

WRITING SAMPLE – Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

THE PEPPERMINT TREE

When I was a child how I loved, how I loved, how I loved a tree
 I sang my troubles to her and she whispered her sharp tune in return,
 A peppermint, catching the breeze in a skirt of finger leaves,
 Swishing and rustling, songs stuck like feathers to a berm,
 Irresistible, to reach and crush and inhale one spear-leaf's biting scent,
 The leaf stabbed into my jeans, like a lock of hair slipped into a lover's locket,
 An elixir of sorts, a language of the senses, knowing but never meant,
 'What about me?' I sang, and you gave more than I put in that pocket.
 Surprise-attack seeds thrown like pellets of laughter between siblings,
 A place to hide away from my mother's raised voice, the red un-friend,
 At the foot of your trunk, nursed back to life, a fledgling,
 Feeding me minced meat by hand, 'til I found my strength again.
 You were a mother's dress for a child to hide underneath,
 While I took from you a handful of seeds and a leaf, a leaf, a leaf.

AXE MARKS IN TREE TRUNKS I

After Ljube Pavlinovich and Remy Beus

To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.
 In the cut, tree trunks bleed amber lollies of sap,
 pliant and malleable as 'girl', a figure in wax.

At nine I dance five miles through bush, trunk to phalanx,
 leaf to fingertip. School the crack of one handclap.
 To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.

*Won a scholarship – my view through the lens, error parallax –
 only boys were allowed an education. Caught in a mantrap,*

became pliant and malleable as 'woman', a figure in wax.

Re-shaped with knives, pliant hands, peculiar English syntax.

Girls only left home when they married – a ring entrapped;
to find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.

Fired in the kiln of tradition and culture, no longer clay or wax,
Hardened and breakable, I long for the days I was that
pliant and malleable 'girl', a figure in wax.

'We need you at home,' so I stayed, lived a life of anti-climax.
Who knew my life was a gift for me to unwrap?
To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe,
Now lost; pliant and malleable 'girl', a figure in wax.

SHE TOLD ME WHICH MULBERRIES TO PICK

After Anonymous

*I dream—beautiful mulberry tree, heavy with fruit, ripe berries
crushed on the ground like bruises. An old lady beside me tells
me which mulberries to pick, which ones I should eat to bury
my yearning for home and stop cancer. In my dream, the ground swells
with water and we know this is where we should sink our bore.
Later, in Manning Park, near the ruins, tramping through overgrowth
I find my mulberry tree, the one from the dream, right by the back door
of the fall-apart home. In the old country, I made a whispered oath
to myself to find a place that I could call *doma*, home.
In the old country an Everest of rocks, here a Sahara of sand.
In Dalmatia, houses are built with our famous rock—shiny limestone—
so when I come to Australia, the limestone homes look like the land
in my dreams, an imagination place I had hand-sewn.
In the ruins I found my mulberry tree, my breakthrough.
Her berries like black grapes, and I thought yes, my dream come true.*

WHEN THE PLUM TREE FRUITS I THINK OF YOU

It starts with the bloody pulp of
plums fruiting early that year—
our house being tented for termites,
the flowers I left in the vase
shriveled like dehydrated fruit—
the flu that filled my head with khaki snot,
then tricked the endometriosis
and my immune system—
the plume of soft jellyfish in the water
where we snorkelled in Florida—
the visit from my cousin in Newport Beach—

the early ultrasound I insisted
 on at the OB-GYN—
 not being able to talk about ‘It’ —
 the one year anniversary of
 my father’s death, which became
 another anniversary—

It starts with—
 all beings that draw
 breath must live and die.
 It starts with two gametes, a zygote,
 dividing cells. A mother’s ‘instinct’ —
 a miscarriage, blood thick and deep red
 as a plum split open—

IF YOU LISTEN TO THE WIND IN THE TREES, SHE’LL TELL YOU HOW TO LIVE A GOOD LIFE

After the collective voices of women

Didn’t my mother-in-law say ‘*Ne diži jedro na svaki vjetar koji puše.*’
 Don’t raise your sail to every wind that blows?

Didn’t the men say that the Bura, the cold, northern wind
 is a woman? *Bura je ko žena.*

Didn’t the wind say, ‘Don’t waste your breath
 blowing into the ears of ignorant men?’

Didn’t Oliver sing, ‘*A vitar puše, a vitar puše?*’
 And the wind blows, and the wind blows.

Didn’t my father say, ‘Don’t be afraid to work?’

Didn't my mother say, 'Don't be afraid of hard work.'?

Didn't the community say, 'We'll help you with that work'?

And everybody arrived to pick, sort, top, stack the onions
at their neighbour's farms when they were ready for harvest.

Didn't the Aussies say, 'All you dings do is work.'

Didn't four women tell me, '*Don't get married at 16.*'

'Don't get married at 17.' *'Don't get married at 18.'* *'Don't get married.'*

Didn't our mothers say, '*Be careful of strange men.*' *'Don't be out late
at night by yourself.'*

Didn't my father say, '*Keep a separate bank account.*'

Didn't a friend tell me, '*Enjoy your beauty when you have it.*'

Didn't a little bird tell me, '*Once you stop loving him it won't come back.*'

Didn't the branch tell me, 'True love lasts forever.'

Didn't the tree tell me, 'Heavy is the branch that holds the bird.'

Didn't Baba—who survived World War II and the death of two husbands—
tell me when I got cancer at twenty, '*You've got to be strong.*

You've got to find strength within yourself.'?

Didn't Marica say, '*Kindness for another's troubles, courage in your own.*'

Didn't the women say, 'The Bura is like a woman, predictable and strong.'?

Didn't Oliver sing, '*Nek' samo puše*' Just let it blow?

STAY IN ONE PLACE TO BE FOUND

Upon the Cleaving of a Moreton Bay Fig Tree at UWA

She, I think I can call her that, had seen the Great Depression pass, and like a cyclone witnessed by a child didn't understand its significance until she was much older, noticing how bitter people had become. People; dropping cigarette butts, throwing empty Coke cans and candy wrappers at her feet, rarely stopping to say, "Hello." A cyclone of their own making. But, really, what did she care? She had grown off the blood, bone, leather and fat of a dead cow, though she never stunk the worse for it. As the cow bloated, exploded then caved in beneath her feet the soil and her roots found new spaces to expand and fill in. She had her ways of taking what she needed and leaving the rest to the earth, the worms, the ants and the sandgropers. Once, when her branches rose only the length of a body above a human, a woman ran up to man waiting beside her trunk and said, "Finally, I found you!" And she heard him reply, "Well, I've worked out if you stay in one spot long enough you will always be found." She took that as her motto: "Invenitur autem in uno loco manere." Afterall, she did live near the Arts Faculty of a university which taught the Classics. Eighty-six years she had been in this spot. Eighty-six years of watching students spin in circles trying to find the Arts faculty or Hackett Hall or the Reid library or the bookstore, which had moved more times than she cared to remember. In the past they used their eyes, or a map to find their way, cheeks flushed like jam, now their faces are blue as they stare at screens and seem to be more lost than ever. Occasionally, the blue-faced ones snap a photo beside her before they leave, usually after they've had to pause to scrape her pithy fruit off their shoes. Her favourite thing is the wedding parties who stop beside her to bask in her canopy, for what is a better reminder of love than her curtain of open arms? She can almost forgive the humans their littering for that adoration alone. Sometimes, she thinks if she were to ever split apart and cleave under her own weight, the crack of her branches and smell of her sap filling the air like a mistimed party cracker, then she'd like people to know that her love of this spot she has inhabited, in the centre of things, was the best thing—besides learning Latin, greeting wedding parties, and getting her sticky fruit on the bottom of every shoe that passed—the best thing that ever happened to her.

MOURNING SONG

In response to “The Battle of Minderoo” by ‘Tien Tsin’ (aka Richard Thatcher), August 1869.

*“And there they lie upon the plain a ghastly sight to view
Their life blood stains the clayey soil of beautiful Minderoo—”¹*

The ghost gums have stories to tell
in the swirls of their pearlescent bark,
in the outstretch of a branch
toward the giant boulders bent
like women’s shoulders over the riverbank,
in the lance-like leaves finger-point
downwards to the puff of dirt fine as icing-powder.
The iron-red dirt was never meant to be stained with
the blood of our sisters and brothers.
It has always been a sacred red.
Red as an oxygenated artery, as a heart,
red as the first microscopic beings
who brought oxygen—
the red soup of life’s inception—
from the seas to the atmosphere.
It is the red of a placenta,
of a black swan’s bill,
of a spinifex pigeon’s eye mask,
of a Sturt desert pea’s silken petal,
of a pistol, of a Winchester, of a poison tin
left out too long in the Pilbara desert by a riverbank.

My fingertips trace the swirls of bark
like Braille, a red ant slips by like a cursor
flicking on and off, on and off.
I want to tell it—
I want to tell it—
but it’s not my story to tell,
although my Balkan ancestors know
this song by heart. At 2AM I awake
from a dream deep as a Karijini gorge keening—
wailing so loud I wake my husband and son—
a song the land told me to sing.
We have known this song for centuries;
she insists, ‘You must sing the song to let the darkness out.’
A mourning song as women have sung

since the oceans turned from red to blue.
 The North West Coastal Highway crosses the bridge
 above the river, a road train rumbles like war drums.
 How many lay here beneath the red dirt
 by the banks of the Ashburton River?
 How many murders has this tree witnessed?
 How many times can we trace our
 white fingertips over the patterns
 of *Corymbia ferriticola* and pretend
 here is a story we cannot see?

20-50 indigenous Thalangi people were killed between 10-15 July 1869 by a party of white men lead by Farquar McRae after Shepherd William Griffiths was speared by Thalangi near the Ashburton River, Munderoo, WA.²

Notes

1. Ryan, Lyndall; Richards, Jonathan; Pascoe, William; Debenham, Jennifer; Stephanie Gilbert; Anders, Robert J; Brown, Mark; Smith, Robyn; Price, Daniel; Newley, Jack *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788 to 1930, v2.1* Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2018, <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/detail.php?r=894> (accessed 21/07/2020). Funded by ARC: DP 140100399.
2. Ibid.