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Once upon the enchanted jungle – excerpt 1

Abstract:

‘Once upon the enchanted jungle – excerpt 1’ offers four short fictional pieces written as part of a larger project that attempts to unravel synergies between science and war, and capture the dark erratic mood that drifted across three different countries in August, 1945. These fictions follow three protagonists, an Australian soldier, a Japanese worker, and an American physicist, and are connected by a sequence of events that relate to the making and dropping of the atomic bomb. They aim to give pause for reflection on the future by tracing back to the past. Are there patterns of thinking that give insight to current events? Is it possible to be both thoughtful and thoughtless? What are the impulses that connect science and war? Recent novels such as Richard Flanagan’s *The narrow road to the deep north* (2014), probe the deep disturbance war brings to human life, while also dispelling romantic notions of heroism. The Australian classic, *The long green shore* (1995), by John Hepworth, explores the validity of the New Guinea campaign and the experience of soldiers. Dialogues with an Australian soldier engaged in the New Guinea campaign, and historical writings by and about the American physicist, Robert Oppenheimer, and a Hiroshima worker, form the basis of these stories.

Biographical note:

Dr Catherine McKinnon lectures in performance and creative writing at the University of Wollongong. In 2008 Penguin Viking published her novel, *The nearly happy family*. Her short stories, journal articles and reviews have appeared in *Transnational Literature*, *Text Journal*, *RealTime*, and *Narrative*. Her play *Tilt* was selected for the 2010 National Playwriting Festival and *As I Lay Dreaming* won the 2010 Mitch Matthews Award. In 2015, she was one of five writers nationally who won the Griffith Novella 111 Award. Her novel, *Storyland*, will be published by Harper Collins in early 2017.

Keywords:

Atomic – Second World War – Oppenheimer – 2/5 Australian Infantry Battalion – New Guinea – Aitape – Hiroshima

OPPIE

Birth

Mind you, this is well before Los Alamos. Kitty and I, five in the afternoon, drinking whisky.

‘The big hurdle for the Bethes is the need for *them* to join the military,’ I say.

Kitty squints her eyes, laughs. ‘Why should they join?’

‘Secrecy,’ I say.

I’ve been attempting, for some months now, to get the swells of the scientific community to join the Manhattan venture. But the military requirement is proving to be a deal-breaker.

‘Oppie, scientists know how to keep secrets.’

‘This is not only a national secret but a scientific one,’ I say, repeating what I’d said earlier to Hans Bethe. ‘Secrecy goes against our scientific code.’

‘Bulldust!’ Kitty almost spits it out. ‘You scientists pretend to share, but when sitting on the golden egg, all is hush hush in velvet slippers until you have the proof.’

Kitty is parked on the sofa, legs crossed, like a lithe Buddha. She has a monastic aesthetic in all things except her alcohol intake. She downs her whisky and stands to pour herself another.

‘No one in their right mind trusts the military, not completely,’ she says. ‘People like the Bethes have seen Hitler ruin their lives, as far as they’re concerned it’s not impossible to conceive of the American military going the same way.’

‘Now you’re being creative,’ I say.

‘Not creative, open minded.’

People underestimate Kitty. She has great intellectual clarity. But there’s sorrow in her. Somehow being with me has lessened her shining light and she’s taken to whisky as a temporary salve.

‘Do you really want another,’ I ask, as she pours a third.

‘Yes, I really want another,’ she says, measuring out a nip while keeping her eyes trained on me, as if to prove that staying within agreed limits is a cinch.

‘The United States is the defending not the attacking side, so right is with us,’ I say. ‘You’d be wise to remember that.’

‘Might is right. Ha!’ Kitty waves the bottle over my glass.

‘Or, at least, we have been forced to go on the attack in order to defend.’ I let her pour but then take the bottle out of her hand.

‘Listen Oppie –’

I love the way Kits pronounces Oppie. Ohhhpeee. She makes it sound free, like the vowels somehow are in charge, like the vowels belong not to the civilized world, but to the wilderness.

‘– I’m being devil’s advocate,’ she says. ‘You don’t need to convince me, but you do need to convince the Bethes. You want brilliant minds, you have to give them something. Oh, now you’re having a double, to my single, that’s not fair!’ She holds her glass out for a top up. ‘What is good for the goose is good for the gander.’

Surprisingly, I have poured myself another.

‘I am asking our scientists to create a gadget of such unimaginable power that it will end all wars to come, does it matter if they are or are not comfortably settled in their homes?’

Kitty’s rises up on the sofa, cheeks blazing. ‘You, Mr Comfort Man, have no idea, *no idea!* what it’s like to have lost a home and found it elsewhere. If you had you would understand the Bethes’ resistance.’

Now it’s my turn to scoff.

‘If the aim is to stop Hitler reaching vulnerable shores, vulnerable homes, does it matter if we scientists have to join up?’ I ask, plonking myself down next to Kitty as if to physically squash her taunts. ‘The United States is a home worth protecting, and you can’t protect it by hiding behind lace curtains.’

‘Now you’re being an aesthetic snob. Lace curtains are perfectly European. And you need to think like a European. Think alliances. Rabi is still adamant that radar is more important than your gadget,’ she says, practically, ‘He has more influence than you do, if you get him onside, you’ll get the Bethes.’

Kitty is and always will be my closest ally but she is also my wisest adviser.

‘You know, once we are at Los Alamos I won’t be able to tell you anything!’ I say.

‘I haven’t agreed to come yet,’ she says.

‘Not a word about what we are working on. Groves is steadfast on that point.’

‘Should I agree to come,’ Kitty says, ‘I wouldn’t want to know.’

‘You will, you will.’

She waves her glass at me. ‘It’s you who wants *me* to know things. So you can lecture.’

‘Not lecture.’

‘Debate then,’ she says.

‘You are my bouncing board,’ I say.

‘Oh swell, bouncing board - what happened to poetry?’

‘My Titania.’

‘Oldie but a goody,’ she says. ‘Only, you are placing yourself as Oberon. Isn’t that too much self-aggrandizement, even for you?’

‘Titania is the most beautiful creature in the fairy world,’ I say.

‘Honestly – you used to have real wit and charm, now you are a transparent manipulation machine. I’m disappointed. Watch out Oppie, your magic powers can be taken away, and it won’t be by me, it will be by those who claim might.’

Kitty is a straight-shooter, I’ll give her that. She didn’t hand out socialist pamphlets through her teenage years for nothing.

‘You know I won’t go unless you agree,’ I say.

‘You’ve already *agreed* to go,’ she says.

‘I can unagree. What?’

She juts her chin out, the way she does when she’s upset. And her body is poised, as if set to spring.

‘There is something I want to say,’ she says.

‘You don’t believe me, Kit, but it’s true.’

‘I wanted to tell you before,’ she continues.

‘Now you’re making me nervous.’

‘No need to be nervous.’

‘I am pouring us both another double,’ I say.

And I do just that.

‘What I am about to tell you – well, for some people it’s a thrill.’ She runs her fingers through her hair, rubbing her scalp, as if somehow this action will prepare her to spill all.

‘Is it as big a thrill as moving to Los Alamos to create the gadget?’ I ask.

‘For some, it is, yes, that big a deal.’

‘I am talking about a history making event,’ I say.

‘I’m talking about a baby making event,’ she says.

‘Oh.’

There is now a rather lengthy silence. Her statement is so completely unexpected. How can another child fit into all this?

‘Kitty.’

‘Yes,’ she says, but I can’t read her expression.

‘No.’ Somehow my voice rings too loud in the room.

‘I’m not pleased about it either.’ She shifts about on the sofa.

‘I don’t know what to say to you. You hardly managed with Peter and now ... another?’

Her face has that frown she gets when she is displeased. She can’t want it. I don’t believe she can want it. Does she not remember the scenes she created after Peter’s birth?

‘In New Mexico the women have a tonic,’ I say.

‘A tonic?’

‘It’s something natural.’

‘Natural?’

‘Stop repeating what I say, you know what I mean.’

‘Arsenic is natural,’ Kitty says.

She places her whisky glass on the table, rather dramatically, then ... then she smiles like Alice’s Cheshire cat.

‘Oh, Kitty!’ I say. ‘How could you?’ But I breathe out so fully, it’s like a pressure valve has been released.

Kitty is bending over, holding her stomach she is laughing so hard.

‘You should have seen your face,’ she says.

‘That was unforgiveable,’ I say.

‘How easily you say unforgiveable,’ Kitty muses. Suddenly she is not laughing. She sits up, stares at me intently. ‘But seriously now, tell me, what would be unforgiveable?’

JOE

Unforgiveable

We wait in the hot dark. Three of us in a two-man foxhole. Bren guns aimed at the thick jungle. Kingo and I, shoulder to shoulder. Miller has our back. Stewy and Clarke, over a way to our right. Birds squawk. Light bleeds through the trees. A mosquito buzzing in my ear. Kingo gives me a sideways look. *They’re coming*, he says. I catch the mozzie, squeeze it. Fat little bugger. Blood oozes between my fingers. Then north, a burst of bullets. We return fire.

Miller swivels and sprays the trees. ‘Miller behind!’ Kingo shouts over the noise, reminding Miller he is meant to be working as rearguard. It’s a precaution that has kept Kingo alive since Day One, and for Kingo, Day One is literally Day One. He was the forty-fifth man to join up with our battalion. Sure enough, ten minutes in, a bullet WHOOSH past my ear signals an enemy push from the south. Then, southwest, more shooting. Heavy fire in all directions. I feel a great need to keep my head tucked down. The noise is loud yet my breath is louder still. Kingo barks instructions. *Eleven o’clock now. Three o’clock, shoot.* We don’t see faces. Flashes of movement, that’s all. Stewy cops it. Ammunition in his shirt pocket that a Jap bullet hits. Two native runners come with a stretcher and cart him east.

When it goes quiet I think we’ve made progress. I keep my eyes focused ahead. Watch for leaves that move. There’s no breeze here. Just a shitty stink. Everything moist and dark. My arms ache from tension. For an hour, nothing. Noon, the Japs attack again. Nine hours we are at it. Finally, they retreat. We scamper out of our

foxhole and trudge southwest across the ridge to blast the village the Japs have been holding for six months. We're expecting to find food. Our own supply is short. Belly's are empty. We're aggressive and soon we are running forward. The natives have long since scarpered. On the far side of the village I spy Jap soldiers disappearing into the jungle.

The village is about twenty huts. Miller and I search for grub. We're dumbfounded when there is none. No garden beds either. But it's clear the Japs have had the worst of it. There's mounds of dirt between the empty huts. Shallow graves. They buried as many dead as they could before retreat. Respect, I think. Say it out loud.

'Hiding the damage done more like,' says Kingo.

Kingo, Miller and I are ordered to dig up the bodies.

I turn to Kingo with a look that asks: 'What the ?X#! for?' Some things are still new to me.

'The accountants of war,' Kingo says. 'Can't keep secrets from them.'

Turns out some high up numbskull, sitting back in a comfortable office in Melbourne or Sydney, wants us to write down what battalion the dead enemy are from. Miller and I get to digging. Kingo keeps an eye out. We're told the Japs are gone, but, like I said, Kingo trusts no one.

Rain spits down and the soil is like a sponge. Digging is easy. Plants run rampant in this country. Sometimes I stop and look around, just to take note. The cool light. Spider webs like vast canopies. Thousands of leaves coasting on air currents. There's a blurring here. A dissolving. The boundaries of myself sometimes disappear, as if I am broken up into tiny bits of matter that drift.

My spade hits a body. I toss the spade aside and work with my hands. I brush soil away from a face. Eyes open. Full of grit. The dead soldier's skin is hot, as though the earth is baking him. I half expect him to sit up. He looks younger than me, and I'm the youngest in my platoon. It took me three goes to get into the military. First, the airforce – they laughed at me. 'Go home kid,' they said. The army next. They were desperate but my eyesight was at fault. 'Sorry kid, but you can't see.' Third time, I lied about my age and memorised the board well enough to get through. Miller called me Babe the first time he met me and the name has stuck. Babe, Baby, Bub. I get them all. The more I remonstrate the worse it gets so I've learnt to grin and bear it.

If I'm a babe in the woods, as Miller keeps saying, this dead soldier is hardly born. He's a runt like my kid brother who is always battling my father. My father is headmaster of our school and is also our only teacher. All years are taught in one large room that runs off the schoolmaster's house where we live. The school yard is our home yard. In our younger years, every Friday, my father would set homework for the class. All weekend, me and three of my brothers would do our chores, do our homework, go running along the creek. My younger brother was different. He spent his weekend kicking a football out on the oval. My father would stare at him from afar. Light his pipe, turn away. Monday morning, without fail my father would call all those who hadn't done their homework to the front of the class. It was always my

younger brother, and sometimes another boy called Rudi, whose family used to run a vineyard. When war broke out Rudi's family, along with all the other Germans, were put into a camp but Rudi was allowed to live with his neighbours. Anyway, every Monday, my younger brother, or my younger brother and Rudi, would be called to the front, asked if they had done their homework. *No* was the answer. They'd be caned right there and then, in front of us kids. Ten strokes each. Fierce hits. My brother's face grimacing is what I remember. He was desperate not to scream out. My father almost without expression but tense. It was a battle of wills. Their conflict was not logical. Either could have relented to make the situation better but neither would. If there was a pattern to their behaviour it was that each would always take the course with the worst outcome. Many times, over the weekend, I'd say to my brother, 'Do your homework!' He never would. When I left home to join the army, my brother left home too, even though he was only fourteen. God knows where he is now.

Kingo calls out to me. 'Babe, you doing your make-up or what? Get a move on.'

Most unforgivable job in the army – digging up the dead enemy. I set the soldier's hands on his chest, the way I saw it done in my mother's coffin. There's a number written on the dead soldier's sleeve. I write it down.

ATARU

Patterns

'Code-breaking is about looking for patterns,' I say.

Nakamura, our new recruit, is very intelligent. He gazes at me with interest yet provides no clue to his thought pattern. This is good for a recruit.

'As code-breaker I focus on target words,' I say. 'Names of senior enemy commanders, or nouns describing aspects of the enemy fighting force, so the name of a gun or of a navy ship. The simplest system is to have one letter that is the substitute for another. If I am looking at an English, American or Australian memo, it may be that the letter *u* is replaced by the letter *v*, then *zvt*, could be gun, or *e* might be replaced by *z*, then *sdzsh* might be fleet. If this is right, if *z* is *e*, then you also know that *s* equals *f*, *d* equals *l*, and *h* equals *t* and you can set about testing such assumptions on other words.'

'The enemy is both within and without,' Nakamura says.

I don't like Nakamura's strange interruption but I continue.

'The Germans have an Enigma machine,' I say. 'This is a machine which allows multiple translations, so an *e* might become *z* and that in turn might become *c*, then *d*. You can change the system daily and simply courier the new code to the receiving end. A very good sealed system. Yes. Yet, this very good sealed system, 'so called' sealed system, we believe has been cracked by the English.'

Nakamura looks to the window. He seems absorbed in the sky, in the three white clouds hanging there that resemble plump fruit.

‘Here in Japan we once used two code books,’ I say. ‘If I had a word consisting of five symbols, I would choose that word from Code Book One. Code Book One had 30,000 words in it. Each five-number word would then be replaced by another five numbers, taken from Code Book Two. The two codebooks stood side by side. There was no fixed number for the daily position to start. We created a new starting position first thing every morning and then shared the key with our fellow workers elsewhere. The key could start at the number 400 on the list and that is how all the codes worked for that day. Therefore 00510 could mean fleet, but it might be transmitted as 13012 today and 27332 tomorrow. What we created, we then destroyed, but we did it so rapidly it was hard for anyone to catch us. Even if you could get a copy of the codebook you could not work it out unless you knew the key and that key changed every day.’

Nakamura nods his approval.

‘But now we have an even more complex system. This new complex system you will attempt to solve. This is your first task. At the end of today, we will discuss your progress. If you were to solve it, many would be surprised. It is your methods that will interest me.’

‘Thank you,’ Nakamura says.

‘The enemy within, Nakamura, may not be a fellow worker. The enemy within may very well be yourself.’

He looks at me askance.

‘You wish to work here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you must not only keep our secrets from everyone in your family, from everyone you might meet, you must also keep them from yourself. As you leave each day you must forget what has occurred. We will win for the Emperor,’ I say.

‘We will win for the Emperor.’ He answers in a flat tone, without excitement.

‘You will work next door.’ I gesture to the room we call the Emperor’s palace.

‘Thank-you,’ Nakamura says.

He rises and exits through the door.

An excellent recruit.

OPPIE

Complementarity

We are lying in bed. Outside the moon is waning. Light shoots through the trees and makes patterns on the wall.

‘There is barbed wire all around us,’ Kitty says.

‘We are here to do good things with good people,’ I say.

‘Intelligent people, I don’t know about good.’ Kitty rolls in toward me.

‘You don’t have to like people for them to be involved in good action.’ My head is splitting. I have the implosion problem moving around in my head. ‘Good in that they want to help stop the war.’

‘I’m hemmed in here,’ Kitty says.

‘What can I do,’ I ask.

‘Oppie, are you really going to appear in that theatre production?’

‘I’m delighted with the idea of being a corpse. And it keeps everyone happy.’

‘Yes, yes. Death is always cheering to you.’

‘Come on Kits.’

‘What did Bohr say today? Or is that top secret too?’

‘Everything is fraught with contradictions. There. Satisfied. I’ve broken all the rules.’

‘Swell, I could have said that.’

‘It is not only in physics, contradiction is in everything. Free will, justice, love, it is in instinct, and it is also in reason. We are building the gadget to end the war, but the gadget could end civilization. We live in a world of contradiction.’

‘Our marriage is a contradiction.’

‘It is all about how we handle it’

‘Our marriage?’

‘Contradiction. Our marriage too of course. Bohr insists we be open. He wants to tell the Russians about our gadget. He’s going to see Roosevelt.’

‘Can he see Roosevelt?’

‘With Einstein’s help, maybe.’

‘Complementarity?’

‘Hey, so you didn’t need me to tell you?’

‘Bohr thinks women are intelligent.’

‘You were testing me? And by the way when have I doubted your intelligence?’

‘Do you know Bohr darns his own socks?’

‘I shine my own shoes.’

‘He does it for pleasure.’

‘Would you like me to darn my socks? It’s not like you do them.’

‘I can cope with holes in my socks, just not in my marriage.’

‘I could darn your socks for you. It’s simply something I’ve never thought to do but it is probably very soothing. If it didn’t assist his thinking, Bohr wouldn’t do it. He is no martyr for women’s causes. So don’t try and tell me he is.’

‘Do *you* think we should set up an experiment for the enemy to show them the gadget?’ she asks. ‘Speaking hypothetically.’

‘Hypothetically, we still have our own test to perform,’ I say.

I watch the shifting light. Kitty’s breath deepens.

‘Trinity?’ she whispers sleepily.

‘What about it?’

‘Everything rests on that test.’

‘When it is over, I’ll call.’

‘Can’t I come to the show and tell?’

‘I’ll send a message. *Change the sheets*. Those three words equate with success.’

Kitty giggles, a dreamy giggle, childlike. ‘Change the sheets?’

‘It’s so innocuous, no one would pick it,’ I say.

‘What kind of world are we living in? Barbed wire, coded phrases like *change the sheets*.’

I roll away from her. If Trinity doesn’t work it will have been a whole lot of pain for nothing.

Kitty rests her hand on my shoulder. ‘Do you ever think what might have happened if we had never come here?’

‘Why think that?’

‘It bugs me sometimes.’ She yawns. Her words are slightly slurred as sleep overtakes her. ‘It bugs me to think what else might have occurred.’

Research Statement

Research background

Many critical and fiction writers have sought to probe the deep disturbance war brings to human life. Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014), John Hepworth’s Australian classic, *The Long Green Shore* (1995), Masuji Ibuse’s *Black Rain* (1986 [1969]) are some of the awarded fictional responses, while Richard Rhodes’ *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (2012), Ōe, Kenzaburō’s *Hiroshima Notes* (1981) John Hersey’s 2009 *Hiroshima* (2009) all offer important nonfictional critical responses. Weapons are important to war. The first and only use of nuclear weapons occurred in the Second World War. Since 1945 many nations have sought to acquire nuclear weapons, indeed, ‘our glittering warheads have become markers of national power’ (Rhodes 2012: 1), yet using such weapons would have catastrophic global consequences. ‘Once Upon The Enchanted Jungle – Excerpt 1’ is the first stage of a longer project employing narratives that relate the sequence of scientific discoveries, personal interactions and military events that led up to the dropping of the atomic bomb, (first on Hiroshima then Nagasaki), and compares these narratives with stories

told about the dropping of the bomb. ‘Once Upon The Enchanted Jungle – Excerpt 1’ begins a project that seeks to investigate the efficacy of globally involved, or what Christian Moreau might call ‘cosmodern’ (2011: 5) literature and also employs Douglas Coupland’s concept of ‘translit’ (2012: 11) literature as a way of looking back to the past, to shed light on the future.

Research contribution

‘Once Upon The Enchanted Jungle – Excerpt 1’ offers four short fictional pieces written as the first step of a larger project that attempts to unravel synergies between science and war, and capture the dark erratic mood that drifted across three different countries in August, 1945. This research will compare cross-cultural experiences: the stories told that reveal the thoughts and feelings of those involved in creating the bomb (scientists, military and politicians), with the stories told by those who sought to understand their experiences - those who had the bomb dropped on them (Japanese citizens) or were in active combat when the event occurred (Australian and Japanese soldiers fighting in the Aitape-Wewak area in New Guinea). It begins a project whose innovative cosmodern translit approach aims to catalyse new multidisciplinary dialogue and influence approaches to global destiny problems. Dialogues with an Australian soldier engaged in the New Guinea campaign, military history, particularly Syd Trigellis-Smith’s, (2010) *All The Kings Enemies* (2010), and historical writings by and about the American physicist, Robert Oppenheimer (Bird and Sherwin, 2006; Kipphardt 1967; Polenberg 2002), and Hiroshima perspectives (Ōe 1981; Hachiya, 1983 [1955]; Hersey 2009 [1946]), form the basis of these stories. ‘Once Upon The Enchanted Jungle – Excerpt 1’ builds upon a comprehensive body of creative practice-led research already undertaken by Dr Catherine McKinnon that examines the complex interplay of narration, violence, history, ethics, and climate change.

Research significance

The significance of this research is that it functions as an independent creative work while also beginning a project that aims to reflect on a complex environmental, energy and defence problem. Its value is evidenced by its inclusion in the double-blind refereed stream of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs’ 20th annual conference.

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