



This story begins in lutruwita/Tasmania on palawa land and travels to Mparntwe/Alice Springs. The artist acknowledges the muwinina people of nipaluna/Hobart and the Arrernte people of Mparntwe and offers her respect to elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

to travel a distance with concrete

to travel some distance with concrete

or melted snow

Priscilla Beck

a short story

part 1: glass

(to hold, or to see)

Through the jar on the window sill, through the snow in the jar, the mountain is reflected backwards.

As the sun warms the room, the contents of the jar evaporate and run back down the sides of the glass, first emptying and then filling the jar again.

Two people pause just outside the gallery to take off their sunglasses, and put on their prescription glasses before coming inside.

The story warms up.

This morning, the mountain was covered in snow. Our car was covered in frost. I walked back and forth between the car and the house with a small water bottle, filling it with water, then pouring it over the ice which shrank and cracked as it melted.

We stopped at the springs, halfway up the mountain. The water was running fast, trickling out of gaps between moss covered stones. You and I got out of the car and filled two large jars with springwater. It was icy and clear. I felt like plunging into a large body of water. We each drank some water from the jar. Everything smells of drenched earth. I imagined licking ice from a clean, damp stone.

1.1

his house was so small
that if she had a shower with the door open
all of the windows in the house would fog

1.2

what she thought was a crack in the glass
turned out to be a spider web
it had been so long since she had drunk whiskey

part 2: concrete

(place)

It feels like it hasn't rained in a long time, but now there is a steady downpour that is settling in to last for days. The mountain is obscured completely by clouds and mist, and you can see your breath in the air. From the way the raw chill of the rain stings your cheeks, you know it is snowing behind the clouds.

The concrete wall, dry yesterday, slowly fills with rain-water, blossoming clouds of dark grey stone show up like a bruise. Creeping in to colour the rest of the concrete as it soaks through until the wind picks up and the sideways rain unceremoniously covers the surface in water.

They have installed concrete bollards on the streets of major cities to stop cars from driving into places where people gather in crowds. In Sydney, they wrapped them like a Christmas present. Either to distract from their purpose, or else to defy it.

There aren't any in Hobart, but they have them in Surfers Paradise.

In Brisbane in 1990 my mother pressed my infant hands into the freshly laid concrete of a curbside on Somerset Street. I have seen them a couple of times since then, although she no longer lives there. They are such a tiny detail of the street that you wouldn't see them unless you were paying attention. That was nearly thirty years ago. I remember some things about that house, that the man next door had a sulphur-crested cockatoo. A couple of times he watched my brother and I, and would let us watch telly, but would mute all the ads. We would sit there watching the ads, not listening to them, but not talking to each other either. Just sitting in silence.

When the show came back on, he turned the volume up again.

In Brisbane, the curbside is always warm. Even in the shade. Even in the rain. The curbside next to where we live in Hobart is growing lichen. The entire surface of the road is a mottled white and pale green. It is so cold that it hurts to walk on the road without shoes.

part 3: time

Above the horizon was a dense white sheet of fog. If you didn't know there were mountains behind it, you would think there was nothing there. Just the sky. In the centre of this white was a small island of treetops, silhouetted by the sun, which was visible behind them as a flat yellow disc. The sun was only as bright as all the white surrounding it, and I looked straight at it until it was all I could see, even when I looked away.

All along the side of the road, the winter wattle has started blossoming.

Each time I have found a white hair in amongst the rest of my hair, I have pulled it out. I think this is more out of some sense of impatience than any fear of death. I think I don't have time to think about this right now, I will save it for later. I often fold them into a post it note, or wrap it in a tissue. I think it has only happened a couple of times, but it happens increasingly often.

Laying there like that, out of context, it could be a cat hair, except that I pulled it out of my own head. While still in my dark hair, it seemed luminous, like spider silk lit by the sun. Once severed, it is lifeless and translucent. I have tried to keep them, but as each occasion is so far removed in time from the last, by the time it happens again I will have forgotten where I put the last one. There are little parcels scattered throughout my house, handbags and studio that each contain a single white hair that I will probably never find.

part 4: snow

(salt tears)

You thought it would be a snow night so we lit the fire. It didn't snow, instead it was the night that Jetty, chasing a rabbit, ran out onto the highway and was hit by a car. Michaela ran out after him and carried his heavy body to the side of the road. Her arms covered in blood, she tried to save him but it was too late. Nick said he cried more than he had in life. I'm not sure if he meant cumulatively, as in he cried more tears that night than he had cried altogether as long as he had known how to cry, or if he meant he cried more in one moment, than any other time he had cried.

Salt tears melt snow, and there was no snow on the mountain in the morning.

We took Michaela up the mountain the following night. We sat in the tavern by the fire and it rained outside. There was a short playlist of soul songs playing on a loop and we heard Otis Redding's '(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay' three times.

Seeing their sadness at losing Jetty, I saw their lives in terms of their feelings for one another as a kind of abstract timeline. Their lives were full, and somehow distant, and this was an opening to it, like a window, or a wound. I saw their lives as time spent with and without Jetty, with and without each other.

The clouds lift to show a mountain dusted lightly with snow. The day is sunny, and cold. The snow fills the grooves on the peak of the mountain like salt crystallises in between rocks by the sea.

I stared at the mountain until my eyes began to glaze over and everything was white. Small bright spots shoot across my vision. Seeing through white blood vessels. I am looking at myself, inside myself and at the mountain all at once.

I recently looked up the reason our eyes go puffy after crying. I learned that what they call emotional tears are not as salty as the kinds of tears that are always in our eyes. When we cry, through a process of osmosis, the emotional tears replenish and dilute the supply of salty tears, filling our eyelids until they swell.

4.1 (salt and vinegar)

The best fish and chips are in a Tasmanian town called Dunalley, where the bushfires burnt out of control. The sky glowed red over the town, and smoke smothered the island. I remember seeing a photograph of a woman sheltering in the water beneath a jetty, clutching her two daughters to her side, their dog keeping watch above. The image was the colour of fire. The houses in the town now are made of aluminium, in people's backyards lie the ruins of convict stones. The bases of the trees are still blackened charcoal, their higher branches are so busy with new growth that they look fluffy, like a dandelion, or as though they are each wearing a winter coat trimmed with feathers.

The fish and chip shop sits on the water, the wood of the building soaked with sea spray, I don't think the fire touched it. An old dog lives out its retirement there, arthritic and slow, it moves between patches of sun, keeping an eye on things. The dog used to be visited by a seal, they would bark at each other, one from the shore, the other from the water.

I haven't seen it in a long time.

In between the shells and the sand on the shoreline are an assortment of red stones, once pieces of brick from a wall somewhere, washed clean and smooth over time by the ocean.

part 5: the ocean

In the north end of Tasmania, just before the turn off to the ferry road is a sign that reads 'welcome to Perth'.

You and I caught the ferry overnight to the mainland. The ocean tore at the ship, rolling us around and smashing against the portholes. I tried to make myself still, like a stone, but my mind adjusted or surrendered to the rough sea, and made motion my normal state. It took until the following night to be able to be still again.

The camera I have with me now was given to me by a police forensic photographer that I met when I worked at the Irish Club in Brisbane. I worked behind the bar, and he played covers of Irish folk songs in a band called Murphy's Pigs. Most of them were policemen. The camera was one he used to take photographs of crime scenes. It can almost only take photographs of detail. I tried to take a photograph of you in front of the twelve apostles but I couldn't get both you and them in focus together.

We saw a black cat stalking marsupials in the salt-bush.

It is hard to get a sense of a place driving so quickly past it. Out of the window of the car I saw a dead kangaroo strung up to each fencepost on the outer perimeter of a farm. You told me I couldn't just say 'oh my god!' while you were driving without offering a reason, it took me a moment to find the words.

My phone keeps telling me the weather in Hobart.
Feels like 6.6°
Snow falling above 600 metres.

It rained and the road was the same color as the sky. Light grey, almost white, like white in the shade. The road was as bright as the sky. It was difficult to tell the difference between the two. The rain covered the road in water, along with all the potholes, ditches, ridges and lines worn deep by truck tires. My knuckles were white with trying to stop the car from sliding out. I was worried I might lose control; I was worried I might lose us.

You told me later that the lake beside the road was pink, I hadn't been able to take my eyes off the road.

In the morning the sun was out, and eucalyptus leaves shone with rain drops. We met a ranger at a national park who complained that it hadn't rained enough. As we drove away, a mob of emus crossed the road in front of us, giving us reproachful looks.

The coastal road gave way to avenues of spotted gums, with thick trunks and branches reaching out to meet above the road. These gave way to endless vineyards, to farmlands sparsely peppered with dry hollow trees, to multi coloured gum leaves hanging over the road like party decorations, and then to low grey blue shrubs and red dust of the desert. I have to keep lowering my sunglasses to see the real colour of things. Checking out the scenery. It stops raining as we get closer to Coober Pedy, but mirages of water lie shimmering on the road, disappearing as we catch up to them. We drive past a pedestal fan in a bush.

part 6: the desert

The rocks in Coober Pedy are pink and chalky, blue and brittle. Pink dust rises with gusts of wind and circles high before settling down to the earth again. The whole town is being blown away by the wind, and the whole town is being baked in place by the sun. The town is staying and leaving. The woman at the store told us she is trying to leave, only nobody will buy her house, three bedrooms, furnished with her life.

We slept in a dugout carved out of the side of a hill.

I found a rock that was sitting whole in the ground, but cracked in so many pieces, so that I could lift the top like a lid, and pull out the piece in the very center.

People say that it is in places like these that we learn the most about humanity. The activity at the edges. I don't know what I learned here. I feel anxious to leave. I don't think I will ever feel safe in a town where the road signs are punctuated with bullet holes, and I am a stranger.

After the dugout life seems to come back into the landscape. Every colour is present at once. Blue and honey coloured grasses, charcoal branches, red dirt, purple stones, blue sky, yellow flowers, pink road.

Marsupial brown. Blood red, bone white.

There is a tension between stillness and movement.

Birds of prey take off slowly from the road. Building up to flight.

When I was a child, I used to conjure up an image of myself running alongside the car. I would stare out the window, guiding her through the landscape, making quick decisions about how to get around obstacles in order to keep up with the car.

I noticed myself waiting for an 'and then...' moment in the landscape, some distinct change defining the territory. But there isn't one, the landscape changes subtly and constantly, flood plains, rises, dry creek beds sprouting tall gums, coolibahs, flat grasslands, distant mountain ranges. Toilet paper hanging from the branches of tactically positioned shrubs, blowing in the wind like streamers.

And then there were rocks, and the landscape rose to envelop us.

The trees get taller again.

We got out of the car and felt a breeze, like a sigh. I let go of the knot in my chest I hadn't realised I had been holding onto since the dugout.

Things in the desert seem to be marked according to their relationship to water. Everything is a spring, a well, an oasis. A roadhouse becomes a waterhole. Appealing to an ingrained thirst, or attempting to differentiate itself from the dry heat of the desert. The river that cuts across the town is dry, and filled with footprints, and patient trees. You and I visit the claypans, which are periodically filled with rainwater, but today, like most days, they are empty.

It all comes back to water. To water and snow and salt and place and rocks and tears. And to stillness after movement.

In Alice, I empty jars of snow water into cast concrete bowls in the middle of the gallery.

