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Writer/s: [Gregory Pryor](#)

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Bevan had the look of a question mark on his forehead.

'They're swans' said his father, who was continually surprised that his son was still interested in looking at paintings. He thought that his own work as an art historian had exhausted whatever genetic material was available in his family line.

'But they just look like rags, like someone has thrown a few jumpers and coats in the water.'

It was true; they were particularly naïve renderings and his mind flashed to the images of dead swans being lifted out of European waterways recently.

Here in Western Australia, the swans preferred black clothing, making them an extremely useful motif for the early painters. They were like a rubber stamp, authenticating a world that was different. He took out a book and opened it to a painting where the swans were rendered more accurately.

'Look at these ones...' he said, '...these don't look like discarded clothes do they?'

'No, but they look like badges or brands' said Bevan, echoing his father's thoughts.

'I know. It's the black: it flattens them out like a print. Like those figures on your shirt. It was designed like that to be effective and stand out. It's also much easier to print.'

Bevan was wearing his favourite tee-shirt with a design of two people hanging upside down by their legs from the bough of a tree. The tree was green and the two figures virtually a black silhouette, the girl's dress over her face in an eerie reference to a lynching.

They looked through the book together, each image neatly confirming the direction of their conversation.

'Is it the same with the aboriginals?' said Bevan, looking at a watercolour by Frederick Garling, '...were they painted just for decoration?'

'Well their black skin certainly gave the artists an opportunity to animate the composition,' suddenly self-conscious, sounding too much like a teacher and not enough like a father. 'Would you like to go and see some real paintings next weekend?' he said spontaneously, as if the world beckoned at this point and physical travel was necessary to inform the little intellectual exercise they had just shared.

'Okay. Cool.' said Bevan, relieving the concerns of his father, who thought that he might have lost his son's interest by spending too much time at the bookshelf. 'Where are we going?'

'I was thinking Katanning. There's an exhibition of

paintings and drawings by aboriginal students who were at the Carrolup mission 60 years ago. They liked silhouettes too.' Ever the teacher, he also thought it would be a good opportunity to mention the 'stolen generation'.

The drive to Katanning meant a bit more time together. After some lost years when Alan had been on study leave in France and too preoccupied with a book which he now regretted had ever been published, he had finally realised that his only son was growing into a thoughtful and engaging young man.

'Wow, look at that...' said Bevan. They were driving through an area that had recently been consumed by fire.

'Yeah, kind of beautiful eh?' said Alan, who slowed down to look more closely at the matt black forest on either side of the road.

'Can we get out and have a look?' said Bevan, his father simultaneously pulling into a clearing on the side of the road.

As they walked through the charcoaled landscape, the remnant smell of fire permeated the air. Brittle sounds, as they brushed against charred casuarinas and bottlebrushes reminded Alan of light globes and vacuum flasks. They came to an enormous banksia and both looked up at the perfectly preserved forms overhead. The huge cones had opened their seed valves and Alan realized they were standing on the spot where new banksias would emerge the following spring.

They eventually got to Katanning, and as they walked through the gallery, they brought with them the smell of the smoky bush. Bevan stopped in front of one work, 'Hey, this is just like where we've been: everything's burnt.'

It was true, the kangaroo by the side of the road, the swan in the water, the figures near the tree and every bit of foliage in the painting, were all rendered in silhouette. The ground and sky were painted in luminescent colours, but everything it supported or surrounded was clothed in black.

Alan began to think about the book he should have written here in Australia whilst he was poncing around in the south of France. He thought about Bevan's mother and the black linen suit she preferred to wear when they were ambitious young academics. He looked at his son, who was now absorbed looking at a painting on the other side of the room and knew that when they returned to the city, like the banksias emerging from the ash, his life was going to be a little greener.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Gregory Pryor.