**Vignettes Transcript - Season 3: Episode 4: Bloom**

**Millie Baylis:**

Hi there,

Welcome back to Vignettes, the EWF storytelling podcast.

My name is Millie and I’m the Program Coordinator here at EWF. I’m recording from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay respect to their elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches. This always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Today’s episode is Bloom. As I write this, it’s the first sunny Spring day we’ve had in weeks after constant rain here in Melbourne. Outside, there are magnolias bursting all down the streets; the smell of new jasmine perfuming the air; heavy purple wisteria spiraling over gates.

When I suggested Bloom as a theme for this season of Vignettes, the first image I had was of Meryl Streep mocking me about choosing florals for Spring! But as we transition in more ways than one, out of lockdown and into warmer days, we thought it would be nice to hear from emerging writers on the new things changing and blooming in their lives.

Today’s artists are Léa Antigny, Paige Clark and Laura Stortenbeker with really lovely readings we’re excited to share with you.

First, we have Léa Antigny.

Léa Antigny is a Sydney-based publicist and writer whose personal essays and non-fiction have been published in *The Guardian*, *Kill Your Darlings*, and *The Lifted Brow*. Here’s Léa.

**Léa Antigny:**

The last time I went home, I was on a late afternoon flight. The time of day when you’ll likely see the sunset somewhere on your way, and watch the orange spread over and then through the clouds, and think how odd it is to sit so quietly in your cramped seat, alone, watching something so majestic it feels as though it should be shared – as though you should get to hold someone’s hand while you fly past all of Life.

On that quiet flight, with more empty seats than usual, I watched a woman in the window seat a few rows ahead of me. Sitting next to her were two young children, aged maybe around six or seven, playing quiet games with one another and occasionally calling on the woman to adjudicate, or watch. I watched her put her hand to her masked mouth and lean her forehead on the glass and quietly cry, her headscarf lit orange by the sun setting all around us. I recognised it as a stolen moment, kept hidden from the children playing next to her, and put my own head down.

I turned to my left and took a picture of the empty row across the aisle from me, lit up by the dark late sun. All around me, orange, and all the orange said was: *you get further and further away*. Further away from the roadside flame trees growing in red earth, from the timber pub with its concrete floor, its orange and brown XXXX bunting strung across the windows. When I’m home I swear I feel physically closer to the sun, as though the land being higher makes me closer to the sky. The longer there is between visits means the shock of red trees and their reflection in the colour of the dirt is more startling each time.

The thing about wearing masks is it makes crying on a flight quite easy and private.

The further I go, the more I am myself, but there is a cost. After I watched the woman cry and after I heard the orange talk to me, I ordered wine and crisps. It was maybe only the second time in my life I’ve ordered booze on a flight. I usually find it deeply unpleasant, something about the smell and the cramped space. I trace it back to flying between home and University, surrounded by FIFO workers ordering rum and coke, the smell an overwhelming reminder of being fourteen and alone. And again, the red dirt. This time I drank my small aeroplane wine and read *The Lying Life of Adults,* by a writer whose honest depiction of the sometimes irrational fear of heredity has always resonated with me.

I always come back to the red earth and flame trees when it’s summer, and I always read Ferrante. It’s hot in those novels and it’s hot at home, being so close to the sky. It’s hot being confronted with disgust, especially when disgust is present alongside love: disgust and revulsion at the parts of yourself that you revile in others, even while you love them. As I read I mark a line under the words: ‘*it was always ourselves we ended up loving or hating*’.

For a very long time I didn’t want to have a baby, or I thought, perhaps I shouldn’t. I thought this for many complicated reasons to do with that disgust and love. What it boiled down to was I didn’t know that I could love a child in the right way.

Now I think about the woman on the plane and everything else she probably keeps secret from her children, everything she might hold onto so as not to hand it down. I think about the landscape around me and the air and the temperature and the smells and I think how these elemental things will belong to my child. For her it will be the salty air and the sand and the hibiscus and the pines, they will be what the flame trees and the red earth and humidity and creek water were to me, and I know that I’ve already started loving her. And I know that I’ll never stop.

And I know that sooner than I would like she will become unwieldy with life, flying any which way she likes, beyond my control, becoming her own expansive sunset, completely impossible to follow or to keep still, but always there are reflections, always there is orange.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Léa. Next, we have Paige Clark.

Paige Clark is a Chinese-American-Australian writer, researcher and teacher. Her fiction has appeared in *Meanjin*, and, in 2019, she was runner-up for the Peter Carey Short Story Award and shortlisted for the David Harold Tribe Fiction Award. *She Is Haunted* is her first book, keep hearing great things about, out now with Allen and Unwin.

**Paige Clark:**

Thank you for having me on the Emerging Writers Festival Podcast. My name is Paige Clark and I'll be reading a piece called, 'These Days With Dog'.

*These Days With Dog*

These days there seem to be three good options: get a puppy, drink booze or have a baby. So my partner Alex and I bring home Freddie the Chihuahua cross, an 8-week-old ball of duck fluff with teeth. We had vowed we'd never buy a puppy, but Australia is sold out of rescues. Our senior Pomeranian died a few months earlier and we are desperate. Our one-bedroom apartment is too small for the both of us. Plus, we are drinking too much and Alex isn't ready to have a baby yet. We aren't the only ones. There is Melaleuca the border collie, Olive the black labrador and Froggie the yellow one.

But there are babies too. Alex spots a box of prenatal vitamins on a friend's kitchen table. My brother tells me he quit smoking weed to boost his sperm motility. He's made a spreadsheet tracking his wife's cervical mucus. And my childhood best friend Sarah stops taking her birth control pills. Suddenly, the women around me are blooming. They are drinking less wine. I am drinking more.

After we get Freddie home, Alex's dad calls and confirms what I have suspected. His face looks at me gently from beyond the iPad screen. He is a man who loves puppies and babies equally. 'Having a puppy is harder than having a baby,' he says. He has four grown children. Off screen, my puppy attacks my feet in their woolly slippers. He thinks they are two miniature sheep to herd. I am inconsolable. Then I remember I haven't slept in days. Every night I get up multiple times to take the puppy to the toilet. Alex can't help it; he just sleeps through the crying.

When you get a puppy, nobody knows quite what to call you in relation to your dog. Suddenly, you are mum. Your partner is dad. You speak to the puppy in syrupy tones and say, 'Go to your dad.' You didn't intend to do this. In fact, you loathed people who did this normally. But then again you swore you'd never get a puppy and now the puppy is here.

Having a newborn dog might be like having a newborn human, but the body isn't buying it. This is not a baby. A baby surely does not have this many teeth. A baby does not run! Or bark! Or gnaw the little plastic bits off of your shoelaces. I look into Freddie's round black eyes – they look surprisingly like Alex's. Oxytocin, the love hormone, is released when mothers look at their babies. It is also released when dog mothers look at their dog babies. This is science, but even science can't fool biology. The resulting surge of oxytocin doesn't do the trick.

But what *does* do the trick are the practical concerns I have. Like that I won't be eligible for maternity leave from my PhD until after confirmation. Or that I'm still not a vegetarian. There is the book I just finished writing and the book I am starting to write. And Alex's business as a mixing engineer. He always has another microphone to buy, another booth to insulate. Plus there are all the places we were meant to go between then and now. And we are both too young, aren’t we? Weren't we?

But then the news starts trickling in and suddenly, we are too old – I am too old, in particular. There will be babies, lots of them and most of them with due dates before my next birthday. I am ecstatic and envious, in quantities that fluctuate based on my relationship with the mother-to-be and where I am in my menstrual cycle. I give best friend Sarah my baby names; but I feel the rage of being left behind by her most, like she is entering a world, which I might not ever have access to. Sarah reminds me that she wanted a dog, but her husband insisted on a snowshoe cat instead. In the background of our phone call, I can hear her cat meowing. It cries like a – well – baby.

'There's never a right time,' was the advice of my only friend with a child. She had her son in her twenties. She missed out on a lot. Sure, but there are better times than others. Now feels like a better time than before, but not as right as in the future. I daydream there will be an accident, a slip-up, that having a baby is not something that I will decide but rather something that will decide me.

Speaking of time, these days we need it. It takes 150-200 repetitions to train a Chihuahua. At eighteen weeks old, Freddie knows how to sit, stay, spin, stand up, you name it and he can do it. I have over a thousand photos of him on my phone. You'll never find me looking at photos of a baby unless I know it personally. But I'll cross the street to meet a dog. Alex tells me that I am always looking for more proof that dogs are the best animals in the world; I say I do not need more proof, I already know it to be a fact. Do I want the thing because everybody else has the thing?

One of the most widely cited fertility statistics, cited in *Human Reproduction*, claims a steep decline in fertility for women after the age of 35. The source of this data is French birth records from 1670 - 1830. Statistics published in *Obstetrics & Gynecology* from a study in 2004 paint a much rosier picture for women in their late 30s, with an estimated 82% chance of pregnancy compared to an 86% for women in their late 20s and early 30s. Alex's sister, who has had a baby, reminds me of these statistics. We read them in an article, ‘How Long Can You Wait to Have a Baby?’, published in *The Atlantic*. She thanks me for reminding her how good she's got it. She tells me that sometimes my life makes her feel left behind too.

But it does not seem so glamorous these days, these days with dog.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Paige! And finally, Laura Stortenbeker.

Laura Stortenbeker is a writer and editor. Her work has been published in *Overland, Meanjin* and *Kill Your Darlings*. In 2017 she was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript.

**Laura Stortenbeker:**

CUT TO SUNSET

To get right into it, Annie Dillard says *the real and proper question is: why is it beautiful?* and she means this about a mockingbird singing but I mean it about everything, limitless landscapes, flowers tucked under someone’s arm, movie cuts of doves being released, how it feels to read the words to a song you haven’t heard yet and to try and guess exactly how it will be beautiful when it is sung.

I mean it about my whole life and I mean it about the sunset, and all of everything else that is beautiful, but also very ugly if you look too long.

To say it plainly the light is hot but it is more about colour.

I’m writing a book that hinges on being able to describe the acute sweep of the sky. This has become more complex than I thought, words used to document the sunset become boring fast and I know it will be a flaw of the work to have misjudged light skies at light, night skies at night, and skies flat and still in colour.

I think there is little accuracy in sunsets when you’re trying to write about them and I wanted to know if anyone would use words I hadn’t thought of, less obvious lines. There’s an abandoned survey in the part of the cloud that has my name on it, and in the survey is a set of photographs of sunsets from my digital archive, and a matched set of questions, to correlate how each type of sunset makes a person feel and see if that matches with the way I divide and theme skies in my head. I still care very much about how others would explain what they saw but I never sent the survey because I was embarrassed.

Under each photograph I had the question *how does this one make you feel?* But the one I most wanted to know the answer to was *Do you ever get bored of the sunset even if it's beautiful?* I don't know what kind of question that is to press upon someone, to ask if they can be so bored of beautiful things they become ugly, or make them ugly by giving them too much attention.

If you open instagram stories and let it run at 8 pm in summer you can watch gradients trade angles across your screen. You can wait around to see who will best get the good gold light or the pink light, the clay colour as the last light blurs, or if light will cleave the sky or just spread over it.

What I like best is a picture of someone else taking a photograph of the sunset, a close-up of their phone screen and their hands. What I like best is that I know for just a moment everyone I know is experiencing something together, turn your head to the light and be changed by it before it fades to evening.

Paul and I have talked about being bored, specifically about the sunset. We had a shared bad mood in the middle of a flush of good sunsets and were talking in a way where we didn’t really give a shit about it. Kind of tragic and sour for us, to say we were bored when I know we’re both fools for sunsets, both still paying an obsessive observance to what happens up there, and taking photographs of it.

I don’t know if it’s god-like to be documenting the sunset or a small mortal habit, meek hands in a two finger pull to zoom into a gape of a pink that can only be described as violent. The same hands with the notes app open, rushing to write about what we just saw in a way that couldn’t possibly match what it is.

What I like about writing is that you can make something ugly or beautiful even if it's not. You can make something of a nothing moment. You can alter the form.

The other night I put the head of a tulip in my mouth for a moment until it triggered my gag reflex. I'm sure you've done something strange just because you could, because you were wired and bored and thought action would alter the form, that the shift would right things.

I would like to be able to tell you that this was beautiful in some way, and I can write it so it sounds like it was – the tulip was rust red, I was wearing a white t-shirt and nothing else, buttery light in my room, I saw an aura in my vision – but it was just strange, and a strange thing to do. I got into bed right after, the petals had been cold in my mouth and I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

I made some notes, tried to decide if it was shameful to write about what I had done, and I think it is, in the same way it’s kind of shameful to write about the sunset. In the same way I divide the sky into themes, I split acts of documentation into worthwhile or repulsive. If writing about the sunset is embarrassing, and describing it is complex, then where does physically documenting the sunset fit.

The point of this reel of thoughts is that the way I usually find out if the sunset is good is from Instagram, which automatically means the sunset is categorised as strange, some inherent breach of what it means to be awed by nature.

You think it's about colour but it's more about light. When the sunset is good and I see the pictures roll in I think about everyone I know standing outside with their phones raised to the sky at the same time and that is beautiful and that is strange and that is ugly, if you think too much about it, but the sunset still becomes a celestial space, all of us out there pointed in the same form, arms stretched above.

The sunset doesn't gleam, that's a trick for the night, but you cannot truly exhaust the interest. And it’s the gesture of keeping a record that is beautiful. I think of it on all the hot light days in a row, each of us with the same compulsion to document. You share it to prove you were paying attention to something not of yourself, you give it to the virtual void in case someone didn’t get to see it the same way you did.

If you ask someone to describe a sunset they'll tell you all of it in shapes that correspond to light and colour. I think it's easy and cool to say that sunset blooms, before it becomes an abyss sky. You can get tired of it and then you can come back and be awed, you can find it default desktop background ugly, you can still think, well fuck, how is that of nature, how is that something we are able to see.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Laura!

That’s our episode for this week. Thank you again to Laura Stortenbeker, Paige Clark and Léa Antigny for their stories today. And thank you for listening to Vignettes*.* If you enjoyed this episode, please drop us a review and recommend us to your friends.

Next week is our final episode for the season, and it’s going to be a really special one. Please join us to hear readings on Sovereign Food.

Also, just a reminder that the open artist call-out for the 2022 Emerging Writers’ Festival is closing soon on December 3rd. You can go to our website to get your application in to be part of the festival.

This podcast was audio produced by Joe Buchan, and our theme music was created by Thu Care. You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website.

END EPISODE.