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## The world-swimmers

For days now you have been driving across unbroken grassland, which you know you'll never be able to leave behind forever, no matter how fast you might go, or however deep into the night you persist in your journey. The northern coast of your country is far in the distance and darkness, yet nothing is clearer to you than the knowledge that the plain you once in a while spit into will surely not disappear when it gets to the water. You have faith it will move without interruption through the breakers, even picking up speed across the ocean, until there is no more ocean—and with all the more reality if it takes on a form you could not even begin to comprehend. After so much confusion—the wrack of entire cities on sickening flats of sand—this alone seems certain.

As you fly across the land, constantly accelerating over slicks of water, you are granted once or twice a momentary vision of a greenness of the least degree of intensity, which before it disappears resolves itself into a pale and flowing plain. You see no people on this plain, in the instant before it evaporates, but you can picture yourself there—a vision within a vision—in the easeful company of the men and women you have decided just now to call the world-swimmers. There have been no other cars in either direction for ages. You have nothing left to do but continue. Even the radio falls dead eventually, and in the morning of your last day in Australia, an ungodly silence fills your mind.

On a radio station phone-in program in the Midwest of America, just before dawn on a day never to dawn, a woman is unable to finish reading out the carefully prepared statement she wanted to make on a subject closely related to the death of her husband, a year ago to the very hour. Before the program host can finish telling her, transmitting on a twelve-second delay, that no one could blame her in the circumstances for being reduced to tears, she puts the telephone receiver down next to its cradle, and walks outside into the yard, her last words moving through the icy air of the state on a twelve-second delay.

In a country of the future, a century or more from now, the first of its inhabitants ever to cry is immediately accorded all the privileges of an emperor. She surveys her people through watery eyes. It is said that she has been elevated to tears. Millions of eyes blink all at once in China; for the briefest of moments, an empire is watched over by no one.

Now you are about to come to the end of the beginning of your journey. As its final hours pass by, you wonder even now—the sole occupant of your strangely empty car—how you could ever describe, to a friend or to a friend of a friend, the momentous things that you have already been witness to, along a stretch of road that has never been anything, you feel, but perfectly flat. Entirely new oceans well up in the most delicate furrows of grassland, their waves breaking in and out of being, as fragile as the high clouds of a coastal region.

Once, when you were many years younger than you now are, you sat in a classroom of sunlit air as your geography teacher described the strangeness a plain of grass uninterrupted by roads or cities would have, if it stretched all the way from the boundary of your suburban school—deep in the drowning depths of Australia—to the furthestmost point on the earth's surface. How might one species of grass give way, under the influence of new weathers, as the miles thundered by, to another, and then to another? But think of this, your teacher said, think of this for a moment: is it possible that by a million freaks and faults of nature a single blade of grass of the original variety flourishing between the roads that you, girls and boys, will this afternoon travel home by, could somehow make it all the way—passing through countless species of grass—to

where the inhabitants of the most distant region of the world laze and sleep, even in the middle of sunlit days, on soft and nearly pure lawns of velvet?

You have always associated yourself, my driver, with that single blade of grass—a foreign flag of green, born out of your teacher’s late-afternoon imaginings. But you have nothing of any of this in mind now, as the edge of Australia, its vastness awakening to the moon, draws ever closer. Sullenly you are suffering from an almost overwhelming desire to piss, yet you dare not stop the car, and you cannot bring yourself to dirty your clothing. It must wait, you tell yourself, until you can clearly hear the sounds of the beach and the ocean.

In the middle year of a century in China in which the ban on all forms of swimming or water play has once more been lifted, a peasant kneels with bowed head in the middle of a paddy field, to know for the first time around his humped body its slush and splash. After a little while other men come and settle themselves alongside him, their backsides all turned to the sun, experiencing each in their own way the touch of water almost unflowing. The peasant who has set off this communal event is hardly thinking of it as a revolution, as he walks slowly back to his village, long after the dropping of darkness, while other men remain in the paddy field of shallow channels and low ridges, experiencing each in their own way the feel of rice seeds floating between their lips and through the gaps in their teeth. A year later exactly, in Peking, the ageing and weakening Emperor, having just partaken of a lavish meal made up of a single grain of rice plucked from every paddy field in China, suddenly becomes tired of lackeyism and wearisome power. Frightening away the many servants nervously tarrying over the various waters that flow through his palace grounds, he enters the single stream—barely a trickle over grass—that he alone knows will, without a doubt, take him into a river that runs to the ocean. For many days he floats along, the peasants fleeing up the banks at his imperial approach, until he reaches the ocean wherein he wishes finally to die.

As odd waters are swelling within you, the coast comes into view eventually, its sounds rise over the sounds of driving, and you are able to empty yourself of your sour waste at last. It disappears quickly into the earth, and from this you gather that, for every one of the hundreds of miles of your journey, the land has been gradually tapering towards the point where air and land and water must meet, and where the bottom of the land (for such there must be in a place like this) comes to an end. You tell yourself that you can remember even now a firm feel to the ground in the area where you began your trip—an enduring sensation of foundation entirely absent in this place, where even skipping lightly on the spot threatens your old confidence in the security of your footing. What matter lies below this inner-land or under-land, perhaps only inches away from where your car tyres have snugly settled, you do not even begin to think about, least of all when you have the urge to name the ordinary sand dunes you are on—as if you had just discovered them—the Shallows of the Land.

There is no hurry yet to go on. As the strained and pressured parts of your stationary car continue to cool and cool, and the remaining drops of petrol in its tank fly apart like quicksilver, you prepare a bed for yourself, and lie down to begin the most blissful sleep of your life, resting your head on a pillow of weeds. For two days and two nights, you dream of nothing but leaves of grass, circulating slowly through the caves and caverns of the most unknown depths of any of the world’s oceans. Intermittently, you urinate without waking, childishly emptying your body of ancient water. On the morning of the third day, you wake to discover that your car has disappeared, along with all of your clothes, and other belongings. Something once close to you is stealing away. With hands made green by the touching of weeds, you rub the sleep from your eyes. Your

face is the colour of a sun almost colourless. Birds fly low and fast through the dry riverways of your veins—wings liquid on the upstroke, pure fire on the down. An ocean, barely tidal, laps at the shelly shore of your heart.

Leaving behind the sandy zone you christened the Shallows of the Land in the last moments before you fell blissfully asleep, finally satisfying your urge to name it, you make for the breakers, where somehow (without your having realised it) things in the long silences of forgotten nights have turned into what they were not. Suddenly you find yourself wading through shallower and shallower wavelets, rather than through water deeper and deeper, and the breakers themselves have become still, as if they were the foothills of the solid sea—holding back the tidal mass of the country—protecting the ocean's hinterland from death by slow drowning. Depths swirl within you as you begin swimming, easily enough, through rolling waves of grassland. Fish notice, then forget you. The land is calming. You are surprised by its warmth as of blood.

In the final minutes of the eighteenth century, on a damp part of the border between Germany and France undisputed in the course of his lifetime, a young man realises that he has become an official of the State with not a single function left to perform. Immediately, by candlelight, he begins to set down the reasons why he will continue to live and to breathe. His writing becomes salty.

With the coast of Australia not yet out of sight above the turbulence in the turf that forms your wake, you don't yet have the boldness to call the plain that you are swimming through the Grasslands of the Moon, much as it seems inadequate to think of it as no more than a special region of the ordinary liquid and solid planet upon which you have always lived. You hear a shout once from the shore—a matter of your car, perhaps—but only this and nothing else, and soon the silence enters into the paleness of the place, and overwhelms you. You swim automatically—the Australian crawl—almost as if you have forgotten that you are a man with a man's nature. Crabs scurry through the dirt; your naked body barely responds to their touch. If you once dived beneath the earth, you would find the roots of the grass swirling and billowing in the currents of the soil. But you do nothing other than swim across the world's surface, breathing regularly—with nothing left of Australia to bother you now.

The steady rhythm by which your muscles are being exercised goes on without interruption or alteration for many hours, until suddenly you enter into a channel of water that baffles every movement, resisting you rather than, as before, embracing and protecting (like an extra skin grown later in life) every hard and soft part of your body. The comforting swells of the land have given way to wavelets of surface rock, which hurt you in many places, and put sand and grit into your eyes. You think, this is water too thick to be natural. Then somehow you pass through it all, and, as if for you this were a second awakening of the day, you start to think, and to feel, and to act, like a man again.

You concern yourself over a sea shining with every known and unknown colour of the world, green excepted. You muse on an image of the water that collects beneath cathedrals and graveyards, lying still in the earth, it's said, over centuries—a solace for water-ghosts. You spit a mouthful of dirt high into the air, as you change your stroke to the pull and the kick of the butterfly stroke. The pattern of the wake behind you changes—it's wider, deeper too—and you can't help but smile, and shout, and laugh. You are active and free, in a world that is becoming ever more active and free. Seagulls are crying overhead—their tears stinging the ocean into which they are slowly falling—but they are alive, after everything, and you are joyful for it. Every last part of you quickens

into greater being, as the waters of your body sustain and nourish the flesh and the tissue of a new season. Young blade that has made it this far—rake, lad, new seed—your body beats the water like a hunter flushing game birds out of grassland.

There are people, the world-swimmers to be sure, not so far off in the distance. The nearest of them, you can see, are surfing on tumbling waves of soil, grass and stones, their tanned faces breaking into brilliant white smiles as they surface through the foaming dirt, their boards wedging into the earth, dripping with sand. For your part, you don't stop stroking a path through the water, and your view of these fabulous athletes becomes better and better with every rotation of your untiring arms, and with each new pulse and push of your legs.

There is no shore to govern the way the waves form and fall, but there is something that causes them to crest and collapse in the same place every time. Behind this stretch of whiteness, the groups of waiting surfers undulate on what looks to you—as each new wave is born—like a line of hedgerow, or like a rise of thick and knotted grass. Your thoughts rip, then smoothly curl over on themselves (a breaking wave; a still lagoon) and you look closely at just one of the surfers with a changed but settled mind—you see now that he is wearing a wetsuit of ocean mud, with scalloped segments resembling the scales of a fish.

A moment passes away, dies. While still unnoticed, you plunge under, and begin swimming through the petrified remains of ancient city-races—the Melburnians, the Sydneysiders, and deepest of all (of course) the Darwinians—letting balls of water escape from your mouth, and from the pores of your skin, watching sometimes the surfers above you, their legs dangling into the roots of grassland. The sun's illumination only reaches you like the light from a star on the edge of death and blackness; millions of coming Australian years have blindly passed you by already, down where you are. Somehow all the speed that your vehicle flung out into the plain during your car journey—land kissing water—finds its true counterpart here. You go very much deeper than you expected you would, but within a few minutes you come to the surface of the dry ocean, well behind the surfers, finding yourself among the main mass of the world-swimmers—although, by chance, a little away from the nearest of them. Thus, you remain the unobserved observer, the observer unobserved and secret; a subtle mystery even to yourself; a stain of skin on the green water.

You understand that one of the world-swimmers will have to see you before the night finally comes, and you picture yourself swimming towards them—sometime in the future—clumsily imitating their native stroke. The whole plain seems to be under the influence of a single current now. Beneath a darkening sky, while everything is moving, everything remains relatively as it is. Breasting tiny sets of streaming earth, now and again gently pissing into the grassy water and soil, you give yourself up to the inevitable drift of the land.

Time passes—slivers of grass through an hourglass.

Then the falling sun casts a greenness of the least degree of intensity over the pale and flowing plain, and you notice for the first time a woman looking in your direction, and squinting a little, as if adjusting her eyes to a sight never seen before. Without any hesitation, you start to move towards her, drinking from the sap of the grass that parts before you, thirsty for the world, no more to be a lonely swimmer on the enchanted ocean; the woman is smiling at you, she is smiling and calling to you among the weeds of the water, and you believe that you can see all the way into your future, to the time when you will be known to her and to her many companions as the Last of the

Australians, and frequently called upon to talk about the absurd and quaint lives of the peoples of Adelaide and Brisbane and Perth, whenever comparisons are made between the failed societies of the past and the magnificent civilisation of the world-swimmers. And now you are almost into her arms, as stroke for stroke she begins to come towards you as you go on towards her, and her eyes are glowing like oceans of snow, like grasslands of the moon.

### **Bio.**

Dr Patrick West is Senior Lecturer in Professional & Creative Writing at Deakin University. His PhD from The University of Melbourne is on Julia Kristeva. Patrick's first short-story collection, *The World Swimmers*, is published by the International Centre for Landscape and Language (ICLL), Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. He was an MA student and post-doctoral fellow at ECU in the late 1990s. Patrick is active in many creative and academic genres including the short story, literary journalism, film script, literary theory, television studies and poetry. The winner of many writing awards and competitions, he has been published in *The Best Australian Stories* twice and in many other prestigious academic and creative forums. Patrick is currently a research leader of a major funded project based on the volcanic plains of Western Victoria to do with creative responses to place and landscape. He frequently reviews books for *The Australian*.