



Chris Stuart

Chris Stuart has lived and worked in Corryong for four years and works at the local health facility. In her spare time, she likes to write about contemporary rural life and documenting the changes in small country towns.

“ Most rural writers are looking back, capturing past moments in time. I want to capture what is happening now, so that in a hundred years, my witness to moments in time, are celebrated just as much”.

DIRT & DIAMONDS

WINNER – OPEN CATEGORY

I don't remember much, not like other people, I don't have stories to tell that make people laugh. When I close my eyes and think back to my childhood – which I don't do very often, I only think of dirt. Warm, cold, hard, soft, wet, dry, sour and bitter sweet, tough and smooth dust with a hundred shades of white, brown and red. As a child, I would spend hours under the house, mesmerised at the way that each of small grains couldn't be squeezed out and crushed between my finger and thumb, grains of dirt so tiny that even though I couldn't separate each individual one, I desperately wanted to count them. I didn't go to school. I only knew how to count to about ten and when I tried that over and over, when I got to ten times counting ten, it confused me and I would fall back into the ground waving and banging my arms up and down so fast that the powdered dust would rise above me and I would pretend that I was lying among clouds. I would then roll over and look down on my place, my land, my community, my people. I could see the paths in and out of the houses, the main dirt road heading to the town and wondered if would ever get to where the end of that road meets another.

When the heat came? The land was baking dry I would pick up a handfuls of fine, floury dust and throw it into the air as high as I could manage, and then watch it briefly hover, swirl and dance, before I would imagine that it was rain starting to fall around me and over me. I especially loved it when my land would fall on my face and hair. It felt like a soft hand, touching my face, brushing my eyelids and lips. I would sometimes imagine that in each grain of dirt was my mother, so that she was all around me, covering and smothering me in a hundred thousand gentle ways. When the wet season came, the rains would turn my dirt from a warm red to a brown sludge, but I was happy because I believed these were tears

from my mother. Her dreamtime spirit was the ground, nurturing and guarding everything that grew and stretched towards the stars.

I learned to walk and I learned to fall. I liked the way I could roll over and over and the ground would cushion me and I especially loved it when I took my clothes off, the dirt was able to completely blanket me. I would laugh with the freedom and it was then that I understood happiness. I knew the land around me and it understood me. Sometimes, at night, lying under the house, and unable to sleep, I would turn on my side and put my ear to the ground and concentrate. I would hear the spirits talking, but in a language I didn't understand. If I squeezed my eyes hard enough and held my breath long enough, I would hear the voice of my mother. She would start telling me the story of the echidna. He was all alone in the world, but brave and could outsmart anyone who tried to catch him. I could never remember the end of the story because I made up so many endings myself. The next morning, I would spend hours talking to the echidna, trying to guess what he had done that night to catch food and how he stayed safe.

When I was about three feet tall and could touch the ears of a small horse, things changed. I didn't take much notice of people around me and I don't ever remember anyone calling me by my name, I don't think they knew and I had forgotten. At first I didn't understand what the change was, but it was like a snake you couldn't see but knew it was there, watching and coming for you. In the community, this snake loomed as an insidious, frightening and powerful presence. Everyone was affected. We kids were scared most the time and terrified at others. The fear kept us on guard, together and hidden.

We knew the cause was in the green and brown bottles and in small square cardboard boxes that were brought into the community by the taxis or the planes. This water was no good. It changed people. They became like bad snakes, twisted and deadly, poisonous, prepared to strike at anything and anyone. As I was getting bigger, I was starting to be noticed and for some reason I didn't understand at the time, my being around made some of the men purely venomous. To protect myself, by the light of the moon which sometimes reached between the floorboards under the house, I would draw goanna tracks around me in the dirt. The goanna spirit didn't like the bad snake and the bad snake knew this. In the morning, in the soft sand, I could see the thin wavelike tracks of the snake as it struggled back and forth between desire and death before a single line indicated that it lost the battle and its retreat was a single line heading towards open ground.

When the drinking would start in large groups, I would take myself off into the bush and stay there until I was so hungry my stomach stabbed. In this place, my land, my ground, my dirt was hard and unforgiving. I thought this was natural. My inside was the same. During the wet, I could stay away for days when I found water, but in the dry, I was forced back to my place. It was the arguing, the shouting, the slapping and screaming, the blood and the fear that made me feel shamed. One day, when one drinking session had been going on for nearly a whole week and no one was finding food, I was so hungry that I couldn't walk steady. The ground kept tipping. I found some rotten kangaroo tail near the campfire and

got caught eating this under the broken axle of an old car near the medical clinic. The man went to thrash me. In trying to duck a fisted backhander, I went headfirst into this soft pillow of red dust.

Curled up like the dogs and shrouded with dirt and keeping as still as a possible, I didn't care about the kicks. When he was gone, I buried my face further into the dirt and opened my mouth, so that the dirt would stick to my lips and tongue and I could feel the grit and inhale the smell. I used to imagine that I could pick up out individual pieces of the dirt on my tongue and teeth and could lie still and count how many there were, in tens. Then I would start counting all over again. I would keep doing this until all I could hear was silence.

A few days later all the bad water was gone and the snakes had disappeared too. Everyone breathed easier and the community retied and renewed their kinships. I was happy.

As an adult, I still remember the taste of the dirt, bitter and bland, but liked the way it felt like food and was crunchy. Sometimes I recall the dirt smelling musty and this was when I was usual sleeping near the dogs. I didn't mind their patchy skins and fleas. I loved them all. I loved the way they would sleep close to me and I loved the way they followed me around and I would laugh at them when their faces would scrunch up when they concentrated on scratching behind their ears. I tried to do the same and believed they laughed with me.

When it got so hot during the day that the air shimmered like it had a fever, and it was hard to move, I'd go outside under the house and shape small pikes of dirt and then turn some of them into bigger mounds and with my finger, make pretend steps going up to the top of the biggest. Then I'd run imaginary channels down and around the various piles, imagining rivers of water running fast and then at the bottom widening the channels to make a large stream which went down into a huge lake which banked onto a wooden pile. My earthworks was based on memories of a wonderful time long, long ago, when one of my aunties took me to visit some relations in a town, a big time away but not yet at the end of the dirt track.

I'd seen my first mountain. The biggest amount of dirt piled onto a rock I'd ever seen. For me it was like the whole earth was standing up by itself. Stones, the size of fifty kangaroos, poked out from the sides of the mountain, pockmarking the landscape. I was amazed. I didn't know this could happen and thought it magic. I asked how?

I was told that during dreamtime, the barramundi was so very proud of his looks and liked to jump out of the water so that all the land creatures could admire his beautiful shiny scales. One day, as he leapt higher than ever before, an eagle swept down and grabbed him with his claws. The barramundi got such a fright he started losing his scales and as the eagle flew higher and higher, barramundi scales rained down on earth and were turned into diamonds. I loved that story as I didn't know what a barramundi looked like and could only imagine diamonds as broken glass. When I got home, I would wet my finger and put dots of damp earth all over the ground and on my face and chest, pretending that I was the

barramundi, proud and beautiful and able to make diamonds. That precious piece of space under the house, with all my collected pieces of broken glass was my special place and that dirt was my whole and contented world for a long, long, time.

Then it all changed and I was taken away.

I'm an old man now and I'm dying. I am lying in a private hospital bed, in crisp white sheets, a watery metropolitan sun ekes through the shaded blinds and every day three different nurses, two cleaners and the odd volunteer, ask me how I am going. I am unable to speak and move, going nowhere, cared for and fed by well-meaning paid professionals. In my mind I turn the sterile clean room into a space situated under the floorboards of my childhood home. My white blankets get transformed into soft mounds of red earth. My mattress is raised at the edges all around me and I know that this is my goanna spirit surrounding and protecting me from the snake, which I can see hanging between the oxygen and suction cylinder above me, watching and waiting. I close my eyes and leave the land that created, loved, nurtured and protected me. I now head towards the river and the barramundi. Slowly I enter the water and start to swim awkwardly at first. My breathing becomes less laboured, easy and slow. I become the barramundi, strong and proud and for the first and last time in my life, I jump out of the water and shine like a diamond.