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Cover Essay

Before the Drought?

They're arguing now. Shouting at each other about the state of the paddock fences and the sheep that got out. And the school fees, too. Dad's crabby and Mum's crying. I wish I could go to Chloe's this afternoon. I miss her from school. Mum was cross with me when I asked if we could go to the city to see where she lives.

"We should never have bought that new harvester two years ago." The door slammed and I heard boots stomping on the dusty wooden floorboards leading to the sheds.

I can tell from the expressions on Mum's face what she's thinking about. "It seems odd that expansive blue skies, day after day, can be a 'bad' thing. In some places, blue skies mean happiness and clarity. No clouds on the horizon! Stranger still that we don't talk to each other about how good life can be here on the farm, far away from the problems of city life. I wonder how much the children know... the pressure on farmers... whether they hear the same old arguments from the city that all us country folks have flash cars and kids at private boarding school. We should talk about it at dinner."

Our teacher talked about oceans today. We learnt about movements of water and ocean currents. Miss Walker said that our rain comes from the ocean, in lots of different ways. We've been to the ocean, twice, once when I was five, and once last year. I love it. Dad takes me and Jim fishing while Mum lies on the beach and reads. We're not going this year, Mum said.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Dad was in a world of his own. "The Farmer's Collective meeting came up with nothing again yesterday. The Government won't declare this year's 'extenuating circumstances'; same as last year. The agriculture department folks have made a lot of the fact that land has changed hands, and that apparently actual cash flows and grain receivals are about average. How could they possibly be 'average'? Politicians (those that do care, like

Clive) have their hands tied, it seems. At least we agreed to have the Bureau of Meteorology at next week's meeting."

"Do you want butter with your potatoes? Salt? Samantha, do you remember when Elsie from the local Aboriginal group spoke to the school assembly? She was the keeper of rain stories, and talked about their six seasons that were different from ours, the cycles of wet and dry, what her mob did during the droughts, and during the floods. She spoke of the way they knew their dreaming and singing trails, and the ways droughts and floods changed."

"My teacher says that the march flies are never as bad during the drought."

"Really? What else did she say?"

"That when the droughts lasted a few years, people used to move all the way to the coast for the whole time that the morning tree is flowering because there were always heaps of fish close to the shore that could be netted easily." It's amazing what some people know. I often wonder who discovered such things.

"Was it Elsie who reckoned the clearing for wheat and sheep has changed the cycles of droughts and floods, or did I dream that?"

Dad was listening to Mum and I, obviously. "Yeah, she did say that; changed their trails too. Look... when the climate bloke comes I'll ask him to explain this El Niño idea, the shifts in sea surface temperature, changing pressures, changing rainfall patterns. When the rains go to one part of the Pacific, the other side has a drought."

Mum says that the climate man should go to the school assembly, too. Why can't we live with these sorts of changes? "Dad, if we know about the cycles, why can't we make enough money during the good years to keep us going through the drought?"

Damn, how did Clive answer that question? Something about the grain cooperative, the contract to sell sheep to

Saudi Arabia, the national rural subsidy for diesel... and the four year electoral cycle probably. “Well, we’re still paying off the farm mortgage, and every time we do well we have to invest in our farm, maybe by clearing some more land, buying more farm equipment. By spending our earnings, we can spread our benefits through other parts of the country towns, so other local folks benefit; the supermarket, hardware store... the Government does well, too, because we pay more in taxes, so when the drought comes next, the Government can afford to help us out.”

“But that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to say, it’s old reasoning. Small country businesses seem to be struggling even during good years! And you know it as well as anyone else—the government won’t pay relief this year, so our only way forward is to work the land harder and go more into debt and hope for rain next season. It doesn’t work anymore. The catchment coordinating group made a statement about this 2 weeks ago, saying that driving the land harder during the drought may even make the situation worse and make it harder for the catchment to recover.”

“Well, I can’t believe that stuff they’re coming up with: clearing of vegetation reduces shade in the dry, and exposes soils to longer seasons of moisture loss, and this is responsible for longer, more frequent droughts! So, what roles do the crops and the stubble play in this? There’s not a shred of evidence as far as I can tell, and if it’s true, then why are the droughts worse only now, not 50 years ago? If we go believing every harebrained idea... look... we’ve been over and over this. If they’re so smart about what we should and shouldn’t be doing, maybe they can give us some decent solutions that work.”

Now they’re arguing again. I wish we could go to the beach these holidays.

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Cover Art

Life before the Drought by Julie Weekes

ABOUT THE ARTIST

This story has been inspired by the cover art, *Life before the Drought* by Julie Weekes. Julie Weekes is an indigenous Australian, the daughter of a fifth generation Australian mother and Torres Strait Islander father. She grew up knowing she was an Islander, but being raised by her mother, had no knowledge of her indigenous culture. She expresses her own identity through painting, reflecting personal experiences and depicting surroundings of her environment through the use of color and design. She has been widely exhibited in Australia and her works are represented in both public and private, national and international collections.

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