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The Unreliable Archives

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The Unreliable Archives

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To Inez, for becoming home,
To my family, for the journey.

SENIOR HONOURS GEOLOGY

BSc THESIS, 1969-70.

THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW.



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Support



I12 Welcome to The Unreliable Archives

This is a geological archive of unreliable collective memories.

I needed to sit with complexity so I sat with rocks. I didn't know where I was going by sitting with rocks. My inquiry gained form in the process. Layering of sediments, radioactive fossils, pressure, heat and time played a role.

I invited others to join and I am now inviting you.

This is an archive of moments of changing perspective.

A shift in how we take up space, in our sense of home.

I am not alone in believing we need to shift our perspective, to become more attentive. To think, feel and live in relation to the places we find ourselves in and to the beings we encounter there. I have a sense that in the future, we will need places and places will need us.

During my research process, I have come to think of myself as a radio mast.

One that is on a hill next to an open cast-mine.

An open-cast mine is like a wound in the landscape. It is not a coincidence my radio mast is here, at the edges where plants are pushing their way back into the gutted earth and the long process of regeneration can begin.

I have been learning new frequencies, tuning into different wavelengths, both above and underground, tuning in to voices on airwaves, floating fragments in rivers and the low rumbles of rocks.

This is one of the first images I drew and although I did not know it then, it is central to how I have been working in this process of shifting my perspective.

My journey went through South Africa, Finland, The UK and Belgium, and so you will hear voices from all these places.



It is important that you make an attempt to understand stones and geological archives, though it took me a while to understand their importance.

Maybe it was the act of sitting with a stone.

Maybe it was the fact that my dad was a geologist,

Maybe it was artist William Kentridge talking about Apartheid as an immovable rock you can't tackle head on, because the more I read and questioned and understood, the more I became aware that he is right. It is too complex, too many-tentacled, too heavy...I can't tackle European colonial histories, structural racism, white male supremacy, neo-liberal capitalism, ecological crises or the whole of western thought head on.

Maybe you laugh because I thought of trying.

But I know I feel accountable and I feel the need for transformation.

When I sit with a stone, I see patterns, shapes, lines. I feel textures and time and what is personal gets put into a long timeline, where humans become insignificant. This allows us to look at the world differently.

My father worked in economic geology and for him this was a way to make a living, to support a family, a wife and children. He has given me parts of his rock collection, his books, slides and photos. I am using them in ways he would consider highly irregular.

If rock can become liquid and squirt upwards through the air, if riverbeds can fold and push up mountains, continents can tear apart creating oceans, then maybe these histories are also mobile. Not less complex, but possibly transformable.

B27 Settling

Volcanic lava stone
Puy de Dome, France.

This was a temporary stopping place. They were once hot liquid pouring out of the earth's core, drying and cooling on the earth's surface. They are porous and light and smell cool and sweet.

There is something sensuous about the way they move. They have moved many times. They know the routine, can describe the bodily impact. They are acutely aware of the effect of changing form, reorientating and starting again somewhere new. They burn Mpepo, it is like sage, to cleanse a place of the old, to bring in the new. They get down and dirty with the cleaning to make each new place a place they can settle in - for a while.

Imagine you are lying in your bed. Your new bed, in your new bedroom, in your new house.

Everything is tranquil, except for the moving walls. The dimensions of the room are shifting. You know something is wrong.

You get up, on automatic pilot and turn left. You bump into the wall and stub your toe. Hopping to the right, you find the door, turn left and walk six steps.

You reach out for where the door handle should be. There is only air. No door, no bathroom. You shuffle sideways for two and a half meters with your hand palms flat against the wall until you find a door jam. Down a bit there is a door handle and you're in.

Your new house has a will of its own. It refuses your expectations. Your senses are testing boundaries, inching along contours. Material substances rebel.

The cartographies your brain is inscribing while awake are being undermined by your sleeping body. Your body remembers every house you lived in, every route to every bathroom.

In your sleepy state, every route is a thread, needing to find another thread to create meaning, to become something. Together they weave new patterns. If at night, only your bladder wakes, the rest of your body is weaving. It could take a while.

This sense of bodily and resulting mental disorientation is not unusual in a new house. This queer feeling can become part of the routine of getting to know a new house somatically.

People, animals, insects, birds,... We all have our own rituals and ways to settle in a new place, ways to build a nest. There are many layers to this. Settling is as much about unlearning old patterns as it is learning new ones, a slow process of bodily un-mapping and reorientation.



4 Belonging

540 million year old Dalradian schist,
Loch Eck, near Tyndrum
West Highlands of Scotland.

This schist is part of a long folded riverbed that pushed up the Grampian mountains.

They have a shamanic sensitivity to people and beings around them. This can make them vulnerable, restless and guarded, but once they open up, they let you in with all their heart. If you ask them, they will say they do not belong anywhere.

The events that shaped them clearly mark their surface and if you look closely they glitter with Micah created under great pressure and heat. They will leave your fingers wondering about gold.

We are in a wooden chalet in the Ardennes in Belgium. There is a wood stove and no wifi. Romantic, we thought. We will go there to work and nothing will disturb us. It is raining, grey, dark and cold. We are in a kind of typical Belgian recreation park where people buy a patch of forest, cut down most of the trees, plant a wooden house in the middle and a gravel driveway. They buy Greek statues, security cameras and an Alsatian dog and then come and stay 3 times a year. Charming.

I am here to make choices. Making choices makes me grumpy. So every morning I send myself out into the rain for a walk in search of a better mood. This works, I even grow to love the rain.

I wander into an open field with no gate or sign and dawdle along the hedgerow. I have stopped because



a clump of lichen has caught my attention. When I get closer I see that the whole hedgerow is covered in mint green, fronded lichen, Caledonia Rangeferina or Reindeer moss (which is not a moss). There is lichen everywhere, and moss. Kahki green, lime green, ochre yellow, Lincoln green, and a sea of whitish minty green on every branch. Chaffinch greets me from just above my head, darts off and comes back, curious. I stand zooming in to the layers of green and yellow, new red branch shots, dark rotting fallen twigs.

My feet are sinking into the swampy ground. I am standing half in the hedge writing these things down, and drawing bits of lichen and smiling to myself like a crazy woman. I am in place, in this place, we are this place, or we make this place in this way at this moment. I am hedgerow.

Place is contingent. It is made of actions and relationships. It gathers stories. ⁽¹⁾ I have read about making kin with the more-than-human world and I am thinking about 'kinning' as a verb. ⁽²⁾ Whoever arrives next and greets or ignores these Lichens and mosses and twigs and magpies and chaffinches will make a different place.

As I am thinking this, a large barking dog turns into the field and races towards me. My heart is thumping. This is a big dog. I step out of the hedge and look for a large stick to protect myself. A man follows the dog and calls him to heel. He tells me I am not allowed to walk here.

"C'est propriété Privé". He keeps his dog under control. I tell him: "je voudrais seulement voir les plants" like an idiot, in bad French, thinking: Lichen is not a plant... telling myself to shut up. He says: "c'est moi qui fait le control ici". His dog barks. He points back along the road: "There's a public footpath up there to the left, it will take you up the hill, there are lots of these plants there too". He is trying to be nice. "Bonne Journée" I say and start walking back to the road.

He takes his dog, still barking, and continues on through the field.

This is a different place now. A private property-place, a place I am not allowed to walk in or spend time with lichen and moss and chaffinches and magpies.

This makes me emotional. Being attentive and open to the call of creatures and beings around me can make me feel raw, stripped, boundaryless, but also steady and grounded. I feel different when cycling in the city

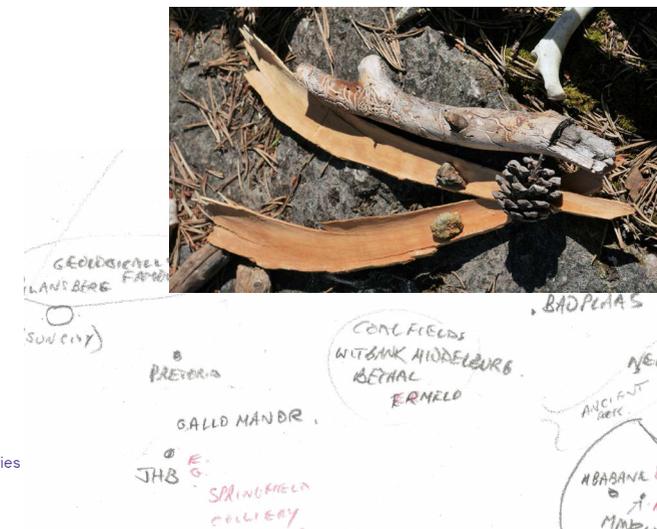
(1) Diane Massey in Pink (2015) Sensory Ethnography
(2) Robin Wall Kimmerer (2021) Kinship series, book one: Planet
(3) Sarah Ahmed (2000) Strange encounters & (2008) Affective economies



or rushing to catch a train. In this mode, I am not in a place, I am traveling through it, alert.

I am not saying let's all slow down and go and sit in a field all day. But slowing down can make us attend to complexity. To the journey of materials in every object, and their complex relationships. To the ways places include and exclude. To the stories that get told, ignored and twisted. ⁽³⁾

This mode of attention created the circumstances for me to understand how I can be both in place and carry place with me, which I like to think of as 'mobile rootedness'. This is not only a personal reconstitution of my relationship to place. It is a call for a practice, both necessary and collective.

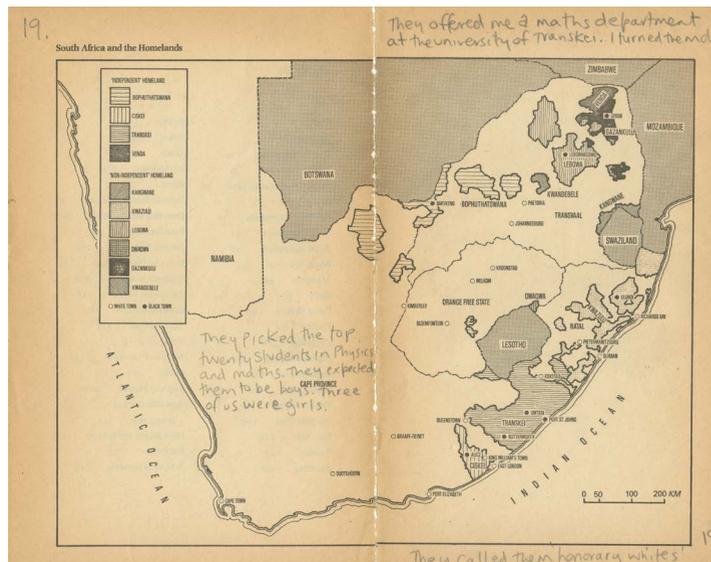


\$19 Resisting

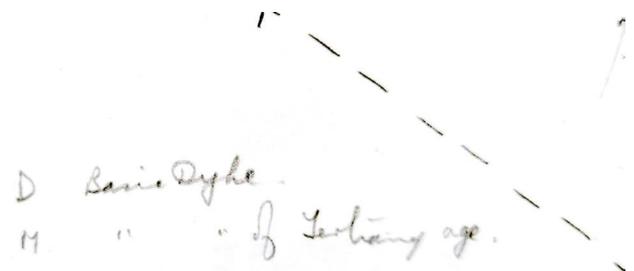
Granite bedrock,
Bushveld Igneous Complex
2.06 to 2.7 billion years old
Mpumalanga, South Africa.

You can see they have a smooth round side, and a flat rough side. This is because they were cut from the bedrock with a diamond headed drill, while bore-logging and prospecting for coal in 1972 in what was then called the Transvaal. They broke that drill and are a reminder of what stubbornness can do when put to work well. They have been forced to move multiple times over generations and despite this they are connected to the land, to the smells and sounds and how to care for a place.

- 3: Can you inherit a stubbornness, a refusal, a 'NO!' in your cells?
- 1: I inherited this stone. My dad carried it around for years as a reminder not to make mistakes, to calibrate more carefully. Being messy can be expensive.
- 2: What happened that he needed reminding?
- 1: This piece of granite bedrock broke the diamond tipped drill of his bore , while exploring for coal in 1972.
- 3: Truly, a beautiful mistake.
- 2: I remember my dad looking through a tiny hole in the door and then running around gathering books and pamphlets and burning them in the yard. Like he burned my poetry once when I was a child. The police had shot someone near our house. An activist. He was scared we would be next.
- 1: My dad says he remembers seeing black people having their passbooks checked and being bundled off into the back of a metal caged truck. He said: 'you could not not be aware of the system'. I always found that an intriguing double negative.
- 2: I guess this is a difference between me and my siblings. I learnt that when you resist something, you don't give it power. Power is something you give, not something that can be taken. I'm stubborn, ok, but, I also just learnt to question the logic of things.
- 1: My mum said 'it was all fine, I was aware there was a system, I guess I just accepted it, I wasn't about to get up and protest about it, I mean when you have a husband and a young baby...you...' and



- then she trailed off... I do wonder if I would have done anything differently, had I been in her shoes.
- 3: Tiny acts of stubbornness can cause ripples that may cause seismic shifts, somewhere along the line.
- 2: Resisting is not heroic, it is about having deep enough roots and a strong enough cohort around you that it simply becomes a possibility.
- 3: Yeah, or having nothing to lose.
- 2: I've got a good one for you. is it better to have been colonised by a backwards nation or one at the top of the pile?
- 3: With a backwards nation, they are trying to prove themselves so they are ruthlessly brutal and cruel.
- 2: Aah, Yes, but, a nation that considers itself civilised are like rats. They charm and talk and fool you with golden words and before you know it, they have taken your arm and gnawed off your foot. Then they will expect you to thank them for it. That is much worse.



M38 Rooting

Pebble with dragonfly shaped trace fossils.

Finnish Lapland.
Then Scotland.

They were brought to Scotland by a melting iceberg and deposited on the west coast shoreline. They are waiting to return. The imprints on their surface are actually made by ancient burrowing creatures moving through the earth. The first trace fossils of animal lifeforms date to the Ediacaran period, about 560 million years ago. They have a strong sense of belonging to the place they were formed, knowing routes and orientating themselves by slow traces of information inherited across generations.



When asked who they are, they start to talk about where they are from.

We are talking about mining. She starts crying. She says she cannot talk about the mining without starting to cry and that it started this spring when they decided to re-open an old iron mine near where she lives.

The next day she takes us to the mine site.

I get out of the car and start gathering stones. I take photos of stones, make little piles of stones. I put stones in all my pockets.

We walk the perimeter fence of the bright blue toxic lake where the chemical run off sinks to the bottom and waits.

She tells us that last year her and a group of artists declared this area a natural park and gave guided tours to the public, until the mining company kicked them off the land.

We drive from the mine site to the sacred stone. Reindeer follow us along the path. In Ancient local animistic traditions people leave offerings at large rocks or deep pools of water. They do this to ask permission for something, to apologise or to say thank you.

People are still doing this. Laid out on this rock are reindeer skins, bones and gifts of food.

I have a sudden urge to leave an offering. I want to apologise for the mining.

For my family's history of mining and the extractivist logic that is everywhere and enables us to have all the objects we pick up daily without thinking, from a pencil to a phone, to a cooking pot.

I feel in my pockets for pieces of ironstone and pyrite. I find a piece of bark that has been written on by insects, two pine-cones and a heap of twigs. I lay the pyrite on top and apologise.

This was just a fleeting moment, but it has been resonating ever since.

This place, this moment, this apology shifted something in me that keeps on shifting.

We walk through the forest and she shows us where to climb down to swim in a 60 meter deep lake. This lake is also a sacred place. It is hot and there are insects everywhere, dragonflies and mosquitos. We spot a tiny frog with a huge echoing voice.

The water is freezing. You can feel it pulling you downwards, into the earth.



CTI Stuck in the mud (I'm not sure about this title)

*Rhyolite or volcanic glass,
Isle of Arran, West Coast of Scotland.*

They were stuck in a patch of mud on the volcano's southern flank. Now they are stuck somewhere else on the other side of the world. They speak in two voices, one a low rumbling and the other in soft agreement. They can only look down at their feet or off out to sea. They keep walls around their immediate surroundings to feel safe. The result is they cannot see life being lived, the daily struggles and the generosity.



I did not know what to do with this conversation.

When people are generous and invite you into their home, give you their time and tell you things they might not tell other people. Because they know your parents, because you look like them. And you want this story, which has been kept behind closed doors. Enkel vier Blankies.

It is not that I was surprised by our conversation, but I was shocked by the everydayness of it. The 'would you like a cup of tea?' blended in with the 'them and us-ness'. My assumed position is with the 'us'-es. Volcanic glass is hard and sharp. But it was once liquid.

And then I am listening to these words, to my own silences.

They took me out for a meal afterwards.

I felt guilty for eliciting this story, for being part of this 'us', for a million complex reasons - but I do not want to focus on static guilt.

I just did not know what to do with this conversation, and even as I am writing this, I still don't.

I have chosen to share a fragment of this conversation as it was (more or less).

THEM

1: We are feeling fairly desperate to leave, definitely Johannesburg and maybe South Africa all together.

2: This is something shared by all or most of the people I know and it is a big topic of conversation at dinner parties

3: Everyone wants to leave the country?

2: They tended to be the wealthier types who could afford to buy a nice house in Australia and a boat. Then all the young people drifted away

1: Most people our age, their children don't live in South Africa, now, if they can, they've gone.

3: And your children?

2: All gone...I reckon that in a few years there won't be any whites left

1: No, not if things continue as they are.

2: It's just too difficult

3: What exactly is difficult?

2: Well, I think living here, it is difficult, you're, as a white, you are in a minority. It's difficult for young white people to get jobs.

1: oh, yeah, especially if you're a white

male. They have adopted a whole lot of American ideas about gender equity. They scramble over themselves to find someone who is physically disabled, to sign them on.

2: There's one problem with them. Culturally, they won't take responsibility, for anything. They are always looking for some scapegoat and the whites are the scapegoat in many cases.

1: Large numbers of them have got enormous chips on their shoulders. So, you just try to be very polite. Worse still the women. Black women, you know, a person in my position, you avoid black women like the plague, particularly the younger ones. Well, they've got such huge chips on their shoulders, they are always looking for some excuse to screech at you: 'you're a white bigot, Racist' etc. So, Stay away from the women.

2: And then you're blamed for staying away from them. So, you can't win.

1: There were a lot of things about their lifestyle, you know, they would feel very uncomfortable mixing with you. For instance, most blacks eat with their hands and there are quite a lot of dishes that whites serve, which eating with your hands is not really a possibility.

2: it's not practical

1: You know, like fried eggs or things like that.

3: What would you say was the legacy of the Apartheid era now?

1: Not a lot of people remember those times anymore. I don't think there is any practical legacy these days, other than for it being dragged up as some excuse for demands for some sort of privilege by...

3: If you could choose, where would you move to?

2: We would move to Australia, at the moment we can't afford it. (to 1) You've got a passport.

1: I have relatives there, my brothers there and a number of cousins

2: For me to get permanent residency would cost 80 000 rand. The thing is, we are alone here, and when you get older, it's a problem, if you can't drive, how do you get around. We'd rather be with family.

3: Ok, well, Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

2: Give our love to your parents, when you see them.

3: Yes I will, Thanks again.



W10 A16

Shifting

The Olivine Basalt Bedrock and The Banded Gneiss, part of the Bushveld Igneous complex, Mpumalanga, South Africa.

The Gneiss picked up the Basalt on a field trip. This was not how it was usually done in those days. Basalt is igneous, so volcanic in origin, and underlies more of the earth's surface than any other bedrock. They like structures to organise emotions and want things to be planned out and mapped accordingly. Gneiss is unpredictable, metamorphic, formed under heat and high pressure. They form bands of different minerals under stress, changing direction and shape, unreliably. They are named for their sparkles.

Basalt and Gneiss have travelled and made a life together along desire paths and around fallen trees. It is not so much their composition that shifts, but the angle from which you learn to see them.

Science is constantly shifting our perception. New (or old) information causes a sudden leap in how we see the world. But, the world is just waiting for us to catch on.

Reading about the history of geology as a science, you see how in a few hundred human years the age of the earth went from 6000 to 75 000 to 20-40 million to 90 million years old, then more recently jumped to 4.5 billion and is now estimated at 4.6 billion years old.

Knowledge is contextual. It is neither neutral or objective. There is no Gods Eye View. ⁽¹⁾

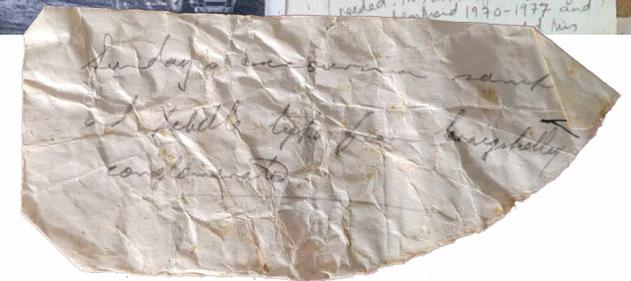
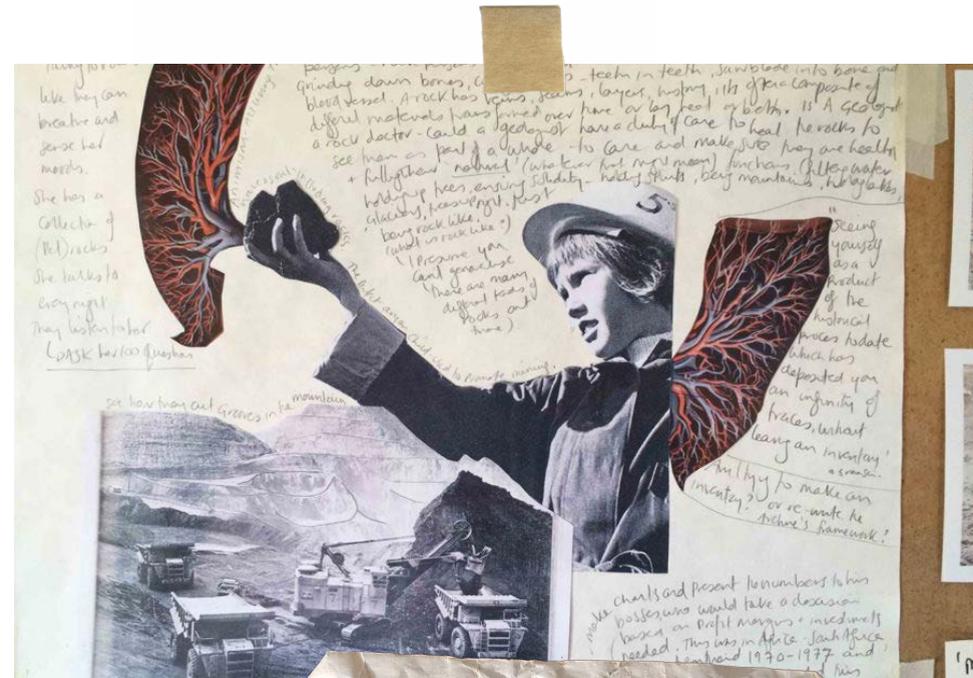
It starts when someone asks you a question.

This triggers a reflex that causes a fragment of information to fling itself to the front of your brain. It sounds true, so you hook it and reel it into a story.

There are no fact checkers in your frontal lobe, and people seem interested, so you expand and add more fragments. Before you know it you are telling a story about how something works or how old something is or how something came into being.

The story carries you and the listener high above the trees on currents in the wind. It is fun to tell and interesting to hear and when you land, you have no idea how you got there, it just seems to happen.

Then your partner or sister in law says: "you just made that up" and you say, "yes" and everyone



laughs, or looks a bit confused. Someone starts calling it 'Kennedy science'. It doesn't matter if it's not entirely true, if it's a good story, does it?

There is always a grain of truth in Kennedy science, possibly more than a grain, maybe it's all true. Maybe it's just how our brains work, pulling fragments together into a good story. Or maybe we learnt it from the men in our family ⁽²⁾, or the grandmothers.

Could this be a form of knowing? Knowing as a complex life-long continually shifting process, where you learn to trust information from unsanctified sources such as your own body ⁽³⁾, or your grandmother? ⁽⁴⁾ One hypothesis can lead to a series of 'truths' depending on your methodology and parameters. Karan Barad shows us that light is both a particle and a wave depending on the equipment you use to measure it. ⁽⁵⁾

The trick is to make a convincing fiction. If you want to hear more, google it or pull out an old fashioned reference book from the shelf. Depending on when it was published or by whom and in what context, they too will have made a convincing fiction, which may

or may not survive perspective shifts over time and metamorphose into what can only be described as contingent and contextually situated knowledge.

We are changing all the time.

You don't need to change for me to see you differently.

It helps if you can tell a good story.

It helps if you do not take yourself too seriously.

⁽¹⁾ This refers to 'situated knowledge' in the work of Donna Haraway.
⁽²⁾ Mansplaining is a word introduced by Rebecca Solnit for a structural phenomenon all women recognise. See her book 'Why men explain things to me'
⁽³⁾ I consider bodily knowledge a valuable mode of knowing, though it is often framed differently. Valuing it would involve learning to see how what our body tells us is knowledge and the link to practical wisdom.
⁽⁴⁾ Tacit knowledge based on experience, knowledge handed down through oral traditions, in songs and rhymes, like what my grandmother's rhymes and songs tell me about life in Scottish protestant mining town in the 1940s and 50's and how she created a warm nest on a windy hillside. ("no booze on Sunday, you'll have to wait till Monday...and the man with no legs ran away")
⁽⁵⁾ Karen Barad (2007) Meeting the universe halfway

Re-story-ing

Granite body Vein mineralisation of biotite micah, quartz and feldspar crystals.

Flintstone in a chalk bedding. Late Cretaceous period. 60-95 million years ago

This flintstone was formed when the skeletons of silicone based life forms called radiolarians, sunk to the bottom of a warm sea. This blue-grey-brown glassy stone likes to be useful, to feel what they do has purpose and is part of a plan. They are sharp, quick and care a great deal. They are serious about teaching people both how to make their own tools and use them well.

The gathering in granite body vein mineralisation are a complex poetry of Crystals floating upwards together until they hit an impervious band of rock. They are born from and embedded in shifting communities across continents. They are the kitchen table around which music, art, religion and poetry are made and eaten with soup and rice. They are born to tell stories

You sing when out walking. You know no one can hear you. Sometimes, singing feels like the only response. Your whole body vibrates with the lines in the landscape.

Most of what you have inherited is composed with love and care. Even so, this can make you complicit in what causes violence or damage in a place. These songs are old, inherited by generations before you. Songs are stories are landscapes. ⁽¹⁾

It matters what stories we tell stories with.

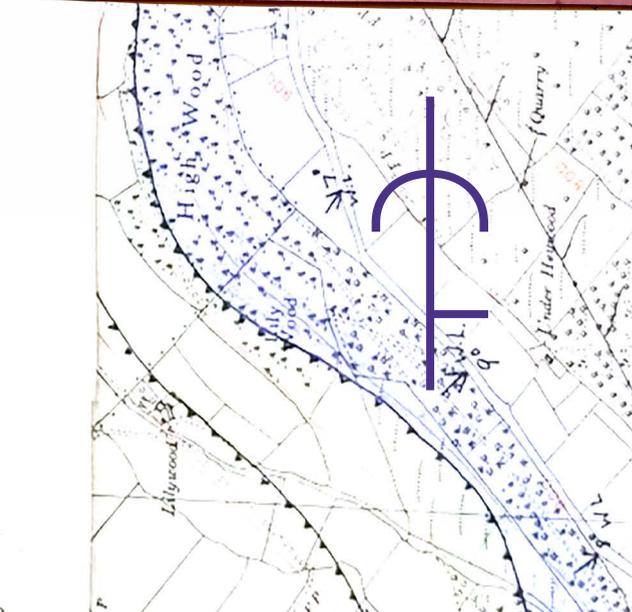
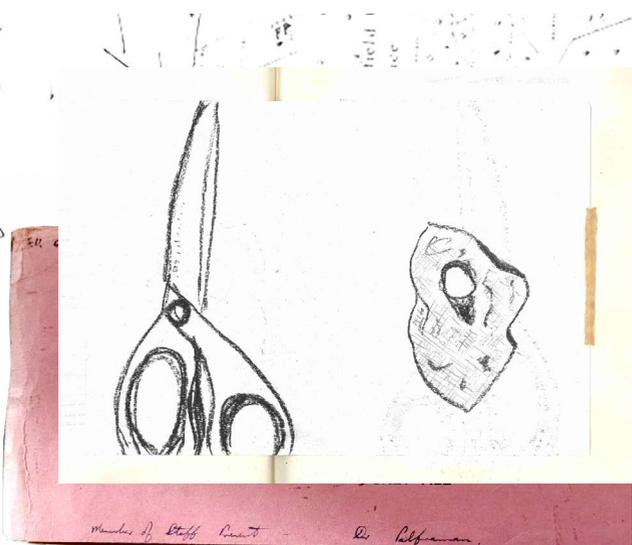
When memories and experiences sink to the sea floor and form sediment, beyond generations, they do not disappear. They shape-shift: crystallise, fossilise. They are not silent, but become radioactive. ⁽²⁾ These radioactive fossils send out signals not accessible to language.

When we cannot understand the signs and signals that appear in front of our faces, when they simply dance and do not form meaning, we become aphasic. ⁽³⁾

If we have no way to understand these floating memories or radioactive experiences, we cannot shift our perception and make new meaning. I am not looking for anything new. New languages do not seem like the answer, in fact, I am not looking for an answer

Senior Honours geology

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at all - I am trying to respond.
So perhaps we can mis-read, and productively mis-translate what we pick up, and weave these fragments together with what we have unnamed. ⁽⁴⁾

- (1) Songlines, also called dreaming tracks, are part of Australian First Nation Traditions of kin-based and place-based social networks. Songlines trace astronomy and geographical elements from ancient stories, and describe how these things have helped shape the landscape as it is now. Christen, K., 2021. Gynn-McDonald, R. 2022
- (2) From Laura U. Marks, (2000), The Skin of the Film. The idea that "it matters what stories we tell stories with", is drawn from the work of Donna Haraway.
- (3) Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler uses the idea of Aphasia to examine how Colonial histories work through present day structures and encounters.
- (4) Thought along with Ursula K. Le Guin's, (1986) 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. & (1985), 'She Unnames them'

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5.8 cm



MEMORY IS UNRELIABLE, ASK MY MOTHER