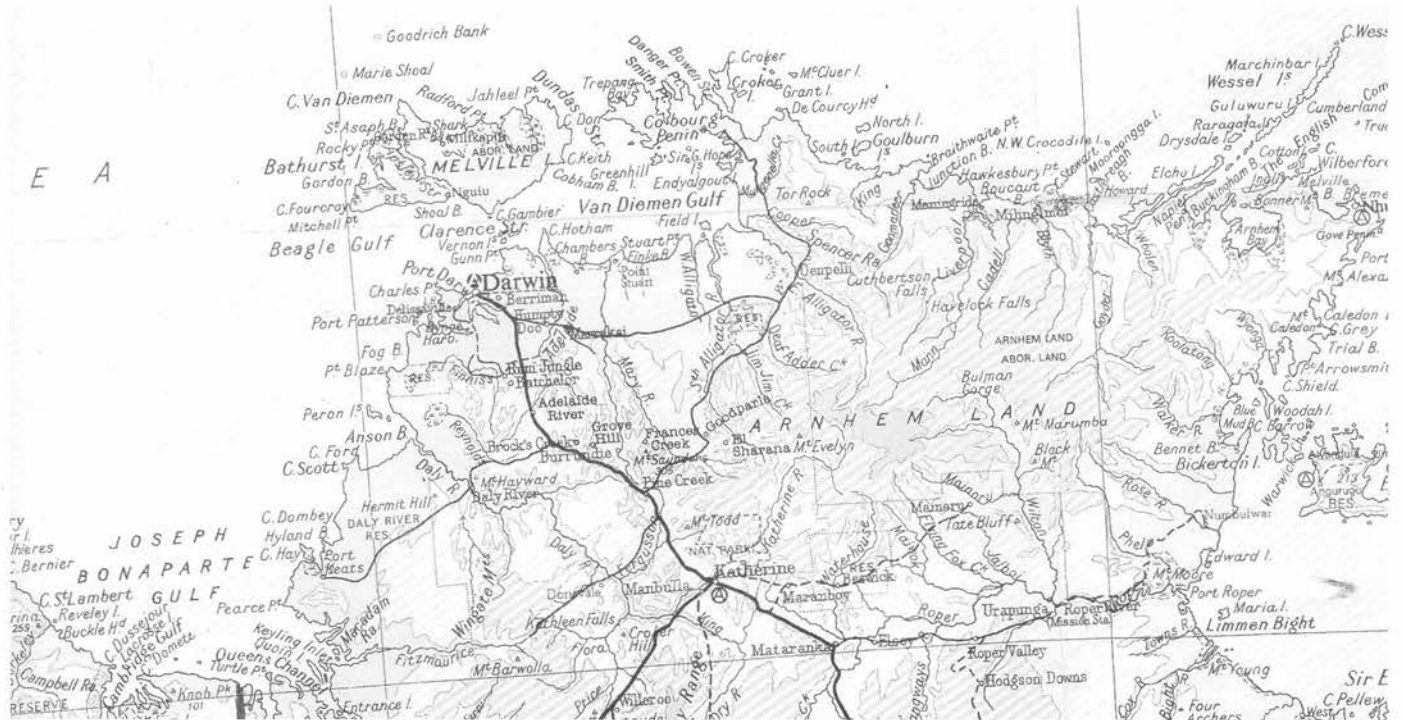


An Excerpt from *Twelve Hours of Light, Twelve of Darkness* by Angus Leech

"It is not down in any map. True places never are."
- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*



We skittered across landscapes like rocks across pavement, leaving only chalky marks behind to mark our passage, taking with us from each point of contact only a small scar that becomes invisible when wet. Our bodies mixed with places as ground mineral dust. I'm not sure how much I actually remember about that time, how much resides in me as the exaggerated poetry of memory. And I'm not sure why I feel so compelled to set things down now, four years later. As time passes, I seem to lose names and words, retain mostly images; lines of text with less and less connection between them. Fragments ever more difficult to piece into story. Even now, I have to fill in gaps with possible truths, make finer details up, leave some blank for others to imagine. I am afraid that, eventually, months will be rendered to moments only; feelings balanced on the heads of pins. When this happens, it will all be so much a part of me as to have become invisible, and I will have no telling except for motion.

If memory will serve me this once, I recall that it started as a glow on the horizon, and feeling the Toyota flat-bed shake and stutter every time I took a curve. Doc had rolled it a few weeks before, sending it and himself twenty yards down the embankment of an old gold-pit, leaving the yellow edge of the road he had spilled over crumbling like cake. The frame was a little bent, the alignment off, and, driving much too fast along the Arnhem highway toward Darwin, I had to fight the wheel constantly just to keep from drifting into ditches; the bugs of night streaming past the headlights like winged rain, and covering most of the windshield in crusted white and green puss. I remember getting closer, seeing the glow turn from faint yellow to orange in a misty light dispersed along the horizon, refracted in the particulate air of Australia's Northern Territory; an oddly thickened sky. I remem-

ber finally topping a low rise, seeing the deep-red hinge-line of flame only moments ahead, on both sides of the road; watching spindled trees burn motionless like black capillaries under a translucent skin of orange, shedding glowing cinder-antibodies blowing like snow. I recall my head opening wide, the water sloshing in the bowl of my skull steaming off into mist, agitated to whitecaps by air blasting into the cab through the two open windows.

Before I ever went to Australia, a friend of mine who had traveled there explained that most of the time, bush fires just burn the ground, ripping through grasses and undergrowth, but only charring the bases of the trees; leaving them intact, better off than before, with a newly rich soil of ash to mine. That's most of the time. But when there hasn't been a fire in a very long time, things can go differently. Flames fuelled by a glut of tall grasses, dead leaves, detritus, and fallen wood built up over years can reach the canopy, ignite trunks, melt green waxy leaves. Paperbark trees start to atomise, lose their skins, collapse upon hollow centres. And eucalypt gums start to explode. With thick sap in hollow cores heated to the boiling point, they shatter into balls of fire that can travel hundreds of metres, ignite distant patches of savannah, trap fleeing life between advancing dams of flame.

I remember hitting the gas pedal, actually being inside the fire for a long time. The flames were distant, near enough to smell but not feel. The Toyota slipped in like a white minnow, a fluidic bubble. The only sound seemed to be a gentle crackling, a hissing of smoke. There was a different world there, inside the fire, where a different sort of thought would focus itself; I found myself concentrating very peacefully on the flame, hardly watching the road, while my body surely flayed itself with adrenalin. For a time, I entered a place where I had never known water, never held a glass or felt thirst. Later, I found that my hands had been clutched so tightly to the wheel, for so long, they creaked when finally opened.

Bush fires in the Northern Territories are normal, mostly set on purpose, to clear land, to regenerate successional growth. The practice goes back to the Aborigines, who would set fires so that new shoots would grow to attract wildlife. On back roads, miners and ranchers casually drop matches onto lighter fluid squirted from the windows of Landcruisers, speed away without even watching the burn grow in the rearview mirror. It looks so easy, the grass and scrub is so dry in certain seasons, but you have to have the knack. I recall being alone one day and curious, stepping out of my truck, looking up and down the road to make sure no one would come. I lit matches one by one in vain among the tall grass. But they all went out, burned to the nub, and gave forth no conflagration, no cleansing at all.

I saw not another vehicle along that roadway across the gun-powder line, found flecks of white ash which must have flown invisible in the dark air in my hair and clothes upon reaching Darwin. I pulled into town in an anxious frenzy, desperate not to miss the objective that had taken me through so much dark country so fast. Parking the truck, still loaded with supplies and samples, as close as possible, I ran to the air conditioned comfort and pink carnival lights of the Darwin theatre, and stood confused in front of the ticket-wicket. The movie I had come to see, savoured the thought of for a month in the field, had played the previous week, and the alternative cinema festival was wrapping up with a series of local efforts. That night's feature was placeless, coastal; spartan and brooding, shot in black and white. Its soundtrack was almost entirely wind. The title was Broken Highway.

I remember the smell of boiling sap.

Photograph by Susan Hohn

