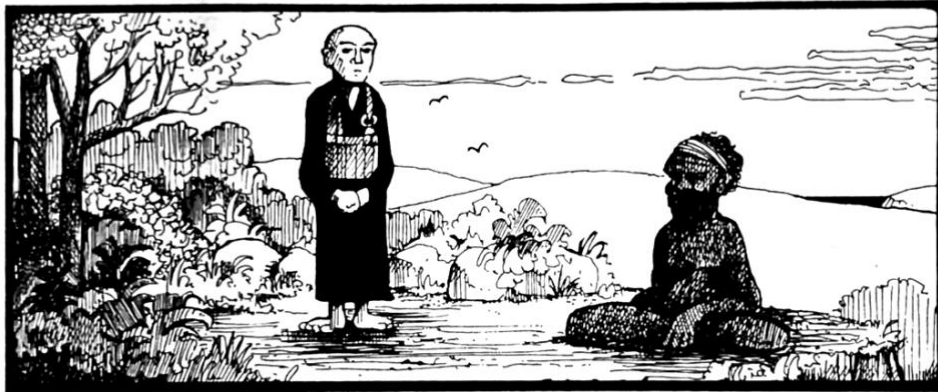


# ANCESTORS

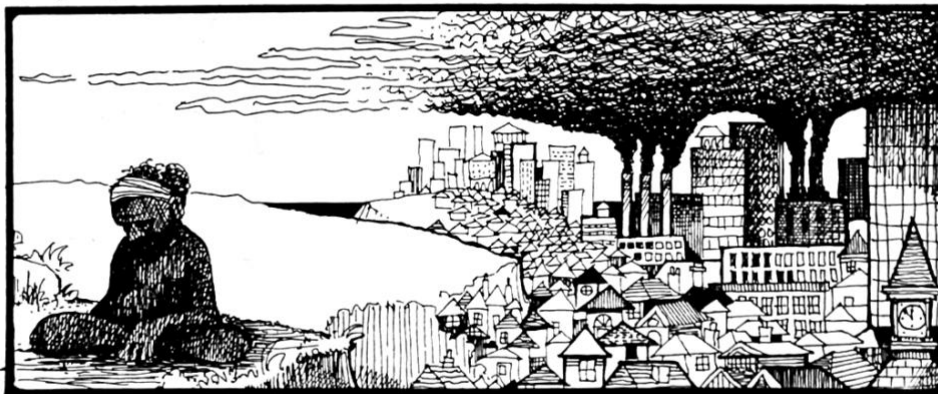
## MIND MOON CIRCLE

THE JOURNAL OF THE SYDNEY ZEN CENTRE  
SUMMER 1987

### THE BOOK OF INEQUITIES CASE 200 (1788-1988)



A MONK ASKED THE VENERABLE ELDER : " WHAT IS THE  
MEANING OF CAPTAIN ARTHUR PHILLIP'S COMING  
FROM THE EAST ? "



THE VENERABLE ELDER BOWED HIS HEAD AND SAID  
NOTHING.

TONY COOTE

WINTER 2023



# Contents

<i>MMC Summer 1987</i>	Tony Coote	Cover
Sally Hopkins	Colin Hopkins	1
<i>Out in the Empty Sky (Rumi)</i> , photograph	Glenys Jackson	5
Ancestor rock and tree and storm	Will Moon	6
Fish Ancestors	Caroline Josephs	7
A lineage of poetry and place	Jerath Head	10
<i>Omma Digresssion</i> , 2023, drawing	Lisa Myeong-Joo	13
Ancestors: Those who have gone before. And some that have come after	William Verity	14
Ancient body	Kerry Stewart	17
The Passover Table	Zoe Thurner	18
<i>Shabbat candles</i> , watercolour painting	Zoe Thurner	20
All Beings are our Ancestors	Subhana Barzaghi	21
<i>Ni Apo</i> , drawing	Eran de Guzman	24
Aging Ancestors	Brendon Stewart	25
<i>Eunice Stewart</i> , painting	Brendon Stewart	27

The next issue of Mind Moon Circle, Spring 2023 – *Friends and Acquaintances*

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## Sally Hopkins

Colin Hopkins

Here we are sitting together, holding in our hearts our dear Sally, no longer embodied. In this there is pleasure and gratitude, and much sadness and tears. We love people and they die we learn there is nothing really to hang on to. No one to hang on to. We let go of everything - and yet - here we are - A mystery unfolding.

I have summarized the main events in Sally's life, and it is with the photo board for those interested. It has been difficult to reduce her life to a few pages, there are so many memories, so many details, unlike when I was delving into family history, where, we find a name, a place, perhaps an occupation, but gain no inkling of the person whatever, so I would like to share with you some reflections, largely drawn from some of Sally's poems and other writing that she left.

All the poems I read here are by Sally.

Our lives are like the pages  
of the autograph books we shared at school.  
A page for someone's drawing, someone's joke.  
The scraps of wisdom passed on by grandmothers.  
'In this life of froth and bubble, two things stand like stone'  
'Be good sweet maid and let who will be clever'  
Puzzles that no one can fathom, Favourite poems.  
Even occasionally a poem or a story especially written.  
Some no more than a signature, scrawled across the page.  
Signs, signatures, a mark to show something happened and then -  
the page turned - moment gives place to moment - can't be erased-can't be revisited -  
though the autograph book sits in our hands,  
seemingly solid, and our lives, our lives they disappear,  
like clouds, into the air, ungraspable.

Sally identified with trees – her earliest memories are of being wheeled in her pram by her mother under the bare overarching branches of the beech trees in Savernake Forest at Marlborough, England, where her father was a Master at the College.

She loved trees in all their forms and always felt happy to be near or under a tree, and felt refreshed and at home when walking in the bush, preferably alone, so that she could give her full attention to the birds, signs of animals, flowers, insects, heat, cold, wind, rain. She was a keen gardener, delighting in small flowers, herbs, old roses and their heady scents. She later maintained a large vegetable garden at our farm, and again at our cottage at Clandulla.

When we were caring for my parents at Forestville and coping with a stressful and frustrating situation, her early morning walks in the nearby Garigal National Park helped her centre herself in the midst of emotional turmoil and distress. This is her poem when the tree outside our window was removed in May 2014.

In the star lit night  
in storm - in calm  
through every blue warm day  
You stand  
Your great trunk  
unmoved  
Alive in the earth - in the air.  
Birds fly in and out of your branches  
rain, hail, wind, batter your leaves  
but you stand  
solidly here  
wordlessly present  
alive through thick and thin.  
Brush Box tree in the garden,  
you, soon to be chopped down -  
put down your roots in my heart.

After the chainsaws,  
the silence,  
Firewood does not become  
ashes, Dogen says,  
Winter does not become  
Spring.  
Box tree, you  
so full of leaves, wind, rain, birds, -  
you, being sawn down,  
do not become sky.

Sally was an avid reader, and continued her practice from University of making a précis of anything that interested her. She kept diaries, of our farm, her dreams, daily happenings wherever she was. She had always written to her parents weekly since leaving home, and also corresponded with the many friends she had made over the course of her life. In her earlier years she had written the occasional poem, but on the farm she began to write almost daily, a practice she continued to follow until June last year.

She noticed people many avoided or passed by unseeingly, the distressed or somewhat deranged, homeless or refugees, offering a few words, and coins or a note. When Rev. Kshanti visited the Zendo in early 2000's speaking of her work with prisoners in the USA, and asking if anyone would care to write to one, Sally volunteered and eventually corresponded with 3 prisoners, for almost 20 years, two have been released and the last is awaiting the result of an appeal. She also wrote and visited 2 prisoners in N.S.W, who have since been released and remain friends.

When refugees were incarcerated in Western Australia, she wrote to several, especially a young Afghan man, just 21, who has since become a citizen, and continues to stay in touch.

### **Beggars at Bombay, 1956**

Dark night come down and mercifully blanket  
the festering sore, and smother the cries.  
Let us forget.  
For entangled in your long black hair  
with Jasmine swinging censer- like  
and the cold moon hung in a banyan tree,  
we will not remember.  
We will not remember faces peering from hovels  
with cold eyes that mirrored the birds overhead  
that circled so silently looking for prey.  
We will not remember the mendicant hands  
that beggared all pride; the squalor-scoured bodies  
thrown down in the gutter to sleep.  
We'll not then remember,  
O dark night come quickly on soft slippered feet  
And until tomorrow- make us forget.

Sally was very accepting rather than expecting, content to live a relatively frugal life and would rather give than receive. She was modest, not wishing to stand out, did not care for fashion, cosmetics or jewellery, happy to be just as she was. She was generous in our relationship, allowing me space and not constantly expecting all my time or attention, not prying, 'what are you doing now'. 'where are you going, been?'

### **On our anniversary, 1994**

The gift you have for me  
and I for you  
is that we  
    share  
this moment  
this day, this life  
that flows through  
    threading us  
like chimes  
    dancing in a variable wind together.

Sally's Zen name was 'Forest Magpie' and she took a special interest in their lives, following the local birds she could see from our window through their yearly cycle of courtship, nesting, chicks, and noting their different calls onto a music score, to which she later set words.

One of her last poems was:

Forget clocks, hours, minutes, seconds-  
forget the calendar, let those safety ropes go-  
lower yourself into the world  
of the rising sun  
the changing moon  
the circling stars.  
Where are you? Do you know?  
Are you lost?  
Can the sun, the moon, the stars  
orient you?  
Your distant forebears had heartbeat, breath,  
watched the sun move daily, seasonally,  
the moon wax and wane,  
the stars circle and circle-  
learned what sun, moon, stars were telling them-  
quite at home in all seasons,  
at home in the Universe,  
watched over by such lights

Sally's last words to me were, "Don't worry, everything is alright."





*Out in Empty Sky (Rumi)*, Glenys Jackson



## **Ancestor rock and tree and storm**

**Will Moon**

We rest upon the shoulders of our ancestors. I like that thought. In a sense, we are completely held by our ancestors. If it was not for our ancestors, would we be reading Mind Moon Circle? Of course, there are the ancestors that we normally think of as being in the distant past, beyond our grandparents, and perhaps including our grandparents. I think of the old Zen masters, becoming intimate with their dialogues and instructions, gifted from a thousand years back. I feel great gratitude for those ancestors, through their dedication and hard work they have shown us the way and left us with a wonderful legacy.

In my exploration of archaeology over the years I have sometimes felt a deep sense of connection with the ancestors of the past that painted on the walls of the caves, and left their tools and old fireplaces in the floor of the caves. I remember a colleague and good friend saying to me once that when he picked up an artefact, he felt like he was shaking hands with the past. When we used to go out in the wilderness exploring and would approach a rock shelter, we could usually tell if it had been occupied. There was a feel about it. You could sense that many feet had walked over the ground approaching the shelter, and for this reason the ground was stable. Loose rocks didn't tumble out from underfoot. Upon entering the shelter, our minds could perceive the presence of people before we could actually identify and label the signs. Somehow our senses knew people had been there. It is an amazing feeling just to sense and trust this sense. And always, the signs would start to appear. A half-buried artefact, a faint line drawn on the wall, a ground surface on a bench of rock. Entering the shelter, we would do so with the utmost respect, sensitive of wherever we placed our foot, and avoided brushing against the wall. In hushed tones, we would speak to each other. There was a sense of gratitude that the ancestors had allowed us to enter the place.

We felt a deep sense of the presence of the ancestors in these places. There was no logical explanation that could satisfy someone's curiosity when we spoke of these experiences. I can now understand why Aboriginal people speak to the ancestors when they are about to visit these places. I would always bow in respect when leaving a place. It would be logical for someone to say, "well they are not my ancestors so why would I feel this respect?" But to think of our ancestry only along our blood lines and culture is to miss that we are essentially all connected. Our ancestors are in a sense everything that holds and supports us. The present moment contains all of the past. The air we breathe has passed through a trillion trees over the evolution of the earth. Each of those trees, an ancestor, keeps the lungs of the earth alive. And the animals that pollinate them, turned the soils over, decomposed the leaf matter, all our ancestors. The complex genetic instruction in our DNA goes all the way back to the beginning of life. Each lifeform preceding the last, an ancestor, each having a role in the shape and form of who we are today. In a sense, all that has ever been, our ancestors. All that has ever been is in this living moment. When the crow calls outside the window, all the voices of the past call to us. As the water tumbles over the rocks in the rapids, cutting the old gorge down through the 400 million year old rocks, each drop contains all the rains, storms and floods of the past. Plunging into the deep pools and drinking the fresh water, our bodies contain all the storms and floods. The rains, storms and floods, our ancestors too.

## My Fish Ancestors

Caroline Josephs

Dogen: *To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.  
To study the self is to forget the self.  
To forget the self is to be awakened by the ten thousand things.*

Did it begin with news of fish fossils discovered in Canowindra in western New South Wales?  
Or did it begin with my daily swims in a very large ocean pool with multitudes of fish?  
The pool at South Coogee is like a giant rock pool, where we swim laps among a myriad of fish – tiny schools of fish (I have named them, ‘comma fish’) or larger silver ones --solitary, or sometimes in two’s or more, with seaweed (algae) and rocks, and crevices, crabs, sea urchins, chitons, sometimes octopuses sometimes or groper, sea stars, sea slugs (I pat these).  
My grandson says of me, “You are a fish! With arms and legs!”  
I love this descriptor.

I have been swimming there each day of the year for about 20 years or so....

Recently my husband, Donald, returned from Canowindra where he had been cycling with some biker friends (with Canowindra as their base). There they discovered the Fish Fossil Museum. He brought me a small pamphlet. It seemed that the story of fossils began in 1956 when a bulldozer driver, working on a new road, turned over an enormous block of earth to find some unlikely shapes embedded in it. He thought not too much of it, but soon after, a bee-keeper saw the site and became excited thinking, ‘These shapes suggest something of some interest’, and brought in the archeologists and expert paleontologists who verified that these were VERY important.

And so, in 1992, enough resources, excavators, and the whole community’s support meant a major dig supervised by the expert paleontologists. What they unearthed formed the basis of the Fish Fossil Museum and eventually a huge storage shed for thousands of fish fossils, deemed to be of Devonian Age, 360 million years old. The story is that probably the fish inhabited a large billabong. In a process which dried it and in the chemical changes that took place, the preservation of the fish was assured.

In 2013 David Attenborough visited Canowindra Museum. He confirmed that the fossils found were of ‘world significance’ -- not only linking we humans in a *direct line of life with our fish ancestors*, but linking us with other continents, when all were joined.

I became so excited by this, that I began immediately, a series of paintings -- of myself, painting -- my fish ancestors, 360 million years old!  
My fish nature had found a way to express this!

I was working from simple graphic ‘reconstructions’ done by paleontologists’ image of what the actual fish would have looked like from the fossil remains – with scales, armour plates and so on...

Further confirmation of the idea came when we visited Canowindra soon after speaking with someone there. (Canowindra is renowned for being the ‘hot air balloon’ place). I spoke with the museum staff I had contacted previously by phone, showed the six paintings I had done based on the fish fossil ‘reconstructions’.

We were introduced also to Dr David McGrath, retired surgeon, and his wife Aleysa who have purchased the land adjacent to where the *first* fossils were unearthed in 1956 by the bulldozer driver. David McGrath was at the dig in 1992. Now David and Aleysa wish to garner enough support and resources to start a major dig there on their property. It is believed what may be found could be the next stage of the fish ancestors from 350 million year ago -- the ‘tetrapods’ with arms (developed from lobe fins) and legs, that walked out of the water and on to the land. Dr McGrath pointed out clearly to us, that the ancient fossils have the same *eyes* as we humans now, the same *brain*, the same *spine*, the same *DNA!!!* Scientifically we are related. They are definitely ancestors of we humans.

It transpired unexpectedly too, that I was offered an exhibition in Canowindra for the paintings – at *Rosnay Organic Farm*, scheduled for April, 2024: <https://rosnay.com.au/art-exhibitions/>

And so, a little later, the paintings then found their way to being in an exhibition in Italy. (I had done three solo exhibitions in Italy with my Italian curator, pre-Covid.) She contacted me and asked whether I could do an exhibition in Lanciano, Abruzzo. I said ‘yes’ of course, continued painting my fish fossils. She was enthusiastic about the idea.

And so emerged not only the six paintings, but also a song from Donald about the story and our human connection. We presented the stories and song to guests in the Scuola di Civica da Musica, in Lanciano -- in June. An audience of enthusiastic, curious, intelligent people gathered in the beautiful, cloistered walkway of an ancient monastery -- now a School of Music -- to hear the presentation, to ask many questions, translated by my lively Italian curator.

Roshi Robert Aitken wrote, in *‘The Dragon Who Never Sleep’s*, Parallax Press, 1992

*Drawing my lineage chart  
I vow with all beings  
To be true to the planet Venus  
And her students, the grasses and deer.*  
p.67

*When someone speaks of no-self  
I vow with all beings  
to be sure there is no contradiction—  
The speaker is there after all.*  
p.55

It seemed interesting to me that as I continued the paintings, the ‘self’, the painter, disappears – and just a hand with brushstroke, remains. Examples of paintings to follow ...



'Canowindra Grossi'  
 Painting is 64cm x 84cm  
 Acrylic on canvas,  
 Canowindra Grossi found only in  
 Canowindra. More than 3000 fossil  
 specimens found to date. It was  
 50cm long.



'Groenlandaspis'  
 Painting is 95cm x 88cm acrylic on  
 canvas. Groenlandaspis is 50cm long -  
 from late Devonian era, one of the first  
 giant predators in the ocean, first found  
 in Greenland, now found on all  
 continents.

'Bothriolepis Billabong'  
 Painting is 69cm x 88 cm, acrylic on  
 canvas.  
 Bothriolepis is a placoderm (plated  
 skin). Found on every continent.



## A lineage of poetry and place

Jerath Head

We stop when we see the sign. It points away from the main track, to the right – up a steep rise, a path vanishing among rock and spotted gum. Wards Canyon. I drop my rucksack behind a tree nearby, not wishing to cart it up only to bring it back down, overly confident that no one would in this far-away place would want for our average camping gear and food supplies. My partner, Camilla, takes a drink from the water bladder. We both stretch out our backs and breathe in the scent of soil and eucalypt.

We begin the short ascent, following rock-paved stairways and a small stream, one of the many that wind their way into the main flow of Carnarvon Gorge. Streams that began as moisture enveloped in the close dark of the sandstone shelves around us, moving downward at an unknowably slow pace. The gorge has water all year round—here, in the dry reaches of the Queensland outback—thanks in large part to this passage of millennia.

On the floor of Wards Canyon the stream passes by plants whose forebears gathered here in a time more distant still. A time when here was part of the land we call Gondwana. *Angiopteris evecta*, king ferns. Their immense fronds spread for metres, claiming space between the long, slender tree ferns whose trunks reach higher still for the sun. The path we follow ends in an artificial railing set in place to protect these residents from reckless visitors. The king ferns hold fast their place on the wet rocky slopes of the canyon, hold us fast in the cool, rarefied stillness.

Judith Wright describes just such a scene in her poem '*The Ancestors*'. In some other pocket of land, the poem's narrator follows a stream that is 'all one lilt of light' until reaching its source, which is populated by a seemingly ageless stand of fern-trees. Within these fern-trees the narrator finds some primordial reflection of herself, or of her kind at least: 'in each notched trunk shaggy as an ape/ crouches the ancestor, the dark bent foetus'. Beings imbued with primordial knowing, with all the possible sorrow and elation of the world to come.

Their silent sleep is gathered round the spring  
that feeds the living, thousand-lighted stream  
up which we toiled into this timeless dream.

The greatest gift of poetry, for me, is to make mystic my engagement with the world. To connect me with the countless individuals across countless generations who have attempted to capture that ineffable aspect of experience which makes being alive more than an academic matter, to paraphrase James Baldwin. To find in the endless recombinant fragments of the ten thousand things a glimmer of the unnameable.

We make our way further along the line of Carnarvon Gorge, encountering fewer and fewer people. The walk is long but mostly flat, punctuated by creek crossings and the occasional travellers passing in the opposite direction, early risers travelling light to make a day of the gorge's length. Native hibiscus flowers erupt in yellow and white from the grey-green bush. Bird calls filter down from cliffs and trees above.

Near the end of the main gorge walk we reach a site known as Cathedral Cave, a massive overhang that, a sign tells us, provided shelter to the Aboriginal peoples of the area for thousands of years. The name and history feel incongruent, and this incongruence offensive. Cathedral, a structure imported and laid over the bones and the culture of the land's first peoples. A name laid over a place where Aboriginal people once gathered but no longer. Their presence is still marked here, though—in red and yellow lines and stencils across the length of the overhang, vibrant or faded with the proximity and distance of generations. Nets, boomerangs, emu feet. And hands, mostly hands. Hands pressed to stone and blown over with ochre to leave a smooth outline amid a spray of paint. Hands of different sizes, hands missing fingers, hands pointing in all directions. A tessellation of hands meeting other hands.

Our way to one lingo where ever fingers touch  
Our hands are free to arms  
We found peace made to blank the storming banks

Lionel Fogarty, *'Mosaic'*

We reach a campsite known as Big Bend, so named because it is tucked into a bend of the gorge creek, which itself it held on one side by a great curve of sandstone several storeys high. It is beautiful, a place that demands presence. We make camp and rest our tired feet in cold water alight with the early afternoon sun. Hikers come and go with the day and a few remain to pitch tents near to our own. We share the space in soft conversation or companionable silence.

In the dusk, Camilla and I sit on a sandy shore next to a wide calm section of the creek while the light dims around us. High in the curved sandstone slab, lorikeets return to roost by the dozen, nests housed in a patchwork of hollows worn into the rockface. As the stars begin their gradual pricking through the night's covering, voices drift to us on the settling air—the other campers, preparing food and plans for the morning, their sounds accompanied by the constant flow of water over rock.

Night doesn't fall before my eyes.  
My idea of night balls before my eyes.  
Independent of my thinking and of there being any thoughts  
The night concretely falls,  
And the stars' shimmering exists like a weighable thing.

Fernando Pessoa, *'On This Whitely Cloudy Day I Get So Sad It Almost Scares Me'*

The following afternoon Camilla and I are on the sandy shore once more. We had risen early that morning and followed part of the Carnarvon Great Walk up and out of the gorge to a bluff that afforded a view back along its serpiginous length. As the sun started towards its zenith we returned along the same path on weary legs.

We take lunch next to the water. The other campers have long since departed, though a couple of day-hikers have arrived and are rinsing sweat from skin in the calm section of the creek. The air holds the warmth of early spring. Lilt of sunlight in water, sound of water on rock. We lay back on the soft earth and fall asleep—

and wake as if into a dream. The day-hikers are gone, no evening campers have yet arrived in their place. We two are the only human beings here, perhaps anywhere. The afternoon begins



to take on the long glow of the sun's declension. The great sandstone slab looms above us, the line of its ridge in hard contrast with the blue of the sky, but for a tree sprouting from its corner.

Division into sky and earth—  
it's not the proper way  
to contemplate this wholeness.  
It simply lets me go on living  
at a more exact address  
where I can be reached promptly  
if I'm sought.  
My identifying features  
are rapture and despair.

Wisława Szymborska, 'Sky'

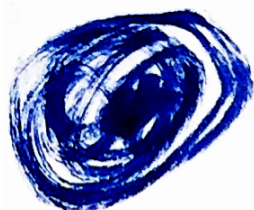
A turtle basks in the sun on a small rocky island in the water. From the tree atop the sandstone slab an azure kingfisher dives, flash of yellow and deep purple, pulling up at the creek's surface in rapid pursuit of something beneath. Pulls away and perches on a shrub on the face of the sandstone slab. Lilt of sunlight in water, sound of water on rock.

Suddenly I realise  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

James Wright, 'A Blessing'

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sun is mother of bird



bird is mother of mountain

mountain is mother of rock



rock is mother of mother



mother is  
mother of  
me.

**Ancestors: Those who have gone before. And some that have come after**

**William Verity**



*‘It’s when people die out of order that everything goes to shit.’*

India Margaret Verity. A child.

Margaret Kathleen Geddes (MKG). An elder.

Grandparents are the ancestors who are both primal and uncomplicated.

We know them as children, before we have a full or clear understanding of the contradictions and complexities of inhabiting this world in human form.

They too have had a bit of time to work things out. Enough distance to appear impressive, motivational.

So it was with MKG. Perhaps a self-centred and neglectful mother, but an adored and inspirational grandmother.

In a family of elder children and rules; of class distinctions and obligations; of the unsaid, the unheard but always felt.

In a family of straight lines, she bowled up in a mess of beauty, curiosity and self-determined authenticity.

Her garden was a mess of foliage and weeds, yet an artful creation of hidden and unexpected beauty. A beauty that was seeded and nurtured but only lightly pruned or controlled. A beauty that was left alone to express itself.

Her reading habits were catholic (and how that small ‘c’ changes the meaning of that word!).

One day there would be a 19<sup>th</sup> novel – Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy – and the next there would be the history of wheat, or a volume of modern poetry. (She loved poets, and she made love to poets for their art, but that is another story for another time).

Where I grew up the greeting was always – sooner or later – ‘What are you reading?’

Because everybody was reading something. Everyone always had a book on the go. An intellectual practice. ‘Where are you sitting in your practice right now?’

She drove cars that bore the scars of her neglect of all things mechanical. She grew up in a time when there was no licence to drive except the ability to afford one, enjoyed only by the Establishment – and they wrote the rules to suit themselves.

And her family was certainly Establishment. Her father a wealthy banker who helped negotiate the Treaty of Versailles with the Germans after the First World War, a father of 13 children where MKG came in at number 7.

Before she died in 2006 at the age of 98, she had been to 12 funerals. Each the funeral of a sibling, some beloved, some estranged, all kin.

So when it came time for me to have my own children, and number 2 was a daughter, it seemed ‘meet and right’ to link India to MKG with the tribute of a name. India Margaret.

It was my gift of partial immortality to MKG to ensure that, long after the last person who had known her in human form had disappeared to deep samadhi, she would be remembered, even if as no more than an echo of an echo.

They shared the same individual, feisty nature, even perhaps some of the same physical characteristics. Or was that my imagination?

But the two never met. India died in a soccer field accident at the age of 3, six weeks before a planned return trip to the UK to introduce her to family.

India became my ancestor unexpectedly, and in the line of a character from the Australian film, *Jindabyne*, ‘everything turned to shit’.

After she died, I returned to my birthplace on my own and shared a tearful dinner with MKG where she seemed lost and out of her depth. She tried to comfort me as best she could, but she couldn’t reach me. Perhaps nobody could.

‘She’s still here, I can feel her,’ she said.

‘But she is also just gone,’ I replied. ‘She is also just gone.’

Shortly before India died, she was dancing. She loved the Wiggles, and she loved to dance to the Wiggles. Like many little girls, perhaps, when I thought of India, dancing came to mind.

So three years later, when life was finally ebbing from MKG and her eldest daughter – another Margaret - had flown from the US to care for her in her final days, there came a moment of final reunion.

There was less than a week to go, and the veil between this life and the next was wearing thin. Neither here, nor there, MKG was finally giving up the fight and relaxing into her death.

She had fallen into a vision-filled sleep and woke up to tell her daughter that she had seen a little girl, and that she was waiting for her, waiting to welcome her. A warm presence. An indicator of home.

‘I don’t know who she was. Was she you? Was she me? Was she someone else?’

‘What was she doing?’ her daughter asked.

‘She was dancing.’

## Ancient body

Kerry Stewart

It's in the body  
I know you,  
feel you,  
see you -  
the same cells  
playing together  
in different order.

My shoulders, hair, eyes and feet  
are immediately recognisable  
as you, dad.  
But where in my body is your  
Sailor boy nature,  
transforming knots  
into fine macramé,  
Tree hugger  
who grew enormous tomatoes  
in sand,  
Dancer  
with a jazz band ear?

My hands, legs, voice and smile  
are all you, mum.  
But where in my body is your  
Maths mind  
counting  
every bird in the flock,  
Diplomat  
weighing up the needs  
of every generation,  
Quite singer  
of quirky rhymes  
and love ballads?

And let's not forget  
the underbelly,  
buried deep -  
insecurity, anger, jealousy  
springing forth  
as quickly  
as a slap

When did this body of mine begin?

With my grandmother's turned eye,  
or her psychic reading of the cards?  
Or my grandfather's tenor voice,  
his stutter overcome?

Or great great grandmother's  
dancing of a reel,  
or weaving home grown  
flax in Brechin?

Or great great grandfather's  
carving as a wood Smith,  
or his sea legs  
found on a boat  
from Marseille?

Busy hands and feet  
are our common thread,  
back to beyond  
remembering.  
As I grow older  
my hair waves in gratitude  
to you all.

I notice my grandson  
with the same thick wilderness  
on his head,  
reassured the future will  
follow in your ancient footsteps.

Every face is original.  
Every hand is old,  
following and making  
new patterns  
from the materials  
and conditions that shape us  
before time.

This is a comfort  
and constant tango -  
tugging and sliding  
with you  
on the dance floor  
of existence.



## The Passover Table

Zoe Thurner

My two grandfathers, Solomon and Jacob, stand at the head of the Passover table intoning ancient Hebrew prayer. The melody is melancholic and bittersweet. It rises in intensity and fills my aunt's loungeroom where thirty members of my family are assembled for seder, a ritual which celebrates the exodus of the Jews out of slavery in Egypt over five thousand years ago. It is incomprehensible to me because the year is 1959, I'm five years old and this is my first seder. But what nobody can know is that Jake will live for another forty years and Solly won't see another seder.

I look out on the vista of crisp white linen awed by the solemnity of the occasion. Silver candelabra, cut glass carafes, my grandmother's ornate fish service gleam in the candlelight. My aunts shift their weight in rustling silk, teenage cousins sulk in the corners and my grandfathers continue to daven in unison. Davening is a Yiddish word meaning to pray, but this is not some quiet contemplation of the Almighty. To daven is a lively activity; bodies sway, voices tremble and wail, the words implore God to take notice and in the slipstream of the melody you can hear the joy and suffering of the generations.

The women don't participate. They sit wondering when the men will finish because the chicken and matzo ball soup went on the stove half an hour ago, it's hot in the lounge room and they know that a scoop of apple and nuts on matzos, a sprig of parsley and a boiled egg won't sustain the children. It will take the next generation to position women at the head of the table and broaden the service but for now the women turn the pages of their Haggadah as the men inch their way through the service. The Haggadah is a complex and at times baffling collection of prayer and commentary compiled over centuries and the word Haggadah means 'telling'. Judaism is full of stories rich with history, irony and life lessons but this is the ritual telling of survival and for many Jews, post war, it's a grim story.

Judaism is not a proselytising religion and given the history of persecution of the Jewish people I imagine there were few eager converts, so the fact my family have retained their Jewish identity and practice cannot be an accident. There is great intention in the preservation of the tradition. There is reverence, a gift for survival and a bold stubbornness in the face of adversity. At later seders I entertain the idea that my ancestors have practiced the faith for millennia but since most records were destroyed in the Holocaust it's hard to trace even the recent passage of my family. I do know that my father's family fled the Russian pogroms around 1905 while my mother's family left Poland in 1938 to escape persecution and I'm pretty sure they moved around for centuries before that seeking safety.

Grandfather Solomon cuts an imposing figure at the head of the table. He stands tall in his tailored suit, the one he manufactured. A self-made businessman with an entrepreneur's vision and a gambler's recklessness, he has made and lost some small fortune to shoddy dealers. But Solly has a ferocious appetite for life, and he is terrifying. His voice booms across our little congregation firing instructions inflected with an East London accent. He shifts mood and tone at speed. One minute he wisecracks in Yiddish the next his exasperation falls like the wrath of God who according to legend visited ten plagues upon the Egyptians to free the Israelites and which we now signify by dripping red wine like gouts of blood onto white dinnerware.

Having left Russia in his youth to start a business in London and support his twelve siblings Solomon moved again to Australia. And again, he built a clothing factory, this time as the world slid into chaos. But Solly has heart and imagination and to sustain the spirit of his Australian family he spins yarns of myth and magic. We're told the family name in Bialystok was de Lurier which also belonged to a famed caste of mystic rabbis. All true, but I wonder if we were the mystics or the chicken pluckers around the corner. Preferably both, practicality and wisdom are needed for survival. Some sixty years later my father's cousin, Les, told me that Solly had paid his living costs so Les could study medicine. Les went to the factory every week to pick up his envelope of cash and one day he noticed something odd about the electricity meter, it was running backwards.

In the spring of '59 Solly's wild heart gave out. He had been to the bank to arrange a loan on an empty orchard in French's Forest. Then driving home, no doubt inflamed with excitement, he swerved to avoid some pedestrians and the shock sent him into heart failure. But I think he would have been pleased with some of his investments. Les went on to become a professor of endocrinology and the founding director of an institute for medical research and Solly's sons became doctors, allowable for Jews in this new country, and avoided premature death and so Solly was successful in delivering his family into freedom.

Back at the seder table my other grandfather, Jacob, beams across the gathering, he is ruddy with good health and good humour. His recital of Hebrew and knowledge of the form is flawless though personally he takes a very liberal approach to its practice. Jacob also wears a suit he stitched himself and this one is impeccably tailored. I discover later that Jacob speaks four languages, invests with care and is firmly, fearlessly, joyously grounded in the present moment. This is a great antidote to the misery of loss of recent history and everyone loves Grandpa Jacob.

Some decades after both my grandfathers have passed away, I found a history atlas showing the changing borders of the countries of Eastern Europe and wanting to map the passage of my family I searched for the towns that my grandfathers came from. Sure enough, these two men who had started life in small villages in windowless single room dwellings, who brought their families across the globe and stood together at the seder table were born in the Pale of Settlement and were neighbours. No wonder they davened so beautifully together.

In the decades to come I organise my own Passover ceremonies with the help of friends and family, the telling made far simpler. We acknowledge that violence and deprivation have been visited upon countless people from many cultures, we understand that the story of every family is a story of survival, and we contemplate a more inner concept of liberation. But we preserve the basic elements so that prayer, white tablecloths, chicken soup, and candelabra endure, and the rituals continue for another generation.



*Shabbat candles, Zoe Thurner*

## All Beings Are Our Ancestors

Subhana Barzaghi

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh spoke often about his ancestors, his parents and also his spiritual ancestors. He taught that when we feel into our body, our feelings, we also sense the imprint of our parents suffering, their love, hopes and dreams. Joanna Macy has a practice of calling on our ancestors. Our ancestors have gifts from their suffering too; forbearance, their hard-won wisdom, courage and endurance. We can receive these as gifts. We are the continuation of their genetic cellular history and the social and cultural conditions that shaped them.

Ancestral dreaming opens up a different layer of consciousness to a vast ever present that holds the past and future, all occurring here and now. It encapsulates the teachings of dependent arising of causes and conditions that are stamped irrevocable through all our lives. This was one of the Buddhas great realisations, that nothing exists totally independent from anything else, that the self is empty, impermanent and inter-dependent. Scientists claim that we are only six degrees or fewer of separation from one another. This is also known as the six handshakes rule, which demonstrates that we are not as separate as we like to think. We are opened to a sense of belonging to an intricate relational brocade of deep roots of our humble and extraordinary human story.

Having spiritual ancestors feels like a blessing, like having a direct channel that taps a perennial spring of wisdom. I'm inspired by all those courageous men and women who have struggled, longed for, endured pain and wept tears for the Way. Shakyamuni's vow under the Bodhi tree to not move until he awakened to the nature of reality was realised through that long night culminating at dawn upon seeing the morning star. The brilliance of his great awakening turned the dharma wheel and blazed a noble path for 25 centuries of spiritual ancestors who passed on the lamp of wisdom. The old sages, hermits and long-bearded mendicants' wisdom was forged out of paying close attention to the truth of things and emptying out the preoccupied self-identity.

The Diamond Sangha Zen school traces its origins back through a lineage of male ancestors from Hawaii, Japan to China and with a mythical leap of affinity back to India and the Buddha. My path has been to make sense of how I might fit within this ancient lineage as a lay female family orientated teacher amongst a long line of patriarchs who lived in a hierarchical, monastic tradition within a patriarchal, feudal Chinese and Japanese society and cast driven India. Yet, this is a deeply intimate tradition that requires a direct realisation of the heart-mind that transcends space, culture, gender and time. Curiously, in my first Zen retreat while chanting the sutras, each Zen ancestor seemed to leap off the page and enter my body. The intimacy of *'entangling eyebrows'* and *'seeing with the same eyes'* as the old Chan masters was an unexpected yet undeniable bond with the successive generations of teachers in our lineage.

At that time that there were very few known matriarchs in Chans' highly mythologised history to turn to for guidance. In all the volumes of koan stories there were only a few brief notations: an unnamed tea lady, a station lady, a rice cake vendor and some nuns were referred to as iron-maidens.

These women appear as isolated interlopers in the vast body of Zen literature only hinting at an untold story of enlightened Asian women. Who were those fierce breasted dharma ancestors that light up the path?

In the last two decades, there has been a growing body of scholarly research which draws from historical, cultural and Buddhist records to uncover from obscurity, significant and inspiring tales and accounts of early Buddhist women masters and teachers. I was astonished to discover in Sally Tisdale's book *Women of the Way*, that there were female Chinese Chan masters, awakened nuns, abbots of monasteries living in the Ming Dynasty who received transmission and provided teachings. These little-known stories are delightfully brought to life in, "*The Hidden Lamp – Stories from 25 Centuries of Awakened Women*" edited by Florence Caplow and Susan Moon. They now form a growing body of work which has invigorated our understanding of women's contribution and role in early Buddhism. Out of obscurity to a visibility in the twenty-first century, women are taking up an important role in contemporary Zen.

Due to the lack of historical acknowledgment, I wanted to create a female ancestral lineage document as an artistic symbolic piece to honour awakened women throughout the generations. In fiery red ink, "*The Record of the Flame*" starts with the first Buddhist nun Mahapajapati the Buddha's maternal Aunt and adoptive mother and documents early Buddhist nuns in India, Chan nuns in China, Japan and up to the present time. In order to honour each female ancestor, I chose the image of a red seal as it is an official stamp still used in China today signifying legitimate authority or an official position. I treasure the carved stone seals given to me by my teachers that are engraved with my dharma teaching name ~ *Myo Un An*, Temple of the Mysterious Cloud. This lineage chart hangs on the wall next to the Ino's seat at Annandale to remind us of the generations of enlightened women who hold our zazen in our arms. I offer a deep bow of gratitude for all our many guides along the ancient Way up to the present.

Recently, I have taken up a line from Chan master Hongzhi Zhengjue teachings, 'All beings are our ancestors' as a koan. Hongzhi was a Song dynasty master whose deep realisation and evocative literature and teachings focused on a unified awake consciousness of the interpenetration of emptiness and form, which he had various poetic terms for: *silent illumination*, the *one bright field*, *single emptiness*, the *single affair of the old home*.

All beings are our Ancestors asks me and you to go beyond our personal narratives, the personal ancestral lineage that we identify with, even beyond our spiritual lineage that we find affinity with and open the heart and mind wider still to include all beings. This is encapsulated in our Bodhisattva vow to save the many beings. A tall aspiration and challenging contemplation. There are many beings' abhorrent behaviour that I don't approve of and cannot respect them as an ancestor. It is that stretch of the heart into the unknown territory that makes this koan particularly challenging. Yet it is the judgemental mind wedded to its crusted beliefs and rusted on views that creates the separation between self and other that needs to be challenged here. Hongzhi advises, "To cultivate the empty field, you must completely withdraw from the invisible pounding and weaving of your ingrained ideas and habits...**and drop off your own skin**".

In 2017, *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* was launched by a host of indigenous elders into the vast Australian landscape. It is a powerful document that has been a centre piece in our daily discourse as Australians face a referendum for an indigenous voice to Parliament shrouded in the constitution. It invites us to walk in partnership together with our first nations people with our strength of diverse backgrounds for a better future. Voice, treaty and truth telling is at the heart of this invitation towards greater reconciliation.

While many of us do not have a direct personal ancestral connection with early white settlement or the atrocities and massacres that were perpetrated on indigenous people, surely our practice of seeing all beings as none other than ourselves is an invitation to recognise their story is also our story, it is our collective story. The land and its people inherit this generational story as part of our collective consciousness. The dreaming tracks and song lines of ancestral beings are embedded in the rivers, cliffs and land itself.

Hongzhi's practice instructions include guides for appropriate responsiveness in the midst of the human condition. His advice was "once you have reached the time-honoured bright field, return to the source and serve the ancestors." An appropriate response is to let go of our racist judgements, internalised colonised viewpoints that posture white privilege and offer compassion and understanding instead. Our meditative practice strengthens our capacity to bear witness to face and acknowledge our dark, tragic past of institutionalised abuse, the stolen generation and the harm and trauma that has occurred without being overwhelmed by it. When we recognise our inter-dependence, we are able, *to see with the same eyes, tangle eyebrows with eyebrows* and offer a response from the heart. We can find a sense of unity and join with our brothers and sisters of the first nation people from a deeper vein of consciousness, one that can genuinely feel, all beings are our ancestors. We might then feel proud to be part of the 50,000-year-old history and respect one of the oldest continuous civilizations on this planet.

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Ni Apo

Eran de Guzman



*'Apo' could refer to a grandfather and also a grandchild*

## Aging Ancestors

Brendon Stewart

I think there is a huge responsibility on presuming that one will grow into a wise, articulate and noble living ancestor. As ‘full-life spans’ become the norm older people may need to learn how to be aged as they once might have learnt to be young parents for example, in their mature years. I am never convinced that the aged and venerable abbots of our Zen traditions carried out their teachings without some expression of tyrannical behaviour.

Living as we do in this time of applauding inclusivity and diversity, there remains, nonetheless, a truth that can only be whispered about: the old can be boring, even cruel and disgusting and they can make younger people feel ill-at-ease. Yet there is certainly a very strong social constraint on what our middle-aged children can say when confronted, maybe for decades with the geriatric care and nursing of some aged ancestor. *The young* of course must put up with this, our querulous manner and maladies because they themselves are no-less vulnerable. \*

Our earthly time allowance has shot up rapidly over the last five decades from an average of about 40 years for men and 43 for our mothers to a new global average in 2023 of 70 for men and 76 for women. In most Western Countries the average is well into the 80’s. Nothing comparable to this has ever happened in our human history before. Even in the first decades of last century vast numbers of men and women became victims of over work, disease, war; most of which is no longer seen in our western societies.

The reason why old age was so venerated in the past, in our Zen texts for example was because it was extraordinary. To be old today is to be part of a huge, fast growing ordinariness with needs and demands. Needs and demands that mirror what we once had known and delighted in. Sexuality, according to some weird moral code, is expected in the old to become asexual. We don’t delight in the idea that some Venerable, on pronouncing wisely, may have just arisen from a bed of conjugal bliss. Proof that overt sexuality among the aged is all part of the sexual abstruseness that accompanies us from the cradle to the grave, so to speak lies in its ability to disturb society as it does. There are plenty anecdotal accounts of family members trying to dissuade their elderly parent from *taking up with* that fellow or woman down the corridor.

The economics of this great and newish longevity has turned into a matter for public concern. The housing crisis and aged care budgets seem to have beset our communities, is this as it might seem to be the consequence of lots of old people living on in their homes and demanding their right to take full advantage of their years of toil. On becoming *a living ancestor* one is not emancipated from desire, this may become a large part of the tragedy of aging. Often, it’s a desire for things past and gone, professional status, looks, circles of friends, but mostly old people want to be wanted.

We chant in our sutra sessions the wonderful and complex Heart Sutra. Lately I have been acutely aware of the injunction that there is no ignorance and also no ending of ignorance, and so on to no old age and death and also no ending of old age and death.

What the fork!

Back to square one with no wisdom and no attainment, since there is nothing to attain. That's a relief as I grow older.

Looking back at attainments past is a pastime easily fallen into. Is it any wonder that as the sign posts of one's younger efforts become old-fashioned and more often lost from view many an older ancestor will turn to autobiography? These authors aren't so interested in the factual records, dates of birth and marriages, whether they were ever sacked or promoted, honours and disgrace but rather they want to tell something that they themselves want to hear. I don't think it's simply egotism that compels this creativity, it's more the need, the want to cobble together a "true" sense of self from all the remembered fragments.

Being wanted. Trees, rivers, mountains, ice caps, dingoes and earth worms also need to be wanted, cared for, noticed and cherished. Each and everything has come into being uniquely, evolution is a journey down a multitude of trace-lines, convergences hybridise into new patterns and then spread out and away again. Co-arising and interdependence are facts of evolution, it's not the same as 'all is one'.

Can we lay claim to ancestors beyond the human form; do the mountains walk and the rivers sing or is this metaphor? Can we not let the rest of creation be in its own essence, its own mountainess? Mountains stand in their own majestic grandeur or explode violently – volcanically.

Geologists from the University of the South Pacific have been able to clarify the geological history of a group of seven small islands at the western end of the island of Kadavu in southern Fiji. Around 2,500 years ago a massive volcanic eruption occurred on Kadavu and a mountain emerged, similar in shape to a mound of earth in which Yams are grown, hence the name today; Nabulelevu – the giant yam garden. This event is told in story and dance by many Fijians involving the eruption and the battle that followed between local island spirits or ancestors. One ancestor wanted to take down the mountain and began to dig it up – stole the earth, while a rival took offence and tried to stop this destruction. As the two twisted and turned, the earth being carried away fell into the sea creating the seven islands to the west of Kadavu. Geologists have been able to reconstruct the possible movement of the great ash cloud based on these stories and so identifying how these seven islands came into existence.\*

Venerable stories: myths and legends held in place through oral traditions, paintings and dance more often than not are founded in fact. The stories living with the First Peoples of our country are replete with place making, animal behaviour and change, flood and drought. These stories are authentic memories of events and come to us from all over the world.





*Eunice Stewart, Brendon Stewart*

‘Each person is in each instance in a dialogue with their forebears and perhaps even more in a more hidden manner with those who will come after them.’ Martin Heidegger

\* Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter*, Penguin Books, 1979

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