asleep at the bend of the river, hair hiding her face.

The Kedumba is a fallen woman. She has her feet in the Big Water, and she has a lapsed pastoral property in her belly. Where her heart might once have beaten lived this man, and he's gone now, and her heart is empty. She's as lonely as she can ever remember being.

### **The practice of belonging**

There is a practice of belonging, and it starts with forgetfulness of self. This thought came to me one afternoon along the track above the valley, and I walked it home and wrote it down. Don't come to the plateau to find yourself, I wrote; come to find the plateau. Come to know oneself, after a time, as one is known by the plateau, as one figures in geological time, in the pattern of the seasons and the rivers. That would be a self worth finding; that would be a life worth living.

I feel less certain now about what I wrote then. Belonging is a practice, not a birthright; this I still believe. Attachment grows if you let a place in, and if you're lucky. It may happen fast if you are porous to places; it may never happen if you are impregnable to the world, as some of us seem to be. But it is performed best, that practice, when it's an accident of one's being and staying somewhere, making some kind of a life and some kind of a living from the country. And then there are some kinds of belonging that can kill you—the ultimate loss of self. Memories of these children lost in the plateau and so many hard lives lived there make my own practice, my pursuit of emplacement, seem to me now a soft and self-indulgent hobby, though it mattered to me then. The best kind of belonging is unselfconscious; I was always trying too hard to find it.

Still, to aim to understand yourself from a plateau's point of view—that, I think, is a worthy and perhaps even a useful aspiration. It engenders modesty; it puts the world around you first and yourself within it second; and I worked at it for years. And now I see how the working at it was the problem.

And yet, in the middle of my years in the plateau—the year I passed forty—I had a dream. And in the dream I was here in the cottage, and I knew that I shared it with a snake, a giant red-belly black, which lived where it had always lived beneath the floorboards. I was not, in the dream, afraid of it, and yet one afternoon after lunch I took an axe and I went down there, and I killed it. As it slept, I lifted the axe a hundred times and I brought it down hard a hundred times and I sliced the snake into as many pieces.

But when I had finished I watched each piece of the disarticulated snake become a snake itself and slide into the timber behind the house. Night came in my dream, and I took myself to the bedroom and lay down to sleep on a mat on the timber floor. And as I settled, I realised that the fragments of the snake had formed themselves into a broken circle beneath the blanket and made of themselves a bed, into which I sank. The snake was not whole, and yet it was somehow alive, the tip of its tail nearly in its mouth. And it held me, and in my dream I fell asleep on the blanket within the broken circle of the snake, and I felt at peace as I have rarely felt in waking hours, as though I had been forgiven everything. As though my life had come together at last.

### **Here I am**

Let's just say that a place is all those interconnected stories, relationships, energies, and forms of life at play somewhere, including one's own being there, the memories, dreams and desires one has known there; let's just say, as a philosopher has reasoned, that it is those complex structures of place that make an experience of self possible at all—then to witness one's place, or even just to do one's work under the influence of that place, is to draw a picture of one's soul.

And to lose sight of one's place is to lose sight of one's self.

So a man might write you a memoir by telling you where he lives. But what happens if he leaves? Who is he then?

### **Plateauing**

I left the plateau at Easter 2005, and by then I had come to love her less than I thought I would.

It was not the landscape, itself, I fell out with, not those two valleys, and my home ridge and Henryk's ridge and the river, which is the author of us all; no, but the towns and suburbs, which sit upon that parlous ridge with so little grace, aghast at what surrounds them. Les said in his old age that Katoomba had become nothing but a tourist attraction. And I think he's close to right. The place is a tawdry theme park, perched in an astonishing terrain. Some find beauty in the dissonance, but it palled on me. The thing is, one lives mostly in the town, and there are better towns.

If I could have stayed, I would have moved to one of the valleys. But we couldn't stay, and I can't afford much valley just yet.

I must not blame the place, though, not even the town for my leaving. I was always like this: I plateau. And I plateaued even here. I'm not much good at perpetuity; I love and I leave.

So be it. I do not have the gift I thought I had for staying put. I am a migrant. I am a faster kind of sandstone, deposited, compressed, uplifted and carried away all in a matter of years. But I wonder if this place or any place needs us all to stay and stay. Maybe it's how one stays that matters, not how long. In this way, I made my peace with the plateau and left her.

### **The past**

When the men had been and gone, when they had emptied the house of the boxes we had emptied the house into, we stood in the front room, which had long ago been a veranda where the plateau came inside and sat, and it was as though everything we had lived here, dreamed and made, broken and mended, everything the place had made of us, was yet to be. And it felt to me like I'd never see any of it come to anything now.

### **The Wold**

He'll be fifty-two tomorrow, and all day Les has been trying to make a road up the ridge to Dawson's Wold. Cleary wants to put a hut up there, and Les is pretty sure the Wold doesn't want a road or a hut, and he's almost certain he'll never get a road to stick to that slender buttress. He has a strong feeling he'll never reach, in his 'dozer, the heaven his father never paid off and that Dan will never get to put his dream home where Les's father never got to put his dream. But Les won't be telling Dan. He'll work on for a bit until the valley proves him right, and then he'll get back to the care of the perennial mountain road and the pastures and the creek. He'll let Dan find out later the Wold is beyond his grasp.

The day has been hot, and Les has been pushing trees over since early morning. There was a storm at lunchtime, but then it eased, though the heat didn't, and Les kept on, and the rain came back at three or four, but Les kept on. At seven, the day gathered itself up and became a late storm, and Les graded on; he wanted tomorrow morning off, and there was plenty of light yet. But by seven-thirty, it was pissing down, and Les, on the 'dozer, felt like the boy with his finger in the dyke. He cut the engine and left the 'dozer on the slope. It'd probably be there tomorrow.

It's summer, so there's still some light to see by. But there's this cloud and all this rain. The scarps are gone. The clouds have them, and the rain has everything else.

Les hasn't got a coat. He pulls the torch from under the seat in the cab and walks in the rain down the rough track he's cut, and he walks in the last of the light until he's halfway across Dawson's Paddock, and it's truly dark and he switches on the torch and points it down the road ahead of him. By then he's getting what you might call wet. He's not thinking anymore. He's just rain from the outside in. He's a river, top to bottom, going home.

May at the kitchen window sees a wedge of light come up over the rise, and she guesses it's trailing Les. It's a comet coming tail first, and she watches Les take shape, an angel treading water, becoming a man walking home like an idiot in the rain and the dark on the muddy road, and she thinks she sees him lift his arm to wave, but probably he's just sweeping the water from his brow. She draws on her cigarette. She shakes her head. She breathes out smoke, and the rain carries on drumming the roof, and she empties the glass of sherry and pours another one, and she pours one for Les and sets it on the table. She thinks, that man will not live to see his birthday, dawdling home in the rain like a fool, and she goes to the bathroom and gets a bath running for him, and she shuffles back along the hall and puts the dinner she had ready for him an hour ago into the oven. She stands at the window again and watches him come.

Les sees the amber light of the lamp falling from the kitchen window, pooling by the house in the rain. He hears the cattle bawl faintly through the rain that pounds upon the clay and rubble of the road, upon his head and shoulders, and even in the rain the road and the paddocks steam. He hears a lapwing call and he turns the flashlight on it and watches it fly from its nest in the grass. He hears bullfrogs groan in Reedy Creek. The house is coming closer, and what he sees of it is mostly the same light the same damned lamp has been making slenderly for more than a hundred years. Hundred and fifty nearly. The lamp that came into the valley with his grandfather. It goes as well, he thinks, as it ever did and probably always will, till someone breaks the glass, and it's a miracle no one has all this time. Probably it'll still be burning when he's dead and dry as bone and gone to buggery in the ground.

He turns off the torch, and May loses him.

**Erosion**

The plateau came in the river. It fell; it rose; it falls again. The sky came, and it fell down into the valleys the plateau keeps abandoning, and it makes the whole thing blue. Or white. Depending. Something's going on here, and it never will be finished. We call it the Blue Plateau. And most of it is made of loss.

## **Five**

Sometimes I thought of myself writing the book the plateau might write. About itself and about me and about Les and the others. About the drowned valley and the drowned girl and the symphony of fires. Though I still think the ecological imagination, the practice of belonging I tried to sustain in the book has its worth, I believe it's impossible. One writes oneself no matter how hard one tries not to. We are creation's anchorites. Well, then, this book is a kind of liturgical setting of my observance of the place.

One may deepen into country by dying a little to one's mere self and by caring and paying fierce attention to all that isn't just one's own life. I think that kind of aspiration counts. I think it may be part of a reconciliation with the more than merely human world on which all our futures hang.

But I do it because I can't help it. I lean toward the places of the world, as though my life depended on it.