

IT'S TIME

reckoning and transformation

Mick Douglas



(ten minutes reading)

10 that moon again

Unexpectedly, nine months into a global pandemic of social isolation, he chose to leave academic employment of three decades. Uncanny circumstances were arising.

University colleagues offered to host an online farewell. 'OK. Let's do it on the last day of my employment', Mick responded, 'in the last hour of that Friday'. For the last ten minutes he would like to say a few departing words, counting down until his exit.

Mick had kinds of privilege, had purpose, some power and social affirmation, had honed a creative working life in a 'world's most liveable city' on the southern island continent, had global travels and friendships, had superannuation and security. He had opportunities to follow curiosity, to make artistic research. Then a feeling arose. Was it feeling for ... the soul of one's work in the world, now, at this time? To meet the fork in the path, a reckoning?

If not retiring, people asked, how come? Mick conjured: 'to experience time'. He was just following a hunch. Back then, he offered narrative fragments to appease people's need for explanation: 'I'm yearning different experiences of temporality, of duration, of tending to living and dying'. Or he might have said that he sought 'more kairos, less chronos - to lose myself with seasons and ecologies in the circle of time.' Or, 'to live more freely from the implied need for approval. To more simply be, and to bear witness.'

Mick's children had grown up alongside his 'arty' projects. Until their late teens, they struggled to answer their friends' question, 'What does your father do?' Curious about the cultural transfer between generations, Mick ponders if he is now enacting the aphorism heard from his father, an opportunistic and adaptably skilful working man who'd say: 'Quit while the going is good!'

He recalls his ex-father-in-law's story, of being tasked to shoulder-tap a senior anaesthetist colleague who was no longer fit to practice sound judgement to induce painless sleep, but not death. After Mick gleaned that the combative and arrogant behaviour of one his own senior colleagues was a symptom of egotistic clutching to life, Mick began to consciously try to gracefully tarry with ageing. Phase changing. Early to acceptance. Making light.

A few summers back, he purchased 16 hectares of bushland in a semi-remote location, three hours from the city, at which to take up residence. The pandemic, and consequent university sector financial crisis, had him in fortunate circumstances, soon able to access superannuation savings. Some said he has a knack for timing - for the auspicious moment. Maybe. Or just attuned to his blood and bones. Able to feel a change of breeze. Deep in a once asthmatic chest, he admitted he could do with less, and embrace a new cycle.

clocking out of university

sixty laps around the sun

falling into granite land rising

9 thunderstorm still

Like his peers, this artist-academic internalized a need to create. To aspire and be productive. To participate in social organization, institutions and cultural structures. To work to deadlines. And then, to let go.

Through childhood little Mick experienced uncontrollably letting go. In the heights of social laughter, he would piss himself. With a wave of belly convulsions, he experienced muscular surging pushing piss from his body, and then the dampness of soiled clothing. Feelings of playful pleasure quickly transformed into shame. One moment, laughter bonded the group. When his transgression was pointed out with gleeful disgust, another wave of group laughter ensued. But not in his body. Feeling laughed at, the patterns of a self-reproaching superego consolidated his being. He learned to hide his source of embarrassment. He tried to resist, tighten and control. Damn difficult, and it often produced a more powerful pulsing surge when he could no longer contain ... himself, his fluid, his vulnerability, and the shame.

The youngster fearfully imagined consequences of the transgressions, but little actual bullying was inflicted. Social condemnation was subtle. He cultivated secret strategies of protecting himself from hurt, finding safe distance through inner imaginative life, and partial belonging to groups. Navigating a knot of pleasure, prohibition and excess came to be repeatedly rehearsed through future acts of creative expression.

In the adult artist's life, building up intensity prior to the release became a way of working. Letting go... of responsibility?... of 'the work'?... of his high aspirations? All-nighters ensued. Making intense experiential passages. Performance installations of context-specific encounters. Heightening moments. Amplifying thresholds. Durational performances. Many ways of calling forth a dialogical practice navigating tensions of containing and releasing; of crafting recognition among social constructs, while pursuing the vibrance of creative disturbance; tending the weave of liveliness and deadliness.

When university colleagues jumped ship, he chose to find words, gestures, the truth, the heart and a poke under the rib. Yes, play the eulogy game! Within the wake-sleep of night, words come, scores, arrangements, feelings for ways... scribbled into notebooks.

*drifting in the excesses of worldly things
lifted with curiosity, riding imagination
you auto-generated text, you spell-corrected you
you muck you mock you mick you monk
you slowly inhale, from the base of the pubis
to the lower diaphragm
and pause*

8 walking sand and sky

He is a beneficiary of settler colonialism, and past national policy that afforded free education. Amidst the layering intersection of crises, an intractable inter-generational injustice prompts an itch, a rash, an outrage, an invitation.

He is the first of his family to study university degrees. And so his children pursue higher education, with the debt of fees. He's accessed institutional resources, academic freedoms and now a voluntary redundancy package. Uncomfortably comfortable... these fortunate-for-some circumstances.

A fourth-generation descendent of uninvited settlers with English, Welsh and Scottish ancestry, Mick lives on a continent with the highest record of species extinction. True, his generation has expended huge non-renewable Earth resources in pursuing global lifestyles of immense opportunities. And now future generations inherit increasing challenges.

Upon acquiring the bush conservation land set in a granite uprising said to be 450 million years old, having endured a painful marriage breakdown and entered into a new relationship, he painted a word on a card, placed this on its house mantle piece, to dwell with, and to problematize. LANDED.

Living and working on stolen land. Still benefiting from the dispossession of the land's First peoples. He had earlier come to inner-city home ownership through his partner's family chain of intergenerational wealth. In the bush, relation to land felt pronounced, undeniable, inviting. How now to engage meaningfully with reparations, hearing testimony, truth-telling, being an ally?

The option ever brazenly quipped in artworks by Aboriginal artist Richard Bell echoes: 'You can go now.' Hmmm.

Yes, this white cis male artist academic position is well established. So then, finding one's own steps to disentangle as beneficiary of the colonial project, of patriarchy, of white privilege? Well, this one is now leaving the university dance floor, stepping aside, making space. Go shrug off that white fragility! Mick is offering himself to the compost heap of entropy, turning over some hope for change in institutions, in cultures of learning and knowing, in ways of being in the world. He will feel sunrise and sunset, moon cycles and the specific local effects of El Niño and La Niña.

*the de-institutionalisation zone is approaching
opportunities for unlearning anew
find stillness lapping the sun
feel it whipper snipper, white cockatoo
extreme bushfire risk, scattering of stars
pick the breath up below the diaphragm
slowly smoothly inhale to the side chest
and pause*

7 emptiness

Experiencing the wondrous creative emergence of the live event repeatedly inspired his awe. Again, he feels entranced, called forth, giving over to a spirit of openness.

With doctoral students he learned about creative grappling with aspirations, prohibitions and inhibitions. About desires to be authentic, valued, to contribute and to be loved. About how to find poise and dignity. And about the careful, considered, ethical and often unconscious processes of creative self-authorization and self-realization. He is moved, eyes glistening, rekindling the joy of such trusting intimate exchanges. You people rock!

Mick *moved* through creative practice research. With movement-based public domain events, festivals and installations, performing mobilities, journeys of cultural transports and transformations via tramways, walking, cycling, shipping, ... *emoting*. And now in a contrapuntal move, he is embarking upon place-based creative enquiry. His hair is left uncut, registering the duration of the body's cell production, windswept with cliché. Feeling for kinds of living entanglement, for kinships, for kindnesses, for other selves.

Two summers after the online departure, neither a post-COVID gathering with university colleagues nor the usual gesture of a parting gift had materialized. These have been exhausting times. Unprecedented! So Mick bakes fruit tarts, brews tea and hosts an afternoon gathering in a city park to mark... 'sixty laps around the sun ... clocking out of university ... falling into granite land rising'... and requests: 'Please each bring an empty cup that you're happy to give away to another as a gift exchange of drinking vessels.'

Semesters ago, the uni's human resources group had gifted him a tacky coffee mug, emblazoned with his name, professorial status and uni logo. He passes it on with tongue-in-cheek warmth to his youngest PhD graduate, now a junior colleague. A witty collaborator, decades ago a former student, loans Mick a powered auger tool for digging... a hole.

feel the grasp of identities dissolving

this... 'I'... 'me'... 'he'... 'artist'... 'prof'...

uncertainty... not-knowing... not-not-nothing

porous, pluralized, they...

communing with expanded relations of kin

inhabiting moments of biting absence

dwelling anew with a present calling

do not be attached

even though attached to stories of identity

of communities, of life and work

learn... to not

be attached

6 dust patterns

Feeling spaciousness arising within and without, somehow nowhere and everywhere. Gentle colours in that darkness, giving way to a clear brightness of light.

For 150 years around here gold-seeking settlers have dug vast systems of holes. At age 18, M met the cave of death. The sister thrown from a car, suddenly dead, sculpting a kind of dwelling with absence that gave form to life's presence. A ghosting. Soon after, the 'manslaughter' of M's risk-addicted uncle, and the mysterious death of the uncle's wife, both splattered in tabloid media, casting a shroud of family speechlessness. M called towards the enigma of death.

On the road before dawn, M places a hand on the chest of the kangaroo, just killed after it jumped into the vehicle path. Shocking, for a long-was-vegetarian. Then, to respond. Soon M is angling the knife, peeling back the furred skin, gleaning from how-to YouTube videos, slicing flesh from bone, passing through another threshold of once-was selfhoods. Sixteen kilos of magnesium-rich meat that will help heal M's shoulder injury, and implode assumptions around care.

To protect two of the oldest yellow-box gum trees from wildfire, M tries to burn the decades of its fallen leaves and branches, and grass, only to have fire smoulder in the root systems, killing one tree. The other struggling to resource its epicormic growth. Now symbols of foolhardy ignorance.

Ten years ago, the southern brown bandicoot was common in this bushland, now locally extinct due to feral fox predation, and habitat burned by wildfires. M learns the local bird species, joins citizen science bird surveys and contributes data to indicate habitat health. The lead ecologist admits we are likely counting towards extinction. M is one of the majority of humans today living without totem species, without a cultural bond of responsibility to care. And now living alongside the last known beings of numerous species, living among endlings.

Renunciating one's name, ego and status. Indeed it isn't easy. Can cultivating presence with the emergence of events nudge M away from anthropocentric self-absorption, and with happenstance, into connection with the spirit of things? A subtle art of retreat, of listening, noticing, communing? Perhaps practice bringing life closer to more life, of being embedded within forces that elicit... a multi-species reciprocity of aliveness? Ha! Hubris? Softening, M dwells with the limits and the powers of language, of being a subject.

creaturely worlding relations always there

noticing the magical fullness of beings

with spiralling and shape shifting

beyond human exceptionalism

pick up the breath below the side-chest

inhale to the upper-chest collar bones, and pause

5 stone navigating stars

Walking alongside parents towards death, M's father shuffles, tripping and falling along a coastal limestone wall uneven with the can-do skilfulness, self-deprecating humour and blind-spotted prejudice of a frontier culture.

M takes father to his father's gravestone, re-linking three generations. The father's progress-facing mind no longer neatly arranges things. Hands-on and do-it-yourself father recently gifted M tools that father used to make things: a carpenter's claw hammer, a wood-shaping plane, a plywood boat-builder's compass. The tools' handles are smoothed and darkened by father's hands. How to loosen one's grip, to be at peace with lessening control? From father's gift of maritime navigation charts, M gently tears these cartography instruments of colonial knowledge acquisition into fragments, pasting them back together as masks, inviting the inhabitation of imbrication. How to face that one is near done; might not have been right; could reorient to nurture the light revealed in the cracks? Father and mother request 'no funeral.'

Father's body is manifesting an inability to open the bladder and let loose. A catheter affords a trickling release into a leg-strapped collecting bag. M massages father's feet, clips his hair, wraps his wet body in a towel. And in the hospital car park, reaches through the passenger side-window and up father's trouser leg to fill a urine sample. 'Lucky the cops weren't passing,' teased the nurse.

Demise moving nearing. Shocking when cancerous tumours appear in the breast of the one beside at night, in the pancreas of the one with whom children were made, and in multiple organs of the young artist friend so quickly slipped from a promise-filled life to mortal end, who would interject for relief: 'Anyone for tea?'

As M teases out a eulogy to selves shed in transformation, father is chipping away at his chronology of life: early rural days, then pursuits of urban life, adventures in the elements. Things done. A line of intergenerational learned behaviours of resourceful men seeking the better life, once capable of hand-felling the ancient magnificence of immensely tall Karri and Jarrah forests. M stands beside brother. Signs their parents' wills. Plants trees. Seeks to soften the superego. Blushes at self-righteousness, bends at breeze.

*yet, inhabiting seven-generation thinking
the children's children's children will ask
who are the honourable ancestors
beginnings... ends... growth rings...
with circadian time... with geologic time...
with the long now and the every-when
becoming reptilian
exhale down the outer chest, abdomen, to pubis
and pause*

4 circling minerals

The geologic time of this granite tor landscape quietens one, as the bushland seduces on this once eastern coastal seabed of the Gondwanaland mega continent.

During the same three decades that M inhabited an urban artist-academic lifestyle of global reach, the 16 hectares of bushland was, with foresight of its previous landholders, being regenerated with the biodiversity of indigenous species. A dream of semi-self-sufficient lifestyle manifested, with mud-brick dwelling, orchard and vegetable plot. And a lovingly crafted English garden, a make-believe heart of the Imperial mother. M observes, respects. And questions: which legacies do we sustain, by choice, or unknowingly?

Layers of regional invasion: first driven by underground gold resources, then harvesting of timber and stone, hoofed animal grazing, cropping, introduced animal and plant impacts. Today vast tonnes of rock are pummelled to find an ounce of gold deep under the nearest town, while a one-kilometre underground mine shaft now hosts a particle physics laboratory looking for Dark Matter, by scientists yet to be enlivened to Indigenous sky knowledge.

M pisses into the bucket. Adds worm-compost juice, soaks it into charcoal and offers slow-release replenishment to the patch of food-growing soil. Probably as much as pissing into the wind.

So much undoing to do. And doing to resist. M feels under-prepared. Overwhelmed. Unsettled. Worried about money. Hard physical DIY work to do! Struggling to focus agency, action, time. Humbled. Those elliptical artist ways encounter wider encircling arcs that challenge the capacity to notice, to register, to listen to. How to possibly 'land-manage' this place where human-induced climate change is palpable? Where one evacuates when the state's emergency app declares, 'Catastrophic Fire Risk'. Not a fantasy of wilderness. Not a tree-change. Not sure. In awe. Looking into the fire.

M is implicated, slowly feeling for discernment, for holding the responsibility of stewardship, for living with chance. Choices to be made, prioritizing diversity of life, collecting Indigenous plant seed to nurture back into Country. Decisions made to end life. Removing a hundred varieties of rose bushes, then sycamore, lavender, rabbits, foxes, feral cats. Begin eating the problem of deer.

M cultivates trust to rejuvenate a regional group of current landholders with interest to care for land. All from elsewhere. All grappling with this place, wrangling with their place, with all this here, now, unravelling. Embarking upon kinds of reckoning together.

*dwelling with entropy
rekindling the learned stories of collapse
mythologies of metamorphosis
peaceful acceptance
turning toward involution*

3 smoke

A hundred steps from the memory-foam pillows is a granite rock shelter. More than ancient. A site of rock-art, tool artefacts, midden of shell and ash. This campsite gathering mob, generations upon generations.

The site holds its rock-weighty reminder of violent dispossession. *Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.* M retreats from metropolitan artistic industriousness, from the manifestations of an extractive drive, a technology-led growth economics. Solitude here. Loneliness too. Phrases commonly shared by the land's First Nations mobs are beginning to share their wisdom: *Country needs people, people need Country. Healing Country, healing people. We don't own Country, Country owns us. We have cultural obligations to care for Country. Right Country, right time, right fire.*

A neighbouring house flies the 1901 flag of the Nation State, made of Union Jack and the Southern Cross. It's currently home of the jovial Vietnam War veteran who will oblige in disposing of trapped feral cats with a 22 shotgun pellet, and say like a gentleman, 'It is my pleasure'. And ask, 'What will you call your place?' Silence. 'You increase the property value with a good name'.

How to inhabit being a 'landholder'? How to hold land with tender care? To be an honourable, uninvited, temporary steward of place, of an ecosystem, of life? M explores land justice, giving land-back schemes. What if the children do not inherit this land title, but experience the gift of giving back, of feeding forward?

It's an uncanny chance encounter when M meets a custodian of this Country who shares exactly the same name. They each see it on the tags pinned to shirts. *One blackfella, one whitefella.* They are thrown by the strangeness, laughing, uneasy. They grin the idea of making a comic duet. M is woken on the eve of the national election, dreaming the two of them stand for parliament, two distinct people, as one political candidate, with the one name. Making something greater than either or both, something third. An Uncle later suggests, with poise, that there is already enough confusion.

M steps aside, steps back, and learns to wait. Then being entrusted to walk alongside custodians reintroducing cool cultural fire practices to care for Country. *Right Country, right time, right fire.* Learning together. Healing together.

*possessive pronouns, weathered by water, by this wind
this long time*

unsettling this presumption of life's station

that Milky Way receding to this Dark Emu sky

slow smooth inhalation

up the inner column of the spine

from seat of the tailbone to crown of the scalp

and pause

2 energy

Night walking anodyne suburban streets, teenaged M and restless friends re-shape a wire clothes-hanger into a straight length. A swinging arm lobs the wire into the sky. Try again, until it lands across the overhead power lines.

Cracking sounds. Sparks of orange, violet and crimson puncture the darkness, as they run, hearts thumping, a vacuum in young souls. The suburb blacks out. The youth feel rebellious power.

At a smoking ceremony preceding a cool burn on the land, invited to follow the mob of custodians and First peoples, M bends into the fire's cleansing smoke. The air currents seem to change, smoke drawn to this present embodiment of settler lineage.

And M hears birdsong anew. Coming to know the habit of echidna, of wallaby, stumpy tail lizard, red-bellied black snake, blue-banded bee, sulphur crested white cockatoo, grey shrike thrush and white-browed babbler. The wattle blooms, the spider orchids opening, a grass-tree flowering after fire, prickly acacia dominating.

M makes iterations of a sound-walk the morning invited guests arrive. Walking and recording talking, just as it is, sharing processes of learning from the place, from this day in the six Indigenous seasons, to guide listeners to surrender into the land and be curious of its lore. An 'unsettling arrival walk'. Clad in headphones, the visitors retrace M's steps, hearing footsteps layer upon their own. M lightly hosts so as to bring up one's ghosts. An invitation to acknowledge. To open up to tales, to the untold, and to the untellable. To feeling it. In the zones of... Spirit? Prana? Qi?

Sun and cloud passing over bent knees, pulling out invasive plants brought to this place for agriculture, or aesthetic familiarity, or sustaining dreams and practices of elsewhere. M watches the breath. Remote cameras watch the patterns of destructive feral animals, the use of nest boxes by squirrel gliders, spotted pardalote.

When a local custodian mob set up camp to protect the landscape of sacred trees from the damage of a state government planned highway, M conspires and contributes hand-made reflective mock road-signs, held vertical upon fallen branches of black wattle.

A red sign: WRONG WAY
 FELLAS

A green sign: TRUE WAY
 NO THRU WAY

*body knows the quietude of gravity
the cosmic distribution of atoms
sensation... bubbling up... and... slowly...*

*let cascade
down the outer spinal column*

1 thresholding

A diffused orange light smothers the late afternoon landscape, held in the thick haze of smoke from days of wildfires burning an immense area of biodiverse bush landscape.

Ten minutes, or three decades, a 'career', or multiple arcs brought to life? All but a flicker of flame. A fluidity of temporalities. So much happenstance unfolding of experience to come. Unknowable. Yet signalled in the oldest stories that keep returning, of metamorphosis, creation and destruction, collapse of civilisations, of retreat and of bearing witness to tell. Renunciation. Dwelling in transformation. An ever-present co-mingling among energies.

Colleagues in the online farewell look at one another in an onscreen gallery-view grid of boxes. Facing screen, M speaks into a megaphone with its looping record and replay function repeating the uttered refrain:

(may we fare well)

((may we fare well))

(((may we fare well)))

... then presses the Zoom 'leave meeting' button. Gone.

The first ones to comment: 'Ooh, Mick is good at leaving'. 'We will miss this!' And the deadpan jest: 'He has left twelve minutes before five o'clock. We should dock his pay!'

Remember Aboriginal elder Bill Neidjie telling us all: 'Tree... he watching you.'

bathed

the maternal bringing forth life

feeling

- out - of - time -

this... as it is

former lives nibbled away by marsupial antechinus

dissolved in the ancient digestive tracts of termites

carried with smoke

do not be distracted

that fox still dragging prey to den

the kookaburra with irreverent laughter

await invitation

to listen with custodians

dwell with ancestors, inhabit more kinds of kin

planetary relations rotating within

consciousness expansive

still - with that vastness beyond breath

may we fare well

