

Watering place

Many in the human world treat me as insignificant, just twenty-seven kilometres meandering from hills to sea. I am Garngoo, my name means watering place. I *was* such for immeasurable time. I *was* life.

Faith walks her favourite path along my bank, alone now, grey head uplifted, a light in her eyes that shines as bright as when I first met her and Joe all those years ago, back when my flanks were grazed raw, wind sore, sun blasted. I was as close to total death then as it is possible to be with your blood still running. Yet I'd felt something powerful when the young couple paused above one of my bends, arms around each other looking out over erosion gullies and bald hills. From their bodies, through the blighted soil, into my poisoned blood, I felt their hearts beating in a duet of wonder, vision. Hope.

Now, Faith emerges from beneath tree canopies to *the* meadow. I feel goose-bumps prickling along her sun spotted arms, the tremor down her unbowed back. Here, she senses the presence. In the soil beneath her feet are remnants of tools and hunting weapons, flint and ironwood found only in deserts and ranges hundreds of kilometres of interconnected trading paths away. This small meadow, bordered by grassy bank and sheltering trees was for countless millennia a place to meet, to dance and sing and pass down wisdom. This was *the* watering place that gave me my name.

A Gerygone, a species once vanished from here, flits aloft, catches filtered light, watches from a branch as Faith leaves the meadow and walks on through the bush, to an abrupt fence. The farm boundary. The delineation is brutal. Over the fence is what this farm was like before she and Joe came. Land harried into ceaseless production, treeless, my banks unprotected, my bed choked with silty run-off, rubbish and rusting metal, indifference.

And yet through it all I run in sparkling clarity. It's only when an animal doesn't know and tries to drink that they taste my poison – salt. Around a hundred and seventy winters ago new people were drawn to my fresh life giving blood, the fertile flats and gently rolling hills I flow through. The bush was cleared, and the water table, no longer moderated by deep roots, sweated upward, evaporated, leaving salt. I drew it like a magnet. In a blink of winters I became poisoned.

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Fifty winters ago no one wanted this desolate farm with its blown soil and useless creek. Joe and Faith, newly married, and teaching at the little school in town, put in an offer. They were stunned, and terrified, when it was accepted. They sought the wisdom of an older farming couple further upstream. Over time they cleared my bed of rubbish. They engaged a like minded share farmer, employed low till and rotation techniques, reduced chemical use, collected seeds from roadside scrub and the older couple, replanted my banks and erosion gullies that link me to hinterlands. I make it sound easy, but it was sheer hard work. Decades of tenacity. Neighbours shook their heads. Lucky they've got off farm jobs. Bush doesn't pay bills.

As wildlife corridors spread outward from my banks, arteried into gullies and along fence lines, they held open days, took people along my leafy flanks, showed the data of increased yields. The place became widely known as Garngoo, the sign Joe made, and the children painted in bright welcome, for the roadside gate.

The farm had become productive enough for Faith and Joe to quit their jobs. Look, they pleaded, we're all connected, big and small. If we all do this then one day the creek might flow fresh again.

Like the world, a few said why not? We have to do something. They planted and nurtured bushland corridors, capillaries of life like the veins of a leaf. But some said, what is the point of me doing it in my little country? The purpose of land is production. Anyway, look at that big agricultural company that owns twelve kilometres of creek, if they do nothing we might as well all do nothing.

And so I flow. Through summers ever hotter, storms that devour the shore I seek with every atom of my salty blood, there to mingle with the currents of the world, vapour skyward, cross longitudes on wind, fall again in that eternal connecting cycle.

And here, when those winter rains come, I run fresher for just a little longer.

Faith turns, walks back into scents of flowers and bursting seeds, birdsong, the presence. I feel it hum through her body, the ancient soil, into my restless blood. Hope. That one day I will again become life. A watering place.