

Returning to Memory Cove
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In 2000 I was lucky enough to have been taken in tow by Wik elder Silas Wolmby for a walk around his country near Cape Keerweer on the Cape York Peninsula. Silas calls me his son, and treats me like a youngster, which I enjoy. Following him was difficult. Although he is thirty years my senior he seemed to be able to traverse the hot, soft sand without any effort while my feet burned and my legs ached as I struggled to keep beside him. He flowed through his landscape as if he were a part of it. Perhaps he is.

Following Silas's words was harder still. His stories were convoluted, manifold and intertwining. The many time-frames of his stories were impossible for me to track. They ranged from contemporary events to the second world war to the first coming of the Duyfken to some indistinct period when animals and fish could metamorphose into men and women and generate an entire people. The stories ranged backwards and forwards and I realised that my understanding of time was inadequate to equip me to follow Silas's wanderings. Often I lost track of whom he was talking about as the characters in his stories blurred into one another in my mind. By the end of the day I was exhausted. I felt that my listening skills were inadequate for understanding this virtuoso storyteller. His narrative style was so layered and complex that my beginning-middle-and-ending sensibility just wasn't up to the task.

I realised that if I was to be able to reach a deep understanding of Silas's stories, of which I had heard only a tiny part of his repertoire, I would have to spend a lifetime with him. Similarly, to comprehend the Cape Keerweer landscape to the point where I could glide through it, completely at home like Silas, I would have to spend a lifetime there.

Silas's stories and his landscape are inseparable. I live too far away and it is already too late for me. I do not have a lifetime; I am 44.

There is a man whose stories I have been hearing all my life, who has shared his life's traditions with me, who has schooled me in his sense of the landscape of our home territory, coastal South Australia, and taught me since childhood about his way of moving through it and perceiving it.

My father is a seafarer, a navigator, by profession, and I followed in his wake. We are both master mariners. But long before I left home and went to sea he would take me sailing around the gulfs in his small wooden yacht. I was about seven or eight when he told me the story of Matthew Flinders aboard the Investigator, anchored at Observatory Point (... see that headland on the end of Thistle Island ...) just after dusk, watching the lantern of his cutter coming back from looking for water in Memory Cove (... that little white beach over on the mainland ...) He described the weather, the tide at the time, and what that meant. (See the dark patches on the water? And how the sea stands up in little crests?) And he described the light disappearing suddenly. (... in there, between Little and Lewis Islands.) Then he explained the macabre meaning behind the names of the islands. And then Cape Catastrophe, the name, started to make sense. It also began to look different.

In this paper I will return to Cape Catastrophe in a boat with my father and hear him tell the story to me again. I will compare this experience with walking beside Silas and hearing his stories. There are similarities and obvious divergences, but reflecting on each casts new light on the other. As I hear this familiar story once again after so many iterations, I will examine the ways it connects me to the landscape, whether it influences my sense of 'home' (being in South Australia, or in southern Australia, or perhaps simply being in a boat girt by sea), and how it influences my understanding of my culture: as an Australian, as a whitefella, as an invader, as a seafarer, as a son.