



# TEXT

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*Deakin University*

**Sophie Finlay**

## *Towards a littoral poetics*

### Abstract:

The three poems collected here form part of a larger project exploring the littoral zone of Australia's southern coastlines. The littoral zone is the intertidal region — alternately covered and uncovered by the tides — and extends to include shallow reefs, beaches, and the spray zones of rocky coasts. It is a place of transition, where terrestrial sand dunes give way to tidepools and kelp gardens, where waves rise and break across the sea floor, and where life-forms shift from breathing air to drawing oxygen from water. It is a space of vibrant unpredictability, a familiar yet complex landscape of entangled ecosystems and diverse species. This project arises from a desire to draw attention to the interwoven lives of species such as the leafy seadragon and its fragile kelp habitat, and to consider how humans might connect with the more-than-human world in ecologically conscious ways. My poetry asks how a littoral poetics might both raise awareness of the intertidal bioregion and enact a sense of human interconnection with the kelp and seaweed, animals, dune grasses, coastal plants, oceanic movements, and the weather systems of the southern littoral zone.

### Biographical note:

Sophie Finlay is a visual artist and poet. She lives, works and creates on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Her poetry is published in multiple journals including *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Plumwood Mountain* and more. She has also been a finalist in several art prizes including the John Leslie Art Prize and the Salon des Refuses exhibition, Lethbridge Landscape Prize. Sophie is currently a PhD candidate in literary studies and creative writing at Deakin University. Her first book of poetry *the terrarium* was published in 2024 with Flying Island Books.

### Keywords:

Littoral poetics, ecopoetry, lyric poetry, bioregionalism, new materialist poetry

## Leafy Sea Dragon

in the creasing light  
she pulls ornate paddles  
through tangle of weed  
are they a burden?  
yet, how could that be—

her leaves are dappled purple  
to mirror the kelp folds  
and her back meanders like a river

the canopy sways under ocean winds  
stirring her tail and heavy with boughs  
fins drift into arbours

bony abdomen patterned gold with ripples  
and the shadow of ripples, as if  
something was passing over her

her dragon mind fronds with the seaforest—

limbed      leafed      gilded

**Tidefields**

*The sky leans on me, me, the one upright  
Among all horizontals.*

Sylvia Plath [1]

an ebbing wave sheens  
over muddied edge—  
wispings, where crabs  
bubble the fine grains

grasses have eyes  
in their tips, seeking  
the wide aura of light  
behind dunes while  
blind roots plume  
into sand beds, weeding  
with the protists  
that fringe wet slopes—  
fragile clasps wire  
and thread the littoral

long before any organisms  
blushed in the seas  
before coral polyp,  
shell-bearing mollusc,  
before the evolution  
of fish jaw and orca pod,  
there has been this meeting  
of earth with the hush of waves  
and the great diurnal cycle

my breath washes in and out  
but I am dark-edged—  
I am Plath's one upright  
against the streak of sea and sky

**the wind knows this place**

on the ascent of the dunes  
tea-trees petal into five-point stars  
shore-birds glisse across  
branches, foraging pollen  
succulents store water  
inside their bodies  
dry grasses have less

we carry the sea, our  
bodies full with salty blood  
ferns need the flow of water  
to propagate, need streams  
that emanate from larger bodies—  
flowering plants are terrestrial  
with seeds that take to the air  
like sea-birds returning to dip  
their (seed) beaks into moist earth

my daughter walks ahead  
while I stop at every plant  
every fresh view—  
on the descent, the beach opens  
to bell-shaped bay  
dark patched vegetation  
compressed sky, wave fronts  
spits of rocky land  
colour of ossified bone  
porous as coral

dark underside of cloud  
heavy and pressing, pressing  
what territory can exist here  
no claim on the flux  
on tonal matters—  
headland breaks  
some rocks grip harder  
stab black fingers  
and the sea's white strings  
loose against deep cliffs  
ancient as moss

sanded hills fall into the sea  
grasses clutch their shifting  
floor, sky sweeps with  
the shadow of wind  
over nesting sites  
where webbed feet dig  
the impossible bloom of dunes  
shrubs gather into a ring—  
rings within rings  
tufts rill against gusts  
hold their strokes thinly  
as sand drifts around  
rhizoids, reaching pools  
gentle and shallow

new ringed sea-grapes  
swirling patterns of kelp  
sea-plants ripple the platform  
snails huddle in neptune's  
necklace, tiny antennas unfurl  
spotted and banded shells—  
further out, waves ruffle like lace

**Notes**

[1] Sylvia Plath's "Wuthering Heights" (lines 37–38) first published in 1961.