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The Lumen Seed (Judith Crispin)

Posted on May 16, 2017 by [Verity La](#) in [Book Extracts](#)



The Lumen Seed opens onto an apocalyptic scene. A hardwood mulga tree, reaching for the sky, holds a placard: “The Lord’s Return is Near”. In Coober Pedy, a curved handmade house rendered in warm mid-tones is edged with the sign “Welcome to Nowhere”. Dusty desert roadscapes unfold into the giant sacred stones of Karlu Karlu. An emu wanders nonchalantly into a gas station. We’re in Emu Dreaming Country now, meeting Crispin’s traveling friends. — Juno Gemes, Foreword: Five Minutes to Midnight, *The Lumen Seed*



Photo: Judith Crispin. Eemie at the UFO Roadhouse (Wycliffe Well NT, Dec 2015)

*Yeah, it make me real sad and cry for my country. Because God bin Judith Crispin put me there, God put my people there. Why someone could move us, because of his power, because of his idea? Cutting off God’s power, God’s idea here, God’s word, God’s light. . .and that is the true. Cut off like this electric wire, if you cut him off, like that. — Jerry Jangala, Warlpiri Elder, *The Lumen Seed**



Photo: Judith Crispin. Jerry Jangala (Emu Waterhole, Tanami Desert NT, Dec 2015)

*It was in Lajamanu that I encountered stories of the giant invisible snakes we share the country with. Tales of rainbow snakes, the Warnayarra, underpin all Australian Aboriginal cultures. These early extraterrestrials emerged from meteors at impact sites like Wolfe Creek Crater. They live in the waterways, in rivers and creeks, and the ridges and mountain ranges are records of where they have passed. According to Warlpiri culture, the Warnayarra gave people their language, and they can rise up to protect the country in times of dire need. In the 1950s, when the UK dropped eighteen nuclear and thermonuclear weapons on Maralinga in South Australia, it is said to have been Warnayarra snakes who propelled the atomic cloud back to the military base at Woomera, killing all the children under five. The sentience of landscape is the heart of these Jukurrpa (Dreaming) stories about Warnayarra snakes. My journey began in the center of Australia's Anglophile government, Canberra, and ended at Wolfe Creek Crater, birthplace of the serpent. — Judith Crispin, Introduction, *The Lumen Seed**



Photo: Judith Crispin. Wolfe Creek Crater (Tanami Track WA, June 2015)

Five Threnodies for Maralinga

The mushroom cloud dispersed rapidly. For a few seconds it took the intriguing shape of an aboriginal face silhouetted over Australia,

then it eddied 1500ft high, and was blown away to the north-east . . .
 (Douglas Wilkie, the Courier-Mail, Brisbane, October 16, 1953)

I

Es atmet mich, it breathes me,
 this cremated field,
 whose pulmonary veins were fused
 by atomic blasts.
 It is breathing slowly
 like a heart, or an animal dying
 and in the periodicity of its own blood
 is become *sternklang*,
 the language of stars.

In the 1950s, Robert Menzies
 surrendered this desert to men who look down
 from flag-draped podiums
 and parliamentary stairs.
 They built bombing ranges that
 from outer space resemble
 occult sigils.
Es atmet uns, it is not in the nature of demons
 to refuse such invitations.

Low on the horizon
 a greasy cloud makes whispering noises
 as it advances
 erasing the mulgas.

Sun glints from its surface
 like something solid.

And its interior is the muscle
 of a snake, coiling recoiling—
 it dislocates its jaw
 and spews blackened birds
 into the desert,

Wedgetailed eagles
 with their eyes burned out.

Soldiers club them from air
 with axe handles—
 some of them are crying.

Do you remember?
 These rivers, these mallee and paper daisies.
 We took it all away.

II

A summer of aeroplanes,
 of air excited
 by radios: public, private, and military.

Ten year old Yami Lester played on Emu Field,
 that day when all birds vanished,
 when nothing in that grassland breathed.
 And turning,

by instinct, stopping
 he pressed knuckles into his eyes
 a split second before the flash and double boom
 roared toward him like a crashing road-train.

And traveling in that sound,
 a blue-white diamond,
 a second sun
 passing through the bones of his hands,

left x-ray impressions
 of blood and skin,
 the intricate network of nerves,
 and his eyes
 burned.

It was black when the pressure wave hit
 a feeling of being underwater,
 and then the air sucked back,
 billowing out his body like sheets on a line.

He didn't see the rain
 that smelled of chemicals and fell
 in dense heavy drops
 but he heard its tattoo

and distantly, from the direction of houses,
 his mother screaming.

III

When they came to Juldil Kapi,
 called Juldi, called Ooldea Soak,
 the United Aborigines Mission,
 in Jeeps and covered trucks
 they looked like moon men.

Soldiers everywhere,
 the older ladies recalled.
Guns. We all cry, cry, cryin'.

Time enough to pack a dilly bag
 of clothes, a framed photograph,
 a child's favorite toy,
 before the trucks rolled out,
 leaving mission buildings to heat
 and swallowing dunes.

And she, between soldiers,
 on those hard troopie seats,
 secretly fingers a stone
 held deep in the pockets of her skirt—
nulu stone, she thinks, last fragment
 of the meteor.
 Its dust colors her skin.

A hundred kilometers to the south
 departing helicopters drop leaflets
 written in English
 warning Aboriginal people
 to not walk north.

But here on the savannah,
 groups of figures separate in spinifex.

And later, when sky pressed toward them
 like a wall, they laid their bodies
 over their children
 and rose again coated in tar.

Soldiers found them sleeping
 in the Marcoo bomb crater.
 They gave them showers
 and scrubbed their fingernails.
 But in the months that followed

their women gave birth
 to dead babies, to babies
 without lungs, babies without
 eyes,

and their men speared kangaroos
 they couldn't cook
 because they were yellow inside.

IV

A marquee stood on Emu Field
 among fruit trees, with chairs and tables
 for politicians and members of the press.
 They served lemonade
 and plates of sandwiches.
 Songbirds
 flitted in the eaves of a grandstand,
 purpose-built for compelling views
 of the mushroom cloud.

And after the last bus,
 when the marquee was packed away
 and only uniformed men flashed binoculars
 on the grandstand,
 they ordered their soldiers
 to crawl
 on all fours through atomic elds.

Their bodies drag the dust.

On a clear day, you could see their backs lifting
 though layers of mist
 like elephants bathing in the Ganges.

And those who flew Lincolns into fallout
 came back without throats—
coincidence, the English courts explained,
we all smoked back then . . .

But I want to know what happened to my grandfather—
 dead before fifty from multiple cancers.
 They gave peerages to nuclear scientists
 and to soldiers, melanomas
 and the chance to buy an unofficial medallion
 for thirty dollars.

And I want to know what happened to my uncle—
 dead before sixty from heart attack and stroke.
 Cells transform into other cells,
 like the songbirds of Emu field
 whose calls were the silver
 of shaken metal fragments.

I want to know if I'm going to live—
You're young, the surgeon said, *for this kind of cancer*.
 But he couldn't tell me
 how people become dust,

how sand becomes glass,
or how Menzies could send soldiers into atomic mist,
and still hold the word God in his mouth.

V

At Woomera,
seventy-five identical graves
remember babies lost to the predation
of atomic clouds.

Their epitaphs are brief—
Michael Clarke Jones
died 24 August 1952,
aged eight and a half hours.

No one has been here for a long time.

Weeds struggle.
A military vehicle passes,
heading east toward the rocket range.

In the west, Woomera township
is a grid of air force housing.
Land Cruisers fill neat driveways,
lawns are trimmed,
blinds closed.

And no one ever steps out for milk,
no one walks a dog.

I photograph each headstone,
stooping sometimes to straighten a plastic posy,
a tilted ceramic bear.

Wind presses a faded greeting card
to the metal fence.
A matchbox car beside a small boy's grave
is blue.

There are nineteen stones without toys or flowers,
for stillborns named only "baby"—
Baby Spencer,
Baby Dowling,
Baby Stone.

Don't look at me
Baby Gower
Baby Roads
from a soldier's gunny bag
with your eyes too white, too open
like the eyes of poisoned fish
tumbling
in the Pilbara's poisoned surf.

Was it night when they came?
those soldiers who emptied the graves?

A secret harvest
of twenty-two thousand children
whose bones were crushed
for Strontium-90 tests in the UK.
Their parents were never told.

The ground here is hard.
Centuries of heat-fueled wind
have baked clay to shale.
To open a grave you'd need

sledgehammers,
pickaxes,
crowbars.

It would not be gentle.

I see them starlit,
Shadow-striped by the wire fence,
they draw a baby boy from earth—
pale as a frog
mud-marked
and he wears my grandson's face.

I don't want to tell him
our bombs unleashed a serpent
older than names,
that hung over the neonatal ward,
above the cots of Woomera,
and the gaze of its lidless eye
returned them all to namelessness.

My grandson,
I don't know what world will be left to you.



Photo: Judith Crispin. Lily Nungarrayi Yirringali (Tanami Desert NT, November 2014)



Judith Crispin returned to Australia in 2011 after living and working in Germany for several years. Since that time she has driven the 8000 km round trip from her home in Canberra to the remote community of Lajamanu many times and established a close relationship with the Warlpiri community there. Crispin has a background in music composition, poetry and photography. She is currently working with Warlpiri elders to create [Kurdiji 1.0](#), a community based app which aims to reduce the high rates of suicide among young Indigenous Australians by using technology to help reconnect them with stories, ceremonies and law.

Kurdiji is currently crowdfunding. Please [donate](#) if you can and help spread the word on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). *The Lumen Seed* can be purchased from [Daylight Press](#).

KURDIJI 1.0 - Give 5 for Kurdiji



Tags: [Judith Crispin](#), [Kurdiji 1.0 app](#), [The Lumen Seed](#)

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