

## Contemporary Rock Art in the Budawang Ranges

By Will Glasgow

During the university break he went into the Budawang Ranges with his girlfriend, Susie. The two-day trip was inspired by a Frank Moorhouse short story that had tapped into a reserve of Australian manliness he had never realised was in him. Like the story, the trip promised hiking and drinking and sex. (They would even try to fit a swim in.) Unlike the story, there would be a shower, because while Frank and Belle were the sort of people who would have sex without one around, they weren't. In a further departure, he thought he might recite some poetry.

“Why couldn't we just go the beach?” she asked as she skipped another track on the car stereo. “I hate hiking.”

“We are going into the bush because that is where we are *from*.”

“No we aren't.” She skipped another track. “You're from Adelaide and I'm from Canberra – and we *never* go into the bush.”

“Susie, please, keep in mind – before there was Adelaide, before there was Canberra, before there was any of this,” – his right hand made a sweeping gesture that passed over her fitted black singlet, the ageing grey dashboard, the bug-splattered windscreen and the driver's-side car door with the lock that didn't shut properly – “there was the bush. *We are returning*.”

“Oh, God. Are you going to talk like *that* for the whole trip?” She skipped another track.

Actually he had planned to talk like *that* for the whole trip. These two days were to be elevated. This was not dreary Canberra with its phoney lake and quiet nights in: this was wild experience, midnight passion, Life as Art. And to make that

clear, he had decided they would speak with an appropriate tone. In a further attempt to elevate, he had prepared a playlist for the two-and-a-half-hour drive – a carefully arranged mixture of Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong. An irresistible concoction of rhythm and verve: the Golden Age of Jazz, as he had told her. But the playlist had not withstood her restless fingers. She kept skipping his tracks.

*She is flustered by the idea of this trip, he thought. She senses she will soon see me in a state of raw manliness, and doesn't know how she will react.* He nodded his head profoundly. *And so she quivers and skips my tracks.*

With a steady hand she skipped another of his tracks, wondering when he would next try to recite that stupid short story to her and how long this Crocodile Dundee phase of his was going to last.

“Don’t touch me!” she swatted his hand off her taut denim shorts, limply, not because she was teasing but because she was exhausted. He had wanted to put it there for the last half-hour. Those shorts, this heat, her grunting – it all made him feel very primitive, just as the trip was supposed to. He wanted her now on this dusty, ancient rock. Her face made it clear that this was not going to happen.

“Where’s the water?” He had no idea. The map reading skills he had said so much about during the car trip had not flourished in the bush. He was supposed to have led them to a rock pool, which he had never been to before, but could sense from its voluptuous shape on the map was going to be a perfect spot for romantic behaviour. He had named it “Susie’s Waters” in pencil on his map.

“It’s just around there,” – he pointed indeterminately to the left – “just a little further now.”

Nearly an hour later they arrived at a fetid, brown bog.

“Here at last!”

“Fuck you, Todd.”

“Easy, easy – we’re not going to swim *here*,” he said in his most reassuring tone. “We’re going to follow the water until it becomes the rock pool – the clean, fresh rock pool – then we’ll swim.” He went to give her a there-you-are-girlfriend hug, but she swatted him off, as if he was another pesky bush-fly.

“You’re sweaty.”

He was irritated by this extremely un-primitive comment, but was soon soothed by a vision of the two of them splashing naked in the fresh waters ahead. And so, once again, they set off, passing still more dusty rocks, still more eucalyptuses and, the newest addition to this Australian bush setting, a lot of very unpleasant water. Forty-five minutes later, mosquito bitten, sunburnt, exhausted, he had to accept that, while not *quite* as brown as the bog, and not smelling *quite* as strongly of shit, the rock pool and the estuary that fed it were pretty disgusting. In the feeblest voice he had used in thirteen years he asked, “Shall we?”

“So it wasn’t our greatest day,” he said, adding eggplant to the garlic and pancetta already in the cast-iron pan.

“No, Todd. It wasn’t.”

“But the night looks like it will be an improvement – this smells delicious.”

He splashed some more olive oil into the pan and stirred. It had taken them a further two hours to get back to the campsite. Aside from an almost very nasty incident with what he was quite sure was one of the world’s more deadly snakes, it had been uneventful. After the snake incident she had not said a single word on the way back to

camp, which frightened him. On arrival she had made straight for the rudimentary camp shower from which, to his great relief, water had run, washing away a fair bit of the day's unpleasantness. While he now accepted that the attempted swim had been an unwise departure from Moorhouse's text, he thought the shower demonstrated that textual fidelity could be overrated. Now she was clean, now the stars shone magnificently above, now a white mist had filled the gorge below. He looked at her and then at the stars and thought that now was the time – *for poetry*. He cleared his throat, made his most romantic eyes and spoke in his fruitier-than-a-Christmas-cake poetry voice:

*“She walks in beauty, like the night*

*“Of cloudless climes and starry skies;*

*“And all – ”*

“Enough! No more poetry – not on such a beautiful night.”

“But –”

“Please, Todd. *No.*”

He wasn't sure whether no-means-no applied to Lord Byron's poetry, but he was sure that he didn't want to investigate the matter tonight. As he busied himself with the dinner, tending to the contents of the pan and boiling water for the pasta, he cursed himself for straying from Frank's example again. It was not only water that ran from the camp shower – it was hubris too.

“Ow! The rock's hurting me – it's grazing my back.”

It had not been easy to get her clothes off, even with the help of an evocative night sky, the nearly two bottles of north-of-twenty-dollars Shiraz and the reassuring presence of the shower. And now this.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Get off me.”

“Susie, come on. You know how much I’ve wanted to do it on the rocks,” he pleaded. “I’ve read that Moorhouse passage to you a hundred times.” He recited: “*They had sex there on the rock slab surrounded by the mist. They played with the idea of her naked body on the rock slab, the bruising of it, the abrasion...* Just try to enjoy it.”

“How about *I* play with the idea of *your* naked body on the rock slab?”

While not thrilled with this suggestion – it felt unmanly, un-Australian – he knew it was the only way he was going to have sex on a rock. He rolled over.

Moments later.

“Fuck – it hurts!”

“Shut up, Todd. I’m playing with the idea of your naked body on the rock slab.”

“Ow! Get off me!”

“The bruising! The abrasion!”

“Susie – stop! I think my arse-cheeks are bleeding!”

Satisfied that she had inscribed a lesson deep into his Australian male body, she got off him and started putting her clothes back on. Then she went into the tent to sleep, leaving him on the rock slab, under the stars, surrounded by mist, dislodging pieces of viciously shaped rock from the underside of his body and vowing to never read contemporary Australian fiction again.

With a pillow nursing his grazed arse-cheeks and her asleep in the passenger seat, he drove his 1984 Toyota Corolla back to Canberra. When he had shown her the damage

in the morning, she had said the scabs were in the shape of a love heart. She called it a fine example of primitive rock art and laughed with what he had called schoolgirl cruelty. He adjusted the support pillow and thought that it was impossible to see a future for himself with a girl who would not have sex on rocks.

The heart-scab was becoming itchy. He raised his damaged haunches slightly so that he could slip his right hand between them and the pillow. With great delicacy he traced the circuit of the scab. Its curves reminded him of Susie's Waters which in turn reminded him that the trip had been a painful disappointment. With his right hand tending his wounds he thought about Life, Art and Savlon cream. With his left hand he skipped another track. And another.

*Enough!* He ejected the CD he had prepared for the return trip, The Golden Age of Soul, and in its place put an American hip hop CD. Within moments its unrepeatable misogyny calmed him, as for millennia the lighting of candles has calmed distressed people of faith. He even sang along for a bit.

Thus the Corolla continued – past coastal retirement villages, roadside fruit-sellers and the Clyde; past Braidwood, its famous pies and the pretty rural scenes that surround it; past Bungendore, its arts and crafts shops and the second-hand bookshop which in his pre-Budawang-trip days he had wanted to visit. As the car descended on Queanbeyan, Todd had this thought: *I need to find a girl who will have sex with me on rocks.* Susie, now awake but feigning sleep to avoid any further lectures he may have prepared, thought this: *I need to find a guy who doesn't try to have sex with me on rocks.* And in an attractive Victorian terrace house in Balmain, Sydney, celebrated Australian writer and bon vivant Frank Moorhouse felt a discomfort he sometimes experienced in his stomach: an unpleasant feeling that wasn't quite hurt and wasn't quite anger. *Some little shit has been misreading me again,* he thought.