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Against the Grain

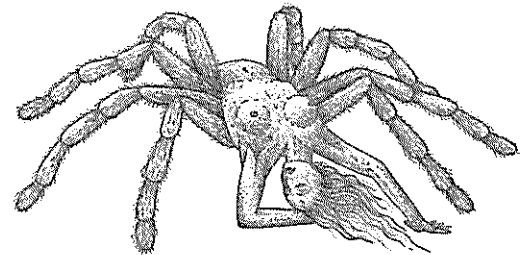
Vahri G. McKenzie

Edith Cowan University, v.mckenzie@ecu.edu.au

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Editors

Sarah Wreford and Adriane Howell

Layout Design

Sarah Wreford and Adriane Howell

Art

Abby Drielsma

Cover Design

Niika

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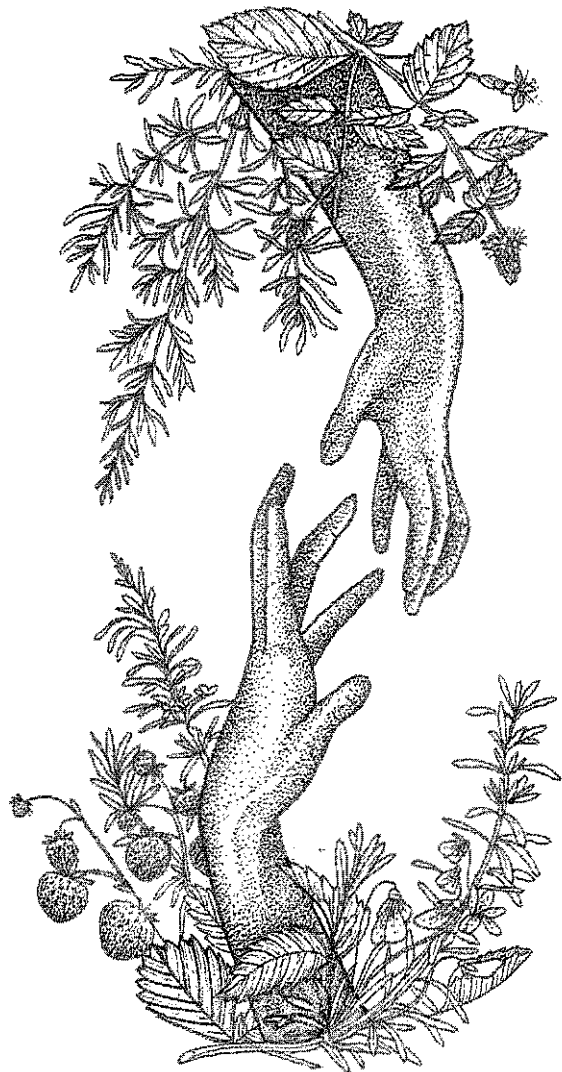
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AGAINST THE GRAIN

VAHRI MCKENZIE

It was not the first bushwalk of its kind but it was the first since the cactus had flowered and neither she nor he knew quite what to expect. Perhaps it was the cactus' way of thanking them for their years of care. The reward would be like the cactus itself, prickly and difficult to handle. But the flowers! Enormous, exquisite white breasts perched on the side of a priapic column. The flowering compelled them once again to cut a length each, remove the spines and fibrous core and boil the flesh down into a bitter emetic. It was a sign of maturity; it was meant to make the trip stronger. They got a large cup of the stuff down and left the house on foot.

It was summer. A few days before she had watched one of those Australian films where people set off on a bush adventure and become overwhelmed by their environment.

Idiots, she'd thought, as they made one stupid mistake after another. *Amateurs*. Her husband had brought a compass and a detailed map of the parkland close to their home on the metropolitan fringe. He knew the lay of the land and anyway, they were virtually in their own backyard. Each had prepared.

"I thought there'd be more walking and less tripping," she said. The walking became difficult sooner than she'd expected and the urge to lie down was immense. They were navigating their way along a series of bare and unappealing tracks, close to the bushland's edge, when they began to shit and vomit and the gravelly scrub had to do. The green cactus goo that emerged looked much the same as the concoction they'd consumed an hour earlier at home. Some couples went out to dinner to mark anniversaries. This odd ritual – difficult and illicit – was more in keeping with their ten years of fierce psychodrama and passionate sex. Relieved, they walked on. "Why do butterflies always go in pairs?"

"They don't."

"They do, look," she said, pointing. "Unless it's just one, and the colour and the shadow are separate."

The bush, as they walked downhill into the river valley, was radiant. On either side the forest sloped slowly uphill and looked like a welcoming playground, soft and clean, with any number of big warm logs to lie on for a little while. Raised in the region, she'd always felt at home there, as if she could snuggle down in the grand saw-toothed leaves under a banksia and sleep like a baby. *There are no predators*, she thought, *and nothing to fear*.

"Let's just wait until we reach some granite," he said. He'd

managed to expel one or two more gurgling fountains by this stage and was feeling good. "You should try to throw up more, you'll feel better." Scraping nails, shedding skin, sacrificing hair: each purge was a cause for celebration. He looked out to the eastern ridge, which was deep-soiled and jewelled with ancient zamias. On the western ridge the bush was thinner, but the large areas of rock drew him. *What is it about quartz and feldspar?* "Doesn't granite have the highest background radiation, and the granite around here in particular? I've read that somewhere, but I can't remember if it's good or bad," he said.

She staggered on, no longer feeling nauseous but heavy as a stone. This was it. This was what happened. They were almost at the bottom of the river valley when a low granite outcrop appeared on the ridge. They cut through the scrub towards it, pushing against shrubs that scratched back. *We're going against the grain. This isn't the right way*. But they reached the granite and lay down gratefully.

As the day warmed they rested for a couple of hours on the rock, vomiting a little. The transition was coming on, splendour in mind and body refracted in each other and the bush around them. They had to drink quite a lot of water. Reaching a plateau, their bodies were at ease and light enough to roll and stretch on the surface. Conversation came easily but talk was balanced on a precipice of wonder, fascinated by nature's occult pattern. It was ridiculous, really, the way petty irritations and frustrations built up and, in the few days their daughter had been away, they'd spat and sizzled at each other. Ludicrous to let that happen when the remedy was in their own backyard. He thought, *I know what to do. Why do I forget?* Complexity mingled with fierce joy. He

sang and shook and straightened himself out on the rock, spine loose and long, brave face softened.

It was time to move on and she decided not to take the stick that had become the talisman of her journey-so-far. It was small and very weathered, a twig from a shrub that once had decussate leaves growing first east-west and then north-south. When she ran her fingers along it, she could feel the subtle way the plant twisted to sprout leaves in one direction and then the other. Touching it repeatedly gave the impression of a small conscious creature who could alter the arrangement of its limbs at will. "I was thinking as I touched this of ways to persist over time, survive and stay sane. Your way is to be hard and beautiful, like a crystal. Another way is to learn a pattern, like growing cruciform, able to shift one way, then another." She wondered what he'd make of her analysis. Recently she'd learned that as a teenager he had aspired to be an acolyte. Yet all the time she'd known him he'd hated organised religion and the knowledge made her think she knew him hardly at all.

"You should take it with you."

"But that's the other thing about persisting: what doesn't break, survives. This stick is fragile. That's why I'm remembering the pattern."

Feeling well, they left the granite and the path and made a greater effort to go with the grain. Their intended destination was a site of significance, a stone arrangement she had found reference to on an electricity company map called 'Terminal Site Selection Constraints – Aboriginal Heritage'. He had mentally plotted the site onto his map and felt confident that it might be found near the bend in the river. They had some water but not much. They were far but not so far from

home. She thought again of the young people in the movie and told him about it. *Idiots*. "I feel so safe here," she said.

"Well. Other things can go wrong."

What other things?

Once, only once, because she'd asked, he'd given her a piece of jewellery, a crystal caught in wire mesh. She realised she'd dropped it and anxiously searched for signs of damage: an inclusion refracted the light in a different and beautiful way. But had she caused it or had it been there all along? She loved it all the more for its flaw. That was enough. Wasn't it?

Suddenly a series of sonic booms sounded and the earth shook. It was a roo. They'd gotten very close before it had sensed them: *a sure sign we're going with the grain*, she decided. Close to the bottom of the valley, now, they thought they could see water. At some point they needed to cross the river, which was actually a watercourse, just a moist cleft for much of the year. It was the hottest time of day and a glint of water drew them down.

"I don't know," he said. "I can't see a way out."

"But we know how close the other side is. We saw the track from the ridge." She led the way into the dense undergrowth that seemed drunk on water, shrubs taller than they were.

He didn't like it. "It looks like you can get somewhere but you can't."

She pushed on. She couldn't feel any pain but noticed her clothes had many small tears and her hands were bleeding. "Look at the line of trees!" She reached forward and called back encouragingly. "They're *just there!*" She was small enough to duck underneath the tangle of shrubs, but still they found out that soft spot between her glasses and hat

brim and scratched her face.

Larger, he was snared some way behind. "I can't do it," he yelled out.

"You can! We're nearly there. I'll pull your prickles out when we arrive."

"It's impossible. Those trees are growing through it, not beyond it. Who knows how long it will last? I can't move... I don't even know if I can move backwards. It's past pulling prickles out. I'm over-fucking-whelmed!"

She might have gone on, if she had more water, or more time. But splitting up? That was always the part of the movie where things went from bad to worse. In India before their daughter was born, she'd want to go somewhere he wouldn't and she always gave in. *I'm being generous*, she'd thought. *It'll balance up later on, won't it?* Painfully she turned around and they found their way back onto the wrong side of the ridge. It was steeper than ever. Small islands of granite broke the almost-parallel lines of ridge and trees. "I think I'd rather scoot under scrub than cling desperately to a cliff," she said, but he was already making for the next rock. Ornate snail hakeas that had delighted her on the way down now marked points to cling to, but not with her hands. The nut sat satisfyingly in her palm, but the plant's hold on the ridge was almost as tenuous as her own. They gave her something to mark progress by. That was all, but it helped.

They reached another granite islet and looked over the river onto the opposite ridge. "See?" he said. "At least from here we can see the other side." It seemed so close. Just one big jump looked like it would take them there. But he would not be lured down again until they saw the bend in the river with its broad pass and a return to the beaten track. There

they rested.

In clear pools, all that remained of winter's flow, she washed her face and hands. She drank more of her own water and wondered whether to drink the river water. It teemed with tiny fish but didn't flow; she didn't drink.

After consulting his map, he pointed to a hill topped with granite boulders. "Could that be your site of significance?"

Yes. The stones had been arranged by some ancient being with the power to carve river valleys and build outlandish shapes with giant boulders. No — the stones *were* ancient beings, as was the river valley. A casual glance would reveal only a hill with rocks on top. A brilliant disguise. "So the obstacle course is over," she said. "Now do we begin the distance event?"

"Well, the shortest way home will take us off the main track again," he explained. And first he wanted to go a little further up river to see how one ridge joined the other along the valley. The cactus had worked its way through and what remained now was a glow that lit the way. It reminded him of a science experiment he read about as a kid that explained how to magnetise a needle by stoking it over and over. All the molecules eventually aligned and the needle could pick up iron filings and pins. It used to seem like a kind of magic. "How much water do you have left?" he asked, and sucked in air when she showed him.

She thought of the film again.

The walking was easier along the river track but she found a little pain in her leg.

She told him and he said, "Just watch it and see."

They walked on and sure enough, the little pain

grew into a big pain under her careful attentions. *Everything has a grain*, she thought. Manufactured materials like paper and cloth, but also water and bush. *Do emotions, or pain, have a grain?* Her leg throbbed now and she stopped walking. *But what if the grain is damaged?* She sat down. "This is crazy," she said aloud, getting up. "Let's just ignore it."

It was the afternoon lull. She had found a beautiful leaf from a marri, *calophylla*, and waved it overhead when she heard the red-tailed black cockatoos calling from the forest nearby. Sometimes, if she let them know she was there, they came close to talk, speaking their Noongah name that sounds a bit like *courage*. So she described circles in the air with her leaf and imagined the way it looked from higher up. Soon she found the family of half-a-dozen, who kept quiet until they knew they'd been spotted, and then she hung around watching them, while one called to the others.

"They were hiding from me. How do you do that?" he said, thinking of occasions in the past she'd managed to conjure the endangered birds up out of the vast forest. *Not vast enough*, he supposed.

He led them homewards along a series of tracks that may or may not have been the ones they took out that morning, many hours earlier. He was certain of the direction but couldn't guess the distance. Soon he felt sure they were nearly on the railway track close to home and they drank what little remained of their water. But when they emerged from the forest into the liminal area of the track against the parkland's edge, they were indeed on the right track but very far from home. "I don't understand," he said. "We must have recrossed our path somewhere."

They were dirty and bleeding. They had no water. But they'd be home before dark. Wouldn't they? He picked some tips of stinkwort, a weed that grew straight out of the laterite on the track, without water, without soil. Its crystalline scent sustained him, despite what the farmers called it. It wasn't native but specialised in those disturbed areas on the fringes; it was a survivor.

She pointed to the butterflies, numerous along the railway track. They all flew in pairs but seemed to hold colour and shadow together in one body now. "See?" she said.

"What?"

They walked on in silence, the sun low at their backs, and each thought of how they'd tell their daughter.