

# Terroir

Mark Tredinnick

1.

**W**IRADJURI—whose land this is where David Lowe and Kim Currie make their wine and fashion their food—didn't grow a lot of grapes or drink a lot of wine.

When the first grapes were cultivated in the Caucasus, 6000 or so years BCE, a sophisticated culture had long inhabited the Cudgegong River Valley, where Mudgee now lies, and northwest of it Tinja. When Europe crashed violently into the valley in 1821 and flooded out a culture longer and more complex than any on earth, wine had long come in the Western mind, to represent, and to some extent enable, the good life. Wine certainly came to the valley with the settlers, and thirty years later, Mudgee had vines.

But all that long while, before wine came, people had found enough intoxication to sustain a wealthy life in this sweet country among its noble hills. They found it in the poetry of their cosmology, in their inhabitation of the weather and the biology, in their intimacy with the rich ecology of the country, in their ceremonies and arts, in the work of their hands and minds, in their farming and fishing, and no doubt in some kind of intoxicants well known to them in the plants of the region. But one imagines the landscape, sacralised by story, was for most Wiradjuri, as much enchantment, as much like a good long life in a sacred and beautiful place on earth, as anyone needed.

There is another world, wrote Paul Eluard; it is this one.

A more vivid, divine and eternal, terrifying world goes on around us all the time. Humans have learned not to experience most of it, Aldous Huxley proposed, because if we let it in, we'd have trouble (out of terror and distraction) getting any living done. Wine, across the centuries, has helped humans open the doors of their perception, to use Huxley's phrase: it can help you apprehend a little more of what you hardly realise you are party to on this earth. Inside yourself and in what surrounds you.

But here in the Cudgegong, one needs no wine to be in touch with the inscape of things, with the mystery and colour and gorgeousness immanent in the land. Mudgee, in its nest of hills, is and always was the kind of enchanting, the kind of perfect, a good glass of wine also is.

So wine, when it came, belonged. And the place, in its complexity and beauty, has inspired, here on Tinja in particular, some winemaking that just about does justice to the handsomeness of the place.

The trouble was, of course, no one asked the Wiradjuri if they needed the wine. Or the cattle and the sheep, the coal- and gold-mining, the various branches of Christianity, and all the rest of it. They got it anyway and at terrible cost.

We know this now. We knew it, though we denied it, all along. No one knows it more acutely than David and Kim. They're happy of course to make Tinja profitable, to sell some fine wines and to please their visitors' palates and make their wallets lighter; they'd like not to lose the place again before they're about ready; but they also want to make all that they make of the place—the way they restore the land to health, the beauty they conjure from the ground—a kind of offering. A kind of putting right, a kind of recompense and restitution for the great wrong that yielded the good life along this river that their wines and foods and hard work now deliver up to some folks, including themselves and their friends and their visitors.

Life is a gift. You earn it and return it by how well you ride the luck and how well you live the life you get. Land is a gift that wants you to give it back. In beauty, in wine, in food, perhaps. In plenitude and in kindness. And in time. Tinja is a gift on its way back to where it came from long ago.

Wine is how you stop  
Grapes becoming vinegar:  
Love works like that, too.

2.

WINE IS an old story. It is a much newer story on a landmass that knew no grapes till Europeans brought them here in the early nineteenth century. But it is old enough. Neither story touches in its antiquity, though, the stories Wiradjuri tell, and eons older still, the canticle of the land itself, the poetry of the weather and the

lays of the rocks in their travels and travails, the sagas of the rivers, the polyphonous fables of the birds.

In his winery one day, David shows me an enormous terracotta amphora he's imported from Georgia—where it was, he tells me, wine was first made. A lot of what he and Kim do at Tinja is innovative; but always, at the same time, it seems to me, they're applying their talent and their ingenuity and craft to fitting what they make (the wine and the food and the experience that surrounds both) into human traditions as old as human culture, itself, and as truthful and coherent and distinctive as the terroir of the place where they work and live.

The amphora, for fermenting the wine before bottling it, sits beside temperature-controlled stainless-steel vats, and outside the sun lies on the vines and the summer grasses, and in the distance the timbered hills rise where they always did around the valley.

The river valley:  
Like a vat, it ferments days  
Into memories.

3.

IT PROBABLY PAYS to enter every Australian place as if it were sacred and as if, at the same time, violence had occurred there or thereabouts, as if each lovely place were suffering post-traumatic stress, and the grief inherent there will be playing out a long time yet.

For so it is with all colonised landscapes—loved so long, held so well, taken so fast and hard. In particular these Wiradjuri lands falling away, like some apprenticeship in paradise, toward the inland. It seems right to enter all country, starting here, as if, though it speeds past the window of your car like scenery, it was the whole world, and maybe still is, to someone else. As if you are missing nearly all of it.

It is too late to visit anywhere on this continent as a tourist. These are not just sights for you to see. This is Country; it is very old; it pre-dates all human ambition, in particular your own; and it embodies values you can barely know how

to name. This is the Beloved here. Come into her presence, or his, with respect. Carry water and listen up.

Proceed, no matter how little majesty strikes you, with humility and reverence. Let that be the way you go. No matter where.

This valley among high round hills—a nest, they say, for eagles; a place, they tell you, of contentment, a dignified and shapely topography—spoke people and speaks them still and taught them what can be known no other way, nor anywhere else. Landscapes are wise in ways we can only dream of being. It may be possible to learn some of that wisdom, taste some of that beauty, if you go about it slowly enough.

Enter into country, then, or make your living there, in hope that you might fall in step with most of what eludes you, that you might catch at least a snatch of the lyric that *is* this realm of rock and grass and tree and stream and sky and birdsong, this soundscape of memory; in hopes that among the frequencies that cohere here into this distinctive music, you may find your own.

Know that much has been surrendered, and most of that unwillingly, so that you can be free to make your way here at 110kph in the rain. Enter the river valley of the Cudgegong, knowing that, like all places on this landmass, this one, though violated—by how inadequately it was regarded and how roughly it was used by the latecomers—remains inviolable. There will have been over-clearing of woodlands and pollution of water sources; there will have been desecration of holy sites; there will have been massacre here. Find the dignity that inheres, notwithstanding.

Don't miss, in your distraction, the amber moon that still wants to rise, in its moment, like the life you wish you'd worked out how to lead, over the Bara Midlands and Box Hill, the flanks of the Great Divide to the east. Walk here as if each footfall fell where someone gave birth and where someone died and where love was made or some goddess landed, or sickness came, and always knowledge grew. Don't think, just because you do not know them, that there are no stories here worth knowing, any one of which will make your own more lyric.

Every corner will be storied, every creek and ridge. In time you may be told them. In time, this place may become a mind that you learn how to share.

On the high ridges,

White cypress among grey gums:

The children of days/  
{Like Helen of Troy}.

4.

NAMES. Languages. Consonants. Phonemes. Faultlines. *Mudgee* is likely the same word as *Mowgee*, one way the language group, or clan, of the Wiradjuri people, whose country this is, has been spelled. Language, kinship group, and country: always linked in Indigenous ways of being. *Moothi*—nest in the hills—may be another way the same set of things are said. It sounds different, but not very different—two syllables, starting with an M and ending with an E, an U or an O or an OU or and OO ahead of a consonantal hinge—a DG, a TH, a TCH, a T. A faultline between two strata of conflicting sounds: *Mudgee*. *Moothi*: a softer speaking of the same thought, the same name for the place and its people. A diminutive, perhaps, or an adjective, a participle, a downstream inflection.

Rest and nest and hills are all spoken in the name. And eagles. Who love the steep hills and the open grasslands beneath them, the river valley of the Cudgegong. Some general sense of contentment, that this is a safe place, is conveyed by the names: *Mudgee*, *Mowgee*, *Moothi*. Safe, unless you happen to be the eagle's prey, of course. There is a line of fracture in the words, a proviso, a rider. A note of warning. Or does one read that in there now, knowing what was coming? We who came with no ear for the native tongue, who shattered the peace and forced their own pastoral idiom on the landscape, a vernacular that had no word in it for way the *Mowgee* knew how to belong.

Rain like syllables  
Of an alien tongue: late  
Night storm in summer.

5.

RAIN FLOCKED the windscreen, coming at us like the war of the worlds through the high-beams, the night we drove the valley into *Mudgee* the second time, and the ridges to the west of us were hectic with electricity. Sheet lightning like shock

therapy, a schizophrenic sky. The power of this place was clear that night, the  
though nothing much else was. By day you know more fully where you are.

There's no guarantee  
The weather will be good or  
The road smooth. Don't wait.

Time, if you're lucky,  
Will sometimes wait. Help will come.  
Just don't count on it.

6.

WELCOME TO COUNTRY: The first time we came to Tinja, I hit a pothole in the  
dusk outside Ilford. I felt the tyre go. I pulled over. We were going to be late for  
dinner. People normally have to go on a waitlist to eat what Kim Currie cooks.

Now I'm not especially handy, but I've changed tyres. And it's a matter of  
pride. But it was growing dark, and though I had the car jacked up, the nuts were  
proving hard to loosen. There was a trick to this I couldn't fathom, a code I couldn't  
break. The first ute that stopped I waved away with thanks. The second one, Jodie  
welcomed on my behalf. Turned out there was indeed a trick, a sneaky VW  
encryption, and the guy was a mechanic from Gulgong, and he knew it. In minutes,  
he had the tyre off and the spare on. He was taciturn and graceful. A Wiradjuri man.  
He wouldn't let me pay him for his time. I thanked him, and he nodded and said  
*Sure.*

The grace of the Indigenous people of this land, my friend said when I told  
him the story. A white guy, inept and ill-prepared, coming into his country, and,  
after all that's gone down here, still he stops and helps. Because he can, because it's  
decent.

On the road again, I phoned Tinja. Kim answered. I'll wait a bit with the  
lamb, then, she said. David will come and meet you at the winery, if you can find  
your way there. We could. He did.

We ate well. The lamb was somehow still tender, though we were hours  
late, and the potatoes were crisp outside and soft in, and I talked with Kim and  
David by the fire in the old house till it was late, drinking a pretty fair local red.

Par-boil before you  
Roast: that's the trick. Let the wine  
Breathe. That's the other.

7.

YOU TASTE the terrain in David's wines.

What plays out on your tongue is what one dedicated human can learn over sixty years, give or take, of being here and waking to the place and breathing its topography in and divining its contours on foot and by tractor and Toyota and reading its seasons and learning to do something like justice, by restoring woodland and banishing chemicals and opening corridors and tending your vines and doing no more harm to these thousand acres, which were a gift you were born to and then had to fight to keep, these pastures that were never ceded, you know, by the Wiradjuri, that can never be more than yours to care for and curate, and which your forebears had flogged, doing the best with what they knew, sometimes not doing even as much as that, through the many years before you returned.

What plays are the ways the rain falls—only sometimes when and where you want it. Sometimes in January it comes down in the kind of thunderstorms we drove into, 25 mils in a couple of hours. In the wine you taste what 670 mils a year on average does to these complex soils (though no years are average, and averages are ceasing to mean what they did). What plays on your palette are eighty days of rain, 113 cloudless days, a year. What you taste is what all of this amounts to, including what it feels like to live and grow and sink your roots deep in a climate that is humid and subtropical but touched (increasingly) by aridity; it is frost across cold winter morning; it is the feel on your skin of blue inland air, and the smell of this turbid geology on the afternoon wind.

Wine writes a diary  
Of how it came to this: don't  
Believe all you read.

8.

WRITING TAKES as long as wine sometimes, and for me, three months after two visits that lasted as long as I could afford, which was way less than long enough, is a laptop that sits on three maps of the region (including the topographic survey—1:100 000) on a desk that once was used for fetes at the Bowral Presbyterian Church; it's a wad of research papers printed from the net, a book of birds and a journal open at the pages of notes I made on my visits; it's a vivid geological map of Mudgee (also 1:100 000) that I've stuck to the wall in front of me; it is the box of wines downstairs, most of which we've kept till I get this writing done and earn them; it is the memory of two afternoons in the truck with David, traversing his blocks and talking childhood and wine and biodiversity and reforestation; it is a breakfast and a lunch or two and some old family letters; it is the Kim's inexpressibly fine cooking; it is the rhyolite and quartz-lithic gravel and the deep violet undertones of shale and slate and Windamere volcanics I tasted inside inside that late-night, fireside red from one of David's blocks of shiraz; it's a swill of weather and memory and geomorphology and care; and it's the fear of getting too little of all this terrain into my telling.

In truth, one could make a whole book and say less about all the country you taste in David's wines than you taste in David's wines. Go, taste one. Ideally, looking out on the hills and the river. With some people you love and a dog at your feet. At best, let these words and the others in the book be a way of naming what will find you there. Inside the wine. And along the river in that strawberry light among the hills.

Writing is living  
Twice. A map that draws worlds. Like  
Wine: terrain distilled.

9.

LOOK AT THE map on my wall: see how its one-hundred-and-fifty eras all want to run northwest with the rivers, a psychedelic kind of marbling you might find on the endpapers of an old and famous book; look how all its colours (six greens, several



violets and purples, six or seven browns, some assorted blues and pinks and some hatched and dotted versions of all of the above) want to leak back toward the inland, all its vivid presents back toward the past. Look, on the terrain it maps, how all the many Mudgees—the regimes of geologic and human time—are all implicit, some of them laid bare, in the surface topography of the present moment, rendered in the topographic cross-section at the base.

So much of all that we live and taste and feel will never register on our senses or find its way to words. But it will be there, that whole complex social ecology—that somewhere on its way to being somewhere else. It will be in your mouth. It will be in the white cypress on the hills and it will be the sadness in the shadows beneath the vines.

The past occupies  
The present the way silence  
Fills the songs of birds.

10.

IF YOU COME, as we did, from the southeast, you take the same way out of the sandstone country that the Cudgegong runs.

The river has made the way, and how the river goes is how the terrain goes, too. The Cudgegong rises in the Wollemi wilderness, at Bin Ben, a little to the east of Rylstone. Bearing northwest, the river drops 400 meters along its 250 K run, picking up fourteen other creeks and rivers before it bends southwest and finds the Macquarie, west of Mudgee.

The Cudgegong waters Tinja. You can see the line of it from the house, across the bottomlands where the Lowes are thinking someday to put back market gardens like those that have been kept in flood-prone land since white settlement. Too wet for cattle down there, David tells me. The river's the reason the house has sat where it sits since the 1870s (and before that house there were other houses, the ruins of what was one of them, perhaps, David shows me one afternoon, much closer to the river).

Just north of Tinja, too, Eurunderee Creek joins the Cudgegong, and runs away with it west.

On the river, a little south of Tinja, but north of the town, is the Camping Tree, a site of importance to the Mowgee clan of the Wiradjuri, whose country all

this is. Wiradjuri appear to have a complicated relationship with the site, and one begins to understand that all may not have gone well for them there; it may be, that now dead tree by the river flats, where the dying began.

The tree marks the place where white settlement began in Mudgee. James Blackman was the first white man to come upriver. William Lawson, the explorer, and by that time commandant of Bathurst, took 6000 acres nearby a little later. But the sons of William Cox, the surveyor, are regarded as Mudgee's first white settlers; they are thought to have found the rest they needed and the water they were looking for at the Camping Tree, where they made camp. Around it they saw land they like, and they claimed a large swathe, Menah Run, radiating west and north from the Camping Tree.

That was 1821. In the two years that followed, many other settlers arrived. David's forebears were among them. First contact led almost immediately, in this place of eternal contentment, to conflict. Wiradjuri resisted. They defended their ground and took issue with the decimation of kangaroos and possums and the mistreatment of their women, and there were killings and counter-killings. Martial Law was declared in 1824 by Governor Brisbane, somehow enforceable over a people said not have been there in the first place and whose sovereign territory this manifestly was. It provided perfect cover for a gruesome kind of land-clearance, the depopulation of the place, to accompany the ring-barking and the burning of the forests that got the colonial project seeded.

David drives me to the river. It flows low and peaceable in braids among sheoaks. And everything is remembered in that shade—the long time before conflict, the time of dispossession, the short generations since.

The railway line crosses the river nearby. It's no longer in use. They pushed this extension of the Wallerawang line through from Rylstone in 1884, and it ran for over a century, opening up the country. It is part of all that's fallen silent now. David shows me how the kangaroo grasses are, he hopes, taking over from the Paterson's curse that got hold in here, as in so many places, a pretty weed beloved of the bees.

Inside the terroir

The terror. Complicit in

What passes, what stays.

11.

BEFORE IT makes Mudgee and, having eased through town, bends north toward its confluence with Eurunderee Creek, the Cudgegong is dammed at Lake Windamere. The ranges close in on both sides and it has cut its way through some tight pinch-points. Perfect topography for a dam. The river has cut down to a bed there that is half a billion years old. Sofala volcanics from the Ordovician—deep green on my chart. Around them, purple and lavender, some Dungeree and Windamere volcanics, a little younger, from the early Silurian. Old rocks. Much older than those where Tinja lies: some Devonian measures and much later, quarternary alluvials, silt the river has laid out over older rocks beneath.

About the river, as it escapes the dam and makes for Mudgee, are ranges made from the rocks, all intergraded, of nine or ten different eras of the earth—igneous periods, sedimentary moments, siltstones, quartzes, sandstones, feldspars, granite, flow-lava, breccia, conglomerate, basalts, limestones, slate, and shale and mudstone. How older rock ends up beside or even on top of newer rock is a long melodrama, often violent.

The point is, like all country, but more than most, the country here—the terrain, the lithology, the way what's underneath manifests on the surface—is almost unfathomably complicated. This is a forty-part motet, a polyphony of stone. All appearance of simplicity is a trick of erosion, vegetation, and the light.

To the east of here, where the river begins, the story is simpler. And much more recent. The sandstones of the plateau make the western selvedge of the Great Divide. Permian sandstones and some Rylstone volcanics, two shades of mid-blue on my chart: this is the geology of the Sydney Basin giving way to older geology underneath. And that country, picking up where the sandstone leaves off, is what surrounds you in the Cudgegong, as you drive northwest toward Mudgee.

To understand the feel and taste and form of the terrain through which the river runs—some of the chemistry of all of it carried in, and carried away by, the river—picture first bands of earth, each representing geological eras of the earth's history, all of them laid flat (as few of them ever were) on top of each other, from oldest to newest. Each of them a different colour, even if not as brilliant as those on my wall. Then imagine those bands folded and faulted (for instance along the river's course at Dungeree and in the township of Mudgee, itself) along lines of fracture, so that the bands on one side of the faultline slip down (and/or north and south) and

the bands on the other side up. There have been revolutions here. Uprisings put down. Radical discontinuity. Disruption. All manner of unrest and violence, though most of it almost immeasurably slow and sustained.

In time, imagine a coexistence, a reconciliation, that settles in. In the right light it looks, still, like the embodiment of ease and conformability. A nest. Your soul's ease.

Imagine that messed-up surface, then—the tops of enormous peaks, formed when the plates of the earth moved and buckled the layers, or at the highest point of sharp faultlines, a kilometre up, perhaps—sanded down by time and wind and weather and rivers into the undulant profile the land either side of you now takes. If the rocks took on the shades in real life attributed to them in the geological chart, and if they were not now largely covered by grass and trees, you'd drive along the valley of the Cudgegong to Mudgee through a landscape a child might have put up in plasticine, every colour in the pack, all rolled together and screwed up and stuck together again and crushed under small fists and fingertips into this undulant array.

Like us, the land stays  
As young, inside, as its first  
Words. Its first bright steps.

12.

This is the big story, the geomorphological part of it anyway, told small in each glass of Tinja wine. The soils on the Lowe's acres vary radically from one rise to the next. The rocks, as I say, where these grapes grow, are newish. But the terrain and the regime of weather that plays in it make up the one country, and that country is complex and turbulent and old, and Tinja is part of it, and a river runs through it all, carrying above the surface and under it all these eras and their convoluted stories, east to northwest and then south again. And just as the river carries and articulates the country it drains, a kind of reduction of all of its characteristics, so each mouthful of wine catches and expresses the terrain it grows from on the vine, and all the other eras of earth implicit in the block on which that vine grows.

So maybe the chart on my wall maps the characters, the complexity and counterpoints, you encounter in any given glass of David's wine.

Grass parrots at dusk,  
Last light on the hills: red wine  
Remembers all things.

13.

THE COUNTRY opens up around Tinja, but still you are among hills. Blunted sawtooth ridges give an elegant shape to the distance, which stands a polite distance back.

Coming into Mudgee with the Cudgegong, though, through Mullamuddy, you travel a long corridor, ranges either side of you steep enough to look like they mean it and domed enough to suggest an attitude of pastoral care; this is a casual assembly of elders, a congress of elephants or of some other more suitably antipodean megafauna. You come into Mudgee among a loose cabal of friendly troops at their ease. Pine Hill. Elephant Mountain. Round Mountain. Eagle Hawk Rock. Mount Margaret. Mount Buckaroo. Mount Frome. You see the eagles (totemic bird of the women of the Mowgee), for which the place is named their nest. You see crows, male totem of the Mowgee. You see apostlebirds and choughs working the highway's edge. Grass parrots. Wagtails. Wrens.

And among the hills, among the slow and dignified gestures of this intemperate, long-suffering landscape, you find Misery Mountain and Cannibal Hill. On the first, southwest of town, where the communications towers now stand, it is said that Wiradjuri, recalcitrant about their totemic practices and insistent on their claims to their own waterholes, hunting grounds and sacred places, were rounded up and made to jump. It is a massacre site and feels like one, and it doesn't help to know that it was the local churches who sponsored many of those events. Only a hundred years ago, you could find skeletons in the canopies up there. Cannibal Hill records an act of Indigenous retaliation, so it is said.

The violence of the rocks—softened into landscape by time, until all this colourful geomorphology looks like a pastoral idyll—was enacted also in the human

realm and on an almost geological scale but much faster. Mudgee is made of misery and of dignity and delight; its trauma and culpability stand over it like a cautionary tale, like a bowing of all heads. An attitude that's five parts penance, five parts pent up rage.

Mudgee sits on a line of ancient fracture. What came radically apart—two disparate orders of time that slid sideways, like two magnets facing off—is now a level plane, all differences worn down to a new coherence, a settled surface fit for a river to run and a town to rise from. What is true of the earth here may only be beginning to come true in the human realm, where one senses that the work of reconciliation of a fracture much more recent has barely begun.

Choughs, like a peace corp,  
Run roadside repairs on the  
Suture: this long wound.

14.

EVERY EASEFUL moment began in violence; every life has been paid for by a death. This is not just Mudgee's story. This is an Australian story. All of us live downstream of that past. We are asked, at very least, to know at what cost and to whom the great Australian good fortune was earned.

This was not a thing, David tells me, he grew up thinking about. Kim grew up in New Zealand with much more awareness of the violence of the frontier. It is a thing both of them are fathoming now and hoping to make right. Among the myriad plans they have for the land, giving it back tops the list. They're restoring their acreage to something resembling the natural wealth and diversity it knew before generations of farming degraded it, and they're doing that for the land itself and for the birds and roos and other beings whose land this was first; but their work, is a deeper restoration—not just repair of land but reparation to the people from whom the land was taken without permission. What they have in mind gives new meaning to the word regeneration. Theirs is a moral project as well as an ecological one. It may not be possible to go back in time (although the terrain around here begs to differ); it is possible to go back (and put things back) in place.

Every pastoral tableau like the one that Mudjee makes on any given afternoon has entailed dispossession, generally some pillage and rape, the violent effacement of another way of life that stood in the way of the cows and the cross, the wool and the vines and all the pretty horses. The peace that prevails in the nest of eagles, the council chamber of the crows, is laced with horror.

[Before there could be the freedom I know to drive into Mudjee in safety along the Cudgegong and find there the best food and wine you're likely to enjoy; before there could be Lowe's Family Wines and Zin House, there was the expropriation and subjugation and annihilation. And no matter how well we try to understand what happened in the context of the values and laws that prevailed, that's what it was.]

These pastures, on their way back, on David's watch, to something like the diversity and robustness they knew before the cattle and the fertilizers, were possibly killing fields; certainly, they bordered them. The river has known a lot of more human dying than it needed to. And a silence hangs in the fastness of the gunmetal hills where songs are no longer sung and where gods have turned their faces away and ancestors weep and where the trauma of the frontier is raw.

There was enacted here, back then, a much less dignified kind of arrangement between settlers and first people, than that which holds now, on any given early morning, between the paddocks and the wooded hills.

And it's hard to say if the pink in an autumn sunset, colour of a fine dry rose, is the landscape's delight that all this orogeny and erosion are at an end for the time being, or if it's the colour of what all this beauty has cost. The stain of a terrible injustice. An absence remarked.

When the trees come back  
And the forests unpack their  
Boxes, even then...

15.

THESE ARE the birds of the Cudgegong. Can you hear them in the Zinfandel, feel the lilt of their flight in the Shiraz, catch the angle of their repose the Aglianico?

*Apostlebird, pink-eared duck, goshawk, crimson rosella, currawong, firetail, flame robin, eastern robin, galah, grass parrot, green rosella, inland thornbill, kookaburra, little friarbird, magpie, musk lorikeet, noisy friarbird, pied butcherbird, plum-headed finch, regent honeyeater, sacred kingfisher, satin bowerbird, spotted pardalote, superb fairy-wren, superb lyrebird, white-breasted woodswallow, yellow-tailed black cockatoo, zebra finch.*

If you mix all these avian phrasings with the phonemes you hear in Eurunderee, Cudgegong, Mudgee, Dungaree, Wilbertree, Putta Bucca, Moothi, Yarrabin, Erudgere, Burrundulla, Round Mountain, Mount Misery, Nero D'Avola, Merlot, Zinfandel, and Vermantino, you hear a complex chorale in which the qualities of the wines Tinja makes in David's hands, the colourful substrates it articulates, are sung.

The birds are the words

The present writes to the past.

Birdsong is promise.

16.

GRAPES were first grown in Mudgee in 1850. The first vines went in at Tinja in 1974. David helped his father plant them. The story goes his father spent most of 1975 replanting the vines David had dug because the boy had put them in upside down. That sounds as tall as a story gets. By any measure anyhow, David's worked out since which way is up.

David shows me that block. Chardonnay. Planted, he comments, mostly with the market, not the ground or the weather or the future, in mind. David's planting that block with something else now (Falangarni, Ansonica, Nero D'Avola), and he's running the vines in curves across the slope, mirroring the contours of the sloping block. He's put in some tillage radish to open up the soil. Informed by the best scientific knowledge and modelling and his own observation of the changing patterns of weather, he's planting vines that prosper in harsher climates than once prevailed here. Now we know that the past no longer lasts forever, the terroir has to include best guesses at the future. In particular, the likelihood of longer intensely hot, and periodically intensely wet periods. Come back in fifty years, if the weather



lets you, and you'll know what that tastes like, all that past and all that future in a glass.

Let's all take this pledge:

First, do no harm. Read the ground

Before you turn it.

17.

BORN ONTO this land, David left it for Adelaide to learn wine. Maybe to come home again to make it. The future of Tinja, if it had one with him in it, lay in wine. He took his time coming back; for a while there didn't plan to. After Adelaide, he learned his craft practising it in the Hunter Valley. When in his forties, the place called him back in the end. He found its thousand acres, as he puts it, flogged. Clapped out. By overstocking and inadequate farming practices. Short of trees, its soils lacking vitality, its pastures poor. Its wildlife depleted.

It's twenty-some years now. His vision then, refined over the years and practised with care, was to make organic wines biodynamically. Natural wines are on trend now; organics sell. Not so much at the start of this century, when David got the winery happening at Tinja.

The ethical part of what David imagined for Tinja has grown with the years. At first, and still, it was a conviction, learned in practice, that wines made naturally, make better wines. It was and is still about quality. A value proposition. There is an aesthetics to it, too: a wine made from what occurs and is available to a winemaker in the soil and air and water of the grape's terrain has a kind of integrity you measure on your tongue.

The ethics—responsibility to the soil and waterways and the climate more generally, and to first peoples to steward their land—have deepened in David in recent years, especially since Kim.

A lot of our conversation is about restitution. The couple are trying to find out what they can about the traditional ownership of the land and about the fate of the people who lived here. About massacre sites and sacred sites. What happened here back then? They're building relationships with the Wiradjuri. Their children have provoked them to think differently about the colonial past and the post-colonial

present. But their children, who had some idea, as one might, that they had some entitlement of their own to this land down the line, have been lately shocked by how seriously Kim and David are taking the idea of giving the land back. The hard part is the instruments and arrangements: how to get the land to the right people and make sure the work they've begun here, making the land good again, goes on.

How hard it can be to expiate a guilt. How hard to raise the dead.

Good fences make good  
Vintage: so the many gates  
Imply. Sky flies free.

18. DAVID DRIVES me round the paddocks. This is his soul he's showing me.

I get out now and then to open and shut the gates. And among the blocks and wines, the native bees and the vintages, I am soon lost. Zinfandels here—from Croatia in the first place. Shiraz there (Sirrah, Bordeaux). Vermentino from Sardinia there. Aglianico from Campania. Fiano from Sicily. Nero D'Avola from the south of Italy. Some varieties from France, but many, I notice, from the south of Italy. Mediterranean terrain and climate regimes. If you want a vine to prosper, plant it in soils and weather regimes like those where it grew first or to which it is long adapted—similar latitudes, topography, climate regimes. But watch the personality of the new place orchestrate in the wine it yields some characteristics undreamed of back home.

David doesn't water his vines—or not much. The idea is to ask the roots to try harder, push deeper to find the water table. It intensifies the fruit and the wine that you make from them. That makes sense to me. It sounds like tough love. Like parenting, sometimes. Like pulling your coffee short. It sounds sustainable. It sounds like seventy-five dollars a bottle.

But he's just about as proud of his grey water dam, which he shows me, too, and the fence that will keep the shire horses from the dandelions, as he is of any of his blocks of vines or wines or schemes for goats and cheeses. From shit to Shiraz, it's all part of the one system, and pretty soon a wildlife corridor will run through it.

If you want to do this thing biodynamically, close to the way the places used to run before the industrialisation of agriculture, you very largely make your own fertilizers, like your own luck, and you have to deal with all the waste you make. You have to turn waste into wealth and return to the soil and the vines. (Effluents to affluence.) David shows me the compost heaps, minor mountain ranges made of slashed weeds and straw and organic matter and this and that. Nature will supply just about all you need—all it needs—to sustain and enrich its enterprise. But you have to study up and you have to resist shortcuts.

Hold to what is hard,  
Said the poet. Truth is hard  
And a long way back.

19.

IS IT JUST because of the names of the grapes (Nero D'Avola to Vermantino to Zinfandel) that grow on Tinja that the country—its well-tailored hills, the way it glows a little resinous in the late afternoon—resembles the mountainous country between Rome and Naples, the Sardinian coast, the hills of Campania? Is it just the names or is it also the look of the vines on the summer pastures in the light of this latitude that make me listen out for the Mediterranean over the next rise and down a bit.

Easy to get lost  
Among the names of things. Be  
Where you are, says crow.

20. DAVID WALKS me through the making of the wines, and I am astonished at the science and the technology (some of it ancient as clay pots and oak barrels; some of it as new as German digital instruments making all manner of measurements of temperature and chemistry, and all of it dark to me) as well as the knowhow and person-hours and grape-years involved.

David among his vats is terroir embodied. Like his plants, he knows where he is and what he needs to do to prosper there.

I'm struck by how many things David knows a fair bit about, and how many, running a place like this, you have to at once. He speaks astutely about marketing and consumer behaviour; he sits down with the sanitation guy and talks black water; he shows me the culture he's making in plastic tubs among the vines, out of the fermenting grapes; he puts the truck into compound low to take a steep grade; he talks with the heritage consultant about the restoration of the batons and horse-hair that make the ceiling in the old house; he tells me about shire horses and emus and generators and woodland regeneration; he orders picking and planting not just by the weather maps but by the cycles of the moon. It works, he says. He's an idealistic pragmatist. He's glad it works.

All wine-makers have to know a fair bit of this; all landusers have to know much of it; all entrepreneurs are inclined to be polymathic; all climate change activists have to be smart about politics and geography. David and Kim are all these things and more.

It strikes me they are instances, together and separately, of what a place on earth is, this one, say. A place on earth is immeasurably knowledgeable and accomplished at being what it is. It's easy to overlook the wisdom being practised in front of you in a landscape, if nothing leads you to stay and pay attention, if your life or livelihood is not dependent upon it. David and Kim are what Tinja is, and what they know is only half of what it knows, but they're listening.

You learn from the feet  
Up. If you let country teach  
You, it's a long walk.

21.

JUST OVER halfway through a novel I love, James Galvin's *Fencing the Sky*, which I read again as I wrote this, there's a passage where the big old cowboy is walking with a troubled teenage girl. They've been fishing. They take a trout they'd rather put back, catch and release being their ethos, but "six inches of fishing leader trailed from the trout's mouth" and the hook is too deep to extract. Sissy, the girl, says she

hates that things have to die so we can eat. Mike says he tries to imagine he's taking on, when he eats, what defined the animal. In the case of the fish, quickness. A deer: wariness, alertness. A cow: not stupidity, but curiosity. A horse: wisdom and sadness.

I wonder what our heart learns, if we let it, drinking a wine made with such attention to its terroir. I wonder what qualities one consumes, not without their touching your soul, one hopes, at Zin House, where what you eat is grown on site. Think of all the trace elements of all the chemistry one imbibes, from all the eras of the earth: the flint, the schist, the lava flows, the volcanic blows, the sediments, the shales, the gold, the periodic shallow seas, the coal, the conglomerates. The rocks, after all, stage the whole show.

Think how the geology of the Cudgegong embodies a gift for reinvention, for forbearance, and for pushing on when all is lost; for rising up and settling down again. Think—in the rocks and beyond them, in the human story—of the loss and think of the craft, the hope, the ambition, the design. Think of the callitris (white cypress), a native conifer, like the other world this one *also* is, holding out in plain view among the eucalypts on the steepness of the hills. There is something *elsewhere* and *otherwise* about how *here* feels here; there is a fold in the fabric of the familiar, a rumple, like the folds in the earth, in the way time passes here. Think also of the serious art involved in making beauty out of trauma that runs generations, eons, deep; think of the coherence the dusk makes on the fields and hills of the chaos enacted just on forever in the rocks below, and upon them; think of the tranquillity the sky makes at midday out of all the trouble that there's always been; think of the suffering and savagery, the hope and hard work, sublimated into gold vermilion by the dusk over Misery Mountain.

I'd like to think you'd get to taste—even take into your way of being—a little of that multiplicity and integrity, that complexity and coherence, that dignity and abjection, in the food you eat and the wine you drink here.

You don't have to eat  
It to learn what it knows: light,  
Falling, will guide you.

22.

TINJA was nearly lost. Twice.

Once when, after his first marriage ended, David had to buy back the acres he'd been born to; again, later, when a business arrangement went wrong, Kim and David were within a day of losing all they'd planned. The details don't matter here; what counts is what that experience taught.

It's hard to see how staring down, twice, the loss of your land, and of all the time and imagination, labour and capital and heart you've spent on it, and all the memories lodged in it, the idiom of most of your days—it's hard to see how the trauma of that and the relief or your surviving it could not wake in you an understanding of two things: the profundity of the gift you have in your hands and the duty you have to earn it out; and the magnitude of the pain of those who lost that gift, that place, once and for all.

It's breakfast. David is getting ready for the ten thousand things—in the office and in the town and among the grapes—he has to do that day. Kim is on the phone, getting after her ten thousand things already. But she has made muffins and jams for me and Jodie and for some others at work on this book, and David is looking at book designs and changing his jacket to something more apt for a speech he has to give in a retirement home. Conversation has travelled over the two near losses I've just alluded to. David mentions a friend who ended up taking his life when the bank repossessed his family farm. Someone says something like this: if that's how much it hurts to lose all you knew, all that you were responsible for, it helps you understand what it meant for people whose whole sense of meaning and morality and purpose came from country, for Wiradjuri here, for instance, to be driven off that country. That was the world and the whole of time, the dreaming, for them. And they lost it all and half their lives

David stops being busy for a moment. Never quite saw it that way, he says. But that brings it home, he says. I hope he won't mind my saying that he teared up a little.

Each loss is all loss,  
If you let yourself feel it.  
Let yourself feel it.

23.

KIM ATTRIBUTES much of their awakening to the rights of first peoples to her children. But David credits her. She grew up in New Zealand, where pakeha couldn't unsee Maori culture and the stories of the wars and treaties. There had been others here first; they were still here; some land rights had been ceded. David is like most of us of his generation on this landmass. We grew up in denial. We imagined first peoples away, though they were manifestly still here; if our churches gave any thought to indigenous cosmologies, it was not to discover more news of heaven there. David is like many of us. But he has had the grace to let his children and his wife and his experience of life disabuse him. And he and Kim now have the imagination and courage, as well as the grace and the place and the wherewithal, to do something about it.

It says in the poet's gospel: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). A text the churches might have usefully spent a more time on. The truth, in other words, can set you free. And others, too.

What Kim and David are doing with Tinja seems to me to be about freedom and about justice. And we need as much of those as we can get.

This earth is heaven  
And wasted on the pious.  
They'll keep; the wine won't.

24.

IT'S HARD to see Zin House as a place of pain.

If you look closely you can see how it was once a home that would not have been out of place in the suburbs. It sits on a lovely site, and it looks out now over the kitchen garden, a long lawn and a longer view down to the bend of the river and out to the ranges beyond. I've got in the way of Kim and her kitchen team and front of house staff, and I've taught a class via zoom from one of the rooms that make the restaurant feel like a home and an occasion, not just a location, but I have not yet eaten there. Others, like my daughter, who has eaten there, will have to tell the story of that experience.

I can tell you, you're going to need to book.  
I can tell you that by all reports it's worth the wait.

But I can tell you that the story of Zin (named for the Zinfandel grapes that are among those for which the vineyard is famed) is another transfiguration of loss into beauty.

The house was built by David's first wife, some distance from the old house, which she never much liked, and the house became her project and it marked the end of her marriage and a lot of heartache afterwards. Later David met Kim. Later they married. Later they made the new house over into one of Australia's finest restaurants and a place of illness of ease into a place of ease.

The story the terroir tells is written in Zin House, too.

Odds are, love will fail

You; or you'll fail love. What counts

Is what you do next.

25.

THERE'S A percentage. Something close to 25. David is telling me this again because he told me the first time we drove through parts of the property that feel like no cattle ever trod them, and I forgot it.

Twenty percent will do, he says, but thirty percent is what you're aiming at. You need only that much of your land to be covered with endemic plants, trees especially, and some of them need to be mature. That much restored integrity makes a tipping point. You start to win the battle. The birds come back, the echidnas, the roos, the native grasses, the wallaby grass and kangaroo grass and the flannel flowers and the microbes. The place, itself, comes back. 25 percent or so is enough for the original country to revive.

You have to fence off parts of the land to keep the cattle out. David has done that now for years, and he's getting near the tipping point. Presumably all of his thousand acres were not always timbered, I ask. Presumably, as Bill Gammage writes, the bottomlands and other bits would never have been thick with trees, and would also have been fired by Mowgee and some of the clear-grown farmed. We're not sure: David is cautious. All I know is you have to plant a hell of a lot of trees to get back to twenty-five percent. We'll make it, though. We have to.



Parts of the property look clapped out and undernourished. As much weed as grass. If you're organic, you're not allowed to kill anything off with herbicides, so the restoration of native grasslands, the fight with the introduced species, is long. Crossing the threshold will turn the tide.

Other parts of the property where David drives me—older white box and grey gums and angophora in thick stands, the ground a dishevelled pastoral of fallen limbs and native grass—already look like no one ever ran a farm there.

*Rough-barked apple, tumble-down red gum, black cypress, white cypress, kurrajong, white box, grey box, red box, bundy box, scribbly gum, mugga ironbark, broad-leaved ironbark, drooping sheoak, various wattles:* Tinja knows some of these trees, and back in the day when the land was cared for by Wiradjuri, you'd have found them all. A wild conference of eucalypts and woodland plants. Tinja may never be that Eden again, but soon, when the tipping point is reached, the place will begin to help. Till then, there's a lot of planting and hoping to be done.

Trees make a library  
Of a hillside. So borrow  
Their shade and grow wise.

26.

FROM THE RIDGE, David points to two dams, one below the other, in a gully, grown up with scribbly gums and boxes. There's a pump at the top, and the idea is to fashion from this arrangement a chain of ponds, something like the way it once was, and to trickle water down, top to bottom, filtered and slowed by reeds and fallen branches, spreading the water out into the surrounding ground to promote a vibrant little ecosystem that bleeds down the hill into a corridor David is making to draw the kangaroos back onto the land and lead them across it, where the grasses will be good, to the river and on to open country.

So, you build up the biodiversity along this stretch of ground, you green it up with the water the ponds spread out across the ground and with the grasses and forbs you encourage, and which the roos like, and you fence the neighbour's stock out, that's critical. We'll have roos again in good numbers; they'll have a reason to

be here again. He tells me how his neighbour doesn't want to build fence because he doesn't want the roos back in numbers, because they'll "get out into my pasture."

It's true, David says, that no fence will stop roos. But why would they want his pasture when the grass is greener in the corridor. But you see what we're up against?

Yield to what love wants.

Keep the water in the ground;

Let it fall and spread.

27.

DAVID POINTS out where there is another camping tree, a tree of significance to Wiradjuri, on the river, inside the fence. Word is, he says, the famous camping tree, not that far off in Menah, became a flogging tree. There's that energy about it, and maybe that's why the Wiradjuri don't come there much. But I was always catching them climbing the fence to camp around this tree in Tinja. So, I figured, why not just open it up? What have I lost?

Kindness starts with kin-

Ship. That's you out there, fenced from

Your self. Come on in.

28.

LOWES have been on Tinja a long time. It seems the property came into the family by marriage in the mid 1800s. But Lowes have been in the Cudgegong, on the Wiradjuri lands around Mudgee, since Europe came to town. A large stretch of valley floor, perhaps at Wilbertree, was granted to Robert Lowe, a magistrate, in 1824. That was three years after settlement, the year of martial law, the thick of the troubles. Later, more land came to him, at Eurunderee. Much is still unclear about who owned what when, but two things are clear: the lands were never ceded by the

Mowgee and never restored to them; and the Lowes have held land and worked it in the valley almost from first contact.

Convicts, assigned to the Lowes, worked their properties; it may be that the Lowes themselves, the landowners, didn't spend much time on the ground along the Cudgegong. Who knows how those lives went and felt, how they ended up. It's pretty country to work hard in, but nothing feels quite right when you are not free, and the soil is harder to turn if you do not own it.

We've always told ourselves there was no killing here, Kim is saying, turning back to the first peoples, leaving the convicts for another day. Not on Tinja. David never knew of any, but he never asked; no one asked. But we don't have the right any more, Kim says, to assume, that history on our land was any less violent than it was all around. Someone needs to find out what happened here, and it should be us. The land comes with all that We can't just call the land council and ask them if they know of any atrocities here. That's our job. The land comes to us with all the history written in it, lost in it maybe

They're trying to find out.

Terroir does not stop  
At the fenceline. The past waits;  
Welcome it with wine.

29.

I GREW UP, says David, without knowing it was something I needed to know.

But it matters now to him—as it should to all of us where we live—to know. (The American Indigenous poet Simon Ortiz used to ask wherever he travelled in the first world, *where are the Indians?* He asked me, too, when he was in country I called home. The implication was, how did this get to be yours? What happened to the first people?) It's a safe bet all the violence didn't take place on everyone else's properties. It seems right to David and Kim to behave as if your good fortune came at someone else's cost. Assume moral responsibility. Act accordingly.

So, everything we do here now, David says, we do to leave the place better than we found it and to give as much benefit, and not just to people, as we can.

We're the caretakers here. We're taking good care. I gotta say I didn't start out seeing it that way, he adds. But it's what all of it's about now.

And we barely begin to know what we're doing, Kim adds. This is a journey for us, too, and there aren't many guides.

A good wine marries  
What is known with what is not.  
Like a place. A poem.

30.

IT IS THE TIME of contagion when Jodie and I discover Tinja: October 2020 and January 2021. The restaurant and tasting rooms and grounds are busy each time. Business is up, David tells me, more than thirty percent. His market is younger, discerning professionals, who value sustainability and integrity and who aren't looking just for wine and good food. They're after a place, an encounter, and a destination. They don't realise how much more of all those things Tinja is than it may seem. How much more complicated, like its wines and its food. David and Kima are selling an experience here. This is not all spin. This is a place here, a place becoming more like itself, its old self, daily. You can take in as little as you like and still have an elegant time of it. In this nest among hills, the good life feels pretty good. There's much more to it than that, but that's a start.

Don't be too busy  
To do what it takes. Choughs aren't  
Too busy. Lovers.

31.

TWO EAGLES circle the vineyard when David and I walk to my car from The Pavilion where we have been talking. We scare up a dozen choughs busy on the verge along Tinja lane. And the afternoon, in which tall white cumulus build, is thick

with crows and plump with humidity. Down in the vineyard everyone's getting ready for a wedding in the outdoor chapel. Two of David and Kim's staff are tying the knot. Kim's doing the cooking, and David's driving the wedding car. A great winged Pontiac convertible, twenty feet long at least and a thrum when you start it up like a grain harvester. I drive David to town to pick it up, and I help him tie the ribbon to the mirrors. He's been in ten meetings already today, and he's spent two hours with me talking up the past and singing down the future. He's only really happy when there's way too much to do. Which is most of the time. Driving the wedding car may top everything, though, today. But he'll be in strife if he forgets the extra fairy lights Kim tasked him to bring home.

ENDS