

# ABOUT SENDING LETTERS

**ALEXIS WRIGHT**

DESTINY OFTEN VISITED the foot-walkers' convoy during the night in dreams. The men were saying they had seen Angel Day living in the worlds of their dreams. They explained to the Fishman that they saw her whole life ahead of her. She lived for several years—decades if the truth must be told, yes. Yes, it was true, Angel now lived unhappily in a devilish place. She would never see the bright starry nights of the Gulf country again. They were painful dreams encompassing some mysterious, windy world, where dull silver strips of tarnished-looking fish glistened in salt under an overcast sky. Rows and rows of these snakelike fish hung on lines drawn over the land, which swayed to and fro with the breeze as far as the eye could behold. Through this grey country many sad children, some who looked like herself, others who looked like people she had never known, came and went. How did this happen? Praise for Angel Day fell easily from the lips now. She was a sensation who dreamt far above the heads of other people.

People cried and shook their heads in sympathy to the Fishman. They paid their respects. You were never supposed to see the look of a deserted woman in those jarring eyes. They sang her praises to each other. She who looked like a lurid wish come true, who had once walked with hips swinging in Desperance. She was like a trophy for best-kept town, most beautiful, best presented, the biggest fruit of a blessed season. Certainly, certainly, it was the most painful memory. Yet a burning candle for her face stayed in the world of local memories.

She disappeared into another world as simply as looking through a hollow log and having no idea where the porcupine went after just having seen him run through it. Poof! It was un-believable that a living creature could just disappear into thin air. In the end Angel was lost. Lost on the long road to nowhere. Mozzie Fishman, unable to leave his Dreaming road, never went after her. A spiritual man could not just go galivanting around the world when he had his business to attend to.

It was natural that outside the sphere of their world she became hearsay in their lives. Some strange person amongst the zealots who never dreamed, claimed he received a letter in his mind, and took it at once to Mozzie Fishman. He read what was written. Angel Day, he read, now lives indifferently to her surroundings, alongside a fast-flowing tidal river in a cold country which was a mystery to him. The green-grey foul-smelling river, carried along severed heads

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of domesticated animals, fruit crates from bustling marketplaces, rotting fruit and vegetables thrown into the river as waste, corpses of white people whose lives had not been considered by anyone to be worth two bob, and the broken-hearted wares of many centuries of a poor civilisation. It was plain to see, Angel Day had gone overseas.

The letter read that Angel shares her home, an abandoned grey warehouse with a moss-covered grey-tiled roof, with others like herself who had lost trust in humankind. Sometimes on dull, grey cloudy days, thousands of grey pigeons assembled from nowhere, and choked for space on the roof. Since it rained all the time, there was rainwater leaking into the building through holes in the roof and gushing along rusty pipes and spilling out onto green slimy floors. In the night, it was no good. The warehouse people went to bed as soon as darkness fell. They slept almost on top of each other for warmth, huddling together under damp stacks of old, rotting clothes.

Every day, Angel Day sneaks away, disappearing through the morning mist like a ghost, leaving very early before the others remove themselves from the tangle of clothes they had crawled into like rats. And in this fashion she goes to work. There, before dawn, she joins numerous others, too many to count, standing in lines like sticks of chalk along the wet marshes of the outgoing tide. Even Fishman acknowledged he could sometimes hear them, flicking their strange-looking lines of plastic rope along the waters. Fishman said he felt that close to Angel, he would turn blue with a cold he had never experienced before in his life. Time and again, he said he tried to ask her what she was doing there but she ignored him. Then, when some complete stranger came along and asked her the same question, she replied, 'Fishing for snakes.' Otherwise, she would have offered nothing.

Words were the enemy of the twilight world where she lived. No one bothered speaking in her world, except to answer a stranger. Every day, Mozzie watched until Angel's line resounded with the twang and thrashing about of waters which others, being more experienced snake catchers, were already making. Then, he watches her smile as the slippery snake, like an eel, starts to wind itself around the line and climb up towards her hand. Stealthily, she flicks the snake off the

▲ The author in her Waanyi homelands in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

IMAGE: ALEXIS WRIGHT

line into a wicker basket and closes the lid. Again and again, she flicks the line back into the emptying marshes, seemingly unaware she stood in freezing water.

When the grey tide receded and the waters were still, Angel knew the snakes had gone far out to sea and it was safe for her to move. She wades through deep water to go home. She goes past a man with a transportable aquarium. He drives his truck with the aquarium that is so large it fills the back of the truck and is the height of the driver's cabin. The water is full of grey fish. People pay the tall man to see the fish by throwing money into his upturned grey hat on the ground, but Angel looks for free. Once she reaches the warehouse, she sits in the sun until it fades away, just to put some warmth into her freezing body. Nearby, there are two intertwining trees outside the warehouse and all she thinks about is Fishman or Angel. Eenie, meenie, miney mo, whose dream?

At the first sign of darkness, a hidden old owl hoots from some hole hidden in the branches. Angel runs away to hide while the frightening owl of the plains flies with luminous plumage. No one could even imagine a world with sea snakes flowing in tides, and freezing bodies asleep in damp caverns of clothes where glow-worms lived. But this was how he read the letter.

It felt pretty special to be told any news of a lady like Angel Day although it was hard to imagine her new life. The zealots made up new stories to send to her. She could be like the owl who shone in the night if she slept in a damp place and became covered with phosphorescent larvae. Perhaps her cave in the mountain of clothes was once a palace, glowing with light.

The Fishman exclaimed to anybody in the world that he never knew a woman called Angel Day, whoever she was. 'Don't send letters to Mr Fishman.' Letters were only from whitefellas to other whitefellas. 'And what am I?' He was a blackfella. No one had any business addressing any darn letter to him, he said. ¶



**ALEXIS WRIGHT** is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The author of the prize-winning novels *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, Wright has published three works of non-fiction: *Take Power*, an oral history of the Central Land Council; *Grog War*, a study of alcohol abuse in the Northern Territory; and *Tracker*, an award-winning collective memoir of Aboriginal leader, Tracker Tilmouth. Her books have been published widely overseas, including in China, the US, the UK, Italy, France and Poland. She holds the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne. Wright is the only author to win both the Miles Franklin Award (in 2007 for *Carpentaria*) and the Stella Prize (in 2018 for *Tracker*).

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