

## TESSA LUNNEY

Gregory Day, *Archipelago of Souls*

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Uncle Tassos wiped the slate of my education clean. He was writing a new story for me now, a true story on the slate, not with untethered colonial ideals but with the stink of death in his nostrils, the rocks and plants at his disposal. (55)

In 1941, Wesley Cress is involved in the disastrous Battle for Crete. A few years after the war, he washes up on King Island, off Tasmania, refusing a soldier's settlement but living a soldier-settler life. *Archipelago of Souls* writes these two experiences, the wounding of war and the recovery through daily life. It navigates their distance and their constant evolution. Day interrogates storytelling as both blade and balm, the only way Wesley can understand what had happened and where he will go next.

The novel jumps between the two time periods in alternate chapters. Both the "then" of Crete in 1941 and "now" of King Island begin at arrival, of either Wesley on King or the Germans on Crete. The two times remain distinct, but the gap is sketched in as Wesley's narrative interprets the memories of Crete through the experiences of King Island and vice versa. Each time period has a distinct set of characters, who act almost as mythical messengers in Wesley's journey. The most important of these are Vern, Wesley's brother and fellow soldier on Crete, the memory of whom fuels much of the Cretan action; and Leonie Fermoy and John Lascelles, fellow King Islanders, whose own trauma provides a sweet space of understanding for Wesley to tell his story:

Lascalles and Leonie and I were just different facets of the same refracting shard. It was only that I was the returned soldier, only that I could command the official sympathy and the national applause, but we were all in the same situation. We were islands in the same archipelago, adrift in a sea of unknowing. (348)

This book is about the stillness after the war, a time when actions must be remembered and stories told in order for the teller to live. It is about the hard, dirty work of remembrance. It shows how the war experience can be a cipher for telling other stories of traumatic experience, especially the private, domestic hauntings that are otherwise silenced. War forces action, isolation, difference, grief and death, all within a brief period. On King Island, Wesley must relive this short time and his reliving and renewal allows others around him to tell their story too:

For how, after all, do we speak the unspeakable, even to ourselves? (332)

Day uses many trauma-narrative tropes – gaps, intrusive memories, silences, broken chronology, other damaged characters, and a focus on the physical surrounds as a path to recovery. He uses them beautifully, in a part of Australian life and war that is little written about. In particular, he uses ideas of isolation to their fullest effect—the titular “archipelago of souls” refers to an isolation that, despite shared waters, is part of the human condition, and how this manifests, in various ways to varying degrees, through personal and national battles. The landscapes both of King Island and of Crete become like a character, an integral shaper for Wesley’s journey. The islands’ nature of sudden changes and sharp descents, of wild weather and unpredictable islanders, teach Wesley about the distance between isolation and togetherness:

The wind is a constant mail boat that comes to pick up that particular correspondence. We undergo a perpetual scouring, a scrubbing and washing. Eventually it wears

away not only our scent but our flesh. We are wind-whittled. Human sticks in a shallow strait ... even the soil that holds us will blow away eventually. When the sky truly will be scattered with an archipelago of souls. (72)

Just as the wind, sun, and snow shape the islands, the novel explores how memory shapes every moment of the present, and through this shapes the future. There are always two realities present, the action and the memory of before, and this is doubled through the written act of remembrance. Writing and memory and life are inextricably bound; it is only through words and tales that one can live. Anything creative—the body, a garden—can become the text one uses to tell the story of pain and renewal. Stories within stories, new plants and new bodily pains, become part of a vital telling, a map to navigate its necessity and its apparent impossibility:

With the first scratch of my nib on the paper I was propelled both forward and back. I suffered all over again, but this time wondering in dark brown cuttlefish ink whether or not every route we take, left or right, east or west, through bitter citrus or healing eucalyptus, will always, eventually, lead us to where we are ultimately destined to be. (192)

There are no rough edges in this novel. Despite the rough-edged characters of Wesley and the war-torn Cretans, of broken Leonie and lonely Lascelles, each sentence is as smooth as flotsam stone. At first these sentences appear too beautiful, too perfect, and the narrative too controlled. What gradually becomes clear is that each sentence is a long-held precious memory, a rock worn smooth with the mind's tides, the narrative pattern set long before the sentences appeared on the page. This is the visible work of a soldier-narrator striving for truth, slippery and unattainable and swathed in silence as he finds it. Each sentence then reads as both fresh and forceful, from his final chapters all the way back to his first understandings, as shown here, sitting in a kitchen in a tiny Cretan village:

I took out my Army diary and began to write a few things down... From the kitchen, Athina reappeared, put down a coffee and took away my empty plate. I wrote:

*It's a part of me now, the constant change. Those classical yarns they made us learn by rote at school, which V took upon himself back on the lake, have finally been digested. Perhaps after all it's just my fate to quietly understand, not to wear my knowledge like a crown. I live not in peace but in my own skin.*  
(355/6)

The novel imitates Wes' progress—halting and too deliberate at first, becoming smoother and faster as Wes teaches himself to tell and teaches us to read him. It is a spiritual journey through the fringe—the edge of a global war, the edge of a continent, the edge of human contact and trust and an ability to keep together body and soul. Wes weaves in and out of these multiple fringes in his progress of wounding and recovery. His recovery is also a remaking, as his movement creates the fabric of a new and stronger self:

I felt strong, strangely complete, and felt my life so keenly. More keenly than I ever had. It wasn't the taste of Andreas' blood I had in my mouth but the taste of my own self-creation. (320)

His writing of the battle is straightforward at first. But as his time on Crete extends, it becomes as full of silences and contemplation as the “now” of King Island. King Island is full of memory and metaphor, full of potent and menacing silences. That is, until the war story is told, and this story draws out the other stories, and so draws out their bitterness and anger until Wes can learn to be vulnerable in love once again.

The quality of silence changes, from a dreadful power to the habit most needed:

After spending our whole lives apart we found our way of coming together mainly through silence... We still had

things to tell, of course, but this time we could say them not with pen and ink, or buttery shortbread and kindling, but by the fire we shared outside the hut at night, sitting on the brow of the hill under the stars, with our pent-up feelings set free and the violence of the sea well below us. (326)

Silence, and what it holds, is the undercurrent of the novel. Silence powers the narrative and holds it within Day's beautiful sentences. Its power transforms, from menace to revelation, from ignorance to love. Not only romantic love, but "Love like the ocean and bigger than any of us. Love like the weather. Brutal love that can change and recover" (22). Love that is self-creation, that is morality, that is freedom, the truth of existence as laid bare through the brutality of war—the very reason we read war stories again and again:

We leant in close to him and there were no longer ranks and reveille, no definitions of Private Kenneth Callinan. We felt it, Adrasteia and I, this thing beyond names, what's stranger is we knew it well too, as if beforehand.

And then he was gone. Ken Cal. And after one of those deep and holy pauses that if you're lucky follows death, the horns of Jericho started screaming again, our hands went to our hears, time and the battle carried us on. Now on the road above Arvi I knew that that was what was worth telling, the only thing I could tell Ken's dad about, what I'd recount to his mother and sisters too, on the mint settee in Newcastle. If only I could find the words. For how he came into his fullness. (319)