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Dog Swamp Shopping Centre

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Arthur Julbert Harris could diversify when necessary, 
bait the swamp with a glass of pigs’ blood, 
then roll up his trousers and wade 
into the water, standing knee deep while the leeches 
attach themselves to his legs. Back on land 
his calves black and writhing, leeches 
are plucked off one by one and placed in screw top jars.

Down at Perth hospital patients 
with boils and headaches, toothaches and fevers 
have Arthur’s leeches applied to their pains. 
If the leech won’t drink, drop it 
in a glass of warm beer until ready, 
then smear some blood or cream near the puncture site.

When leeches went out of fashion 
Arthur began to mix up dingoes with wadjella dogs 
yellow, red, blue and black with strange amber eyes 
that terrified with their indifference. 
There was good money for a mottled pup 
that could kill a rabbit as easy as scratch a flea.

When old Arthur Julbert died, 
his dogs escaped from their kennels 
and ran wild in the nearby swamp 
their barking and howling drifting 
through the night like mournful sirens.

After the dogs were shot and buried 
the water endured a blue-green shade, 
the paperbark fringes were cut up and burned; 
the ground rolled and smoothed over 
for a shopping centre and sporting oval.

Out behind Woolworths the swamp lingers. 
Two turtles have adapted to the conditions, 
turning sideways to swim through the rusted iron grate 
into a big concrete drain beneath the shops. 
A sign says ‘This water may cause ill effects.’ 
No drinking, No Swimming, No Boating, 
No sailing, No fishing, 
No Dogs.
Nandi Chinna was born in Adelaide in 1964. Her poetry has been widely published in journals and anthologies. Her first collection *Our Only Guide is Our Homesickness* was published by Five Islands Press in 2007. She is currently a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, for which she is writing poetry about wetlands and walking.