

On the threshold: A road trip beyond the living and the dead, through lands of desert gold, and heavenly kings

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the thought processes at the intersection of memory, culture, and mortality through a personal narrative that juxtaposes a road trip across the Western Australian desert with a journey to Toraja, Indonesia. The author, Paul Trinidad, reflects on the experience of riding his vintage Ducati motorcycle through the Eastern Goldfields, where the vastness of the landscape evokes thoughts of pioneers, some of whom are buried in the harsh terrain. The thought processes travel *the tary serpent*, via unsettling mindscapes which follow pioneers' struggles and tumble posthumously through the remnants of their lives. The journey provides impetus *to make*, and to explore new meanings, new representations. Though not stated implicitly, the writing explores new ideas in context of contemplation and discovery along the way, the development of our own myths, representing humanity's endeavour to find meaning in the awe inspired by the universal cosmology. This introspection leads to a poignant comparison with Toraja's unique approach to death, where the deceased are not buried but placed in an elaborate variety of tombs, emphasizing in the process, a continual connection between the living and the dead. Trinidad grapples with themes of existence, contrasting rituals surrounding death, and the cultural significance of memory, ultimately contemplating the role of art and personal expression in finding new ways of preserving these legacies. The narrative weaves together a tapestry of experiences that question our understanding of life, death, and the bonds that transcend both, reflecting our inherent quest for meaning and representation amid the vastness of existence.

KEYWORDS

NASA, Mars Rover, Goldfields, memory, culture, mortality, desert, Toraja, Ducati, pioneers, rituals, Tarytau, Tary serpent, Bituminous line, existence



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Introduction

Verse 1

Thundering along the Goldfields Highway on an old (1975) Ducati 860 GTS

On the way back from Leonora / Menzies

I was barrelling along the section of road high on the dunes banking the Western edge of Lake Goongarrie

ROARing onward, Cane Grass, Broad Arrow, the flats,

Kalgoorlie....

I'd had little sleep and it felt like an eternity astride the Italian deus ex
...MACHINA

Mind besieged with tiredness
Road hypnosis kicking in

DRIFTING above and along the tary carborundum snake
I wound through the advancing eucalyptus, saltbush scrub and mulga

Nothing was in stasis

Roaring sounds
whirring bevel gears
and bellowing exhaust ...ahh the Conti's

Giddy forward motion opposing unrelentless hot wind
Perfect conditions Altering perception

Tree lines steadily cruising like battleships along and below the horizon,
Guideposts yawning away
then back toward disbelief
They became black stumped yellowing teeth
gnawing my mind
With expanding consciousness my helmeted head felt contained in a space suit bubble

Thoughts became isolated, absolute, complete
I was a little afraid in the vast desert space

Time becomes visceral
molasses gives over to deeper lost thoughts

the perception of a marker
the bourne of consciousness
the *other*

...**my shadow's keep**

Disjointed thoughts drift to the pioneer's cemetery a few kilometres West of the
bituminous line

My mind wove though foggy passages in time
a hundred years earlier to the struggling itinerant workers and their families

How did they endure this desert place?

Certainty gasped with knowledge that the old resting places
hold tomes of their stark hardships
Desolation

... in land resembling scenes transmitted by Mars Rover to mission control
Mars Rover ...to mission control
Mars Rover to mission control
Mars Rover to mission control
Mars Rover Mission CONTROL
Mission CONTROL



Verse 1 Epilogue

Mostly pasty-faced Westerners arrived from their mother countries to this isolated and remote outpost, they were following dreams of finding gold littered upon the surface and within the earth. Headstones record that infants died from gastro, allergy, snake bite and tuberculosis, adults suffered from other diseases and accidents in a land, which knows little about forgiveness. Michael (Mick) Madden died in a mining accident (RIP) after being knocked from a Skeleton Cage to fall downward in the abyss to a grisly death at the bottom of the main shaft of the Goongarrie Gold Mine (1897).¹

The ritual for death at Goongarrie was pared back and elemental, the same as funeral rites carried out elsewhere in the Australian wilderness at that time. A grave dug into

¹ <https://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/goongarrie-cemetery/>

[1] <https://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/goongarrie-cemetery/>

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangaroo>

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devonian_Reef

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithography>

the earth, remains lowered below, a few passages from the good book, the deceased invariably buried in the earth in graves marked by natural stones, painted or hammered out metal plates, crosses hewn from local wood or with headstones via monumental works in Kalgoorlie or from further afield.

Due to changes in the way we perceive recorded history and as contemporary culture moves on, largely the legacy of these pioneer's struggle is relegated to the too hard basket. Although degraded to many, their vast integrity has been retained by my own personal experiences, memories, flesh and bones. Here their dreams and endeavours are not long lost they were never abandoned to the absolute, but remain in the care of my shadows keep, my Aluk, and through faith in the creator!

"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." **Genesis 3:19**

The Land of the Heavenly Kings

At a steadier stage in my life, I gave up the peregrinations on the old motorbike for seemingly more polite modes of transport, which included fewer fatigue related *mind-bending* experiences. I travelled further afield throughout Indonesia. I discovered a place in the Northern region of South Sulawesi, Toraja, **Land of the Heavenly Kings**, a mountainous regency caught between ancient times where the old rituals, religions and animism, traditions and cultural practices mingle with modern practices. I never entered this culture, I collided with it and was thrown back to memories experienced in my earlier acid trip ROADS, it felt like running into a boomer ² at 130 kph.

I flew into Toraja from Ujung Pandang in a plane which could have come off the set of an Indiana Jones flick, the small box shaped plane bounced in-between the highland mountains among the convective and shear wind turbulence like a cork in a bubbling creek. I observed the landscape below bathed in the most intense of lights and contrasting shadows. Tongkonon rooves appeared like buffalo among the foliage and the fields, there were flashes of the reddest earth tinted by oxidised outcrops, the gorges captured mystical pools filled with deep shadows. Tears welled in my eyes as the rocky limestone took on the appearance of the geologically familiar Kimberley Devonian Reef ³, which in another life I prospected with the Bunubah mob for lithographic printing stones ⁴.

The Devonian reef is more familiarly known in the Kimberley at places like Windjana Gorge, Giekie Gorge and Tunnel Creek as an ancient landscape formation, a limestone reef formed during the Devonian period of earth's evolution. An unexpected geological

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangaroo>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devonian_Reef

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithography>

and cosmological connection on entry to Toraja, which overwhelmed my emotions. Toraja proved to be a land of mystery where life, death growth and decay coexist in a natural social cultural ecosystem.

The complexity of the proposition borne from my earlier road hypnosis began to drift away as I experienced another conceptual collision where life does not end as it did with Mick Madden, at the bottom of a grave dug into the sandy ochres of the desert pindan. My mind tumbled through trusted essential footholds of known memories concerning life and death. Conceptualizing Torajan funerals and the cultural approach toward life after death were ideas I could not process as I had not previously encountered such extremes. *I felt overwhelming sensations, unfamiliar but somehow logical in the setting where a seemingly unruly marriage of consciousness, poetry and forgotten memories seemed to form an irrational coherence where life leaks to death and death leaks back in the form of a visceral emulsion.*

Toraja confronted me with palpable supernatural elements where previously understood modes or reality blended with unknown fantastical cultural practices. In Toraja, the blazing example is manifest in ancestral representations of connections with God. *I had never connected to God as I traversed the remote Lowellian⁵ canals of my homeland* In the desert, God doesn't exist beyond mandatory graveside passages. But in Toraja the transition between living, the dead and the gods suspends disbelief as it permeates among the architecture like descending clouds, with and among their subjects to play key roles in existence. With no ability to comprehend, I felt myself relinquishing distant thoughts of desert graves.

In Toraja, death seemed like nothing I had knowledge on, or could explain, death almost resembles life, where the deceased make their transition from one room to the next where introductions are seemingly not dissimilar to the living. In Toraja, bodies will not be buried under the earth and forgotten. There are no funerals in which mortal remains are put to rest beneath the earth to be obstructed from the *tender gaze of God*. Instead the transitional state of death and decay is expanded to release the pain of loss and trauma.

Death is digested within the cultural framework and knowledge that we are the only animals who conceptualize our own mortality. Within this concept lays the powerful motivating force which pushes members of Torajan society to live life to its fullest and to embrace and celebrate death when it most certainly arrives.

⁵ <https://ketanj0.medium.com/the-martian-canals-of-political-and-scientific-perception-80e7f4de2763>

[1] <https://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/goongarrie-cemetery/>

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangaroo>

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Toraja culture is based in Aluk to Dolo (animism), the ancestral custom and belief, and the funeral ceremony Rambu Solo' where through communal ritual there is acknowledgement that the deceased spirit seamlessly passes into the afterlife as definitively as the sun rises then sets.

The deceased remains are respected as living until the funeral ceremony is complete and the transition into afterlife assured. This is hard to imagine as we ponder on Mick Madden's (RIP) unfortunate demise and subsequent burial, probably the next day in the desert south of Menzies.⁶

One distinctive feature found in Torajan funeral custom is that the corpse won't get buried below ground. Closely related to the community's modus vivendi, they believe their holy ascendants came from heaven and earth. Hence, it's inappropriate if those who died are buried under the ground. Torajan people deem it might ravage the sanctity of earth, that in turn, impact on the soil fertility. They'll put cadaver in Patane (Torajan tombs), such as in cave, in the pit of huge rock, on steep cliff, or at particular set built for dead people. The one and the only goal is to make sure they won't be buried underground. ⁷ Adzwari Ridzki 2014

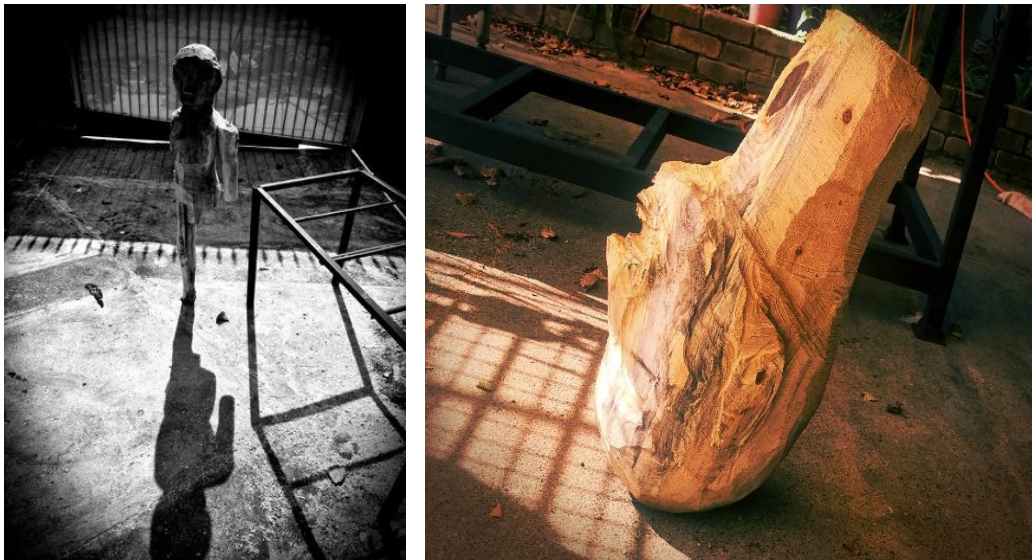


Figure 1. Tau-Tau and Tau-Tau Kepala Paul Trinidad

⁶ <https://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/eerie-premonition-michael-madden/>

⁷ <https://invisiblephotographer.asia/2014/03/31/feastforthedeadbody-adzwariidzki/>

The Mark

Tau-tau statues are usually found near where the body of the deceased has been laid to rest (not buried in the earth). Believed to have originated in the 19th century, these effigies were once produced only for aristocrats and the wealthy to reflect status and opulence. As a representation of the deceased, Tau-tau are also regarded as guardians of the tomb as well as protectors of the living. In so doing, they preserve the link between the dead and the living.⁸ Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia 2019



Figure 2. Tau Tau Kepala Paul
Trinidad

⁸ <https://www.indonesia.travel/au/en/destinations/sulawesi/tana-toraja/tau-tau-statues>

[1] <https://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/goongarrie-cemetery/>

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Marking the grave in Torajan culture in some instances is made with the use of Tau-tau. A carved effigy that represents the person who has passed away. The Tau-tau are expressively carved and symbolic, powerful icons in a culture based on *old beliefs*. Our culture is comparatively secular, though you will see the use of religious statues on some graves here in Australia, usually the Virgin Mary, holy mother and overseer of sinners, respectfully present, omnipotent.

Antony Gormley chose cast stainless steel to represent figures on the Salt Lake by Snake Hill on Lake Ballard to represent the inhabitants of Menzies for his installation Inside Australia. These figures capture the essence of their subjects in a similarly expressive way though in completely different contexts. Somewhere between the desert graves, Inside Australia and mystical encounters in Toraja I feel compelled to carve wood and retain carbon as a means of expressing an otherwise unformed idea, a section of my own odyssey.

In the process of carving the wooden sculptures, I am hoping to keep the connection alive, the sense of bewilderment, disorientation and chaos.



Drifting clouds of dusty laceforever lay across enshrouded face. [Nellie Cooper](#) 2019