



Peter Skrzynecki:  
Landscape Poems

A promotional blurb for Skrzynecki's poetry makes the claim that:

*“His poems are elegiac, meditative and lyrical - intimately concerned with the Australian landscape, its people, fauna and flora ...”*

... but what does this mean to our study of his compilation Old/New World?

Simply put, it means that his poetry centers on his contemplations about those things that are lost or missing in his life, and how his surroundings impact on his sense of belonging and individuality.

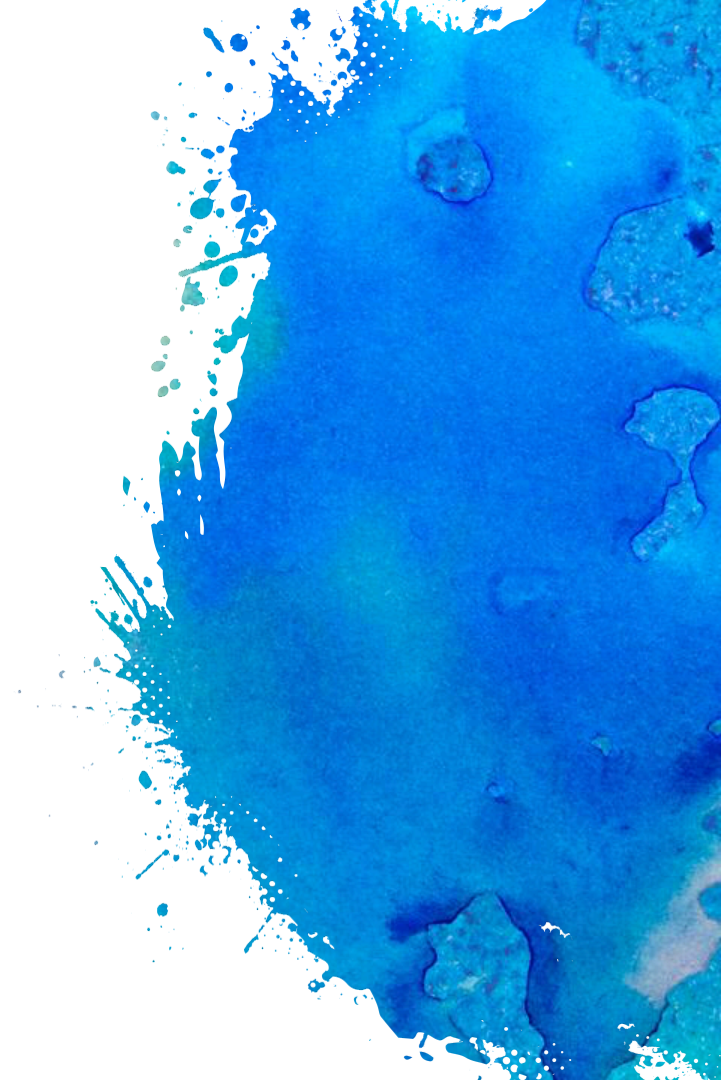




In his own words:

*“My poetry has mostly been concerned with ... the expression of my fascination for the physical and spiritual features of Australia”*

hinting that there is a personal exploration of himself and his place in Australia/Australian society in his poetry.



Past and present, old and new are embedded structures in the majority of his poems, as the poet revisits landscapes (predominantly Australian) remembering significant places and phases of his life.

Birds are often the subject of Skrzynecki's poems and this collection is alive with ravaging lorikeets, fearless seabirds, mythological bellbirds, sparrows, swans, apostle birds, finches and black cockatoos.



Skrzynecki often uses nature to symbolise the migrant experience, as demonstrated by the birds in his poem 'Migrant Hostel'. In this poem migrants are compared to a "*homing pigeon/circling to get its bearings*" as he remarks on the struggle of taking someone out of their previous home, like an animal out of its natural habitat.

Nature is also a major element in Skrzynecki's effort to reconcile his heritage with his experiences of living in Australia – his frequent referencing of Australian landscapes signposting his journey to identify as an Australian.





Animals, fish and reptiles also populate the landscapes of his poetry.

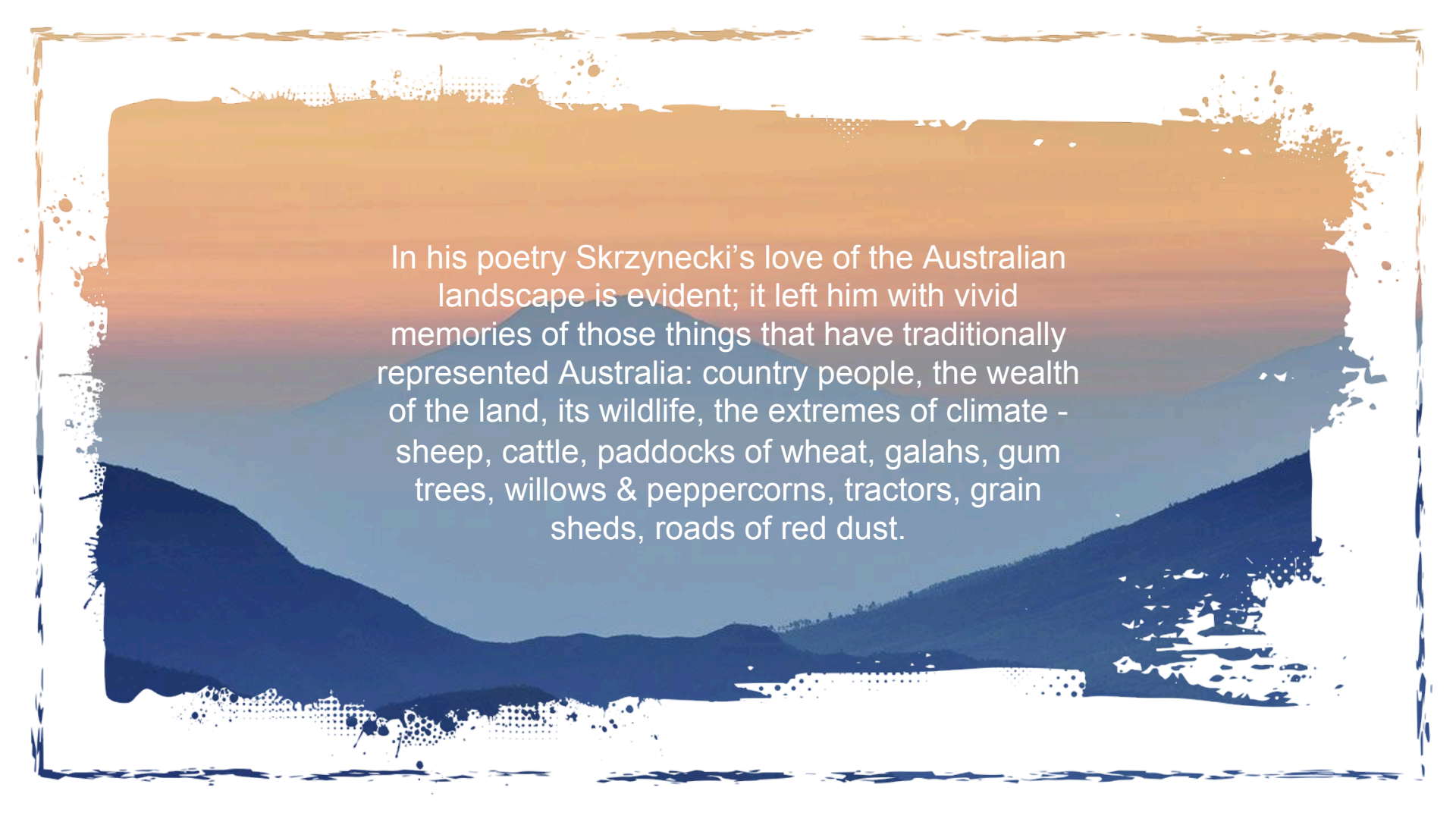
In the poem 'Devil Fish', for example:

*“A rat-trap mouth, skinless,  
each bone a grasshopper's leg—  
eyes like portholes we can't look into,  
from anywhere on zones of palm or ice.*

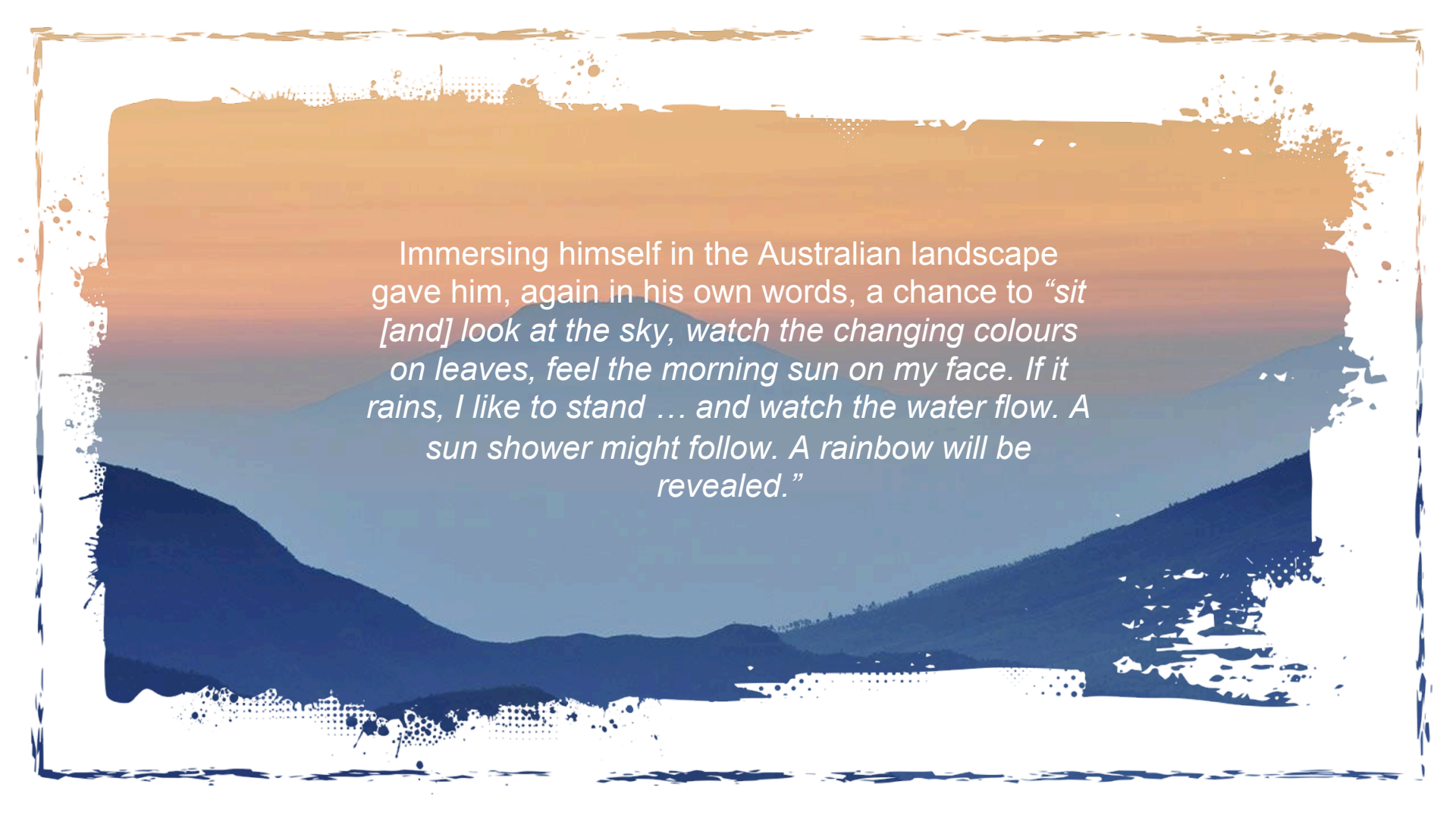
*Exiled from a pock-marked sun”*

the fish's journey by sea is identified with the displaced person's sense of exile.



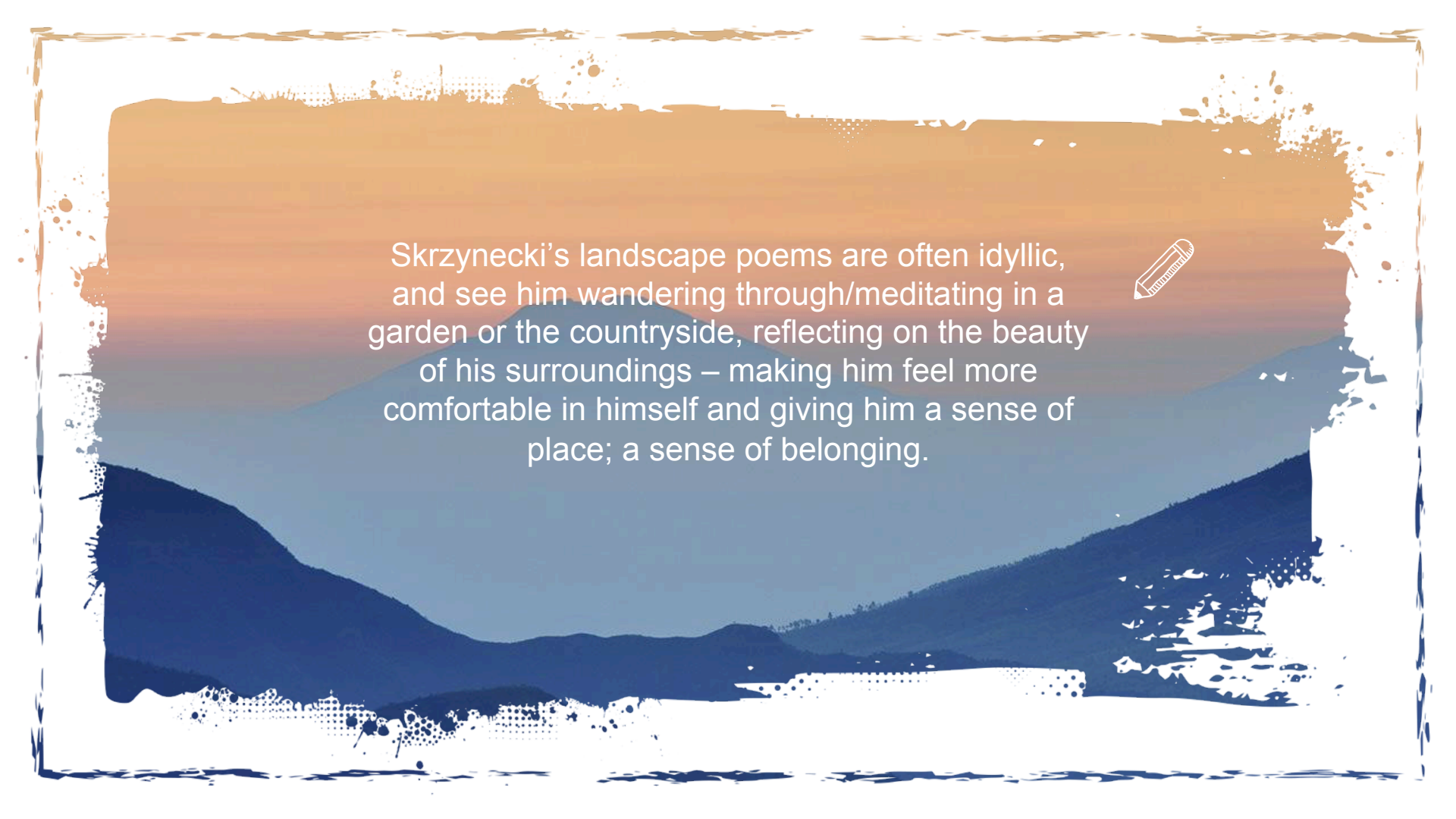


In his poetry Skrzynecki's love of the Australian landscape is evident; it left him with vivid memories of those things that have traditionally represented Australia: country people, the wealth of the land, its wildlife, the extremes of climate - sheep, cattle, paddocks of wheat, galahs, gum trees, willows & peppercorns, tractors, grain sheds, roads of red dust.

A landscape photograph of a valley with mountains and a river, framed by a thick, textured border. The sky is a mix of blue and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The mountains are dark and silhouetted against the sky. The river flows through the valley, reflecting the light. The border is made of various textures, including dots, splatters, and brushstrokes in shades of blue, purple, and white.

Immersing himself in the Australian landscape gave him, again in his own words, a chance to *“sit [and] look at the sky, watch the changing colours on leaves, feel the morning sun on my face. If it rains, I like to stand ... and watch the water flow. A sun shower might follow. A rainbow will be revealed.”*





Skrzynecki's landscape poems are often idyllic, and see him wandering through/meditating in a garden or the countryside, reflecting on the beauty of his surroundings – making him feel more comfortable in himself and giving him a sense of place; a sense of belonging.



Skrzynecki turns to the Australian landscape to help define his sense of identity that the old culture, and the old ways of life, of his past no longer affords him.



The landscape that dominates Skrzynecki's early poetry, and that haunts the later, is that of the New England plateau in northern New South Wales, where he took up his first teaching position.

Finely observed and presented with a clarity that owes something to the particular qualities of the region's light, but more to his sense of being an outsider looking on a strange new world, this landscape is both alluring and menacing.

It is appealing in its intensity and yet unrevealing, as if some vital part of it were beyond his reach.



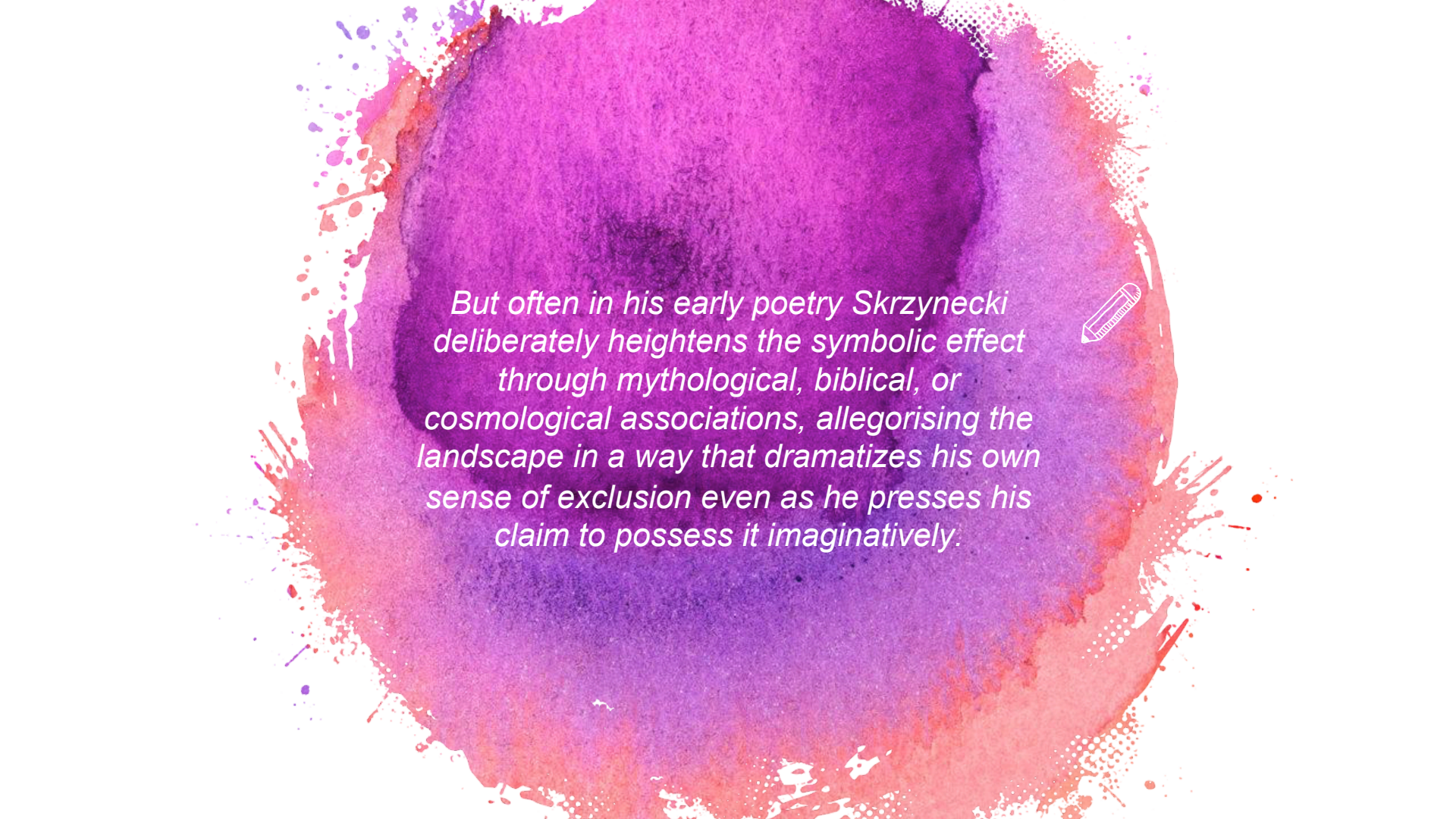
In 'Bullock Skull' Skrzynecki compares such a landscape to *"a distant planet / once glimpsed at the edge of a dream"*:

*"grey paddocks sheeted with frost  
and cattle standing mutely  
under shrouds of rising mist;  
sheep feeding beside yellow dust roads  
or the edge of granite ravines—  
crimson lowries streaking through forests  
and over waters of the Styx."*

The river in question is actually called the Styx, and so the symbolism is unforced.







*But often in his early poetry Skrzynecki deliberately heightens the symbolic effect through mythological, biblical, or cosmological associations, allegorising the landscape in a way that dramatizes his own sense of exclusion even as he presses his claim to possess it imaginatively.*

The following is from 'Wallamumbi':

*“In the ancient forest of gorges  
He listened to the whisper of birds:  
Heard the chant of midnight prophecies  
And a name spelt out into the darkness of gullies;  
Saw the migration of men and wings  
Along the frozen river in the Kingdom of the Dead:  
The begin-all, end-all landscape  
From which no one before him had returned,  
Where all mists rise, frost hardens bone,  
And each granite boulder, like a stationary planet,  
Becomes a landmark under a galaxy of tableland  
stars.”*



The landscape in his later poems is suburban for the most part, the detail humble and ordinary, but in such poems as ‘Burning Off’, ‘A Green Memento’, or ‘Weeding’ these suburban settings are transfigured by an almost religious spirit of affirmation:



*“Sweat stains our limbs  
in the sunset's light. A shiver ripples  
along the downhill breeze.  
We tug at knotted roots  
like a pair of servants  
working on hands and knees.  
The child within you  
has not yet started to move—  
though  
you laugh and strain at the toil.  
We turn up roots, white as flesh,  
and our fingers touch  
in the warm, black soil.”*





# RECURRING IMAGES/ SYMBOLS/MOTIFS:

## ☐☐ Natural Imagery

Used literally to show beauty of Australian landscape - but also as metaphors to represent key ideas or people or things.

This suggests that people don't just inhabit or occupy land, they become part of it and a connection is formed between people and land – a connection that Skrzynecki is searching for.

## RECURRING IMAGES/ SYMBOLS/MOTIFS:

☐☐ Rainbow trout



☐☐ Migratory birds



Both are introduced/migratory species that have been able to adapt to, and thrive within, the Australian environment; an allegory for the experiences of migrant families trying to assimilate into a “new world”.



## RECURRING IMAGES/ SYMBOLS/MOTIFS:

### ☐☐ Water – rivers/rain/‘River Styx’

Water is integral to the lifecycle of the land, and the people/wildlife that inhabit the landscapes he frequents.

The ‘River Styx’ – both the actual name of a river in New England (NSW), and in Greek mythology it is one of the rivers that act as a boundary between the kingdom of the dead and the land of the living – a tangible symbol of the “old world” and the “new”



## POEMS & QUOTES:

'Bushfires at Kunghur' (p22);  
'Flying Foxes' (p21);  
'Black Cockatoos' (p192)

*These poems are evocative of a specific  
"Australian-ness" in living with nature. They reflect  
Skrzynecki's contemplations on what makes up  
the "Australian spirit".*



## POEMS & QUOTES:

In 'Bushfires at Kunghur' we are presented with situation where *"fires dotted the range/like rubies in Persephone's crown"*, and the land was *"dying under a haze of smoke"* away from the *"flocks of nuisance galahs"* (notice the bird imagery). Here *"men returned by ashes and soil,/cursing fire-breaks and ruined crops"* but life goes on as intimated in the lines:

*"little pepper-grey moths flew out of the bushes,  
desperate against the cold panes, thirsty for light."*

## POEMS & QUOTES:

In **'Flying Foxes'** we are taken to *"the season of jagged hail that stoned down upon flame-tree and poincianas/while people talked of petals flowing like blood/past doorsteps and along the road"* where, once the storm had passed, people *"prepared meals as if a holocaust was at hand"* but life continues, taking this in its stride, as *"children were allowed outside/to imitate the screams of flying foxes"*.

The flying foxes themselves arrived and departed *"crying like lost souls"* being *"offered/no respite or refuge from the secrets/they carried to unburden themselves from"*. In this we see a situation where a transient species seeks out a temporary safe haven before moving on.

## POEMS & QUOTES:

The birds in '**Black Cockatoos**' represent freedom in the new world. The cockatoos are a natural part of the Australian environment and make themselves heard with brash and screeching voices so that they can be heard "*above the boom and crash of the waves*".

The cockatoos in this poem are totally in control of their lives as they "*swept down the cliff*" and "*whistled, broke formation, chattered*" taking over the whole beach.



## POEMS & QUOTES:

'A Bushwalk at Jeogla' (p98);  
'Jeogla 2' (p324-5)

*These poems reflect the Australian landscape &  
its effect on Skrzynecki.*



## POEMS & QUOTES:

*Jeogla Public School was his first place of work, of him experiencing independence for the first time.*

*In his own words:*

*“What I did not know was that I would take Jeogla with me emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Jeogla became part of my mindset, my thinking, a reference point at which questions of identity, existence and eternity were questioned; it was a sanctuary to shelter in when I felt threatened by forces I could not cope with ...”*

## POEMS & QUOTES:

In 'A Bushwalk at Jeogla', Skrzynecki takes the time to sit and contemplate his natural surroundings:

*“to rest for a moment and watch the sun” that “hung/like a ringed furnace above the tallest trees” and “burn[t] through shades/surface of water and beetles’ wings”.*

It was a place where he *“rested longer than [he] wished/while Time ran past like water and sunlight shattered/the course of a day that was set/and is still unfinished.”*

## POEMS & QUOTES:

In 'Jeogla 2', we can once again gain an appreciation of the peace that this particular place afforded Skrzynecki - the comfort he felt *"fall[ing] asleep/in a weatherboard house/surrounded by hills and granite chasms"* being surrounded by a *"stringybark forest"*: the *"morning frosts"*, *"golden mists"* and *"the creek/out of whose heart/a rainbow rose"*.

It was a place where *"time was the measure/of a strange interlude"* while he was *"living away from home"*, where he learnt *"that you never argued/with the seasons, with farmers/or the old fashioned ways"*.

The background is a landscape painting. It shows a wide river valley with a town or village nestled in the distance. The sky is a mix of blue and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The foreground shows the banks of the river and some vegetation. The entire scene is enclosed within a thick, hand-drawn border in shades of blue and purple, with some splatters and brushstrokes. The text is overlaid on the upper part of the painting.

## POEMS & QUOTES:

*'Styx River' poems 1 – 4 (pp13, 99, 133, 188)*

*These poems portray the Australian bush/imagery  
of life and death.*



## POEMS & QUOTES:

An Australian “voice” materialises in his poems about water as represented by rain, creeks, waterfalls, mists and this is especially evident in the ‘**Styx River**’ poems.

In these he describes an environment that is earthy, mossy and cold.

He describes the sounds of whipbirds, black cockatoos, the sightings of king parrots in the trees, of waterhens running in and out of the undergrowth. He describes the course the river takes - of broadening out, then becoming more narrow and of finding rainbow trout in rock pools, swimming languidly among floating leaves. All of this has an impact on his association with this natural Australian bush landscape – a place where he can contemplate his place in the scheme of things.

The fact that he continually revisits the Styx River – at least poetically – only reinforces its importance in him exploring his developing sense of belonging and identity.

## POEMS & QUOTES:

Particularly pertinent quotes relating to contemplations about life in general:

*"The waterfall crashing out of forgotten centuries..." (1)*

*"confirming/myths of Hades or other stories/brought back by men from the city..." (1)*

*"where Charon himself is a passenger..." (1)*

*"fall/on your knees to drink from the river. As time and frost slowly enter your blood..." (1)*

*"A river enclosed by walls/of leaf, tangles of thorn/and impassable blossoms..." (2)*

*"A year of travelling to its edge/and watching trout glide through dark shadows..." (2)*

*"never daring to step across/and break the surface of a sunken world..." (2)*

*"Follow it through dark ravines/eucalypt forests and a chasm of primeval sounds..." (3)*

*"Wildlife will be your only companions..." (3)*

*"remember previous visits made to the underworld/and what the return journey means..." (3)*

*"Sunset floods the gorge/in its tide of black and red/throws a net in flecks of gold/across the backs of rainbow trout." (4)*



Does  
anybody  
have any  
questions?

...or any  
points of  
clarification?



Thank you for  
paying attention



BWR