

Bluebone Soup by Julie Woodland

Turquoise water wraps fast round fat grey pylons, way out to the cruise ships. Clear on top then two, maybe three metres melting to a cobalt cloud. Dark shapes strain against the flow busting to get somewhere that doesn't involve my line or anyone else's by the look of it. Old fella left grunts 'bluebone' and gives another jerk. Plenty of talk about bluebone here. Everyone's got their stories, of course, but somehow today is different; somehow, today, there's nothing here. Mysterious. The spots that the blackfellas talk about are the worst. Must be havin' a laugh when they see you heading up a track they know is useless. Meanwhile, they're heading in the other direction. You'd think there'd be a bit of brotherhood between fishermen despite everything but apparently it's every man for himself. Even the women are cagey as shit. You won't get anything out of them but a sideways nod to the bucket if you ask.

It's not for the want of trying. You can stand knee deep in green gravelly soup near a mangrove, hoping you're not the one in every crowd the locals shake their heads about. A bloody mangrove, for Christ's sake, one eye on the float and one in front waiting for the ugly grey head to shoot up and all your nightmares come at once. Shit, just imagine. Lucky those tourists are floating further out and can't believe their luck just being here. Must be like paradise. Anything comes it'll take them first. Decoys. German takeaway. Soup clears, bluer as it creeps up legs. Step back up the beach as twisted trees are swallowed slowly from below. Smaller and smaller and now bobbing blobs of green.

There's only so much sun, even here. It's got to go down sometime, end your day ... the chance. There's only so much you can do when the soup gets sucked to Africa and you've got even less chance of nailing something. Pack up and move on. Reel in the fluoro bomber fast, skipping like a flying fish into the grey ripples. Cost me sixteen dollars. Hits the mud like a Catalina. Wouldn't be the first time these parts. Give it a rinse and slide it back in the tackle box with the rest of the school. Broome time, they call it. Another day tomorrow.

Why that café on the beach hammers the garlic I don't know. It floats up here and turns us off our food. Didn't used to need all that rubbish before, not that I did much with the dinner side of things of course. Timing is the key and best to keep it simple; a few veges, a bit of meat – can't go wrong. Not like the television when every time you turn it on there's a cooking show turning a feed into bloody rocket science. Beryl in the van site over the back is another regular. Got a pressure cooker that sings out Tuesday afternoon; soup or stew. She's not bad, Beryl, always sending a container my way but it's not on to keep accepting. Wears out your welcome. In any case, they're pulling out Friday. Had their usual three weeks here before heading up the Gibb River Road.

Ralph doesn't knock it back. They've been feeding him for six years now and he's excited every time it's offered. Silly old coot, getting greyer and grizzlier by the week. Doing it hard, old bugger; keeps watching and waiting and never gives up. A man ought to break him the news.

"Toughen up, mate" I say to him "another day tomorrow ..."

Got to admit I look at him some days and wonder if it'd be kinder to end his wait. When he can't get up that first step any more it'll be a sign. There's always a time but the trick is putting your finger on it. In the meantime he's not a bad fishing mate. Doesn't protest if we're held up or I keep casting after sundown.

Barks like hell out the window at that mob on the track to the Cape. Hippies, probably, though some look plenty old enough to know better. A doctored road sign in the red dust says "Reduce speed" and a slash of paint turned "speed" to "greed". Propaganda. Worse.....graffiti. Should be bloody ashamed of themselves. Smart-arses, probably never worked a day in their lives and think hooking up with some of those indigenous will make all the difference. Bring on the gas plant. I'll go as fast as I bloody well like on the track and hope the cops haul them out the way of the bulldozers and everybody gets on with it. Bugger the whales and all their hangers on.

Ralph hangs his head out the window and takes it all in, even the dust. If his eyes run a bit I'll give him a wipe clean.

“Cheer up mate,” I say, “no good bawlin’.”

Some tinned food and a bit of toast and he’s happy enough and good company on the track. All we need really, keeps it nice and simple and the dust doesn’t bother us in the van. Not now. Bit of a wipe and ten minute once-over now and again. Rinse the angels and back on the shelf. Bone china they call it, pale blue, kneeling face to face. Bloody nuisance on a rough track. Quick sweep of the sand with the mini-broom and shuffle the sleeping bag. Little bugger slides under it and sticks his head out lookin’ up with those big eyes. Just looking. Says stuff all so it’s bit of a one-sided conversation these days. Gives us plenty of time, that’s for sure.

Not that we’re not busy. Flat out. Corrugations shook the diff on the way back from the Lagoon and once the gasket comes from down south it’ll be days under the four-wheeler on the tarp. Then the ankles appear out of the vans. Everyone will have their two cents worth of course, especially the flash bastards with the hi-tech setups who’ve never fixed more than a jammed typewriter. Superannuation-on-wheels I call them, standing round with soyacinos asking stupid questions or whinging about interest rates. Try filling a tank on a pension. Waiting for the day when Ralph shoots out from under the chassis and sinks the fangs into that skinny set belonging to the know-all lawyer and his blonde missus. I won’t be the only one laughing.

“Steady mate,” I’ll say, “maybe not a lawyer. This setup is all we’ve got”.

About a week or two should get it done. A trip or two up the peninsular before the heat turns to wet and the supers start to flap and cackle. The trickle out the park gate turns into a flood the stickier it gets. Even the bloody bluebone leave the shallow reefs and drop lower down for a feed. Every man for himself. Leave it go a fortnight til there’s a bit of space around and the wharf empties. Pick your tides and throw in like there’s no tomorrow. But eventually, you’ve got to chuck it in. Ralph can’t handle the heat like he used to and you have to be fair. Air-con stays on most of the way to Gero, blowing his whiskers north as we push through the shimmer. Four days should do it, dodging the fluoro mobs, past the red hills and spear grass and probably copping

a massive head wind. Watching the tide in the tank drop and dragging the gauge with it til the trees bend low with the howling sea breeze.

Christmas with my daughter's mob again. I suppose the kids will be glad to see us. Taller and less talkative each time, heads stuck in those gizmos. Wouldn't know what to get them now even if the money were there. Give a couple of notes in a card and let their mother work it out. At least I've got her sorted if I can keep the blue china buggers in one piece. Bit of nice paper and ribbon for presentation. She'll unwrap them slowly, carefully, like the paper matters and she doesn't want to spoil the surprise too early. Done the same since she was small. She'll know them as soon as the angels come out of the wrapping. Going quiet is fine as long as she doesn't get a bit teary and upset Ralph. They miss him when we pack up and start another bog lap around the country. Might even wonder if he'll make it back next time. Block of wood under the first step and steady, mate. Another day tomorrow.