

Kirsty Gunn - Artefacts of Writing

At the end of the street where I lived, a street of gracious two-storey houses set in large gardens that were planted with oak and ash and maple, with English herbaceous borders and flowering fruit trees and shrubberies, was a park.

?A park?? you say.

A park, yes. But not a park as you know a park to be, not what you would call a park.

1. This is how [Kirsty Gunn's](#) [1] latest memoir-essay-fiction *?Going Bush?* (2016) begins. As the tense and voice indicate, we are at this point in a [memoir](#) [2]. A few paragraphs later we move without warning into a fictional story about a charged moment in the life of a young girl growing up in [New Zealand](#) [3], and then, just as unexpectedly, back into the memoir which also begins to shade into a literary essay. This continuous movement in and out of genres, and towards some other kind of writing, is a signature feature of Gunn's oeuvre which is, in this respect, comparable to [Antjie Krog's](#) [4] (see Chapter 6 of the book).

2. At one level, reading the opening as a memoir is easy enough: the 'I' recalls the world of suburban [Wellington](#) [5] where Gunn spent her childhood in the 1960s, a world that also features in the more explicitly autobiographical parts of *My Katherine Mansfield Project* (2015), another of her literary forays away from established genres and into the uncategorizable. At another level, however, things get a little trickier in part because this memoir, somewhat unusually, has an addressee: the unnamed but not uncharacterized 'you'. What can be said of this figure? Not much, except that she or he?we?re never given any gender markers?speaks a version of [British English](#) [6]. What this figure calls?and so perhaps knows as?a 'park?', for instance, is probably what the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as sense 3a (?A large public garden or area of land used for recreation?) or possibly the older sense 1b (?Any large enclosed piece of ground, usually comprising woodland and pasture, attached to or surrounding a manor, castle, country house, etc.?).



John Constable, Wivenhoe Park (1816)

Whereas a 'park' for the Gunn-figure is a children's playground. Later, the 'I' and 'you' have similar difficulties with the words 'countryside' and 'country' which 'you' parses as a 'place of leisure. A 'Locus Amoenae' [7]'. A rural idyll or pastoral' (24). As the Latin phrase, literally meaning 'pleasant place', suggests, 'you's' version of British English is rather erudite. In the opening section, the Gunn-figure plays up to this when she evokes what is now generally called William Blake's 'Jerusalem' [8]', describing the suburban park/playground of her childhood 'this green and pleasant land' (5).

2.1 It is not only the 'I' and 'you' who find themselves caught in an intercultural play of language where translation, even within the varieties of English, is constantly required, though often inadequate. Similar difficulties arise for the Gunn-figure herself who repeatedly reflects on the gulf between the linguistic repertoire of her present writer-self and the child-self of the past. 'We used to call it 'the burn' [9]', remember?', she records in one of her notebooks describing a return visit to the park in later life: 'That Scottish word for a little stream, how could we have called it that?'when, look at it! Choked with weeds and mud slick, water sluggish and engorged with rotting leaves' (10). This word, which reflects her Scottish heritage, is an embedded part of the colonial world of her childhood, the other constituent elements of which include a stock of English nursery rhymes ('Ring a Ring o' Roses' [10]', etc.), the 'Fair-isle cardigans sent to us from Scotland', not to mention the suburban houses with their 'English herbaceous borders' (5, 16-17). This criss-crossing of autobiographical selves/moments takes on larger historical proportions when the Gunn-figure turns to Katherine Mansfield [11], one of her primary literary interlocutors. After citing one of Mansfield's own descriptions of the New Zealand landscape, she comments: '[Mansfield] tries, as though she could, to translate: 'green place', 'great valley', 'blazing sun'; all these words she imports to the place to give it meaning, locate it, limit it' (25). No match for the new world in which she finds herself, Mansfield's English is, by implication, no help to the Gunn-figure either.

2.1.1. It is, however, with the word *‘bush’* [12] that all these questions to do with language, writing and translation come sharply into focus. As the *‘you’* recognises from the outset, this is a uniquely freighted term in the *New Zealand English* [13] lexicon used in part to refer to what the *‘I’* recalls as the nightmarish, seasonless *‘dark presence’* beyond the park (5).

‘It’s bush.’ [*‘you’* says]

Not woods. Not a forest. Nor a copse or a dell or a glade. [*‘I’* writes]

‘It’s bush. It doesn’t translate.’ [*‘you’* says]

As we shall see, the play on speech and writing is not incidental. In a subsequent passage of memoir, the Gunn-figure turns to the British *Chambers 20th-Century Dictionary* [14] for help, citing, among other definitions, *‘wild uncultivated country’* and *‘lost in the bush: bewildered’* (11). Yet this still doesn’t capture all the local nuances of the 1960s New Zealand usage which also includes the phrase *‘Going Bush’*. Her father, she recalls, used this to describe *‘a friend who’d made the decision to go into remote and difficult country, allowing himself to be altered by that experience’,* though others, also always male—as she makes clear the idiom is gendered—used it to mean *‘going native’* (12). The *OED* entry for the phrase *‘to go bush’,* which the lexicographers date from 1908, has *‘to go into the country; to leave the city; to disappear from one’s usual surroundings. Also transf., to run wild, to go berserk. orig. and chiefly Austral.’* As sense 9a for the word *‘bush’* itself it gives: *‘woodland, country more or less covered with natural wood: applied to the uncleared or untilled districts in the former British Colonies which are still in a state of nature—that is, beyond the cultivated territory of the agrarian, colonial state (see the post *‘Scott’s paradox’*). All the examples of this usage, first attested in 1826, come from Australian, New Zealand and South African sources. The definitions (translations?) dictionaries offer are of only limited value, however, so the Gunn-figure once again recalls her father’s vernacular usage: *‘To be unobtainable’,* my father tells me. *‘Going Bush’. That’s what the expression means’* (13).*

3. The story of the girl replays these semantic quandaries in another key—or rather, threaded into and across the literary memoir-essay, the third-person fictional mode allows Gunn the freedom to wrest her title phrase from men, dictionaries and the colonial past, opening it up in new ways while also probing its limits and, indeed, the limits of her own medium. As a story it is couldn’t be shorter or simpler. It is about a family picnic in *‘the bush’* focalized mainly through the eyes of an unnamed young girl. Things get a little more complicated because this very ordinary outing happens to coincide with a momentous event in the life of her changing body: that morning she has her first period. And then there are some psychological complexities. For one thing, the girl’s mother, who instills a fear of *‘the bush’* in her, regards menstruation as shameful and so makes her feel ashamed; for another, the girl does not get on with her cousins, particularly the boy who, the narrator observes, pursues her *‘like a hunter, like a man’* (36). However, most of the cousins like taunting her with racial epithets—though it is never clear exactly what her heritage or ethnicity might be, they consider her a *Maori* [15]. By contrast, all we have are hints and intimations: at one point the narrator refers to her cousins as the children of her father’s *‘paheka’* [16] brothers and sisters?, possibly suggesting mixed parentage and/or a history of adoption, and at another the narrator describes her as *‘this heavy girl-woman with her big legs and her silent Maori ways’,* though we are at this point seeing her through the eyes of the predatory boy-cousin (7, 26). To make matters worse, the day of the outing is extremely hot and the girl had hoped the picnic site might have a pool, that is, before her period made any thought of swimming impossible.



Totara Tree (Source: Wikipedia)

3.1 Unsurprisingly, given all these converging pressures, the girl decides to escape to 'the bush' where she strips and enjoys a brief moment of euphoric wild swimming in the river before she has to find other ways of evading the cousins who follow in pursuit. Yet, for her, 'the bush' is not 'the bush?', or even what her parents call 'the forbidden place?': it is a sanctuary in which she feels 'safe?' and where everything, birds, trees, and the river, seems to be inviting her, even singing to her not in some generalized call of the wild, but in a disaggregated array of voices, each identified by its Maori name [17]: Whauwhau [18], Titoki [19], Mingimangi [20], Horoeka [21], Ngaio [22], Manuka [23], Totara [24], to mention only the trees (26, 35). (While she hears Maori [25] speech and song, we of course read Maori words transcribed into the Latinate writing system, a process British missionaries initiated in the early nineteenth century. Maori has been an official language of New Zealand since 1987.) All these voices also instruct her in the indigenous arts of camouflage, using mud and foliage, helping her learn not just how to conceal her nakedness and hide from her 'terrible cousins?' but how to accept her changing body (37).

4. The girl is not the only one to find a more nuanced Maori lexicon to replace 'the bush?', the indistinguishable mass characteristic of the outsider's or foreigner's gaze. As an adult the Gunn-figure also discovers 'the parts of speech, the articulations, pronunciations?' she never learned as a child, the 'long site-words, naming-words?' that enable her to 'break bush down, separate it, make of it this place here, or that place there?', and so think beyond the English language and its colonial heritage (13, 16). This certainly signals a new phase in her own thinking and insider's sense of the landscape, yet the cautionary note she strikes at the outset ensures that it remains just that: a moment in her autobiography not an epoch in the colonial and then national history of New Zealand. When the 'you?' recognizes that the New Zealand English term 'bush?' does not translate into any word in the British English lexicon, the 'I?' asks:

Perhaps it [the bush] can change us, though?
'Change us?'
Perhaps. (6)

'Going Bush' itself, like all Gunn's uncategorizable works, reinforces this blend of utopian aspiration and sceptical reserve by asking us, as readers, to go into uncharted literary territory not to map, let alone colonize it, but to allow ourselves to be altered by the experience—or, in other words, to 'go bush' not as you (they? we?) know going bush to be, not what you (they? we?) would call 'going bush'. That's the utopianism. The scepticism lies partly in the fact that, for Gunn, as for any inventive writer, such transformations can never be guaranteed, since the onus is ultimately on the reader. Yet, for Gunn, though not necessarily for other writers, it also lies in the fact that change, particularly as effected by writing, can never end. Ideally 'Going Bush' will transform how its readers think about its title phrase, but it cannot bring the process of meaning-making to a conclusion because, characteristically for Gunn, there is always an unobtainable remainder, a secret that has not yet been revealed, a possibility that has not been explored. The Sylph edition of the text underscores this wariness, which applies as much to her own medium as to anything else, by reproducing a series of mixed media assemblages by her sister, the artist Merran Gunn, [26] that use other, visual means to represent 'the bush' as well as the ephemerality and foreignness of written English.



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5. A sense of, and feeling for, the unobtainable pervades Gunn's writing. It is there in the fifteen stories that make up the collection *Infidelities* (2014), for instance, many of which reflect her preoccupation with the perils and promise of the intercultural and all of which add new layers of meaning to the title word which has as much to do with the secret inner lives of lovers, fathers, and wives as with the potential betrayals of writing itself. These concerns resurface in *Caroline's Bikini* (2018) which explores the desire for the unobtainable in the long history of literary writing about love. They also underpin the 'zig-zag thinking' that shapes her understanding of translation, the intercultural and much else besides (118). As she explains in *My Katherine Mansfield Project*, 'zig-zags' are the 'crazy, zany, hopscotch-stepped paths that criss-cross all over Wellington's hills' and, as such, they represent a more viable metaphor for her understanding of the always disruptive movement between moments, places, languages, cultures, selves and genres than the more reassuringly linear figure of the 'corridor' the Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri [27] once used in an interview to describe his own spatial and cultural journeys between India and England (118, 121). Again her wariness centres on the intractability of experience and the limits of writing: 'I may be able to bring together my 'here' and my 'there' in the work I make, in my imagination, but both ends of the zig zag have about them the jolt of the now, either of the newly arrived or the just left behind', making it impossible 'to connect the two and make familiar the connection' in any final sense (121-22). Chaudhuri in fact shares her wariness—see my discussion of 'hovering' in Chapter 8 of the book—but, as 'Going Bush' shows, Gunn's way of articulating it remains wholly her own. Her sense of the unobtainable also raises further questions about contemporary claims regarding the kinds of knowledge literature affords whether of ourselves or others (see the post 'Getting past empathy?').



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Kirsty Gunn, *Going Bush?* (London: Sylph Editions, 2016); an abridged and adapted version also appeared in the *New York Review of Books* online as *Deep in New Zealand* [28]?, 27 October 2016.

This is number 27 of *The Cahiers Series* [29]? produced in collaboration with the Center for Writers & Translators [30] at The American University of Paris. The entire series is relevant to the concerns of this site. It aims *to make available new explorations in writing, in translating, and in the areas linking these two activities.*

Kirsty Gunn, *My Katherine Mansfield Project* [31] (Devon: Notting Hill Editions, 2015).

Kirsty Gunn, *Infidelities* [32] (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

Kirsty Gunn, *Caroline's Bikini* [33] (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).

OED Online [34]. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Accessed 8 August 2017.

For Amit Chaudhuri's reflections on his own literary forays into the uncategorizable, see *?I am Ramu* [35]? which appeared in the online version of *n+1* [36] for 22 August 2017.

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Links

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