Vignettes Episode 2: Skin - Transcript

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Hi there!

Welcome to Vignettes: The Emerging Writers Festival Podcast. My name is Ruby and I’m the Artistic Director at EWF. I am coming to you from the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

For our final episode of our autumn season,we are reflecting on water.

Life, death, healing, hydrating: water is all these things - symbolically and literally - and so much more. In this final episode of our Autumn Season of Vignettes, we have invited three wonderful writers to share with us their thoughts on waves and whirlpools and waterways. Let’s dive in...

First, we have Natalie Cromb

**Natalie Cromb:**

Yaama, I am Natalie, Gamilaraay yinaar speaking to you from Dharawal country. I pay my respect to Dharawal country, Elders past and present and give thanks for the ability to live and thrive on this beautiful country.

As an Aboriginal girl growing up in rural Australia, time on country with family was my safe haven. I did not need to have my guard up, I was home with my family among all that was beautiful about my country. The rolling thuyuls (hills) that lead to the Warrumbungle ranges, the powdery red dirt that was the consistency of garaay (sand) that felt so comforting between my toes, the feeling of smelling the trees and the morning frosts that awakened my lungs knowing the day ahead with my cousins and siblings was going to be a good one.

I remember the beauty of swimming in the Castlereagh River and the taste of yellow belly (golden perch) fish on country. The sound of the water lapping at the edges of the river, the feel of it between my fingers as I stroked through the water and the feel of my skin after I had dried off. The water on country was something as intrinsic as air to our survival and lifestyle, it was not just for drinking but it was a part of our lifestyle, our family activities and for countless generations, the Aboriginal communities that lined the Murray-Darling Basin have not only protected waterways by actively participating in coordinated environmental management with other clan groups but ceremonies have taken place reinforcing the importance of and respect for water in its most natural state.

The Castlereagh River is part of the Murray-Darling basin, and I have watched it worsen over recent decades. It is not the only waterway in this basin that has been devastated. To think that in my life time, things could deteriorate in this way is sobering and speaks to the urgency of this crisis. A land mass cared for and managed since time immemorial, now sits on the brink of irreversible devastation.

First Nations in this country have the oldest living cultures in the world which have sustained and been sustained by this land called Australia. Protecting country is an essential aspect of culture and survival. From 1788, the British colonisation of Australia marginalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from land and water resources and traditional rights and interests. This marginalisation has harmed not only First Nations but the land and water itself.

The land was cleared to make way for the ‘settlements,’ the rivers, lakes and even certain locations within the sea were depleted of fish as the invaders netted large catches, kangaroos were hunted unsustainably, and the waterways were polluted. Aboriginal people’s existence was never to be the same, as loss of family, ceremony, free movement and activity on their land became something that was persecuted.

In came the invader with law and gun to strip us of our lore and lands.

It is difficult to express how essential to our being that the land and waterways are, we require them to ensure the sustainability of life but are equally bound to serve in their protection and preservation as our cultural responsibility. Since invasion, that responsibility was stripped from us and we have watched on with our hearts in our throats as the destruction of both have taken place.

Although we still have water practitioners able to care for and restore our waterways, their ancient expertise is being ignored in favour of corporate interests.

In the early months of 2019, the Darling River sustained two mass fish kills with estimates of over one million fish dead. As I saw what little water still sat within the banks of the rivers of the Murray Darling basin, I could see the outer edges lined with dark brown murky water and hundreds upon hundreds of fish laying dead and stagnant. The [fish kills](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-08/rob-mccbride-files-police-complaint-against-cotton-australia/10884334) were a direct result of low levels of dissolved oxygen, high water temperatures and no flow. These ecologically catastrophic events are emblematic of how colonisation and governmental mismanagement has wrought havoc on the Australian ecosystem.

The Darling River has had 15 cease flow events since 2001 which means that the water within the river itself is so low that it does not flow and sits, to be evaporated and has dramatically reduced oxygen levels – making it unsustainable for life within it. With the added impact of drought and the changes brought about by climate change induced heatwaves, bushfires, the reduction of native flora and fauna and water shortages, it is no wonder this waterway is suffering in a devastating way. Native species are threatened, including fish like the Murray Cod, Golden Perch and Bony Bream. A reduction of plant life also means a reduction of the bird life in the region.

The fact is that, despite some gali (rain) falling recently, the bagaay (river) on my country and the broader Murray-Darling River Basin is in a state of crisis and ecological stress. So when I think about water and write (or speak) about its beauty, how intrinsic is is to life and country and culture, I cannot simply express it without the purpose and call to action that is so desperately needed to protect water and the life it sustains from destruction, from desertion of decency and history for corporate interests and for our children who deserve to practice culture on country. Water is life, let it sustain you so you can fight alongside us to sustain it.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Next up, we have Hineani Roberts …

**Hineani Roberts:**

My ancestors came from saltwater.

Their tears cried me into an unknown future.

My mother’s body filling up with salty water for me to grow in, filling and swelling until she burst open,

brine spilling onto the hospital floor,

wet and screaming.

Because of them, the ocean lives inside me.

I can taste the salt of my sweat on tear-stained cheeks;

lick my fingers.

My people say that water is their country,

boats the islands, theirs the biggest on this blue planet.

They were here before the land.

My father was a fisherman.

He lived where the dull sandy foam washes ashore,

bringing gifts of driftwood,

sour-smelling seaweed,

and dead sodden birds for the scavengers to pick apart;

pecked bones and eyeballs, rotting flesh unrecognisable. The beach is not beautiful for everyone.

He built me a boat from the driftwood so I could sail backwards in time and left me directions written in the sand.

He said it was the salt that made my hair curl like the waves.

My mother cut my hair short,

“Too hard to comb... too tangled...too messy.”

“It’s easier this way”

and the tide rose with her words and washed the sand away. “Don’t swim too far out girls.”

She was frightened of the water.

My placenta was put in a contaminated waste bag,

and my mother’s blood washed clean

with disinfectant.

We moved far away from the sea,

to red-brick suburbs with barking dogs

and supermarkets with no air conditioning.

If I am the ocean, why am I drowning?

Waves crash onto deserts in my sleep;

I dream I am swimming, but wake choking on sand instead; dry heat and confusion,

headache in the back of my neck,

the cat scratching at the back of the door.

No one can sleep in this heat

and a sweet moment of loving you, is like the reprieve of an ice cube run down the back of my spine.

You remind me of him

standing there in your sunglasses, but you can’t come where I am going in my driftwood boat.

My father’s arms

were strong and brown,

lifting my broken body

the day I fell

from the fence.

I had caught two flatheads

and was pretending I was a pelican.

Head cracked open,

vomit stained cement,

a limp fish in his arms gasping for breath.

The wounds oozed clear fluid for a week;

mum washed them in sea water to get them to heal.

“What makes the waves curl like my hair papa?”

“It is the tears of Ranginui”

“But why is Rangi crying?”

“Because he lost his love to the embrace

 of the ocean ~

 and in his arms, she still lies today.”

How do we let go

of the things we love?

Life turning like tides,

never still, ever-shifting.

Sometimes I am those rotten birds being pulled to pieces on the shoreline, sometimes the shore itself.

My father taught me to swim in deep water,

how to sit on sharp rocks and

suck the yellow creamed eggs

warm and raw from the belly of kina.

He could turn into a fish himself,

or a sea monster,

an evening storm,

or the closing hour man

going to clean bent cigarette butts

and spilled beer off the pub floor at 1am.

Always raisins in his pockets and

fish scales on his boots.

The day he died

he turned into a fish one final time, lungs filling up with water he swam away from me.

I let my hair grow long now and never comb it.

You like it that way, and say it reminds you of instant noodles, and waking up together in the back of your van,

and something from your childhood,

or maybe before your childhood,

a shadow you can’t find in the back of your mind.

Your tide is coming in,

while mine is running out.

Our grandmothers would giggle at us now.

They reach forward towards us

from that small town on the east coast, where mine brought sugar and tea from the shop your grandfather built.

I drag the driftwood boat from its high ground,

across the seaweed

dried and sharp, slicing skin on my bare feet.

The bone hook I wear around my neck

becomes the anchor.

Strips of flax and woven stories my sail.

A black and white dog runs at my feet.

Drenched sandy fur.

He lifts his head to smell the salt in the breeze, lips curled.

Does he see all those generations standing behind me?

Is that why he barks into the air?

Does he know that even though I am alone;

I can never be lost when out at sea.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Thanks Hineani! And finally, here’s Nikki Viveca.

**Nikki Viveca:**

POEM 1: WHY I CRIED WATCHING DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

There is a species of oceanic dolphin

Known as the “false killer whale”

In Latin, Pseudorca crassidens, which means

False Killer Whale

With fat teeth

Dear Pseudorca crassidens,

I don’t think you’re false

I see you

Maybe only on TV in documentaries

But I see you

And I respect you

For the animal you are

And I think your teeth are fine.

You are a valid whale

You are your own dolphin,

And you deserve a name that’s all your own

To not live by comparison

To an orca who is better known

Because they happen to have a gig at SeaWorld.

You are not a false killer whale

 Not some cut rate Free Willy

You are a valid whale

And a genuine killer

Of squid and fish

And dolphins too

OK I don’t know about that specifically as a life choice

But it’s your life

You do you

And don’t be ashamed to claim your place in the marine food chain

Because you are a legitimate cetacean

A whale real and true

Do you not crest the same waves?

Do you not sing in the same deep?

Do you not do the “pssssssh” thing where you blow air through your blowhole?

You do!

The sea is for you

As much as it is for any creature.

Oh and if you see one

Tell the sperm whales they deserve better too

Dear Pseudorca,

You deserve a name that doesn’t throw you shade

Because your life and your whaleness are not fake

And not even Attenborough’s dulcet tones

Can tell you your identity is not your own.

Yours sincerely,

With love,

From me,

A woman.

\*

POEM 2: O

My goddess was born of the sea foam

Fully formed and fabulous

A woman from Her first breath

Which is how I’d like you to think of me too

As if I magically appeared through sheer force of beauty

Already complete

My childhood? I was barely in it.

My adolescence? I threw it back.

If you want to know where I came from

Look to the sea

Where it lovingly strokes the shore

Every wave a rebirth

That carries no history.

\*

POEM 3: DARK WELL

My poetry is so often a bucket dipped into the dark well of the past

To draw on cold stagnant emotion from underground lakes

Why drink of these lost springs

When there are fresher fountains all around?

Why stare into the mirror of cursed water

That reflects only the faces of ghosts?

More years of unexpressed feeling pool beneath,

Lapping at the foundations of the heart,

Than could ever be given voice

Why risk the sip that is the first step to drowning in the dark?

Every sunbeam across your pillows is a poem

If you look for it.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

This is the final episode of season two of Vignettes. Thank you so much for listening. If you enjoyed this season, make sure you’re subscribed, so you can keep up with us when we bring you more wonderful readings from Emerging Writers.

This podcast was produced by EWF Program Coordinator Millie Baylis. Our audio producer is Jon Tjhia, and our theme music was created by Thu Care (Thao Ly). You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website.

This podcast was created and edited on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge that First Nations peoples are the first storytellers of this land, and that their sovereignty has never been ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and to the Elders of the lands this podcast reaches. It always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.