TOM CARMENT
CORNY POINT

Tom Carment is a *plein air* artist and a writer. Born in Sydney in 1954, he has been painting landscapes, still lifes and portraits since the early 1970s. His pictures have been shown in numerous exhibitions, and selected twelve times for the Archibald Prize. He is the author of *Days and Nights in Africa*, *Seven Walks: Cape Leeuwin to Bundeena* and *Womerah Lane: Lives and Landscapes* which was shortlisted in the 2021 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards.

AFTER A WEEK OF CAMPING at the Corny Point Caravan Park, they started calling me 'Tommy' in the camp kitchen. Maybe I was fitting in. By then 'Smithy' and Mick and their families, the Corny Point summer regulars, had realised I wasn't fishing or surfing as I nestled among the rocks south of Berry Bay and below the lighthouse. I was painting pictures.

The Corny Point Caravan Park lies at the southwestern tip of Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, a paddock's width south of the tidal flats of Spencer Gulf. Most mornings, these gulf waters are calm and go out with only incremental change in depth for about five hundred metres. Pelicans land smoothly, leaving straight, white wakes across the bruise-coloured water. The beach is patchily covered by deep beds of dry, ribboned seaweed. Parked tractors sit in sandy gaps, waiting to pull fishing boats out of the shallow waters and back up through the low dunes to the bitumen road. It's hard to believe that some of these machines, farm work 'retirees', still function. The motors and gear boxes of the older models are like the sections of an insect, their colours eaten away by the rust to match the maroon beds of seaweed nearby. The strip of sandy heath that separates the long beach from the single street of the town is interspersed with flowering pigface, a pink-flowered succulent whose laddery tendrils extend in all directions along the sand. Walking there, I would stoop from time to time to pinch off and eat the fleshy base of one of the dead flowers. The calyxes of these blooms look a bit like crab's claws, purplish red, with white flesh inside that tastes sweet and a bit salty.

About five kilometres further south, where the Spencer Gulf becomes the Southern Ocean, the terrain changes to pock-holed limestone cliffs with intrusions of black basalt underneath,

like dinosaur spines, running out into the surf. The ocean changes here too, into a regular, rolling swell, which throws up shells and sponges onto the gravelly sand, and clouds of white spume as it hits the rocks. There are long beaches to the east where everyone goes to swim and surf: one side of Berry Bay is sheltered and good for small children and kids with boogie boards, while the hardcore surfers drive further, along the corrugated road to Daly Head.

Corny Point, a windswept limestone headland, marks the meeting of gulf and ocean. At its western end there's a lighthouse, completed in 1882, of a standard British design, simple and painted white, with vermilion railings around the upper windows. It's automated now, with a big padlock on the heavy entrance door, but still flashes out its light after dark.

The Yorke Peninsula is Narungga Country. In 1802 Matthew Flinders anchored *The Investigator* just off its western shores. He noticed fires at night, heard howling dogs; campfires of the Narungga people, or perhaps the bark torches they used for night fishing. The lives of these people were soon to be drastically altered. By the end of the nineteenth century most of the mallee trees had been cleared and wheat was planted from coast to coast along Yorke Peninsula. Sheep had eaten the tubers and the native grasses, and rabbits and foxes had overrun the native marsupials on Country where the Narungga foraged and hunted. No doubt, on that night in 1802, they looked across the water and saw the light from Flinders's vessel too, disappearing and reappearing on the swell, and then, after dawn, the white sails unfurling.

At the Corny Point Caravan Park, I was sharing unpowered Site 6 with my Adelaide neighbours, Tanya, Eloise, their small

dog Pip, and friend Varvara. It was Tanya's favourite site and she re-booked it year after year. I'd pitched my small hiking tent and unfolded my plywood card table and canvas stool. In our circle of chairs, we read our books after eating: *Nice Girls Don't Get Rich* for Varvara, and *Chernobyl* by Serhii Plokhy for me, P.D. James for Tanya, Jane Austen for Eloise. Maybe we should have swapped and learnt something, as Varvara, born in Ukraine, knew little detail about the nuclear catastrophe of 1986 and I knew little about twenty-first century capitalism.

It was end of December – the days were long – and I was woken before dawn by loud galahs in the trees above and then by the need to crawl out of my tent and crunch across the gravel to the bathrooms. I wended my way between tents, folding chairs, caravans, and boats on trailers, sometimes passing sunburnt kids in pyjamas already out on their bikes. Across the road, where the galahs gathered, was a cricket oval with brown patches of coarse grass. Old ship's rope marked out the perimeter and a hand-painted sign faced the road, reading: NO DRIVING ONOVAL – the last two words joined together (like the brand name of a medicinal cream I thought). The place was pretty full and reached peak occupancy on New Year's Eve, with every spot taken – nothing too wild happened within the park grounds that night, but later on I heard young men shouting, next to cars parked on a dirt road behind the fence, doors open, Men at Work songs pumping out from the speakers. Eloise said she was woken at 2 a.m. by someone yelling: 'Who vomited on my car? I'll kill them!'

The camp kitchen where we did some cooking and washed our dishes was a big open-sided barn of a place with seating for about eighty people and a games room to one side. Between 6

and 8 p.m. it was full of families and groups of friends eating at sturdy benches and looking up at the tennis or Big Bash cricket on the TV on the wall. Mainly men, in shorts and thongs, tongs in one hand, drink in the other, were cooking dozens of chops and sausages on the industrial scale BBQ. Next to the big stove and cooktops it was mostly women, chopping for salads and heating up alfoil-covered casseroles and mornays. Occasionally a lucky fisher brought in their day's catch of whiting or tommy ruff – inadvisable I thought, to cook them in all that sausage fat, but they usually did. Out of school holiday time the owner's wife ran three-day surf camps for teenagers and towards year's end, Tanya told me, they donated the facilities to Warooka Public School (the closest town) for their annual camp. The entrance to the caravan park has no boom gates or security codes, the doors to the amenities block are unlocked (outsiders can pay five dollars for a shower) and there aren't too many prohibitive signs – I like that.

We outstayed most of our neighbours: the two muscly men and their wives in matching 'Fire-System Plumbing' utes had come and gone, the Elders stock buyer from Clare with his new girlfriend packed up their neat camper trailer and left after two nights. Tanya surmised that it was their first such outing, noting a certain awkwardness. A couple (late thirties) from the Adelaide Hills with a sweet red-haired boy of eighteen months had been replaced by four earnest students from Adelaide uni (they had climate change stickers on their car and I thought maybe I could talk to them about Chernobyl, but I didn't). The amenities block was given a workout, often full of steam from the bore-water showers and the smell of soap and over-sprayed deodorant. It was elbow to elbow at the basins, cleaning teeth and shaving.

The regulars remained in place, Smithy and his family who surfed each afternoon at Berry Bay and Mick the plumber (I noted down the number on the side of his van for future use) who fished from his sea kayak. They'd been doing much the same thing every summer for the last twenty years.

Most mornings, just after dawn, and sometimes earlier, I'd get my painting gear and walk down the road or drive somewhere to make my first picture of the day. I planned it the night before, thinking about where to go and loading my oil palette with fresh blobs of paint, making my paint bag neat – solvent topped up, brushes washed and ready, a few primed panels selected. I didn't need an alarm to wake up then (the galahs helped) but I just had to overcome both a reluctance to leave the warmth of my blankets and my self-doubts about the motif I've chosen, the weather, the wind, the whole process. After that, I was usually very glad to have made it out there, to be sitting on my little stool, in the morning light, looking out and painting with a singular focus. On some mornings though, bands of grey cloud suddenly lifted and let the sun come blasting through, changing things completely. Rain squalls would sweep in off the ocean, and, like a turtle, I had to quickly pull my palette, paint bag, brushes and painting panel to within the circle of my tightly held Bunnings umbrella, hoping they'd blow over.

Despite these weather events making it hard to carry on, some of the paintings I do in adverse conditions are often better than those done on the still mornings, when the sun rises up through clear skies.

During these early outings I figure that my brain is probably only half awake, or perhaps less cluttered, and so I don't often

overthink or overwork the paintings. After an hour or so, I'm keen to get back to camp and eat breakfast. A few pigface calyxes don't fill me up.

A friend once told me that when the artist Colin McCahon woke each morning, he would get out of bed with his eyes shut, walk to the front door of his house, step outside, then open them. I think about that anecdote sometimes when I rise early to paint, even if my very first vision of the day is the stainless-steel urinal of an amenities block.

I made a list of the creatures I tried to avoid when driving, those who crossed or lay on the road, in order of frequency: shingleback lizards, kangaroos, rabbits and hares, snakes. The birds were less predictable and one day I heard a soft thump – when I got back to the camp site I found a dead starling stuck deep in my grille.

North of Corny Point there's a gravel road, heading to a small settlement called The Pines. This road runs parallel to the sea and about two kilometres inland. Halfway along it is a spot with ragged wind-blown ti-trees and fields of yellow grass and wheat stubble that I have enjoyed painting and returned to several times. There isn't much room to pull the car off there, due to a high ridge of dirt and gravel left by the grader and the proximity of fences. It's not a busy road and I usually move off to the left as best I can, but when I'm painting there the passing vehicles often pull up to see if my car has broken down. When they see I'm painting, they usually take off again. If they hesitate, I show them my palette or my painting, holding it up, and give them a wave or a thumbs up.

One afternoon, a grey-haired couple in a big silver SUV stopped beside me, blocking the road, and the man, leaning his

elbow and head out the window, shouted out a list of questions: ‘Do you usually paint trees and stuff?’ ‘Why do you want to paint here?’ ‘Where are you staying?’ ‘What’s your name?’ ‘What are your pictures worth?’

I tried to answer each question politely and briefly so he’d be satisfied and leave me in peace: ‘Not always’, ‘I like these paddocks’, ‘Corny Point Caravan Park’, ‘Tom’, ‘Not much’.

The Pines township has about fifty modest houses, many with fishing boats and tractors outside, mostly built on land less than three metres above the high tide level of the nearby gulf. Several hand-painted signs on the sole entrance road tell drivers to slow down to thirty kilometres per hour. Tanya informs me that low-lying vacant land is cheap there, because, to fit in with the new council global-warming building regulations, you would need to construct a new dwelling on tall stilts for it to comply with the altered ground floor height.

One day, after I’d been painting the coastal bush on the north side of The Pines, I was scrabbling around in a box of tools and paint tubes in the back of the car when I nicked my finger on a rusty knife blade. It was only a minor cut, but I drove to the small general store on Ti-Tree Road, two rows back from the sea, and asked if they had any antiseptic for sale. They had lots of fishing stuff, tinned groceries, and boxes of cereal, but no antiseptic. The storekeeper told me, ‘Wait a sec’, and went out the back. He returned with a waxed takeaway cup half filled with diluted hydrogen peroxide for me to dip my finger into. He laughed when I offered to pay him.

On this southern sector of Yorke Peninsula you see piles of white rocks, stacked like cannon balls, in the corners of most paddocks. According to Martin, a fourth-generation

farmer friend from nearby Warooka, small and large lumps of limestone keep emerging out of the cleared ground, disgorged from the earth – the Country's stubborn protest against agriculture. 'You can either pick them off or push them back in,' he told me. To do the latter he uses an ancient metal roller about fifteen metres long. It has strips of metal welded roughly all around a rusty iron cylinder which looked as if it had been repaired many times, the welding blobbed on with no regard for anything but function. If placed vertically in a city square, I thought, it would make a passable piece of public art – a sort of battered Vendôme Column. This ribbed cylinder gets filled with water (for extra weight) and towed behind a strong tractor to prepare the rockiest paddocks for sowing. Many of the fenceposts are encrusted with tiny grey-white snails, like barnacles on a wharf. Martin says that burning the wheat stubble used to get rid of them, but that's outdated now.

A red late-model ute pulled into a double camp site opposite ours, next to the low white fence. A couple got out, tied their kelpie to the bull bars, and efficiently erected one of the biggest tents in the caravan park, a multi-winged affair. On each door of the ute there was a signature and phone number with the title 'Visual Artist', over an image of galahs on the driver's side and blue ranges on the passenger side. 'Hey Tom,' said Eloise, 'why don't you get some sign-writing like that on the Impreza?'

Late one Saturday morning a strong wind came up. It blew sand and dirt into my attempted painting, before flipping it over face down. I gave up, slid my gritty palette into its box and decided to pay a visit to the Corny Point Museum, a flyer for which I'd seen on the back of the bathroom door. When Tanya

and I arrived, a lady volunteer, dressed in a pink patterned frock and cardigan, was unbolting the doors and putting up an OPEN sign on the porch of the old schoolhouse (Hours: 12–2, twice a week in summer). She welcomed me: 'Interested in local history, are you?'

'Yes, I am,' I replied. I asked her if she'd always lived around there.

'I wasn't born here,' she said, 'but all my married life…more than fifty years. I've lived here all my married life. My husband's a fisherman. His father was too.'

'In the old days,' she told me, 'they used to put the fish in baskets with ice on top and load them onto ketches headed to Adelaide. The wheat too was loaded onto boats in thousands of hessian sacks.'

The Corny Point Museum eschews artifacts and is mainly a display of old photos. They had been copied and lent uniformity by the print shop in Minlaton, onto A4 sheets, hung in plastic sleeves alongside printed captions: 'Smoking the old pipe at Lighthouse Beach', 'Corny Point Lighthouse on Armistice Day'. Locals drop by to reminisce as they look at the black-and-white pictures: the picnic groupings, the football teams, the men lugging sacks, families standing beside trucks, cars, horses, and ramparts of stacked wool bales and wheat sacks. I met a retired farmer, a short and very stocky man, dressed in a mustard-yellow striped hand-knitted sleeveless in the colours of Hawthorn Football Club. 'The trouble with this mallee country is, not enough magnesium in the soil,' he told me. He pointed out a photo of a neat 1920s house: 'It was made from the stones of the demolished lighthouse cottages.'

There was a bookshelf against one wall of the museum,

stacked with folders. One of the thickest folders was labelled: 'Corny Point Lighthouse'. I'd been painting near the lighthouse all week, so I pulled it out and sat down on the nearby chair to read. Tanya tapped me on the shoulder and whispered that she was going for a swim with the girls. 'You'll find us. Use your homing instinct.' It had been an ongoing joke that, after I'd finished painting, I always managed to find where they'd gone for an afternoon swim – a choice of about four places within ten kilometres of the caravan park.

I returned to my folder in which there were a number of photocopies of older photos from events celebrating the lighthouse: its centenary, its renovations, and various get-togethers of keepers' descendants. In the days before automation of lighthouses there had to be two keepers on duty at all times, swapping shifts. I found several pages devoted to the Lighthouse Centenary Debutante Ball. Photographs showed young couples with shining hair entering the hall through the arched doorway of a two-metre-high armature of a lighthouse garlanded with flowers. A skilled Yorke Peninsula welder must have put the lighthouse-shaped frame together – a scaled-down version of the one at Corny Point.

Towards the back of the folder I found ten pages of typed-up excerpts from the lighthouse logbook, dating back to its commencement. The Head Lighthouse Keeper, I read, was, for eighteen years, retired sea captain, Alfred Webling, and I guess the writing in this log was undertaken in much the same way as when he was at sea; treating trivial, dramatic and heartbreaking matters in an equal manner, and also with the readership of a supervisory authority in mind. Most of the writing, I think, was Webling's, but unless he wrote about himself in the third

person, there must have been other keepers who also wrote in the logbook. I pulled out my pencil and copied down some of the entries into my notebook:

1 Nov 1882 Glass pane in lantern window cracked, possibly a big bird.

20 June 1883 Found washed ashore near lighthouse a deal trunk containing one earthenware dish, two forks, one knife, one iron spoon and a pewter soup ladle. This after a period of heavy squalls all morning.

9 Sept 1884 Mr Barclay returned the bottle of oil I lent him on the 26 Nov 1883.

16 May 1887 Infant daughter of 2nd Keeper died (W Gardner).

18 Aug 1888 I find that G Edmunds is quite ignorant of the duties of a lightkeeper, and, owing to his deafness, great trouble and difficulty to make him understand what is required. G Edmunds on probation for a month.

28 Aug 1888 Observed a most brilliant meteor…the whole display lasting about 10 seconds and lighting up the whole district.

11 Feb 1890 Death of Mrs Webling whilst Headkeeper was on leave.

18 Nov 1892 … When the gale was most fierce the chimney of the 2nd Keeper (G Duthie) cottage was struck by lightning, falling bodily clear of the building.

13 Nov 1894 Incident with Mr Duthie. Webling's daughters accused him of opening their letters. I also have to lay charge against the 2nd Keeper for making overtures to my daughters, to meet him at unseemly hours and using threats towards them.

9 May 1897 Slight tremor causing furniture and crockery to rattle.

31 Dec 1899 Relieving Keeper J Matheson drowned while bathing in the surf with Webling's son.

10 Jan 1900 Body of J Matheson found four miles south of lighthouse. Headkeeper identified body.

26 March 1907 Mr Clem went over headland with his rabbit-destroying machine.

13 Dec 1908 The ceiling in the Headkeeper's parlour fell in.

Captain Webling can be seen in just one posed photo, an old man standing solid, looking hard at the photographer, with his daughters, Ella and Bella, on each side. He has a thick white beard and wears a richly embroidered cap, perhaps a souvenir from his seafaring days. I wondered if these two daughters were the ones who had been the subject of the second lighthouse keeper's 'overtures'. The volunteer told me no, these ladies were his twins from a second marriage, and she showed me another photo of them both, as elderly ladies, attending a lighthouse reunion in the 1950s.

The two hours of opening had passed quickly and the volunteer had to lock up, so I thanked her and walked out into the glare and heat, as from a daytime movie, a gothic one. The melaleucas were bent over and thrashing about. Back at Site 6 the entrance section to our biggest tent was flapping wildly. Two nylon loops had worn though, and the contents of Tanya's 'parlour' were a tangled mess. With a makeshift repair I managed to secure it and tighten all the guy ropes, and then I ventured out once more to Lighthouse Bay – the site of J. Matheson's drowning. The lighthouse was a dark silhouette against the 3 p.m. sun, and I walked down a narrow track from the windswept car park, through loose rocks. It was a relief to enter the protective lee of the limestone cliff. Here the shallow water below at last became transparent, pale green, and lapped the sand gently. I heard barking and spotted Pip the dog, looking

skinny, wet and sandy. My camping companions, Tanya, Eloise and Varvara, were seated in a row, towels across their knees, reading their books in a band of late afternoon sunlight.