

Her Uncle the Historian

She remembered the first time the family went camping. They walked along the Bibbulmun Track in southwest Australia and at dusk they set up tents by an old wooden bridge. When the air grew cold her dad lit a fire and her uncle the historian told everyone about the magnificent track that snaked through 600 miles of country. At night she lay in the tent hoping to hear voices of the Noongar people who had walked along it for over 50,000 years.

The next time they went camping the family drove northeast for six hours to a place called Kadji Kadji. It was the middle of summer. Dry grass fractured under every step. Flies performed a slow drunken dance. They pitched tents and walked to the small rock pools her uncle knew about. She stripped down to her bathers and stood thigh-deep in burnt soupy clay. That night she sweated on her sleeping bag while her father and uncle drank and sang under the star-freckled cosmology.

In the morning they set off for a place called Perenjori. They drove for over an hour with the windows down, hot air blowing across her face. Her uncle the historian told them that Perenjori was a Yamatji word that meant waterhole. She followed the burnt orange road, a never-ending driveway lined with low scrub that would lead them to an ancient body of water.

When the station wagon came to a halt its doors burst open and she peeled her sticky thighs from the vinyl. The landscape had changed to a smooth rocky surface – an artist's palate dabbed with red, orange and brown. She saw the expansive waterhole filled to the brim with clear water and drew excited breath. She held it. A group of people were at the water. Her rough count threw up a hundred.

The large group of people laughed and waved and called her and her family over to join them in their fun. She imagined running over, holding onto her knees and jumping off the rocky ledge and into the water with the kids. She pictured herself racing with them in a swim to the other side.

But she felt the pull of her tourist family who stood fastened to the rocks, too stilted to join in, and she became them instead. And so she waved to the group of people and turned before she could see their baffled faces. She walked slowly back to the car. On the drive back her uncle the historian didn't utter a word.