

Merri Creek – 600 words.
Charlotte Watson

In Australia, any water is likely old water, and old water means storied water. The Merri is a narrow creek, one of the few green corridors still existing within Melbourne (or Narrm, it's traditional name). It has listened to stories alongside its banks for tens of thousands of years. The one I bring is about change and grief. It is but a drop in the brisk current that passes through the inner north every day.

Last year life stopped for me as it did for nearly everyone. I've always walked the creek but began to visit it obsessively, under the pretence of exercise but mostly for sanity and a literal sense of ground. For almost a year, under the canopy of gum leaves and fruit bats I have been losing the skin of the person I have formerly been. With the changing seasons and moving water my own dissolution began.

Merri Merri means *very rocky*. Like its name, it holds clues to stories that can only be understood through regularity and attention. Visiting the Merri is ritual. With one foot in front of the other I've moved under silver wattle and juvenile gums, planted as revegetation in the last thirty years. Perhaps that is part of the connection? Most of the green cover that conceals me is as old as I am. But the paths I walk sit atop former lives as gravel pits, dumps, bluestone quarries and farms. Before my ancestors arrived, this was a traditional gathering place for murnong, fish and stone tools. The basalt bedrock exposed by the water's edge, reveals its awkward hexagonal shapes that cooled long before any human set foot. Near the water is the occasional scar tree, typically a river red gum that likes wet roots. Their thick outer bark has large carved ovals, exposing their pale bellies. If you run your hand over the inner ring, zig-zag indentations rise to the touch. These are traces of former relationship and reverence. They remind me that sacredness is both ancient and yet not that far away.

As I have come undone the creek has maintained, braiding it's way down toward the Yarra River. Indifference is what nature does best. In its silence it leaves interpretation to the thinking, feeling humans moving through it. As contemporary humans we enter these spaces in part for their reliability; for the very fact that they alter but do not move. In this, I crave the creek for its perspective. Each time I visit I relearn its non-human lesson on how to simply be.

Dusk is my favourite time down there, though at odds with my own safety. Women have lost their dignity or their lives under the dark oak trees, and I carry a craft knife in my right hand pocket. Were it not for fear then I could savour that liminal hour where something happens that, in my poorly versed estimation, might be akin to god. Tawny frogmouths, otherwise silent, alight onto acacia and breathe to one another. The form of the Dark Emu emerges amongst the stars, and the water – always the water – holds onto the last of the inner-city light.

Grief is like the dusk. It distorts time and I fare best if I submit to what it demands that I see. Though dark by the water I feel safe to surrender to the waves. Down there, beauty and loss are equal. Tears can arise from the bright call of a kookaburra or the deep pit in my chest. For in the company of trees it doesn't matter. With their silhouettes at night I discover the antithesis to being lonely. With their guidance, I have the capacity to breathe out solitude.