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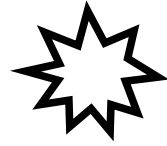
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THIS ALL COME BACK NOW

AN ANTHOLOGY OF FIRST NATIONS SPECULATIVE FICTION

EDITED BY MYKAELA SAUNDERS

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For weird mob everywhere and everywhen, our brave and strange thinkers, feelers, lovers, warlords and healers – those who are dreaming up new ways to tell our stories and are pouring them back into the river of our collective culture for the benefit of all.

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OVERTURE

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There were only a few ways to find new music when I was a teenager, growing up in a small town in a pre-internet world.

I found old music easily enough, flipping through the old girl's records and listening to them with headphones plugged in to the speakers in the lounge room, studying the cover art and liner notes and lyrics as I sang along. But finding new music was a different, more difficult quest. There were not yet any music blogs to scour or YouTube rabbit holes to get lost in. Radio sucked, even the few alternative stations that we picked up in Tweed. I was too poor to just go out and buy albums whenever I wanted, and CDs were pretty hard to flog, so if I wanted an album I had to be sure I loved it, to justify spending my meagre, illegal wages I earned cooking brekky at the local markets.

And so mixtapes and compilation CDs were my gateways to finding new music that excited and moved me.

I loved receiving the gift of a mixtape made by someone whose taste I relied on to open up my world. I could count how many of these people I absolutely trusted on one hand: mostly older, cooler mates, and my older brother. I loved making my own mixtapes too: the craft of taping songs off other songs, nailing the precise timing of starting and pausing, and carefully transcribing the song

list – sometimes whiting-out an old tape sleeve that had already been whited-out and written on dozens of times over.

I found real joy and pride in making a mixtape that was coveted by people I respected. I loved the ritual of swapping mixtapes with others, always hoping to hell that you all recorded the song names and artists accurately, and wrote them down in the correct order of their position on the playlist, lest you begin telling people how much you love the wrong band. There was no greater shame than in being a poser.

Later on, I discovered small punk and metal labels that would put out compilation CDs seasonally, to showcase forthcoming samples from their bands. There were music magazines that did this too. And when I belatedly got the internet, I found blogs dedicated to making playlists of seminal bands in whatever genre you could think of. Thank god for all of these pedlars and purveyors of new music; listening to their offerings felt like being at some mythical overseas music festival where you could check out hundreds of bands and find new favourites from the comfort of home. These compilations were hit and miss, but sometimes it felt like a powerful and prescient god had tapped into your mind and curated this gift especially to your tastes.

Short story anthologies are like mixtapes, and I want you to think of this book as a burnt CD from me to you, a way for you to sample new worlds, a mishmash of styles gathered together that speak to similar themes, and an opportunity to find exciting writers you might not have otherwise come across.

In 2004, Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan edited the anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial science fiction and*

fantasy. In 2012, Anishinaabe scholar Grace L Dillon edited *Walking the Clouds: An anthology of Indigenous science fiction*. I read both North American anthologies in 2016 and they excited me so much they set me off on my current path of researching and writing my own speculative fiction (spec fic), in both creative and critical work.

Closer to home, over the last few years we've seen a rising tide of 'un-Australian futurism' anthologies, and the more the merrier, I reckon – this is the way that nascent movements grow strong and interesting, and that new ideas and approaches begin to unfurl.

After Australia (Affirm Press) was published in 2020 after editor Michael Mohammed Ahmad commissioned work that responded to the provocation: *What might Australia look like fifty years from now?* Contributors answered in a variety of genres. Also in 2020, *Collisions: Fictions of the future, a Liminal anthology* (Pantera Press) was edited by Leah Jing McIntosh, Cher Tan, Adalya Nash Hussein and Hassan Abul. The short stories came from the longlist of the 2019 *Liminal Fiction Prize*, and while not all stories are spec fic, they all write into the prize's theme of 'the future'. Contributors from these anthologies are, respectively, 'diverse writers' and 'people of colour';¹ *After Australia* features

1 Both of these are descriptors and categories that I loathe, as they lump all non-white people together in relation to whiteness, and centre whiteness in doing so. This especially disregards ways of belonging to land and community, or not belonging, particularly as a point of difference between First Nations and settler communities of colour. It also euphemistically equates colour with culture, as racial pseudoscience does, and it assumes a commonality of experience under white supremacy, without factoring in proximity to whiteness, or passing as white, or similar privileges. Finally, it assumes a cross-colour/cultural solidarity that's mostly not actual, but based on a fabricated similarity of struggle. This is often done without any socio-economic considerations, of class or access to resources, and other ways that fracture and divide cultural groups. McIntosh acknowledges some of these limitations in her introduction to *Collisions*, too.

four First Nations contributors while *Collisions* features two. Both anthologies speak back to white Australia's literal and literary territorialism over the past, present and future with a multiplicity of fresh voices.

But until now we had yet to see an anthology of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speculative fiction, written and edited entirely by us. And with the jaw-dropping cover art created by Jessica Johnson at Nungala Creative, and the book itself designed by the talented Jenna Lee, this has been a one-hundred-percent First Nations project (well, besides owning the means of production).

But why, in 2021, is this a world first?

Over the years that I've been studying Indigenous spec fic, I've had countless conversations with people interested in my work. One question I'm always asked is, 'Why isn't there much Indigenous spec fic being written?'

'But there is!' I answer. We blackfellas love reading spec fic and writing our own, so a better question to ask is, 'Why isn't there much Indigenous spec fic getting published?'

Well, it is. It's just not being published in the places you'd expect.

Anecdotally, many First Nations spec fic writers I've spoken to have had their work embraced by mainstream literary publishers after being rejected by Australian spec fic publishers. Indeed, of all the stories in this anthology that have been previously published, none of them come from traditional Australian spec fic publications. They were all first published in mainstream literary publications, and a few of them have won lucrative literary prizes.

To be fair, there aren't many spec fic publishers in Australia,

but those that do exist have historically not published much of our writing. Some might say this is a matter of taste – as though taste is objective, and just a matter of style or aesthetics – but taste is judgement, which determines the ways we read, enjoy, and interpret stories, and this is always, always shaped by our world views, which are always cultural.

Of the many spec fic stories *about* First Nations characters and cultures, the vast majority have been written by non-Indigenous writers, and published through traditional Australian spec fic channels. It's gotten a little better recently, mostly, but there's a long way to go, considering that for most of its history the Australian spec fic publishing industry has been hostile to our stories and indeed our presence, while mining our cultures and pillaging our spirituality to trade in tired themes and tropes.

Australian and global spec fic prizes have, too, been historically averse to actual First Nations writers but welcoming of non-Indigenous writers who win awards for biting our style and flogging our experiences for their storylines. This is still true at the time of writing. No wonder *we* feel hostile to the Australian spec fic community too.

I don't say any of this lightly or pithily, or to provoke a controversy for the sake of the discourse. I'm saying this with my whole chest, hand on heart. I say this with the authority of somebody who has sought out and read every single Australian spec fic story that features at least one Aboriginal character. And I say this loud and clear: the vast majority of this characterisation is no good, whether they're infantilising or fetishising or assimilating or demonising us, or some combination of these.

I'll concede that some non-Indigenous writing about us has gotten a little better, but not always, and in any case, a few

half-decently rendered characters over the last decade can't possibly make up for a solid century of grotesque representation.

Traditionally, Australian spec fic publishers have preferred fake, palatable versions of our stories over the real deal, but this is no surprise as it mirrors the same proclivities of mainstream literature, which of course is just a microcosm of this country at large. They want the nice stuff: the ochre, the opals, the stoicism, the spiritual purity, the creatures, the cosmology, the mystical shamans and evil sorcerers, the magical properties in our blood, the portals in our scared sites. But nobody wants to reckon with the effects of state-sanctioned violence, of ecocidal policy, of genocide, of eugenics.

If this all sounds harsh, consider being an Aboriginal spec fic fan: the rare times you see your people written into the genre it is mostly by non-Indigenous authors, most of who use us and our stories as plot devices or to play out their own colonial Dreamtime fantasies.

Spec fic is a big and porous basket that holds all the slippery types of stories together, including science fiction, climate fiction, alternate history, futurism, post/apocalyptic fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, fantasy, horror, gothic fiction, surrealism, magic realism, and slipstream fiction.

Spec fic, as a Western genre, employs devices that our cultural stories have dealt in for millennia – the difference is, to us these stories aren't always parsed out into fiction or fantasy, as they are often just ways we experience life. For example: time travel isn't such a big deal when you belong to a culture that experiences all-times simultaneously, not in a progressive straight line like

Western cultures do. And talk to any Aboriginal kids, from any community anywhere on this continent, about gussies or ghosts, and you will find a captive audience of experts, and maybe a highly skilled storyteller if you're lucky.

There are so many common spec fic themes that are just stone-cold reality for us. Right now, right across this continent, we are post-apocalyptic and not yet post-colonial, so all those violent histories of invasion and colonisation must be read as apocalyptic by any standard. Related, *Mad Max* is probably the best-known Australian cli-fi story, but for our people, who have seen unfathomable ecocide enacted hand in glove with our own attempted genocide, all stories that take place in unceded lands post-1788 are climate fictions. Finally, and perhaps more universally, some say that spec fic deals in the 'not real', but what of the absolute fantasy of continuous consumption on a finite planet?

So it sticks in my craw a little to call this a spec fic anthology, given that for many non-Indigenous people that means it's all completely made-up. But I do concede that these are spec fic stories while I underline that these are not stories that diverge from reality, as defined in a Western scientific materialist sense. These stories are *about* our realities. Lisa Fuller explains this much better than I can in her 2020 essay 'Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter' in *Kill Your Darlings*. 'Myth This!', her story from this collection, alludes to this too.

Spec fic is just one toolkit of many that we use to tell our stories, and if I have to hierarchise labels, the stories in this book are First Nations stories before they are spec fic stories; that is, they centre and celebrate our communities, cultures, and countries while using spec fic tropes and techniques as literary

devices. We make these tools our own rather than using them in the way Australian spec fic writers use them. We use them in cultural ways, respectfully, and we don't allow the tools to use us, as we refuse to pilfer our collective cultural consciousness for shock tactics and plot twists.

In *This All Come Back Now*, it is clear that the writers aren't overly concerned with prescriptive spec fic protocols, as their stories only sometimes affirm accepted genre conventions, sometimes extending or subverting them, or else collapsing them into new forms, or discarding their conventions entirely.

Some of these writers have been writing spec fic for years, and some have won awards for their work. But for Evelyn Araluen, Timmah Ball, Loki Liddle, John Morrissey, Merryana Salem, Jack Latimore, Krystal Hurst, and Kathryn Gledhill-Tucker their story in this book is their first foray into spec fic, a departure from what they're best known for, respectively: poetry, essays, music, short fiction, critique, journalism, visual arts, and tech writing. This is more proof that discrete categories of genre, form and mode don't restrict our people in our storytelling wholeness.

I'd been thinking about editing this anthology for a few years, purely because I wanted this anthology to exist. I waited patiently for someone else to do it, but it didn't happen – but that's okay, because I eventually felt arrogant enough to do it myself. I am indebted to Dillon, Hopkinson and Mehan for showing me ways that it can be done, and for inspiring me to do it too.

The parameters of this project have always been fairly plastic as I believe that the shape of an anthology like this should be

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determined by the stories, rather than forcing choices to fit into a preconceived paradigm. However, in the call for submissions, I laid my cards out on the table.

I sought work written by us, with a strong preference for stories written for us and about us. After reading so much of our literature, I'm much more interested in stories that centre and celebrate First Nations characters, that focus on relationships inside and across country, community, and culture. I did not want this to be an anthology full of pan-Indigenous, written-to-teach-white-Australia-a-lesson-about-itself stories that could be mistaken for coming from other cultures.

I encouraged all blackfellas to submit, whether emerging or established writers, unpublished or widely so, whether they had written spec fic before or were writing it for the very first time. I emailed dozens of writers whose writing I loved with an invitation to submit, and I'm happy to say that many are in this book.

I wanted to collect the best of our spec fic writing together in this basket of like-minded genres, so that the stories could all be read in their proper cultural context, side by side with their siblings. And so I opened up submissions to already-published works, as so much of our strong and interesting black spec fic has been published in journals and other anthologies; it would have been a tragedy to exclude the stories by Evelyn Araluen, Karen Wyld, Jasmin McGaughey, Samuel Wagan Watson, Loki Liddle, Krystal Hurst and Hannah Donnelly. For the same reason, it was important to include extracts from seminal, longer texts by Ellen van Neerven, Sam Watson Snr, Archie Weller and Alexis Wright, and standalone stories from books by Alison Whittaker and Adam Thompson.

On that note, I can't tell you how special it is to feature stories by a father and his son in this anthology. Sam Watson Snr passed away in 2019, and with the blessing of his family I've included an extract from *The Kadaitcha Sung*, the first Aboriginal speculative fiction novel, published in 1990. I landed on this particular extract through yarning with Watson's son Samuel Wagan Watson, whose story I am so proud to include in this book alongside his father's. How did we decide on this excerpt? Well, this part of the story is set in my community, in Fingal, a place beloved of both Watsons and myself, so that was that.

I had the pleasure of reading over sixty pieces in a few short weeks, and as I read and made my decisions, purely based on my own tastes, the collection began to shape itself organically, like a clump of crystals growing from a common source and forming around each other. And what did we end up with? A multi-gender, multi-generational, multi-perspectival community of exciting thinkers and writers, coalesced around our collective storytelling campfire.

In choosing, I always leant more toward the experimental, outlandish, surreal and satirical, rather than the traditional, predictable, conventional and solemn. Some writers sent in two stories, and I often chose the most cultural of the two. There were around forty stories that I couldn't include, so keep your eyes peeled for an explosion of First Nations spec fic in the coming years (if literary publishers continue to publish our spec fic, and if traditional spec fic publishers begin to open their gates up a little).

In my experience, all the best projects are built on good relationality, as this is what builds healthy communities. In the call for submissions I guaranteed the cultural safety of

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contributors through my editorial guidance, and I strongly suspect that's why such a flood of stories came in. I stipulated that all writers would have creative control over their stories, that I wouldn't try to make their voices sound white, and I'd protect their work from other unnecessary meddling.

A hands-off approach is attractive for some editors, perhaps seeming simpler when editing across cultures, and not wanting to step on toes. But not for me. Rather than discarding every less-developed story outright, I committed to nurturing work that showed potential through a collaborative editorial process. This was sometimes an intensive exercise but it was always rewarding once the story came out gleaming.

I only decided on the book's title after I had spent time with the stories; I think choosing a title before you know what stuff the book is made of is a little like naming a baby before they are born. I had a one-page shortlist of titles; these were phrases taken from the stories themselves that jumped out at me during editing. And when I saw a draft of Nungala's cover art, I decided. (On that note, if you happened to pick this book up based on the cover – good! You clearly have great taste.)

This All Come Back Now is a line taken from the opening story, 'Muyum, a Transgression' by Evelyn Araluen. Throughout this story of departures and returns, the spectral narrator speaks of herself coming back like falling star or like scintillation or like nothing. All manner of other things come back, too: waves will be coming back for their rivers, and dead creatures come back, bringing comfort. At the end of the story, as the narrator crosses a threshold she's resisted since the beginning, she announces 'this all come back now', alluding to the singularity of thought

and feeling that she's now become, at one with everything, right at the end of consciousness.

In this anthology, 'this all come back' for us, too – all those things that have been taken from us, that we collectively mourn the loss of, or attempt to recover and revive, as well as all the things that we thought we'd gotten rid of, that are always returning to haunt and hound us. Characters return, sometimes in different forms, and things are returned to characters. There are themes that come back through this book, time and again – family and other kin, Old People and ancestors, government interference, corporate greed, the destruction of land and water, the archive, technology, language, law, ghosts, hauntings, warm and deep belonging and despairing alienation. *This All Come Back Now* speaks to what Grace L Dillon calls 'Biskaabiiyang – Returning to Ourselves' in *Walking the Clouds*. It also speaks to our cultural conception of time as everywhen, or all-times at once.

These are stories that take place outside the bounds of consensus reality, showcasing a variety of possible worlds, and they are all rooted in our ways of being, knowing, doing² – or becoming. Some of these writers are summoning ancestral spirits from the past, while some are feeling around in the muck of daily living for their stories. Others are looking straight down the barrel of potential futures, which always end up curving back around to hold us from behind. Not many of these stories are utopian, though our cheek and humour shines through in even the grimmest and heaviest of stories.

★

² This framework is adapted from the work of First Nations knowledge systems scholar Veronica Arbon.

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A good playlist will take the listener on a journey; the relationships between contiguous songs make sense and transitions are seamless, and in this way short, disparate songs are strung together to create a unique larger, longer composition.

‘Open with a banger and close with a burner’: this advice is sometimes promoted by editors of literary anthologies and curators of musical compilations alike. I didn’t follow this adage, but I didn’t *not* follow it either. Instead, I sequenced these stories in such a way that, together, they tell a bigger story; each of the stories is in conversation with its neighbours, bound to each other by through-lines of genre, character, setting, theme or trope.

The anthology opens with Evelyn Araluen’s moving and mythic ‘Muyum, a Transgression’, which won the Nakata Brophy Prize. Set in between worlds, this haunting story is narrated by a young ghost in Araluen’s unique and powerful prose. This is Aboriginal gothic, where the sadness is born from intimate knowledge of place and people and what has been done to both, not horror arising from the land itself as mysterious entity, as with regular gothic.

We then move into the magic realism of Karen Wyld’s Borderlands Prize-winning story ‘Clatter Tongue’, which takes place in a contemporary urban street, school and home. Young Treanna’s sadness and anxiety invokes the purging of colonial refuse, and the way Wyld renders metaphor and symbol into story is astonishing and lovely.

‘Closing Time’ is Samuel Wagan Watson’s urban ghost story, an atmospheric exploration of the father–son relationship, and the ways that the past seeps into the present. Set in autumn 2020, it channels and exudes the global ambient anxiety from

the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Watson's distinctive lyricism is, as always, evocative.

Kalem Murray also explores the father–son dynamic in the fun and creepy bush horror story 'In His Father's Footsteps'. This story is based in Murray's home country, and the texture of his world is finely rendered. It's a beautiful invocation of the bush and the mangroves, and the delights of crabbing seen through the eyes of a moody teen.

In Lisa Fuller's 'Myth This!', a Murri family goes camping on a cold winter weekend. This is another bush horror story that speaks to some of the same themes as Murray's – but with a slight shift in tone. This, too, is really a story about family, and Fuller's characters are vibrant and relatable.

Another urban ghost story, 'Jacaranda Street', is Jasmin McGaughey's take on the 'be careful what you wish for' trope, made fresh by a young family finding the mundane in the magical, and vice versa, and kept grounded by arguing over money. Through deadpan phrasing in unusual situations, McGaughey's wry and dry humour is a delight.

'The Kadaitcha Sung', the titular excerpt from Sam Watson Snr's novel, is the first of four stories that feature the pub as a setting. The story begins with the young Kadaitcha Tommy Gubba going to the pub to drink with his mates then sneaking off to make love. He then attends to his sacred duties in other realms and realities, before arriving back to the Fingal mish to be told off by his fierce Aunty. This excerpt is representative of the tones and textures within the novel: light and heavy, mundane and magic, loving and violent, and ancestral and futuristic.

'Snake of Light' is set in a country pub, a place often associated with small minds and big violence – and Loki Liddle

plays with audience expectations of where the danger comes from. This unearthly urban fantasy speaks to both our ancient spiritual ways and to contemporary small-town problems, while also being a satisfying tale of revenge.

Adam Thompson's 'Your Own Aborigine' may seem like an absurdist take on the near future, but it is not so unlikely given that the government has before repealed section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act in order to get away with targeting Aboriginal people in a similarly embarrassing and infantilising manner. This is good Aboriginal satire: written *from* but not *for* the white gaze. The possibilities of this story are both funny and frightening.

Is John Morrissey's story 'Five Minutes' about a repressed public servant masquerading as a sci-fi writer, or the other way around? Either way, through Morrissey's clever layering of different realities, as his protagonist projects his struggles onto the page, those struggles begin to bleed back into his life. It's funny, very meta, vicious, a bit cooked, and is a withering look at the public service, and at the Australian literary landscape too.

Now we begin to move into further-off futures, into worlds that are currently unrecognisable – but may not be too far-fetched give or take a few things.

The next sci-fi story is Merryana Salem's 'When From', a satirical corporate dystopia from an Aboriginal perspective. Salem has extrapolated on the current pandemic and Hollywood's proclivity for filming in Australia, and added some time travel and mixed in a strong dose of Aboriginal cynicism for good measure.

Set in a future urban Redfern, 'The Centre' by Alison Whittaker is a disturbing thought experiment, grounded in

cultural and historical fact, that grapples with a truly blackfella future in ways that poke fun at the present. Particularly prescient is Whittaker's climate-changed future, and her reckoning of abolition within a gamified reality, which is reminiscent of all the quick-fix sloganistic government programs that are constantly dreamt up to solve our problems.

In Timmah Ball's ficto-critical 'An Invitation', a jaded ex-urban planner gets an offer via email that triggers a meditation on the lead-up to the architectural apocalypse. Ball takes a hard look at corporate personalities and the white queer power dynamics that enable them. Anyone working in the arts today will recognise this as a hard-won Aboriginal insider's perspective, and so it might be worth paying attention to Ball's messages.

Laniyuk's 'Nimeybirra' is a trans-generational meta-story, told in the epistolary form. The story explores familial relationships through time, looking near and far into the future and coming back again. The cross-generational connections and call-backs throughout the story show the continuum of ancestors and descendants, connected through story, and offers a glimpse of what trans-Tasman First Nations solidarity could look like.

Ellen van Neerven's 'Water' is set in a near-future Canaipa/Russell Island. The government are about to create a separate 'Australia2' where Aboriginal people will soon be segregated – at the expense of the islands' ancestral inhabitants. An abridged version of the novella that originally appeared in *Heat and Light*, 'Water' focuses on the relationship between the human Kaden and the plantperson Larapinta, showing how their fascination with each other grows as its own story within the broader saga.

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My story, ‘Terranora’, is set just south of ‘Water’, and in a similar saltwater mangrove world. ‘Terranora’ takes place in my own community, in the Tweed, and is my take on the classic ‘a stranger comes to town’ set-up. The story explores belonging and relationships inside a tight-knit Goori clan who’ve reasserted sovereignty in a dizzyingly climate-changed future.

Archie Weller’s sprawling futurist novel *Land of The Golden Clouds*, from 1998, is set on a hot, irradiated continent where people live in distinct cultural clans, and is a fantastic example of a hopeful yet post-apocalyptic future. This extract, ‘The Purple Plains’, focuses on the Aboriginal Keepers of the Trees, who Weller imagines living far into the future the way our ancestors did. This extract is full of creation stories from all over our continent, with a bit of romance and danger thrown in.

Set in a post-apocalyptic feudal wasteland, Jack Latimore’s ‘Old Uncle Sir’ is arranged on the skeleton of Hamlet. Always incredible and sometimes uncomfortable, the narrator’s lyrical voice is a fresh mix of gritty, gross and playful. He invokes a rich and violent world as he contemplates his place within his messed-up family, and wonders whether he might someday found his own trash kingdom.

‘Dust Cycle’ is an excerpt of the titular chapter from *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright’s Australian Literature Society Gold Medal-winning novel. This story is a shining example of surreal futurist fiction, especially as it speaks to dystopian policies and the absurdity of government in the here and now, and projected visions for the country and climate in the future. This excerpt sets up the climate-changed world, with Aboriginal people living in an army-controlled compound.

We are introduced to the protagonist Oblivia and her beautiful swans, as well as Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions, and the Harbour Master, a healer for the country.

Krystal Hurst's haunting and beautiful story follows a small family of climate refugees across a burnt and desolate country as they seek the fabled Lake Mindi, where they believe rebirth and renewal will be waiting for them. Hurst's story collapses multiple genres together and offers us a fresh and cultural take on the apocalypse, particularly in the ways that the characters comfort each other in crisis.

The collection ends with two considerations of a post-human future. Hannah Donnelly's micro-fiction 'After the End of Their World' encapsulates a whole world in less than five hundred words. Sometime in the past, disappearing humans created the sisters of the Skylands, non-human custodians of country. When the sisters visit earth to conduct a cultural burn, they are forced to feel grief for the first time – and they learn of its transformative power.

The anthology closes with the beautiful, lyrical 'Protocols of Transference' by Kathryn Gledhill-Tucker. The way the narrator yarns to the AI with such affection, sadness and gravity in this post-human future is truly moving. This story, in the author's words:

comes from attempting to reconcile cultural protocols of knowledge sharing with the enormous capacity for technology to consume, learn, proliferate beyond our intentions. There is some convergence too with the mechanisms of cultural protocols and the technical protocols computers use to exchange data.

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Overture

It is with joy and pride that I present the world's first anthology of blackfella speculative fiction – a love-letter to kin and country, to memory and future-thinking. I hope you enjoy this mixtape of weird, black and excellent stories from some of our most brilliant writers.

Bugalwan!

Mykaela Saunders

Yarrgehmbu, 2021

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MUYUM, A TRANSGRESSION

Evelyn Araluen

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EVELYN ARALUEN is a Goorie/Koori poet, researcher, and co-editor of *Overland*. Her debut poetry collection *DROPBEAR* was released by the University of Queensland Press in 2021. She was born and raised on Dharug country and now works on Wurundjeri country.

When I crossed there was only little light darkly. This place where I have been told to find you is light and floor-stained tea-tree, as my sister who dreams has described, she who sees still water when she hears my name. It is she who should be here to lay down in you and listen, but I was the one who was unravelled by silence.

I came to bear the name of this house in the wind season, a different time than the dry in which I came to behold it. I followed the name I am not named with more specificity than any other kind of presence and in the alignment of star and of river and of stone and although I was not brought up with belief in cartography, I found myself singing maps to find you. Raised also not to endorse the social performance of pronoun but rather the designation of moietic and ceremonial relation you became personified by what I believed you to pouch and to be pouched by and it is in this synecdoche and delirious state of nostos I am afraid that I forgot the function of gate or of bell or of knock. And convincing myself that to press forward barefootleftfoot is sufficient sacred and in neglect of smoke or sandalwood I made myself guest to this house. The homestead Muyum at the edge of this hill Slaughter which presides over the

valley Canaan, baptised by the waters of Kings and christened by parochial charm and local gazettes.

When within I searched for mirror as the half remembered in me gathered honey from river wells. Watched as much as I was watching I made point to unlook corners and crannies and with my dictionary accent tried to talk of home. In return and report I hear chatter from below and above, rustle in undewed grass and a name swooped through trees. I tell myself I am no fool, that I know not to drink that blood, not to eat this skin. Tell him, I say, tell him I have come back like falling star. Tell him I have only ever tried to be what is wanted.

I move past rooms in which memory is pressing against the doors, galleries of this one this mob this one that mob this one full that one full they all full. But in speaking your name to the parlour-room portraits, in the distance I hear a door ache open on rusty hinge. I drag my eyes from my eyes and add one more looks-like and double-take to my own heaving room.

Do I creak or does the hallway? When small I thought the rough groan of tangled blue gums in wind were lyrebirds peering out from fairy doors. You see, my father wanted to give us everything: daemons and dreaming, sprites and spirits. I grew up in worlds that crisscrossed and bled and were flown between. I have heard songs that say we come from the moon and songs that say we are the earth itself.

I think for him it is allthis allatonce but somehow this house has always been more away than the moon.

In trusting doorways more than doors I stand here only. I have come back, I tell the empty, like falling star. I am heard but not reached for. Beyond I hear murmur and wind so distant and long. If I step forward I will step on jirrajirra. He dances

between my feet. Jirrajirra one, it is my father. Jirrajirra two, it is rain. Jirrajirra three and I must leave. So maybe not here, I translate, maybe not now. Jirrajirra one now, and he willywags around me as I turn from doorway.

Up and over we find a library. Jirrajirra loves libraries, he flies with heavy spectacles and ink stains through the archives. I ask the library boy for the names. I want shelves of them, I want indexes and appendixes that I can swallow. It is lucky I ask for this, he tells me, with his voice like a radio. I say I only want to teach my tongue this place. He gives me bible and, here, look what me and mine have made for you. We put all these sounds together and turned them into light.

But I have been told this sorry story before. Jirrajirra tears out the prayers with his claws and we leave. At the end of the hall I press my face to the window glass and watch shadows move in the outside. Sun is reaching across the valley. Look how clever I am to make all this gold, the light says to the grass, to the treetops. The cockatoos are sheen shining and sailing over the mountain. Jirrajirra tells me of the time his brother followed the eagle all the way up to the sky and I am such deep sorrow.

But never mind, never mind. We pass bedless bedrooms on our way to the museum. Oh, the smell. The hot heavy haze of old brown. Here the dead have been assembled into cabinets, stacked so high the walls are heaving into us. The curator slinks heavy through the room, eyes green nose wet and all the black in the world in his fur. With deep accent growl and empty mouth he bids us enter. Jirrajirra flutters up up above, he is plucking at the fishing lines hanging from the canopy. The room is full of chatter as all the birds fall free and collide above us, coughing sawdust and blinking with glass eyes.

I uncrucify moth and monarch and all other flying things.
I untip mason memorials to the sea, my nose burns from
the formaldehyde but all the stained scales and skeletons are
crawling back together, flapping and flopping on faded carpet.
I unbind the turtles too: they are howling with hollow, so
sickly mounted in shapes of going home. Who could have bled
you from your bones, turtle? I shatter embryo tank I strip skull
shelf and they crash and constellate the up and down and all the
arounds. I am the centre of wonder-room of sea and sky, I am
whirlpool, I am harbinger of such mighty change.

Do you mind, panther, what we are undoing?

The curator speaks in absence of teeth; this is not my place.
All these are the ancient ones and the taken ones. Those hunted
wrongways, their homes cut down their oceans drowning. He
watches above, waiting for the swallows he can swallow whole
to become too close.

I climb the cabinets and call jirrajirra to take shelter in my
hair. Where now, where now, my glorious friend my protector?
It is time to find the rivers and the trees. It is time to go back
for the maps. We check each room; some are mounted against
windows, some are folded into keyholes. There are a hundred
spellings and shapes for home and everything in between.
I like best the ones with mountains like scars under my fingers.
Pretty browns and beiges, did they know all the ochres when
they painted this from their dreams and instrument rooms?

More in the library, we think, so we hurry past the missionary
who chases us with gloves and glasses. Laughing laughing, we
can be scholars too, look how neat I write my references, how
clean I keep my check-out card. The next librarian scorns the
careful tools, he gives us astrolabe and anemometer, drops

smoking ash on parchment, presses eager on the page at every sign of beauty. Shows me how they invented time and length to find us. He does not see jirrajirra no matter how he flickers about, blue-eyed boy of the pages he speaks with hush and wonder at all the places that have been found.

I ask him for rivers and he tells me of boats. I ask him of trees and he tells me of rust. With the artificial horizon he measures the altitude and the accessibility of the sun and moon. Behind field glasses he says he likes my lashes. We speak different languages he and I, even in the middle tongues our words for 'find' and 'take' jar and unsound. But I stay here and listen, all the while jirrajirra is fussing and flying almost like he is everywhere. It is the longest time of this voice and these maps before I realise, jirrajirra one, jirrajirra two, jirrajirra three and now I have to go.

I know, the cartographer knows, the stars know, but I say no.

To where and for why, I say.

The house says, listen.

I say, speak.

The library shudders. Windows rattle, books fall to the floor. The maps curl closed over my fingers, and their keeper has disappeared. I feel tugging at my hair, it is jirrajirra, he is pulling and poking. Dust and ochre fills the air. Outside, outside, and I am anger now, it is louder and sadder than sorrow. I shout at jirrajirra, I stomp my feet up and down these halls, watch the walls shake and shudder. The panther hovers at the edge of the museum, the fish have scattered like breaking glass and there are no birds now.

How have I deserved this? How have I come back to silence and empty and shame? How have I come so far and made time

so much for name and sound, for map and shape, and all I am
is wandering new old halls? Downstairs now, doorway again,
darkness still. But this time I am the wind, I stride through my
own. Jirrajirra gone but I don't care, I am my own, I am all me
and mine and if I am to be lonely then at least I will be strong.
I came to find you and so that you might find me. I have come
back like



I feel you first. Before you scintillate I am coiled and sheathed.
Fire out. Dark blue dark in and over this circle. You watching
me but all my myths are misting and I cannot meet your eyes
with my eyes that are your eyes but I am reminded so sharp and
so sudden of my spine crawling beneath my pinprickle skin.
I wait for you or the dark to swallow me whole. I find voice in
shudders: what thunder I have caused to be heard by you. You
must know how I have loved you and have traced your shape
into my skies even in unknowing, even in other place. No-one
has told me where to go and no-one but you is here to meet
me. Do not show me back my fear. Give me smoke and words
I am ready. Give me place and purpose I am so very here and—

Eyes open.

Not here now.

Nothing here now but shame.

I walk longways around darkness. No creak for door, no
light for window. The stars are muddled and moving. I ache for

blue eyes. I ache for jirrajirra. I ache for the base of the mountain where I have slept for so long in dream of you. Where you came to make us in the wrestling ground of the gods. Where we shall curl together when the big waves come back for their rivers. Did you take the panther with you from those hills?

Longtime to next place. I breathe into the embers and the room is filled with glow. The table heaves with finger limes and bunya nuts, riverred grubs, lillipilli wine and wattle damper and whiteflesh fish and powdered milk, bullybeefwithrice, devonandtomasauce. Kangaroo blood. Waterlilies and black snake, black cockatoo. Crow and eaglehawk. All there. All steaming and scenting, go on eat it eat it all why don't you have a feed fill yourself burst yourself silence the starving you might as well get what you can get and that's all you gonna get from us you greedy stupid girl you take this name in vain you gone away so now you gotta go away.

Keep on keep on with empty mouth. Trace teeth with tongue. I dream they fall out, leave my gums empty and raw. Maybe I moved or maybe the museum did, but somewhen in this longtime longway I find the panther and tell him my dream. Tell him I have mouth full of ghosts. He says be grateful, but I say I am sad. He asks who taught me what is sadness. And I think all this is journey and metaphor but his eyes are green hurt and distance. I promise the panther that if I ever learn to walk between these worlds I am cast from I will find the ones that took his teeth.

Where is jirrajirra, panther?

But the museum is gone now.

So wherenow, my friend my protector? I say this to silence and to alone. The library is heap and broken image. Shadows

stride stony rubbish. Open for breeze and star and bats, who are pouring over the pomology pile. No missionary, no mapmaker. Only the kind of quiet that you drink. All my far-gazed horizons watch me in this half room. Hello river in the air, hello emu nesting. How kind you are to visit, how precise.

I hardly notice the man who is picking up the books. Brushing off the dust, ordering them into chaos. With the poetry he builds branch for the nightjars. With the poststructuralists he carves out possum hollows. I watch in this drunken silence and look for jirrajirra on boughs of blank verse.

The man asks me to describe my lost thing. He has a book for that, he says, with green soft eyes. But there are bilbies curled in slumber all up the binding, so we begin to search our own. He whistles and we argue if it is night, and how far is water. I ask how he got here and how I might leave. He doesn't remember and doesn't know. He says I don't want to leave this place. That all the dead things have come back now, and maybe their skeletons are a little strange but that it is lovely to have them curl up in pockets and tickle bushman beard.

Is this your home? But he tells me that is something I should ask the birds.

And the quiet is lovely dark deep for a while. We walk with less wall and ceiling than memory made. I feel grass under my toes and speak the story of the moon lady and the dew. We talk of hill and saltwater, of how to descend mountains. We exchange rivers and poems. It feels like time is taller now, is bigger in every direction. And he sings and whistles new blues but I am always looking. Look for jirrajirra, look for name, look for eyes, look for scales, look for circle, look for flame, for way home. Across the big sky we watch shooting stars. Each blazes

through purple dark and is swallowed by the earth. We watch all this come back, sharing our sad songs and sorrows.

You are still coiled round me in muscle memory. I lose sense and sight of room and hall but know we are constellating you. And maybe I might be satisfied with fringes and fray. My tongue slips metaphor and recalibration. We take out my words like unsheathed fluttering things, we give them back to the grass to the bark to the birds.

When it is time to go it is not jirrajirra that says it. We stop when we find the water. Light and shore-stained tea-tree. As my sister who dreams has described. In periphery like too bright light I see warrugal and kia and eurobin and gwirra and guriyal. Jirrajirra watching them all. Soft wind and waterlilies are dancing.

This is why they named the house Muyum, says the green-eyed man of southriver and preacher rock and birds. And it is time for his leaving because it is time for your coming back. He cannot go further in this place, stands smiling and forested at its edges. Sugarglider peeking from sleeves, wattle blossom in hair. I will meet him again before the waters drown looking-glass rock. I will make room for him in the shadows of the mountain. Goodbye goodluck, my friend. He to wander and me to home.

Here, now. I ask entry.

I sing thanks and promise.

Only then cross barefootleftfoot through smoke and sacred. You are with me still in coils you have always been with me in coils.

This all come back now. Like,

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