

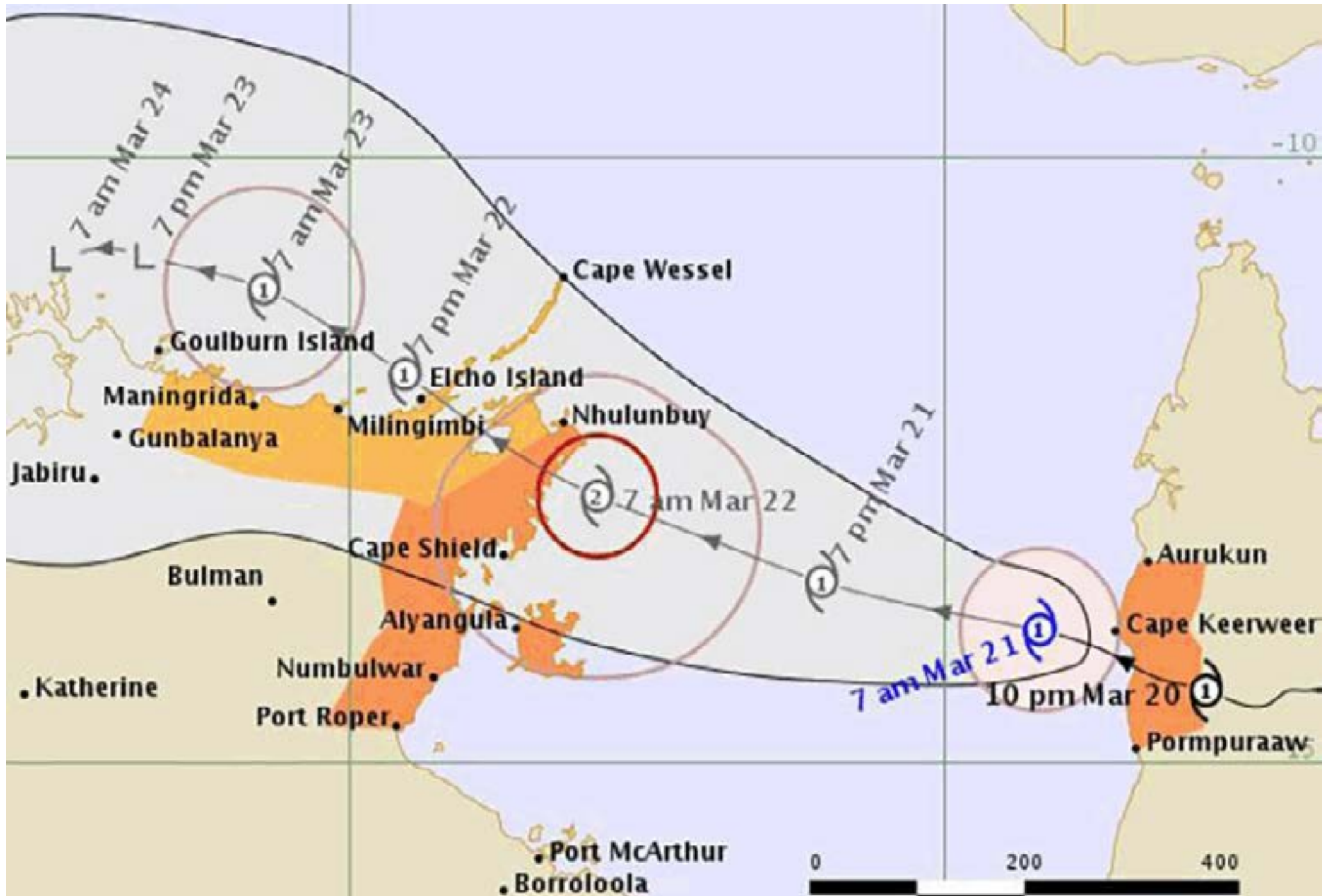
An aerial photograph of a tropical cyclone, showing a dense, swirling cloud structure over a remote, mountainous region. The terrain is rugged and appears to be a remote Aboriginal homeland. The cyclone's eye is visible in the center, surrounded by a thick wall of clouds. The surrounding land is a mix of green and brown, indicating a mix of vegetation and possibly some cleared areas or roads.

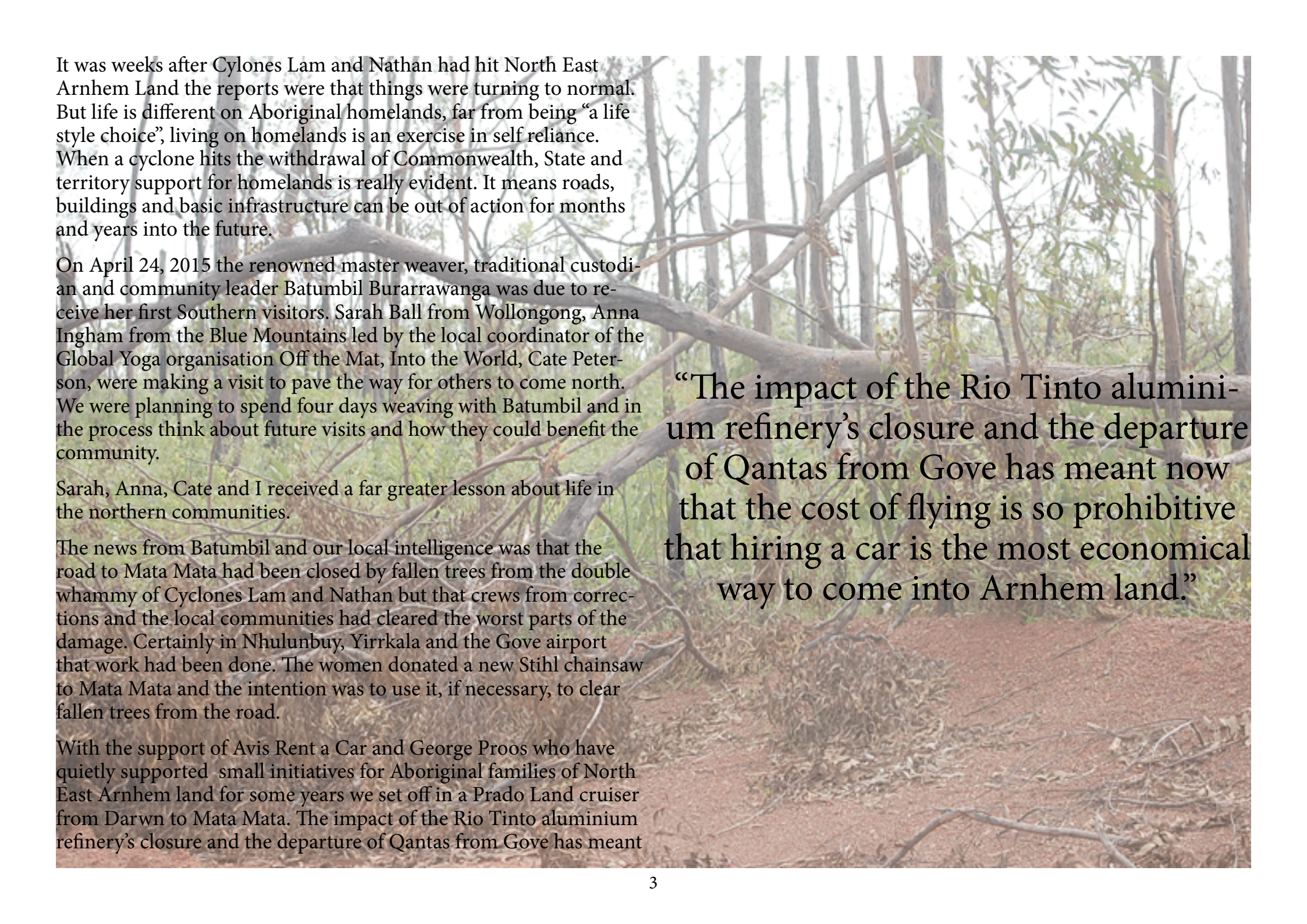
When the World Turns Upside Down

A Glimpse of the Impact of Tropical Cyclones Lam & Nathan
on Remote Aboriginal Homeland

May 2015

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It was weeks after Cyclones Lam and Nathan had hit North East Arnhem Land the reports were that things were turning to normal. But life is different on Aboriginal homelands, far from being “a life style choice”, living on homelands is an exercise in self reliance. When a cyclone hits the withdrawal of Commonwealth, State and territory support for homelands is really evident. It means roads, buildings and basic infrastructure can be out of action for months and years into the future.

On April 24, 2015 the renowned master weaver, traditional custodian and community leader Batumbil Burarrowanga was due to receive her first Southern visitors. Sarah Ball from Wollongong, Anna Ingham from the Blue Mountains led by the local coordinator of the Global Yoga organisation Off the Mat, Into the World, Cate Peterson, were making a visit to pave the way for others to come north. We were planning to spend four days weaving with Batumbil and in the process think about future visits and how they could benefit the community.

Sarah, Anna, Cate and I received a far greater lesson about life in the northern communities.

The news from Batumbil and our local intelligence was that the road to Mata Mata had been closed by fallen trees from the double whammy of Cyclones Lam and Nathan but that crews from corrections and the local communities had cleared the worst parts of the damage. Certainly in Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala and the Gove airport that work had been done. The women donated a new Stihl chainsaw to Mata Mata and the intention was to use it, if necessary, to clear fallen trees from the road.

With the support of Avis Rent a Car and George Proos who have quietly supported small initiatives for Aboriginal families of North East Arnhem land for some years we set off in a Prado Land cruiser from Darwin to Mata Mata. The impact of the Rio Tinto aluminium refinery’s closure and the departure of Qantas from Gove has meant

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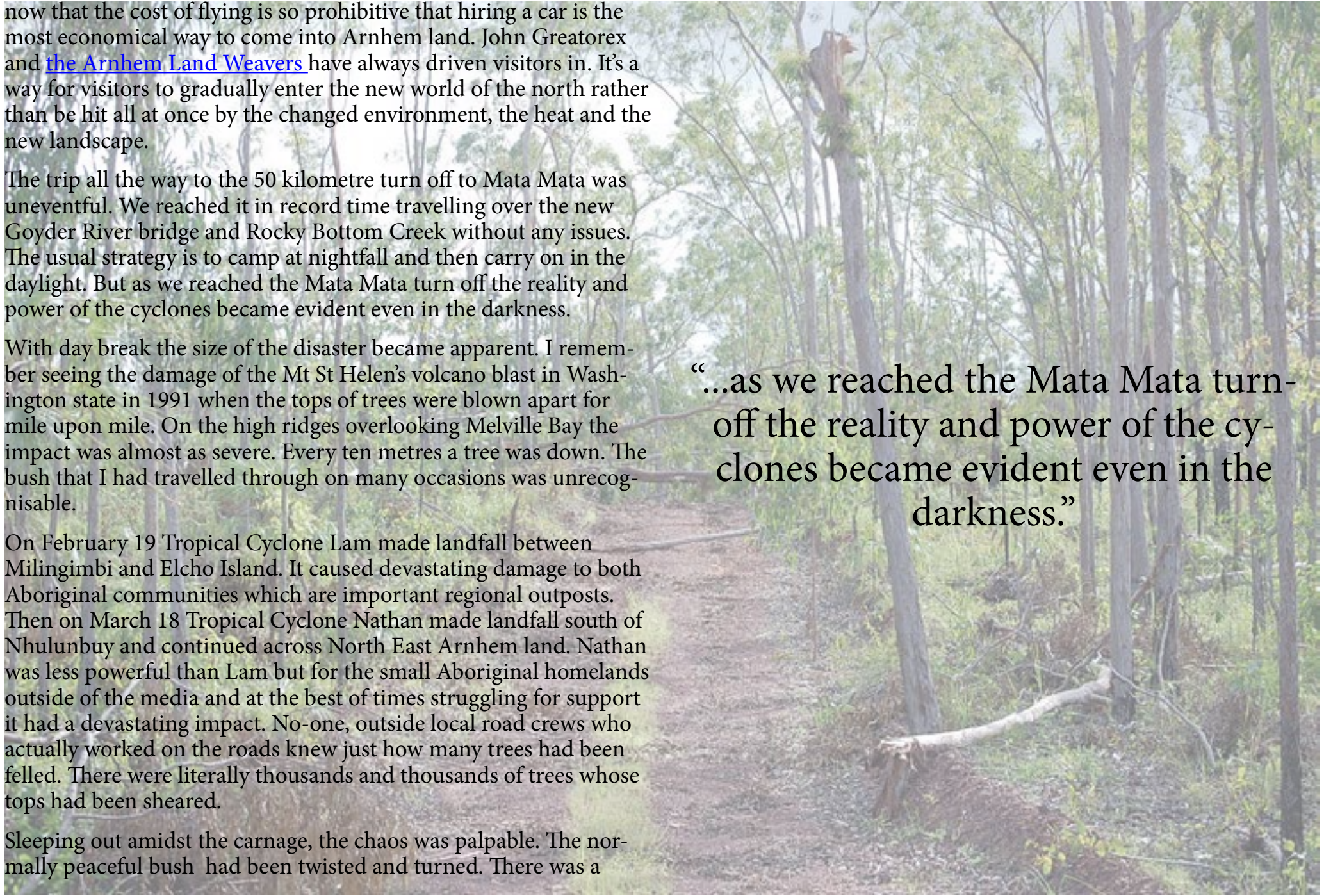
now that the cost of flying is so prohibitive that hiring a car is the most economical way to come into Arnhem land. John Greatorex and [the Arnhem Land Weavers](#) have always driven visitors in. It's a way for visitors to gradually enter the new world of the north rather than be hit all at once by the changed environment, the heat and the new landscape.

The trip all the way to the 50 kilometre turn off to Mata Mata was uneventful. We reached it in record time travelling over the new Goyder River bridge and Rocky Bottom Creek without any issues. The usual strategy is to camp at nightfall and then carry on in the daylight. But as we reached the Mata Mata turn off the reality and power of the cyclones became evident even in the darkness.

With day break the size of the disaster became apparent. I remember seeing the damage of the Mt St Helen's volcano blast in Washington state in 1991 when the tops of trees were blown apart for mile upon mile. On the high ridges overlooking Melville Bay the impact was almost as severe. Every ten metres a tree was down. The bush that I had travelled through on many occasions was unrecognisable.

On February 19 Tropical Cyclone Lam made landfall between Milingimbi and Elcho Island. It caused devastating damage to both Aboriginal communities which are important regional outposts. Then on March 18 Tropical Cyclone Nathan made landfall south of Nhulunbuy and continued across North East Arnhem land. Nathan was less powerful than Lam but for the small Aboriginal homelands outside of the media and at the best of times struggling for support it had a devastating impact. No-one, outside local road crews who actually worked on the roads knew just how many trees had been felled. There were literally thousands and thousands of trees whose tops had been sheared.

Sleeping out amidst the carnage, the chaos was palpable. The normally peaceful bush had been twisted and turned. There was a



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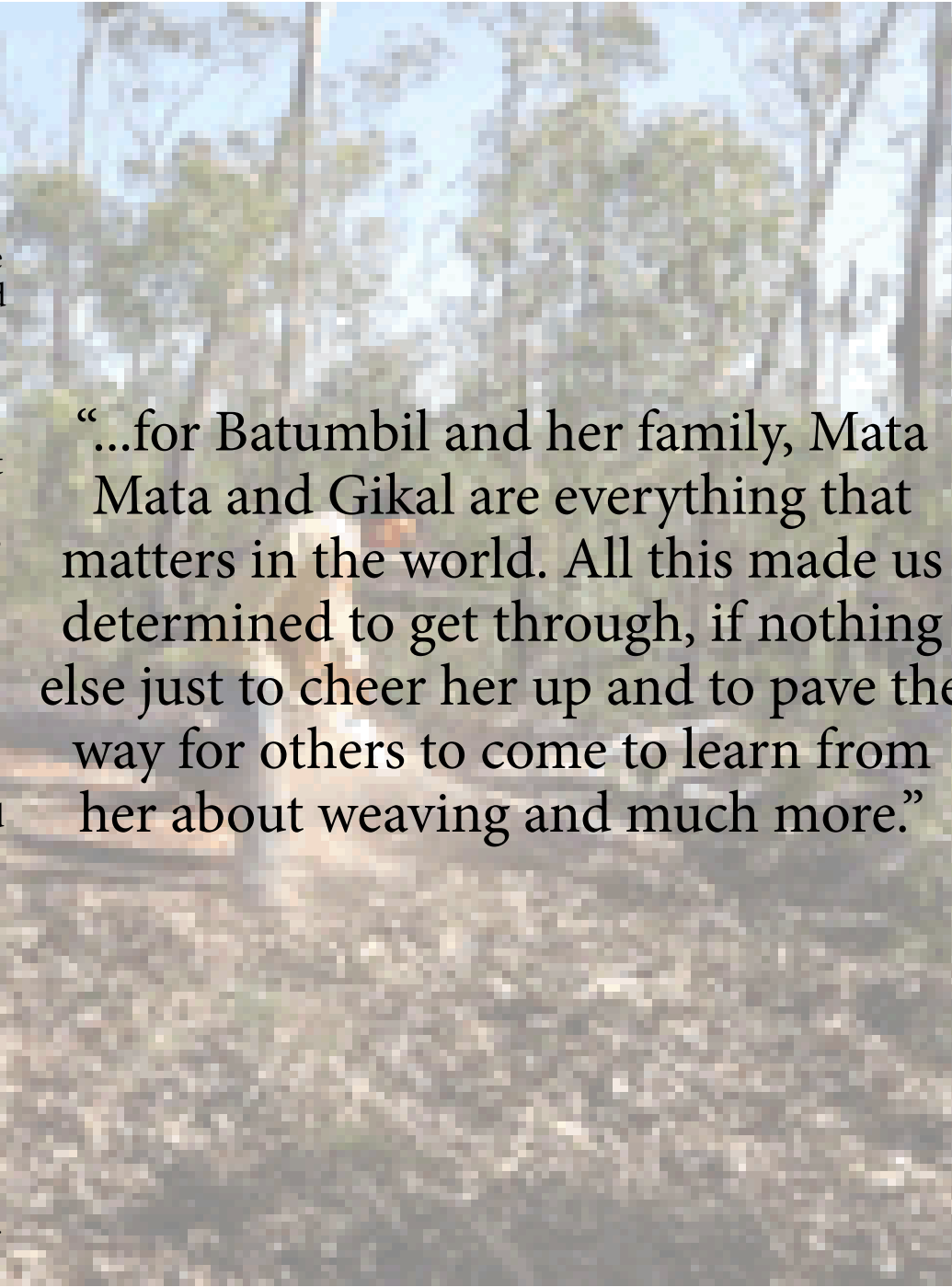
new feeling of unease across the land. Buffalos and other animals were in unusually high numbers along the road. The large amount of timber on the ground will make the normal burning processes tricky and I wonder what the thinking will be this year. So much of the usual selective process of obtaining yidakis, larakitj and other bush materials will now be disrupted.

One month after Nathan and two months after Lam, the road to the small communities of Nyinyikay, Mata Mata and Gikal was well and truly closed. The crews that had come before us had done a magnificent job. But there was still work to be done. How much we didn't know.

Mata Mata is the oldest NE Arnhem land homeland established just after the war and Batumbil and her family have hung in there despite the deaths of partners, siblings and the loss of support that has occurred since the Northern Territory intervention and since the departure of the legendary missionary Harold Shepherdson. The madness of the current regime exacerbates all of the problems of living in a remote location.

There have been glimmers of hope for homelands. Djambawa Marawilli has done great things for his community at Baniyala. Over the past decade community initiatives at Bawaka, Nyinkai and Maypuru have brought visitors and supporters to the homelands of North East Arnhem land from the south and these have been important new ways for support for homelands to occur. The ISX over many years has favoured a model of peer to peer support and social impact investment. It favours slow and steady development for the communities and investment centred on Aboriginal grass roots organisations led by traditional leaders.

Though it is difficult to maintain the homelands and sometimes it seems that families are dealing with the worst of all worlds, for Batumbil and her family, Mata Mata and Gikal are everything that matters in the world. All this made us determined to get through, if



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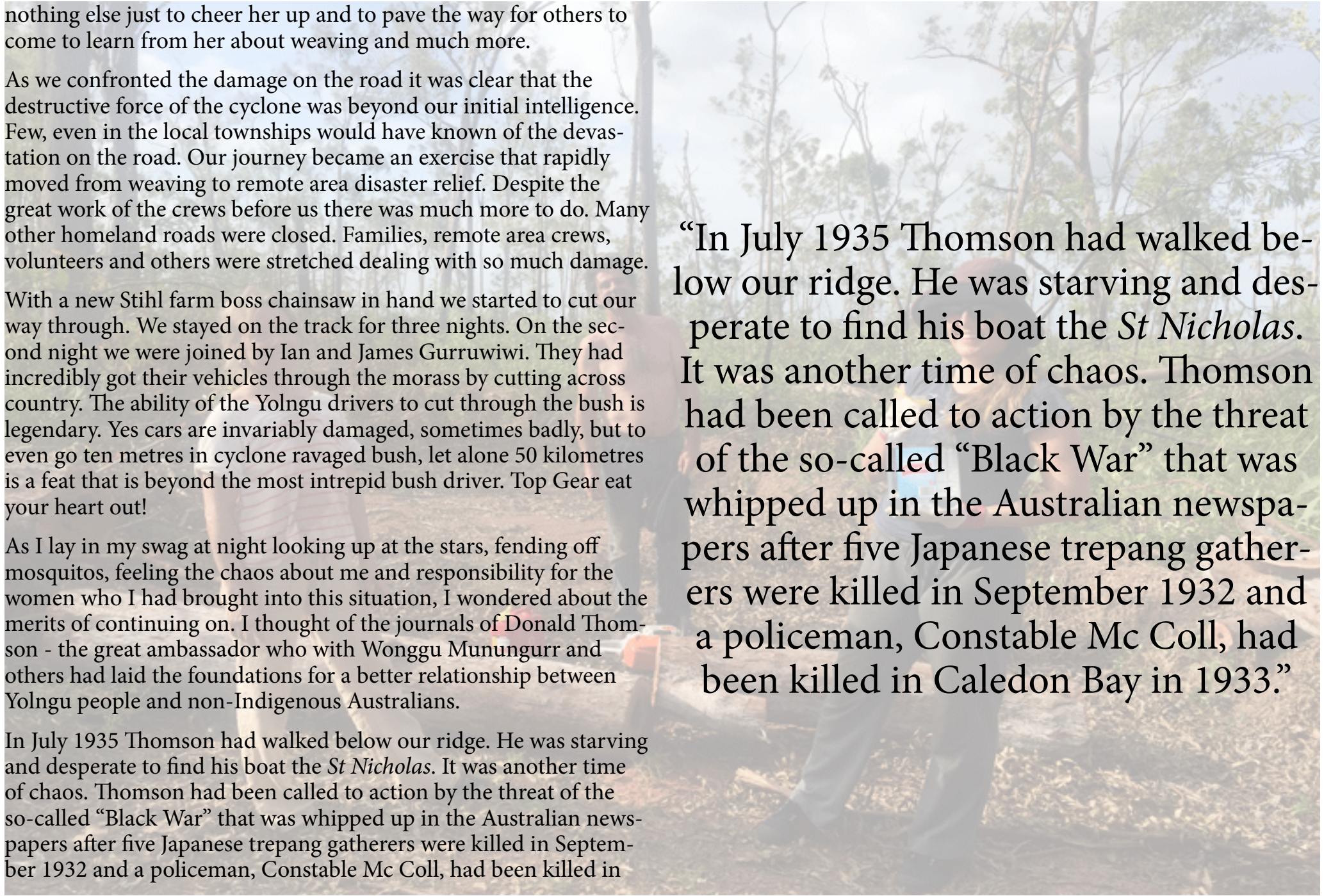
nothing else just to cheer her up and to pave the way for others to come to learn from her about weaving and much more.

As we confronted the damage on the road it was clear that the destructive force of the cyclone was beyond our initial intelligence. Few, even in the local townships would have known of the devastation on the road. Our journey became an exercise that rapidly moved from weaving to remote area disaster relief. Despite the great work of the crews before us there was much more to do. Many other homeland roads were closed. Families, remote area crews, volunteers and others were stretched dealing with so much damage.

With a new Stihl farm boss chainsaw in hand we started to cut our way through. We stayed on the track for three nights. On the second night we were joined by Ian and James Gurruwiwi. They had incredibly got their vehicles through the morass by cutting across country. The ability of the Yolngu drivers to cut through the bush is legendary. Yes cars are invariably damaged, sometimes badly, but to even go ten metres in cyclone ravaged bush, let alone 50 kilometres is a feat that is beyond the most intrepid bush driver. Top Gear eat your heart out!

As I lay in my swag at night looking up at the stars, fending off mosquitos, feeling the chaos about me and responsibility for the women who I had brought into this situation, I wondered about the merits of continuing on. I thought of the journals of Donald Thomson - the great ambassador who with Wonggu Munungurr and others had laid the foundations for a better relationship between Yolngu people and non-Indigenous Australians.

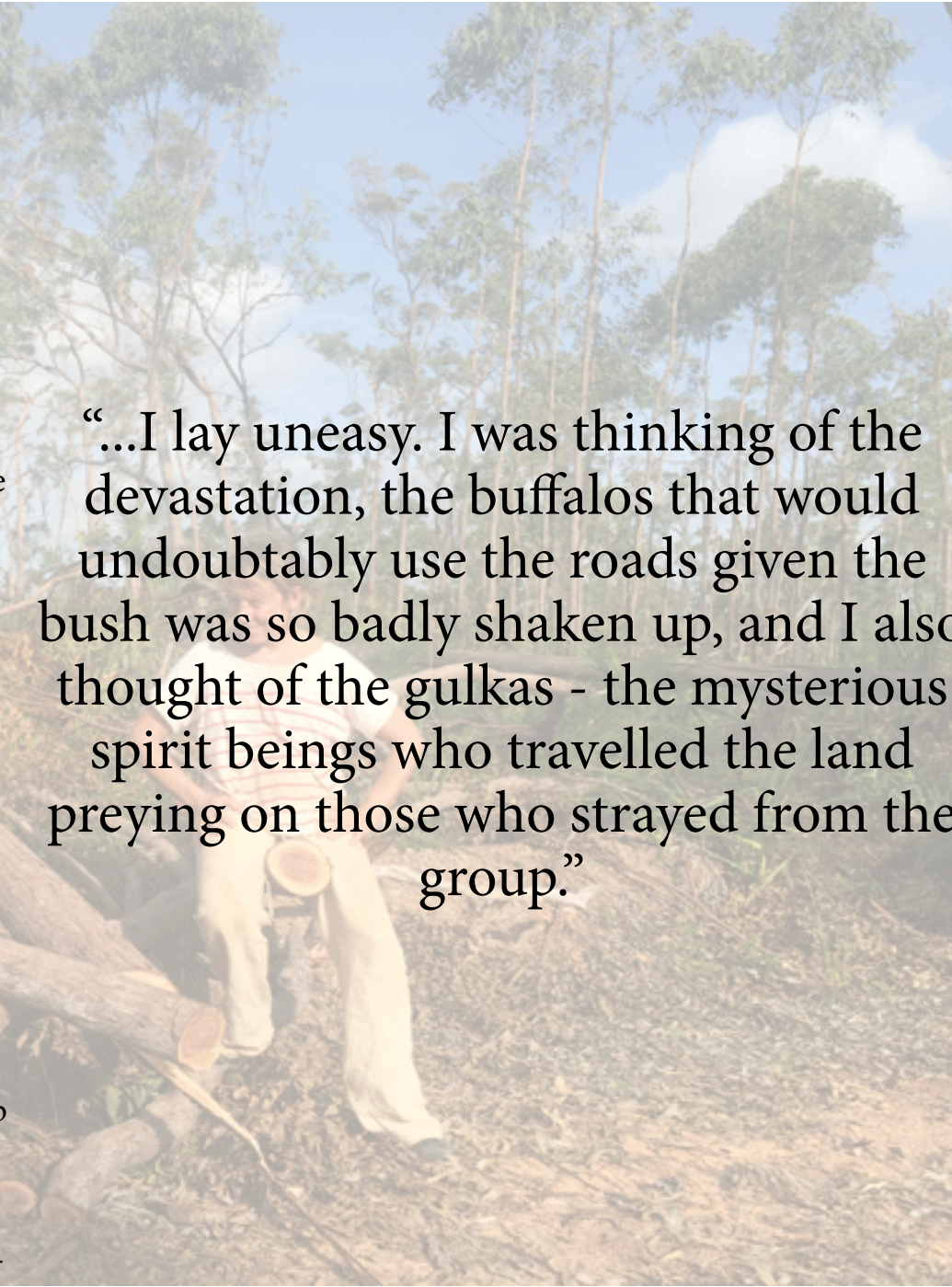
In July 1935 Thomson had walked below our ridge. He was starving and desperate to find his boat the *St Nicholas*. It was another time of chaos. Thomson had been called to action by the threat of the so-called "Black War" that was whipped up in the Australian newspapers after five Japanese trepang gatherers were killed in September 1932 and a policeman, Constable Mc Coll, had been killed in



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Caledon Bay in 1933. Dhaakiyar Wirrpanda was tried in Darwin and found guilty of the murder of Constable Mc Coll who, according to witnesses at the time, had first handcuffed and later raped Dhaakiyar's wife and then emptied his revolver at Dhaakiyar who had come at her call for help. As Thomson concluded "If he had been a white man his action would have been self defence and on other grounds, justifiable homicide". (Thomson, p. 28) Upon appeal Dhaakiyar was acquitted and released. But he disappeared never to be seen again and it is clear that police in Darwin had dispensed their own justice. A few years ago descendants of the Mc Coll and Wirrpanda families had a moving reconciliation at the Garma Festival.

The three Yolngu men who had been held responsible for killing the Japanese trepangers, Natjiyalma, Maaw and Ngarkanya Munungurr were still in Fanny Bay Jail when Thomson visited them in May 1935. He obtained a message stick from them and presented it to their father the great Wonggu in July. In another year the men were freed, a triumph due to Thomson. The men would return home safely heading off a major dispute and ongoing point of conflict. After that great meeting with Wonggu Thomson walked from Port Bradshaw/Bawaka across the Gove Peninsula towards Rorrawuy and Muta mol then over the river he named after his sons, Peter John, to the Mata Mata/Gikal area which was also our destination. It was here he journeyed below our ridge. Thomson wrote in his journal "A long, almost sleepless night followed, for I was in some pain and weak from dysentery. In the morning I bound my leg, which I could flex only with difficulty, using an elastic bandage, but the limb was stiff and swollen, and this bandage only added to the handicap and had soon to be removed. Because I knew none of the people with me well I worried that if I waited to rest, they might slip away during the night as the food was gone. Moreover, the dysentery showed no signs of abating, and it is not easy to lie still, alone, in far away places. The peculiar conditions of this work called for activity and hard work. I decided to push on while my strength last-

A person is sitting on a large log in a forest. They are wearing a striped shirt and light-colored pants. The background shows tall trees and a blue sky with some clouds. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“...I lay uneasy. I was thinking of the devastation, the buffalos that would undoubtedly use the roads given the bush was so badly shaken up, and I also thought of the gulkas - the mysterious spirit beings who travelled the land preying on those who strayed from the group.”



Ian Gurruwiwi, Gathering and teaching about bush foods as we cleared the road together.

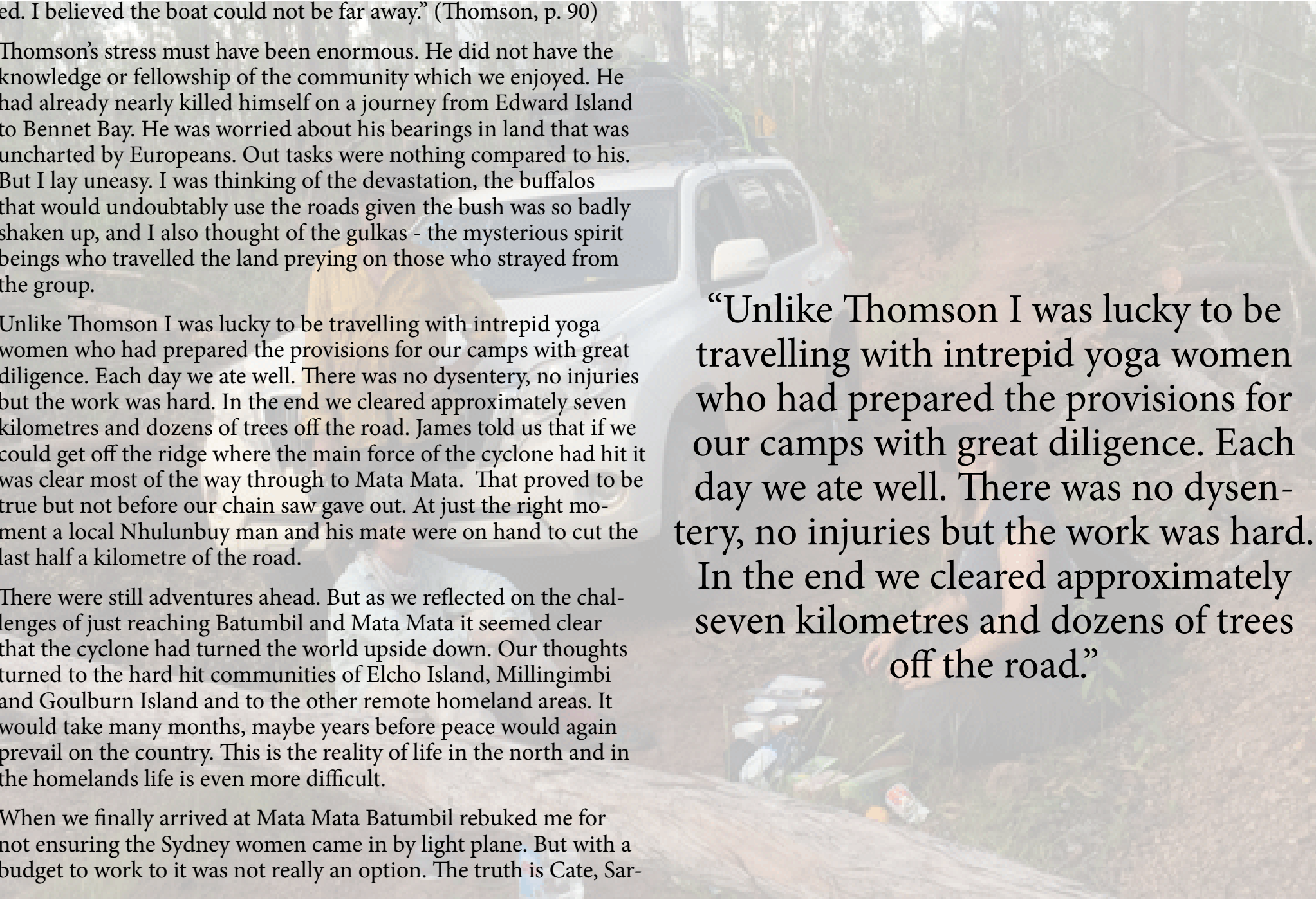
ed. I believed the boat could not be far away.” (Thomson, p. 90)

Thomson’s stress must have been enormous. He did not have the knowledge or fellowship of the community which we enjoyed. He had already nearly killed himself on a journey from Edward Island to Bennet Bay. He was worried about his bearings in land that was uncharted by Europeans. Our tasks were nothing compared to his. But I lay uneasy. I was thinking of the devastation, the buffalos that would undoubtedly use the roads given the bush was so badly shaken up, and I also thought of the gulkas - the mysterious spirit beings who travelled the land preying on those who strayed from the group.

Unlike Thomson I was lucky to be travelling with intrepid yoga women who had prepared the provisions for our camps with great diligence. Each day we ate well. There was no dysentery, no injuries but the work was hard. In the end we cleared approximately seven kilometres and dozens of trees off the road. James told us that if we could get off the ridge where the main force of the cyclone had hit it was clear most of the way through to Mata Mata. That proved to be true but not before our chain saw gave out. At just the right moment a local Nhulunbuy man and his mate were on hand to cut the last half a kilometre of the road.

There were still adventures ahead. But as we reflected on the challenges of just reaching Batumbil and Mata Mata it seemed clear that the cyclone had turned the world upside down. Our thoughts turned to the hard hit communities of Elcho Island, Millingimbi and Goulburn Island and to the other remote homeland areas. It would take many months, maybe years before peace would again prevail on the country. This is the reality of life in the north and in the homelands life is even more difficult.

When we finally arrived at Mata Mata Batumbil rebuked me for not ensuring the Sydney women came in by light plane. But with a budget to work to it was not really an option. The truth is Cate, Sar-



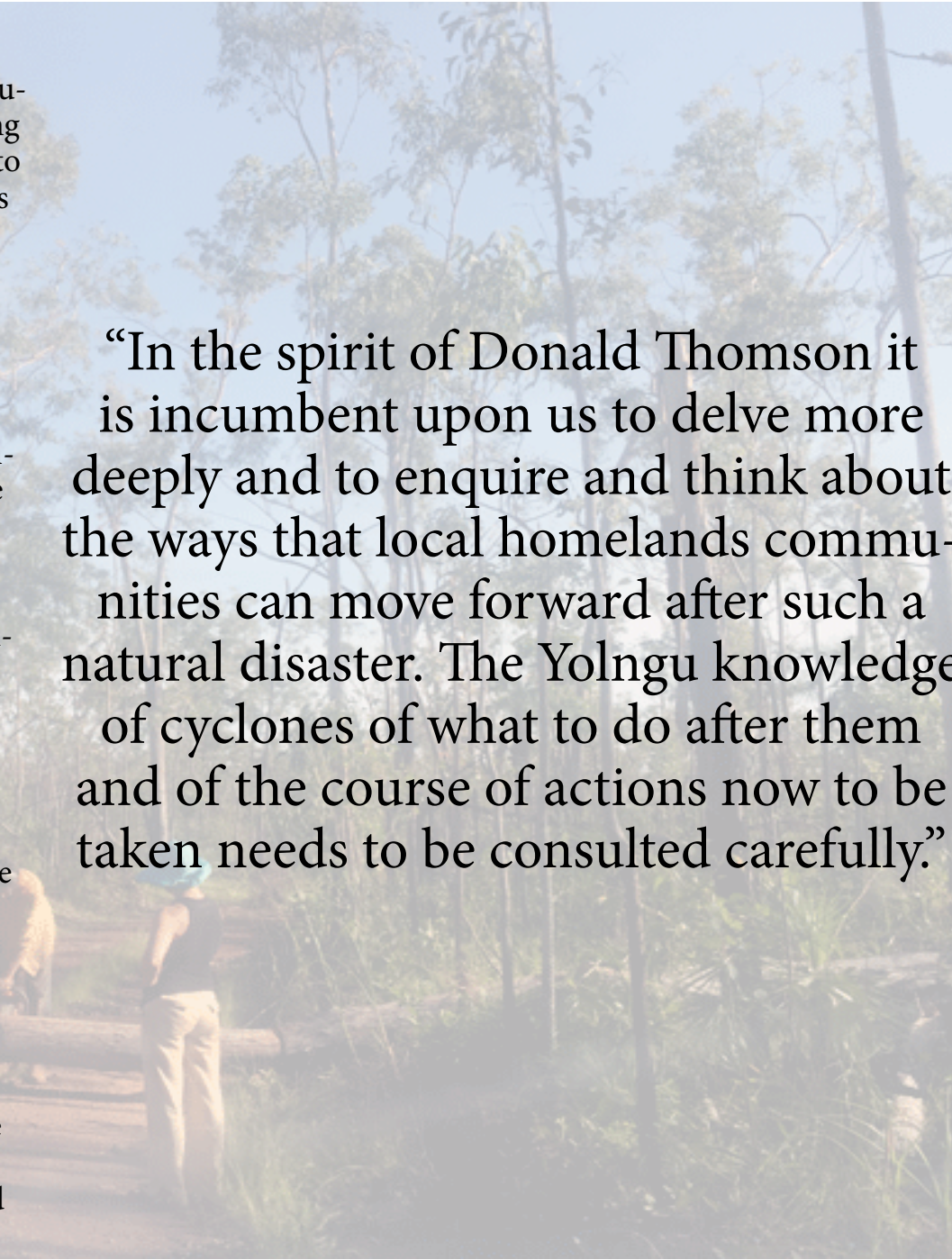
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ah and Anna had not uttered a word of complaint. They had been magnificent companions. This was also part of what they came to learn about this remote northern community. James and Ian Gurruiwi had joined us for a delightful meal and taught about gathering yams, food was exchanged and so much was learned on the track to Mata Mata. It was another glimpse of the difficulties and hardships of homelands and the true resilience of people like Batumbil and her family.

Cyclones truly turn the world and everything with it upside down and create a chaos that make all seem lost at times. The task is to turn it all to some better purpose.

Along the roads and in the stringbark forests there is now an abundance of hard wood timber lying on the ground. This can be made into fine tables, posts, yidakis, clap sticks and larrakitj. The funds that the Northern Territory government spends on disaster relief should be used to support local Aboriginal industry, and funds should be provided for the equipment necessary to extract the timber and clean up the land before the usual season of mosaic burning. The goal should be to provide employment and equipment for local Yolngu people and not to some bureaucratic government department or agency.

There is still latent racism in the Northern Territory and Arnhem land. Many are ignorant and not respectful of the knowledge of the Yolngu. There is a kind of resentment that is really a wonder given the fact that the infamous Gove court case of 1963 has meant that the Australian community and those who have benefited from the mine and refinery have profited at the expense of the Yolngu. Instead of thanks and understanding there is a tendency for the workers and managers who have come to Gove because of the industry to think they have all the answers and that they do all the work. These are often the shrillest voices when it comes to lobbying government or obtaining disaster relief. In the spirit of Donald Thomson it is incumbent upon us to delve more deeply and to en-



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quire and think about these matters. At minimum we should think about ways that local homelands communities can move forward after such a natural disaster. The Yolngu knowledge of cyclones, of what to do after them and of the course of actions that now needs to be taken needs to be consulted carefully. But will it happen?

In July another group will be headed to Mata Mata to weave and this time to walk “the Yolngu roads” through the area with Galpu and Gumatj guides. This is the very best way that people of good will from all over Australia - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - can make a contribution to the preservation of the homelands and their surrounding estates. Thanks to Cate, Anna and Sarah, at such a turbulent time, for paving the way for others to visit Mata Mata and Gikal.

Mata Mata needs multiple layers of investment. It needs funding to support its community leadership and planning. [The ISX has launched a national living treasure campaign to support Batumbil and her community.](#) Mata Mata need its school to be renovated and re-opened. It needs a housing fund to ensure that the houses, roads and its airport runway are well maintained all year round. It needs basic infrastructure for sewerage and for the maintenance of the grounds. It also needs investments in its core income sources namely art and cultural development, bush fruits and harvesting and cultural tours and bush craft skills. With the departure of government from these responsibilities the contribution of the community, companies, individuals is so important to show the way forward. Prime Ministers and Chief Secretaries and the whole Aboriginal bureaucracy and industry needs to be pointed in the right direction.

Reference

Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, The Miegunyah Press, 2003

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Addendum

Cyclone Lam in 2015 was the strongest storm to strike [Australia's Northern Territory](#) since [Cyclone Monica](#) in 2006. It formed from the [monsoon trough](#) on February 12 in the [Coral Sea](#). For much of its duration, the system moved westward due to a [ridge](#) to the south. The system crossed over the [Cape York Peninsula](#) and moved into the [Gulf of Carpentaria](#), whereupon it gradually organized due to warm waters and favorable [outflow](#). On February 16, the [Bureau of Meteorology](#) (BoM) classified it as a Category 1 on the [Australian tropical cyclone intensity scale](#) and gave it the name Lam. The storm intensified further while drifting toward the [Wessel Islands](#), developing an [eye](#) and strengthening to the equivalence of a [minimal hurricane](#) on February 18. It strengthened to reach [maximum sustained winds](#) of 185 km/h (115 mph) early on February 19 before turning to the southwest, making it a Category 4 cyclone. That day, it made [landfall](#) on Northern Territory between [Milingimbi](#) and [Elcho Island](#) at peak intensity, and it rapidly weakened over land. About six hours after Lam moved ashore, [Cyclone Marcia](#) struck [Queensland](#) as a Category 5 cyclone, marking the first time on record that two storms of Category 4 intensity struck Australia on the same day. In its formative stages, Lam produced heavy rainfall and flooding in [Far North Queensland](#). Later, the cyclone's rainfall set daily precipitation records in Northern Territory. However, the winds caused the most damage, with gusts estimated as high as 230 km/h (145 mph). The highest gust was 170 km/h (110 mph) at Cape Wessel on [Rimbija Island](#). Lam caused considerable destruction, particularly affecting local aboriginal communities. Total damage in the Northern Territory reached at least [A\\$82.4 million](#) ([US\\$64.4 million](#)). Source: [Bureau of Meteorology](#)

Cyclone Nathan formed east of far north Queensland in March it made landfall near Cooktown as a category four, crossed the Cape York Peninsula and weakened to a category one storm before gaining strength as it moved west across the warm tropical waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria. After this long journey, Nathan came within a few dozen kilometres of the largest town in Arnhem Land - an area about the size of Victoria. On Sunday night it was forecast to pass almost directly over the community of Galiwinku, on Elcho Island west of Nhulunbuy, which only one month earlier had been hit almost directly by the category four Cyclone Lam. Power was earlier turned off across Elcho Island after high winds caused powerlines to clash. The Nhulunbuy shelter opened at 6:30pm (ACST) on Saturday. Arrivals trickled in from nearby Wallaby Beach and Ski Beach communities and they came well prepared — bringing with them plastic crates of toilet paper, bags of sugar, tea mugs and bright floral blankets to lay on the concrete floor. An organiser pointed out when everyone

sheltered for Cyclone Lam one month ago that nobody had their own electric fan, but this time almost every family brought one. One elderly man, Morgan Mununggurr, had his own mattress and bed frame, brought from his home in Yirrkala by his family. “In the old days we used to hide in caves or dig a hole in the sand or roll a canoe over and cover yourself or make a paperback shelter and put sand on it so it doesn't get broken,” he said. “If the cyclone comes this way these houses won't stand a chance,” Wallaby Beach resident Bunumbirr Marika said on Friday. “They're 50 years old. There's asbestos in the house.” -

Sources: [Australian Broadcasting Commission](#)



On the road home, Anna Ingham, Sarah Ball, Cate Peterson, April 30, 2015