



*Living with
Sister My*

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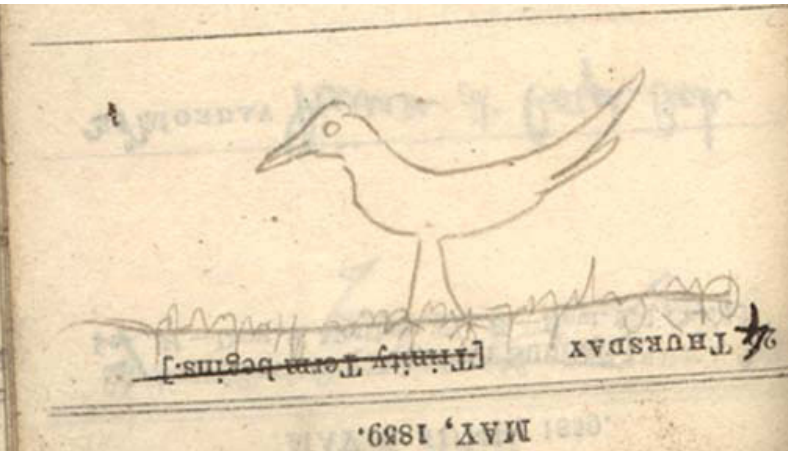
Words by Lisa Roberts

Page Design by Claire Sives

Visual sources identified by Lisa

Comments and corrections welcomed

Contact lisa@lisaroberts.com.au



PREFACE

For years my sister Nadya wrote directions for a film. Before she died I worked with her to start the film “Flying with my sister” and the animation “And can you turn me”.

www.lisaroberts.com.au/content/herstory/2020-2029/2022.php

The film combines stories and art by people who cared for Nadya. The animation traces and transforms words recurring in Nadya’s writing: “And can you turn me into...”.

I showed the film to writer Carmel Bird. She suggested, “...in the interest of the story itself you probably need to be much more explanatory”. I wrote an explanation and she wrote back, “...A brilliant piece of writing that probably needs to be available in printed form. Standing alone.” So I asked designer and scientist Claire Sives to consider co-authoring a picture book.

- Lisa Roberts

When Lisa invited me to collaborate in creating a digital artwork to honour the life of her sister, I was thrilled. Both for the opportunity to reconnect with Lisa, my dear friend, and to travel with her on a journey of grief and celebration for her sister, Nadya.

It has been an absolute privilege and joy to be part of this project which tells the story of Nadya’s life. Thank you, Lisa, for allowing me to be part of this and I hope that my visual interpretation does justice to everyone’s memories of Nadya.

- Claire Sives

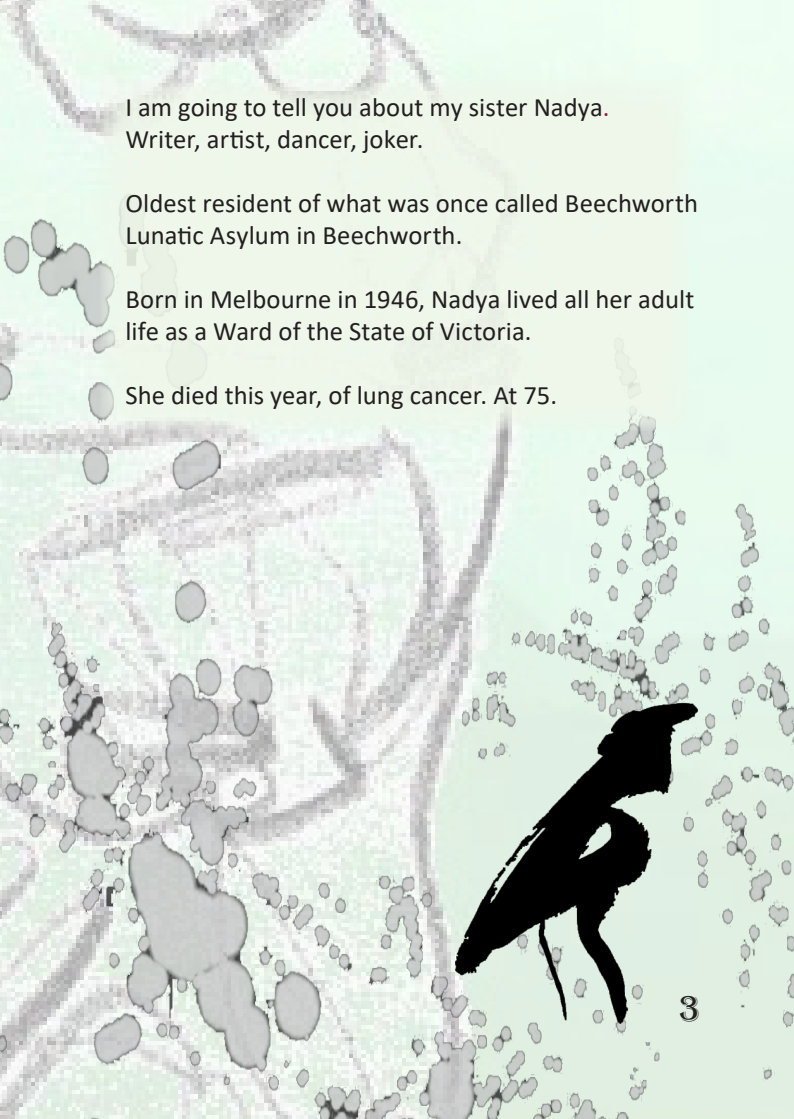


I am going to tell you about my sister Nadya.
Writer, artist, dancer, joker.

Oldest resident of what was once called Beechworth
Lunatic Asylum in Beechworth.

Born in Melbourne in 1946, Nadya lived all her adult
life as a Ward of the State of Victoria.

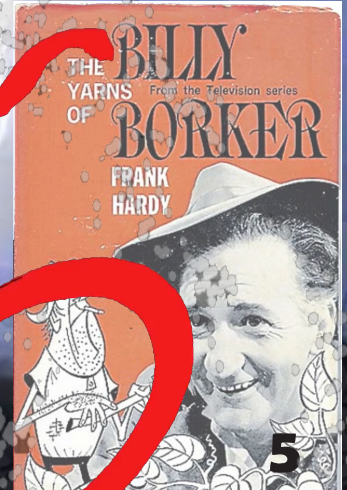
She died this year, of lung cancer. At 75.



Our mother, Jean Ralston, was a tailor and an artist. During WWII she sewed army trousers and army tents.

She made costumes for J C Williamson's theatre company. She did alterations for wealthy women in fashion salons in Toorak.

Nadya was the child of Jean's first marriage, to Peter Carver. He was an actor known for his role in the ABC TV series The Yarns of Billy Borker.





My father, Noel Roberts, told me he met Jean at a party. He said she reminded him of his war-time lover, Elyse, after whom I was named.

Elyse was a French-Tahitian woman Noel knew from working as a radio operator on ships carrying munitions.

Noel showed me a tiny photo of Elyse dressed in a sarong, sitting on a beach. In the photo she is smiling and holding a coconut like an offering to my father, the photographer.



Can you turn me into a coconut?



Nadya and I grew up together. We first lived together on Norfolk Island where I was born. Noel was working there to establish radio communications systems after the war.

There's a story from a local that Jean and Noel were the bohemians of the island and that they set fire to a Norfolk Island pine at a beach party.



There's a photo of Nadya under an arch of whale bones, sitting behind a boy on a rocking horse.





When Jean married Noel, Nadya became a Roberts. Soon after I was born we moved to Christchurch, New Zealand. Noel's job was to install radio communication systems at Harewood Airport.

Grandma Roberts (Norah) came to visit and took Nadya to live for a time with her and grandpa Ca (Caleb Roberts) in their house in Melbourne.

Norah and Ca's house was full of paintings by Ca's father, the artist Tom Roberts.
Pictures of people in fine clothes.
Pictures of family and friends.
Pictures of Australian bush.

Nadya told me that Norah and Ca taught her to read and write. It's likely they also encouraged her drawing.



an you turn

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When Nadya returned to Christchurch she and I were inseparable. We lived in a government housing estate inside the airport. Noel was home every day for breakfast, lunch and tea.

For me and Nadya there was space and freedom to explore. Planes moved close around us. We felt earthquakes.

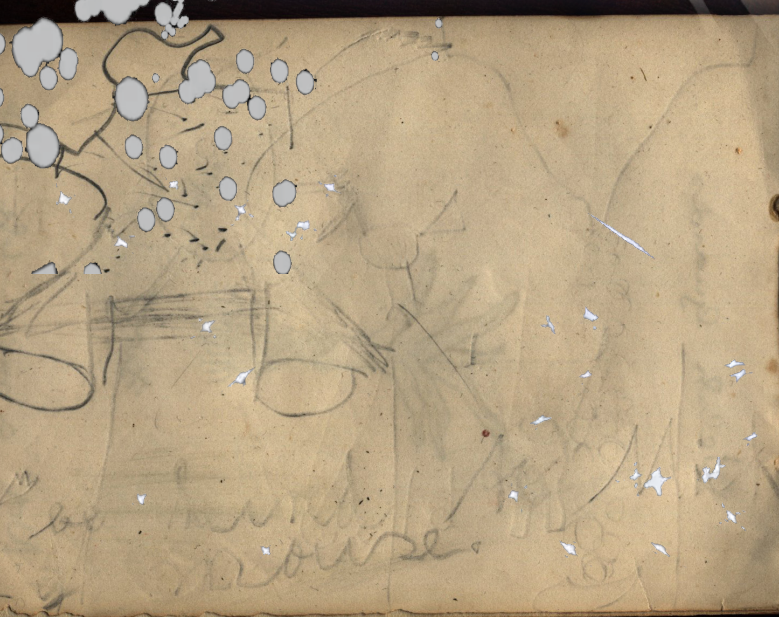
We watched Queen Elizabeth and her Duke drive by on their tour of the colonies. We stood waving flags, our tiny feet in tiny shoes, with socks trimmed with crowns, machine embroidered.

For us life was fun but chaotic. Noel and Jean shouted and threw things at each other.



Noel wanted us to call him and Jean by their first names.
For us, Noel was always Noel.
But I followed Nadya's lead and called Jean Mum.

Noel named me Elyse after his war-time lover.
But ever since Norah's visit I was called Lisa.
Norah was a formidable matriarch.

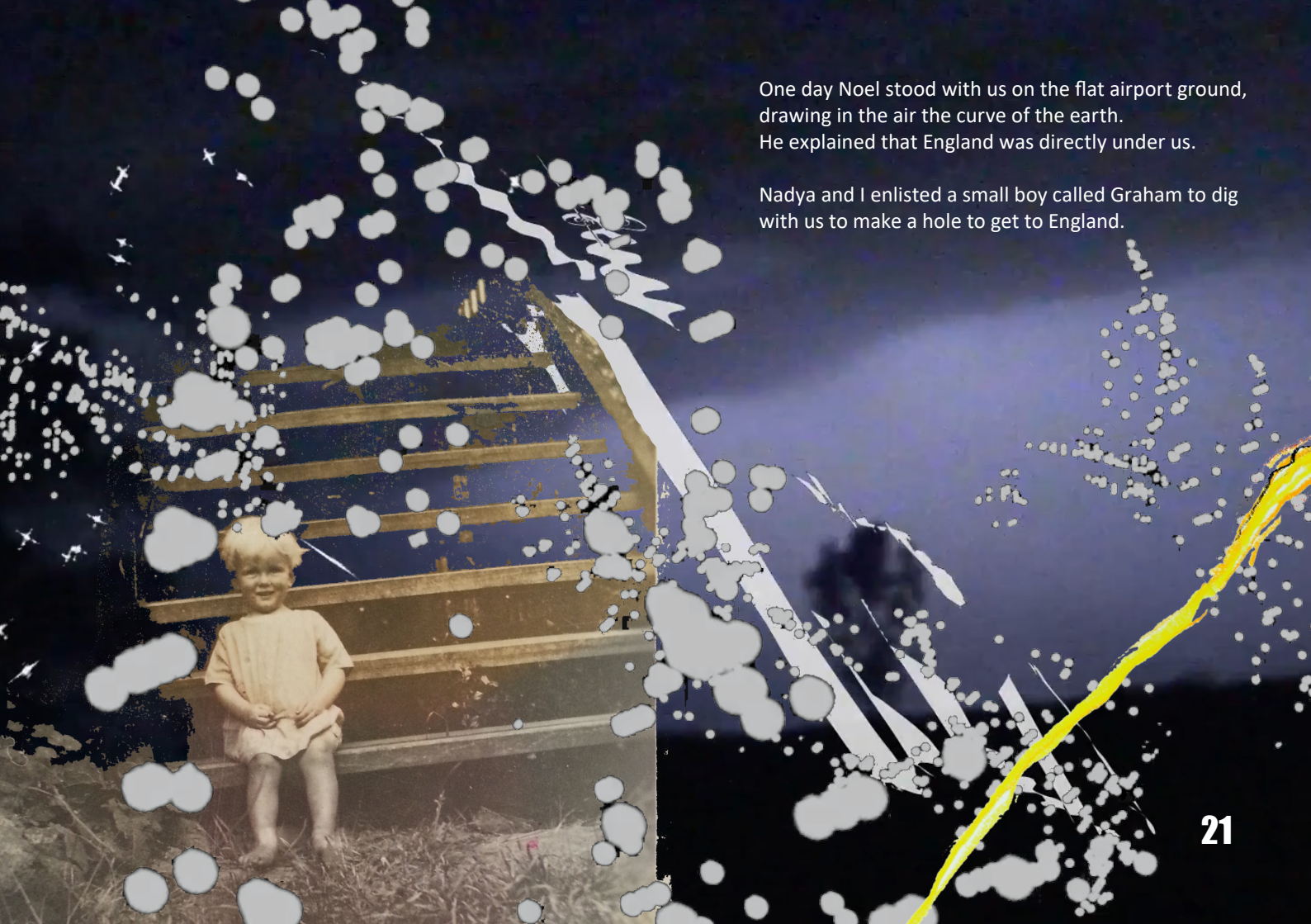




Mum encouraged our drawing and painting.
I don't have any memories of her reading to us.

Nadya and I drew on walls inside and outside our little airport house. We drew with charcoal from the hearth. Sometimes we drew with soft lead pencil we found in Noel's workshop. Noel would yell at us to scrub it off.

We collected travel brochures from the airport lounges and stuffed them down ventilators in the nearby buildings. We stamped and broke up ice that formed on puddles. We climbed up onto the back of a fire truck that suddenly took off with the driver unaware of us clinging on. We swam in the long shallow pool used for washing fire hoses.



One day Noel stood with us on the flat airport ground,
drawing in the air the curve of the earth.
He explained that England was directly under us.

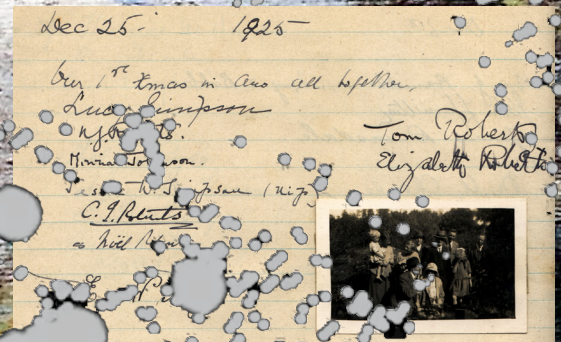
Nadya and I enlisted a small boy called Graham to dig
with us to make a hole to get to England.



In 1954 we sailed by ship across the Tasman sea to Melbourne.

We moved into 'Talisman', the house in Kallista, in the Dandenong Ranges, designed by our great grandparents, Tom Roberts and Lillie Williamson.

In Talisman we were not living so much on top of each other as we were on Harewood airport. Rooms were arranged around a central chimney. Around the house was a garden with Tom's studio at one end. Sherbrooke Forest was a short walk away.





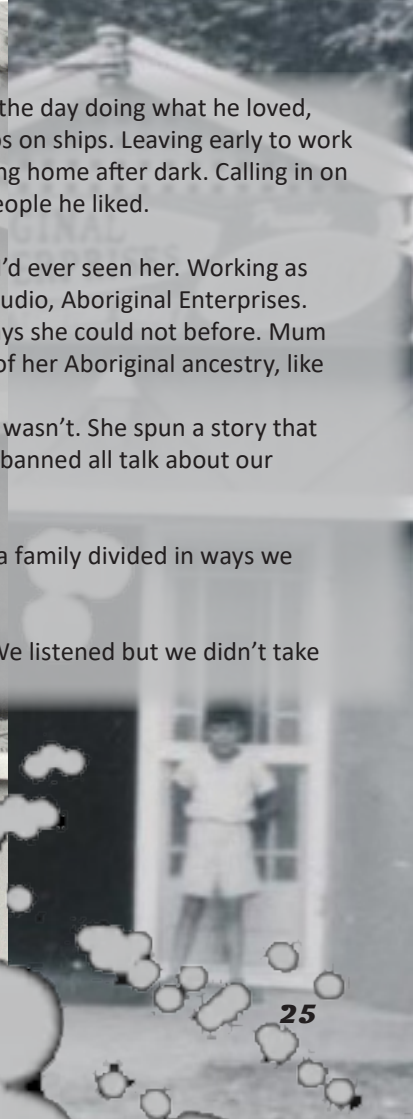
Noel was away most of the day doing what he loved, building and fixing radios on ships. Leaving early to work in Melbourne and coming home after dark. Calling in on his mother and other people he liked.

Mum was the happiest I'd ever seen her. Working as an artist in Bill Onus's studio, Aboriginal Enterprises. Expressing herself in ways she could not before. Mum was curious and proud of her Aboriginal ancestry, like her uncle Bill was.

But her mother Phoebe wasn't. She spun a story that she was Maori. Phoebe banned all talk about our history.

Nadya and I grew up in a family divided in ways we couldn't understand.

We did what we liked. We listened but we didn't take sides.

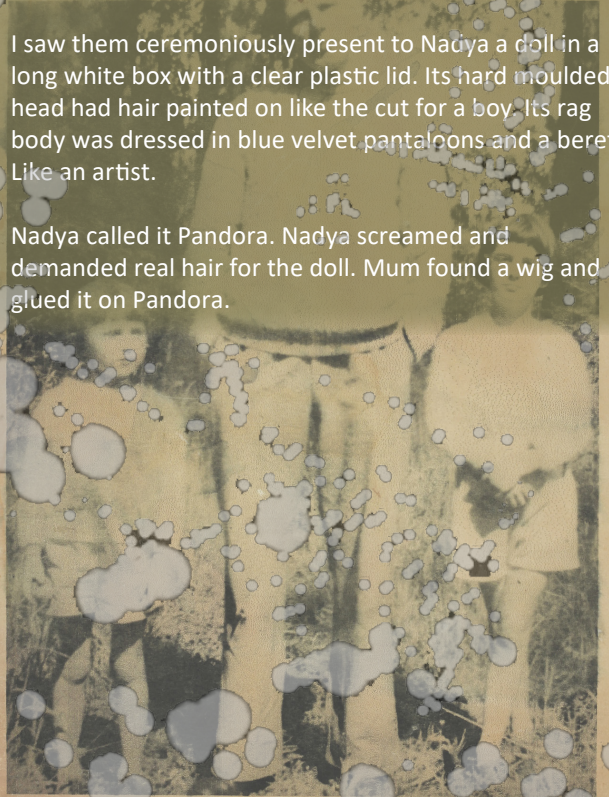




Nadya's father, Peter Carver, came to Talisman once with his mother to meet Nadya.

I saw them ceremoniously present to Nadya a doll in a long white box with a clear plastic lid. Its hard moulded head had hair painted on like the cut for a boy. Its rag body was dressed in blue velvet pantaloons and a beret. Like an artist.

Nadya called it Pandora. Nadya screamed and demanded real hair for the doll. Mum found a wig and glued it on Pandora.



Lisa and Noel and Nadya
in KALLISTA



Nadya and I would spend hours on our own in Kallista. Or with Mum in Tom's studio, drawing, painting and making things from scraps.

We shared a bedroom and at night we would talk before we slept.

We imagined the branches tapping on our window were creatures from the stories that Noel read to us. The Violet Fairy Book, Wind in the Willows, The Magic Pudding, Tom Sawyer and Huckleyberry Finn.

Nadya loved birds. She asked for two budgies – a blue one and a gold one.

Mum bought them for her, and a cage. Very soon Nadya opened the cage door and let them out. She said she wanted them to be free.





Nadya and I last lived together in Glen Waverley, in a house Noel had built with a war service loan. Ca gave Noel his green Holden car so we could travel in comfort as a family. Our brother Tom was born in 1958. No safety belts in those days. Once Nadya pushed me as we drove along and I clung to the handle of a swinging back car door.



When Nadya was around 15 she was approaching men for sex, in our street and in the local pub.

It was then she was assessed by the psychiatrist Geoff Goding and diagnosed with schizophrenia. Geoff introduced family therapy to Australia. He also worked as a Superintendent at the Beechworth Lunatic Asylum, and invited residents to staff meetings to discuss how they wanted to spend their leisure time. He enabled them to form clubs where they could do what they liked: arts, crafts, reading, writing, performing, gardening and so on.

I remember a family meeting with Geoff at the Bouverie Clinic in Melbourne. After some talking with us all he invited me to play by myself in the hall. The hall had colourful stained glass windows high on the walls. At one end of the hall was a stage with velvet curtains. I danced with the lights that cast colour from the glass onto the floor.



One day Nadya was taken from Glen Waverley to be a ward of the state. She then lived in different places around Victoria, in institutions that have changed their names over time: Larundel Mental Asylum (Bundoora), Aradale Mental Hospital (Ararat), special accommodation in Wodonga, Beechworth Lunatic Asylum, May Day Hills, Gilchrist Ave, Willows, Blackwood (Beechworth).

My brother Tom remembers Nadya coming to stay and asking Mum if she could come home 'for good'.





In the months before she died, I got closer to Nadya than ever.


I saw her most days and we shared memories. We agreed that our family included all the people who have cared for us, and that here we both were, in a sense, home together, for good.

Now telling this story I learn even more about her world, from the many other people who cared for Nadya.

I am telling this story for my family and other people to celebrate relationships that make us who we are.



Over the years Nadya wrote letters to our grandfather, Ca. The letters are directions for the production of a film she wanted Ca to make and to show to Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh.



I wanted to follow Nadya's directions but the directions are not clear.

Her letters reflect a freely associating creative mind. Colourful, textured, rhythmic scenes transform. Characters turn into each other and herself. No line appears to separate them.



Is it a paradox or is it logical that I use line animation to make sense of my sisters writing?

I honour Nadya's writings through the creation of the short animation "Can you turn me", which is followed by a short film honouring the joy of connections that Nadya made in her life, "Flying with my sister".



When she died, I posted a call for stories about Nadya to the Beechworth Community Facebook page. Generations of her carers responded.

I also received, by mail, heartfelt works of art that serve as messages from people who made them to be shared.

So this story is an animated mix of my experience of Nadya, fragments from her film directions, family stories and photos passed down, Facebook messages, and works of art.

IMAGES

Cover Drawing by Lisa Roberts 2022

Copyright page Early drawing of bird by Tom Roberts, in his father's 1859 diary

Page 1 Page from Nadya's writing book 2022

Pages 2-3 Lisa and Nadya at The Willow Community Care, Beechworth (henceforth Willows), 2019; Pandora and Maggie drawings by Lisa 2022

Pages 4-5 In moon- Jean Ralston and Nadya 1947; Peter Carver on bike - still from film "Sundowners" 1960; Lightning- still from "And can you turn me"; Maggie and Red Bike by Lisa; The Yarns of Billy Borker- promotional poster 1964

Pages 6-7 In coconut- Crying baby (Caleb Roberts) by Tom Roberts 1898 (with black lines scribbled over the mouth by the child); "And can you turn me" sketch by Lisa 2022; Nadya fire and ashes- still from "Can you turn me"; Hula Girl www.amazon.co.uk/Hawaiian-Mini-Hula-Girl-Dash/dp/B001GIQO7S

Pages 8-9 Burning Norfolk Island Pine by Lisa 2022; Roberts family home, Norfolk Island c1950; Maggie by Lisa 2022

Pages 10-11 Nadya with friend under whale bones 1949; "And can you turn me" sketch by Lisa 2022; Norfolk Island photo by Richard Wilson c1990;

Pages 12-13 Norah and Ca London 1920s; Kooka- still from "And can you turn me"; Nadya sketch by Lisa Roberts 2022

Pages 14-15 Harewood Airport 1940s; Nadya at Willows 2011

Pages 16-17 Noel, Ca, Dick, Norah and Lillie at Talisman 1920s; Norah's autograph book with drawings by children alongside adult art 1920s; Still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 18-19 Lisa and Nadya dress up at Harewood Airport family home 1950s; Eucalyptus seed beads by Barkindji woman Maddison Gibbs on Wiradjuri Country 2022

Pages 20-21 Noel at Talisman 1920s; Still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 22-23 Tom painting 1930s; Orford Ave family home, Kew, with Noel (right) and brother Peter (left) c1938; Tom and Lillie's Talisman Visitor's Book, Dec 25 1925: "Our first Xmas in Aus all together"; Background painting by Tom Roberts c1925: "Washing Day at Kallista"

Pages 24-25 Bill Onus's Aboriginal Enterprises 1950s with Bill on right of the group

Pages 26-27 Maggie by Lisa; Pandora look-alike dolly, www.theriaults.com/german-bisque-doll-klingmodel-195with-sculpted-hair-and-painted-eyes; Pandora drawing by Lisa; Lisa, Noel and Nadya in Sherbrooke Forest near Kallista 1950s

Pages 28-29 Nadya's budgie Bluey knitted by Sue Fenech 2022; Photo from Talisman Visitor's Book, Dec 25 1925: "Our first Xmas in Aus all together", L-R Noel, Norah, Lillie, Tom, and friends at Talisman

Pages 30-31 At Noel and Jean Roberts family home The Ridge Glen Waverley 1950s: Uncle Peter, Mother Jean, Cousin Mandy, Auntie Marg

Pages 32-33 Mayday Hills, Beechworth 2015; Doctor sketch by Lisa; Kooka- still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 34-35 Parents Jean and Noel and brother Tom at Ross, the Loder family holiday house 1960s; Beechworth Lunatic Asylum 1950s; And can you turn me sketch by Lisa

Pages 36-37 Nadya at Willows 2019; "And can you turn me" sketch by Lisa; Mayday Hills White Gatehouse residence

Pages 38-39 Queen Elizabeth Duke of Edinburgh www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/the-crown-netflix-queen-elizabeth-prince-philip-affair-marriage; Page from Nadya's writing book; Still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 40-41 Writing- still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 42-43 Nadya writing, drawing by Lisa 2021; River of stars- still from "And can you turn me"

Pages 44-45 Still from "Flying with my sister"

"This is the best thing I have read for who knows how long."

- Carmel Bird, Writer

"Every page is a work of art."

- Richard Roberts, Stage Designer

