

Japanese by Clare Aman from NSW

Pillowed above the oars
And deep in sleep until dawn breaks
I wake to find no ship:
The one that bears my longings in the dream
Has borne me in the daylight from this boat.

The Priest Jien

It was in Yunta, where the autumn wind can arrive in quelling gusts, that I first saw Mr Suzuki. He was standing in the bar of the Imperial Hotel, shuffling and smiling and letting his arms hang limp, almost bowing. I was waiting for someone to notice me so I could buy my cask of wine. There was a potbelly stove and the crowd jostled around it, shouting and boasting. With that smile he would have been wishing to be near the stove, but he was such a wispy man that no-one had thought to beckon him over.

Yunta is in stony country after the road has taken you in a straight line into South Australia from the east. I'd stopped for the night in a gravel park where other travellers had pulled up, yellow light behind their curtains.

Back in my campervan with the wine I lay looking up at the moon outside my window, thinking about the tiny Japanese man.

In the morning the tussocky grass was frost-withered and I was glad of my quilt. Out of my window I saw a small motorbike beside a dome tent. The Japanese man crawled out of the tent and set a pan on a gas burner. Hunched over the stove, he spread his hands above the pan. Soon he lifted the pan and tilted it over a cup. As I sipped my own coffee, I watched him holding the cup against his cheek.

He took down his tent and packed everything into two yellow duffle bags which he strapped to his motorbike. He put on gloves, jacket and helmet. Now there was only the bike. He did star jumps, one, two, three, four, five, six. Then he pushed the bike around to face the road, first letting out a little cry. Hai-yah!

I remember my encounters with Mr Suzuki in the way of a series of ink wash paintings. The pictures seem instructional, like the steps of a teaching, but they have their own beauty. I remember him that morning in bold brush-strokes, seizing the motorbike as he gives his cry of resolve. It was not exactly an encounter - I only watched from inside my campervan. But I considered it our second meeting. My life is solitary; even the slenderest thing can seem like something.

If that was our second encounter, the ink wash painting of our first encounter shows Mr Suzuki standing alone, smiling at the floor. It is as if this picture of him is a detail of a larger painting which would have included the bar of the Imperial Hotel, and the drinkers, and the pot belly stove. I would also be there somewhere, with my hand in my pocket. It is bashful, the way he stands. He could be the bottle washer come out of the kitchen for a break. There is no drink in his hand. He is very slight, just a feather of a man, and all around him is empty white space.

There was nothing in Yunta, so I took the road to Port Augusta.

My campervan, a Getaway, is like a cubby house on wheels. I bought it with my divorce settlement. There's a toilet and shower, a fridge, my dish-brush hanging on a hook. Everything slides and hinges perfectly. At night I climb up to sleep on purple sheets. In the afternoons I sit at my window and pour my wine. Going on the road is the best thing I've ever done. What I like most about my van is that it's so self-contained. There's seldom any need to climb out except for my petrol or groceries or wine, or to attend to my waste and water tanks.

Those were the things I needed to do in Port Augusta.

After my shopping I drove to the foreshore to make lunch. The day had become hot and I propped a sunshield over my window. As I parked, I noticed the Japanese man sitting at a picnic bench. Beside him were his stove and his pan.

West of the Dividing Range, nomads trawl every highway. It's not unusual to see the same couples in Meand'er motorhomes rafted up at free camping spots, or the same backpackers in rented vans. I'm not sociable but I'm observant. I watched him from my window as he gazed out at the Spencer Gulf. That is the third ink wash picture. It's a quiet picture: the expanse of water, and over to one side the small still man with his tea-things.

After a while he stowed his things and rode across the street to a petrol station. I needed fuel too: I dropped my plate in the sink and slipped into the driver's seat.

At the bowser he was filling fuel cans. 'Getting warm!' he said to me as I unscrewed my petrol cap. Everything was tied to his bike so neatly, and he was so small, that I did something out of the ordinary. I asked him where he was going.

'Uluru, Carpentaria, Kakadu, Tokyo!' he said.

He told me he'd been all over Australia.

'Eighty-seven camps!'

'On this?' I asked. It was the kind of motorbike a farmer would use.

'I am small, must have a small bike,' he said. 'Cannot go fast.'

I told him my campervan was slow. I lumber along holding everyone up, especially in rain.

He said he'd been in a storm near Nyngan.

'Very heavy rain,' he said. 'Thunder!'

He'd stopped and waited by the roadside. 'Until gentle rain.'

I know that road. There's no shelter, nothing.

'Very frightened!' he said, and laughed.

The fourth ink wash picture is Mr Suzuki laughing, close up. His chin is finely whiskered and his hair is bedraggled, as if the end of the paintbrush was frayed. He's about my age, his neck is quite scrawny. Very frightened!

I thought: he is not like the men I know with their red faces and their mouths obstinate like a sheep's mouth. I told him yes, there could be unexpected rain in autumn, and we wished each other a safe journey.

Before I left Port Augusta I bought a packet of green tea and a teapot. Then I set off north.

I am the captain of my journey. I am like an expeditioner charting a route, rather than the sort that clammers up a hill with a flag. Landscapes interest me. I like the geological aspect, the span of how things are formed. Even though I avoid leaving my campervan, I study the country. I have my books, maps and notebooks. I was a librarian but I should have been a geographer. I enjoy knowing where I am. I take my bearings with a compass, inside looking out. I dislike my van from the outside. It is so large and blank.

Now that we knew each other, I named the Japanese man Mr Suzuki. But there'd been something in our conversation which disappointed me. He said you could go all day and the land stayed the same.

'No change. Funny country!' he said.

I felt he was wrong. There is no painting for the small moment of my disappointment. It's just a hidden imperfection in the fourth picture, the laughing one. But a small flaw can add beauty.

I kept driving north. I camped at Woomera and Coober Pedy. Whenever I made the green tea I used slow, ceremonial movements. It's not true that the country doesn't change. You just have to look. The soil changes colour. The trees hunch and twist as it gets drier. Spinifex grows in the harshest places. I hoped Mr Suzuki would notice something he thought beautiful or strange.

I admired Uluru from every carpark. They don't want us to climb. That is alright with me, we have taken so much already. But I noticed a little ant-line of climbers, arms aloft for photos.

I expected to see Mr Suzuki there. I couldn't help wondering, what did you do? Were you one of the ants? I mean, everyone climbs Mount Fuji for the sunrise. There's no question.

I stayed for a week reading about land formations. Brawling lizard men and snake women shaped the landscape. The earth is over six billion years old. Uluru was once under a sea. The wind has blown the ground away, and the red hunk is all that remains for now. Human history is just a blink.

If I'd met Mr Suzuki there I might have asked if he climbed up. But the fifth picture is enigmatic. Uluru stands in an empty landscape. The brush has barely touched the paper, just enough to convey rock, horizon and sky. But high on the rock is a speck. It could be just a fleck of ink. You can't tell.

I cannot say this fifth painting depicts an encounter. Yet there can still be a painting. Anything is possible.

But I did see him, near Barrow Creek. I'd stopped to make my green tea. It's such an empty road. A motorbike can pass you, taking an age to vanish. The sixth picture, mostly sky, shows a tiny figure wheeling away into an uncertain landscape.

In the evenings I read about Darwin in the war. There were sixty-four air raids. Hundreds dead, ships sunk and sailors washed up, all on Admiral Yamamoto's orders. I worried that Mr Suzuki didn't know about all this. You don't know what people are taught about the past.

At a roadhouse I thought it was him with his back turned, looking through the magazines. I moved closer. He was checking out bikini girls on choppers. But it was someone else. I felt like asking at the counter, using my hands to describe him, if anyone had seen him buying fuel or a steak sandwich. Or maybe he would have heated a cup of miso soup somewhere, alone. Anyway, it didn't seem worth an ink wash picture.

I took the Carpentaria Highway. I wanted to look out on the Gulf, where a great freshwater lake had once been. I wondered how far Mr Suzuki's fuel cans would carry him. The northern roads are long. It was a feat on a small motorbike. But I decided he wouldn't brag about his journey. He was too small and polite to swagger. I tried not to be bothered by the fact that he kept count of his campsites.

The Carpentaria Highway is a single lane of rough bitumen that crests, unfenced, through dust and mulga. If a triple road train comes you have to pull off, heart in mouth, while it swerves past. Brahmin cows are the same colour as the land. They can be waiting anywhere. Overturned, they puff and stink. It's a dangerous road and I regretted taking it. The ink wash picture set on this road is the seventh and final one.

I know first aid and I know this: never remove a crashed motorcyclist's helmet. They might have broken their neck.

I came across him an hour after the turnoff. He made a lonely sight, face-up in that spreading country under the blue sky. He was covered in dust. I lifted his visor. One leg of his jeans was a mat of blood and gravel. I called triple zero on my satellite phone. I told them he was Japanese. I said he was conscious and breathing. The woman on the other end said Careflight would come. When? As soon as they could.

I moved my van to shade him. Flies busied themselves on his leg and tried to crawl inside his visor. As the sun climbed, the shade disappeared. I rigged a shelter over him using sticks and my sunshield.

'They'll come,' I said. I wished I was in my van.

The open visor made a window for his eyes. 'Very long time alone, tired of the sky,' he said. 'Dreaming about my wife.'

I told him his wife would be worried.

I didn't expect him to tell me she was dead.

The brush moves swift and delicate across the paper. There is always beauty and sadness. I bent over him. I kept the flies away

and trickled water to his lips. I kept the sky from him. It is something thin and solitary, a man who has lost his wife.

‘When did your wife die?’ I asked him.

‘Three years,’ he said. ‘Crying very much. My sleeves, always wet.’

He lifted one hand to touch his other arm.

Once the brush is on the paper, the stroke must be executed. The last painting shows an immense, low-rolling landscape with spindly trees. The horizon is so distant that there is hardly any distinction between earth and sky. A figure sits on the ground, face upturned towards a tiny aeroplane. The plane is already far away, and will soon fly out of the picture. That is me on the ground. My van cannot be seen: this picture, even though it shows such a vast landscape, is only a detail of a far larger painting. I am watching an air ambulance fly Mr Suzuki to Darwin. He will be alright. Despite its scale, the picture is simple and intimate. Time and distance, object and mystery are fused. There is harmony between bright and dark, filled and empty spaces. Through asymmetry there is balance. It is my Japanese moment.