The Annual Fiction Edition

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Peter Temple
Janette Turner Hospital
Eva Hornung
Luke Davies
Linda Jaivin
Alice Pung
Yan Lianke
CK Stead
& more
Praise for Griffith REVIEW

‘An always vibrant mix of creative writing, essays, photography and ideas, Griffith REVIEW has gone from strength to strength.’ *Adelaide Review*

‘Of all the small magazines in this country, Griffith REVIEW is the one that’s essential reading.’ *The Australian*

‘One of our best journals.’ *The Age*

‘Griffith REVIEW represents “the long game” in journalism, providing quality analysis in an age of diminishing journalistic integrity.’ *Walkley Magazine*

‘Admirable insights…witty and cuts through the complexities.’ *Australian Book Review*

‘Griffith REVIEW is a wonderful journal. It’s pretty much setting the agenda in Australia and fighting way above its weight…You’re mad if you don’t subscribe.’ Phillip Adams

‘It’s a cracker, a reminder of how satisfying on every level good quality non-fiction can be.’ *New Zealand Herald*

‘An outstanding example of what “zeitgeist” means…uncannily prophetic. Griffith REVIEW seems to get better with age.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Rare, sometimes shocking candour…Editor Julianne Schultz seems to inspire unusual frankness in her contributors. I recommend a long and leisurely reading of this revealing collection. This collection shows Australia and Australians from every point-of-view but the obvious, revealing a diversity of worlds.’ *M/C Reviews*
SIR SAMUEL GRIFFITH was one of Australia’s great early achievers. Twice the premier of Queensland, that state’s chief justice and the author of its criminal code, he was best known for his pivotal role in drafting agreements that led to Federation, and as the new nation’s first chief justice. He was also an important reformer and legislator, a practical and cautious man of words.

Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city’s second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

Like Sir Samuel Griffith, Griffith REVIEW is iconoclastic and non-partisan, with a sceptical eye and a pragmatically reforming heart and a commitment to public discussion. Personal, political and unpredictable, it is Australia’s best conversation.
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**COVER:** Poh Ling Yeow, *I Waited & Waited with the Major and GG*, acrylic on canvas, 120cm x 120cm. Courtesy of the artist, Hill Smith Gallery and Libby Edwards Galleries. www.pohlingyeow.com

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INTRODUCTION

Best done slowly
Reading for pleasure and insight
Julianne Schultz

DURING the 2010 election campaign we were told that the prospective leaders’ favourite books were *The Lord of the Rings* and *Cloudstreet*. Both fine books – but, like so much else that was said in the campaign, answers with a suspiciously focus-group feel to them, unlikely to offend anyone.

Tim Winton’s families in working-class Perth jumped off the page. Theirs were epic if not heroic journeys, where sentimentality bumped into reality. Reading the story helped us make sense of our lives and those of millions of Australians. It did not take long after its first publication, in 1991, to become a classic and for Tim Winton to be feted as the author of a – maybe even the – great Australian novel.

It is easy to see why *Cloudstreet* would have made a lasting impression on a young lawyer who had moved from working-class Adelaide to cosmopolitan Melbourne. Julia Gillard was thirty when the book was published, and beginning to make her way in a different world to the one she grew up in.

Tony Abbott’s reported preference for *The Lord of the Rings* also tells us a lot about him. JRR Tolkien’s great trilogy was published several years before Abbott was born, but by the time the future prime ministerial contender was a young man it had already assumed cult status – a mystical adventure tale replete with spiritual symbolism. Again, it is easy to see why it would have struck a particular chord with a religious young man who was both brainy and sporty.

These books tell us quite a lot about where the putative prime ministers came from, but little about the people they have become.

THE POLITICAL EVENTS of the past six months – including the vacuity of the campaign, and its nail-biting conclusion – have had an epic quality, a storyline at odds with the more mundane realities of political life.
The drama opened with the Liberal Party’s decision, on an unseasonably cold December day in Canberra, to replace the man who was prepared to put his leadership on the line to provide bipartisan support for legislation to mitigate the impact of global warming. That he lost by one vote gave the story a particular poignancy. The humiliation of the fall was offset to some degree by the narrowness of the vote and the enormity of the underlying issues. It was easy to see the pain on Malcolm Turnbull’s face, his wife’s outrage, Tony Abbott’s glee, and the sheer handwringing delight of the apparatchiks who surrounded him and engineered his ascendancy.

Thanks to the immediacy and ubiquity of television and the internet this was on display for all to see – but in the wash of floating images it is always difficult to draw out the significance and hang on to it.

As it turned out, the removal of Malcolm Turnbull was an across-building tryout for the removal of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd six months later. The intensity of the plotting and the speed of the execution had all the intensity of a made-for-TV drama.

It was hard to find parallels in political history. The old cliché of the faceless men exercising power did not stack up: they may have been faceless in another age, but as the feverish counting to remove the Prime Minister was underway Paul Howes, the Australian Workers’ Union official who was intimately involved in the coup, pitched for a change of leader on ABC television and then allowed the national broadcaster’s cameras to follow him for weeks afterwards.

It took some time before the literary analogies were drawn on to make sense of the drama. The handful of political commentators with a literary bent quoted from Macbeth – ‘if it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly’ – and, as the election campaign unfolded more darkly, from Julius Caesar.

As the ins and outs of the move against the Prime Minister slowly made their way into the public domain, the emotional legacy of the actions lingered. This was clear in the questions that were asked in the public forums during the election campaign, but seemed a mystery to those who were closest to the coup.

It should not have been. The psychological dimension of power and its loss is all too often ignored in the pursuit of numbers and the abstractions of policy. Yet this dimension animates and makes sense of the whole enterprise.

IT IS FAIR to assume that few of those who were directly involved had listened carefully when they were taught Shakespeare at school, or even that ubiquitous early high school text Lord of the Flies. As Fintan O’Toole noted in his primer Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life, the teaching of the Bard’s works has more often than not failed to excite the imagination of schoolchildren. ‘They are the mental equivalent of a cold
shower; shocking, awful, but in some obscure way good for you, bracing you for the terrors of life and keeping your mind off bad thoughts about politics, society and the way the world changes. They are an ordeal after which you’re supposed to feel better, a kind of mental muesli that cleans out the system and purges the soul. And like muesli, they are boring, fruity and indigestible roughage.’

Learning to make sense of the world requires understanding that goes beyond your own experience. Reading great books and plays is one of the most time-honoured ways to draw on the wisdom of those who have gone before and captured their knowledge with elegance, wit and insight. There were lessons from Shakespeare’s great tragedies that could have usefully been recalled in Canberra in the winter of 2010 – but in a world of the here and now there is little room for such distilled wisdom from the past.

Yet the jargon of the day refers repeatedly to the narrative of politics: What is the story? How do the bits fit together? They have lost control of the narrative. It is ironic that journalists, who are in the business of reporting facts, should seek for clarity from the rhetorical mode of fiction. The quest for a narrative has rarely been on such shaky ground as it is in an age of immediacy, constant news updates and competing opinions. More than ever narrative is, as the former editor of the New York Times Joseph Lelyveld noted, ‘a hungry beast that can seldom be commanded: inherently unstable and on the lookout for for prey...always foraging’.

We make sense of complex events through storytelling, but the thread is easily lost when events are moving quickly and not all actions or motivations can be known. Journalism may provide the first draft of history, but it is increasingly ill-suited to making sense of the big story, of fitting the details together, of making sense of the full complexity. It is left to us to join up the bits and make sense of it all.

RELYING ON OUR own experience will often be inadequate. As I sought to make sense of the local political events of 2010, a series of novels – narratives – gave me the greatest insights.

Hilary Mantel’s depiction of the exercise of power in her Booker-winning Wolf Hall is a study overloaded with contemporary insights. Her book is set in the court of Henry VIII, but could effortlessly transpose to the present: the characters and challenges are universal. Mantel’s description of Thomas Cromwell watching the execution of Thomas More is apposite: ‘Like all the other witnesses he swirls his own cloak about him and kneels. At the sickening sound of the axe on flesh he darts one glance upwards. The corpse seems to have leapt back from the stroke and folded itself like a stack of old clothes – inside which he knows a pulse is still beating. The past moves heavily inside him, a shifting of the ground.’ More’s head has hardly hit the ground before Cromwell notes the King’s diary and realises he has a few days free – ‘Who says I never get a holiday?’
In *The Unnamed*, the young American writer Joshua Ferris tells the tale of a lawyer, Tim, beset by an illness that forces him to walk, endlessly. After several bouts Tim seeks to return to his firm, and makes a plea with striking familiarity to anyone who watched Prime Minister Rudd’s gut-wrenching final address, when he castigated himself for ‘blubbing’. Ferris describes a similar situation: ‘He had sat before the panel trying not to cry. Whatever you do, don’t cry, just keep talking. His desperation was like a pheromone secreting itself into a roomful of wolves. He appealed to them on the basis of over twenty years of impeccable service and the many millions he’d made the firm. You thankless sons of bitches! he wanted to scream. You ruthless bureaucrats! You’ll get sick one day too. This flinty need vied against total supplication. Oh please take me back! Grant me some measure of life again…I will be good, will do as I am told.’

As the election campaign unfolded two other books made sense of the daily tableau in a way that went beyond the headlines. Jessica Rudd’s amusing snapshot of the chaos and emotion of life on the campaign trail, in *Campaign Ruby*, went a long way to explaining the exhausting routines of seeking office – and how it was conceivable that a girl from another country could plausibly drop into a campaign and, in the madness of an ‘always on’ media cycle, even be asked to write policy that might become legislation.

And as the inflammatory discussion about population amplified the fears of many Australians, the reality of a closed society came to life for me in David Mitchell’s Booker-longlisted *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, a masterful novel that reaches deep into the reality of what happens when a society pulls up the drawbridge and declares itself closed.

The insights these books provide cannot be easily found in reporting, or in the reality TV of day-to-day politics. An act of imagination is required.

Finding time to absorb lessons in human psychology is hard in a busy life. Bookshops’ shelves are crowded with self-help and pop-psychology, so there is clearly a demand – but the insights are also there in the best biographies, and brimming out of the best novels.

It is a shame that by the choice of their favourite books, our political leaders seem to be saying that reading fiction is something done as a young person, or merely for amusement. Reading great fiction is an entertainment, but it is also a way of learning about the world, about people and, most importantly, about consequences.

I HOPE YOU enjoy this collection of short stories and memoirs, that they will give you pleasure, and the occasional insight into what it means to be alive in the emerging Asian century.

7 September 2010
Congratulations to the winners of the second annual GREW Prize, sponsored by the Copyright Agency Ltd and supported by Text Publishing and Varuna Writers’ House.

The fiction award this year goes to both **Jeremy Chambers** and **Anna Krien**. The winner of the non-fiction award is **Cameron Muir**. You can learn more about these writers and the GREW Prize at our website: www.griffithreview.com/GREW

The winners have been selected from those emerging writers published in Griffith REVIEW this year whose work has been deemed most original and influential.

The award includes a week’s residency at Varuna, manuscript appraisal and mentoring.
The magnificent Amberson
Nick Earls

The toilet was not what I had expected. Still less the porn.

The pedestal in the bathroom of our executive suite at the Roumei Beauty Hotel looked like something built for astronauts, or a movie prop, or a tangent that design had taken in the near future. It had a console with covered buttons and symbols that suggested heat and jets of water and perhaps vibration. It appeared to have a function that might keep it steady in an earthquake. Useful, up to a point – but the writing was all in Chinese.

There was a single deep-red rose petal in the pristine bowl. I got the camera and took a photograph of that.

Gillian was on the bed in our room, watching Jon Stewart on the widescreen TV on the opposite wall. She saw me pick up the camera and take it into the bathroom.

‘Do I want to see what you’re taking a photo of?’ she said. ‘It’s okay for some things to stay private.’

‘Twice around the bowl and pointy at both ends,’ I told her as I centred the petal in the shot. It looked like a daub of blood against the dazzling white of the bowl.

‘You know I don’t think that’s funny,’ she said. ‘You know only Tom thinks that’s funny, and that’s only because he’s nine.’

I set the camera on the green glass bench top next to the basin and shut the door. I sat down on the toilet and the seat fired up to greet me, supporting my thighs like a feverish hand. I had never been on a heated toilet seat before, and it felt as if someone else had crept into the room and my business was no longer my own.

There was a spa in front of me, and a small TV recessed into the wall beyond it. I could hear the fuzzy sounds of The Daily Show through the closed door, and Gillian laughing.

The TV remote sat on the edge of the spa. I pressed the power button. Channel four came on, just a small green number in the corner of the black screen at first, and then eye-popping girl-on-girl porn. The girl on the receiving end was moaning pretty hard. I fumbled the remote, and it clattered into the spa.
'Are you all right in there?' I had been heard above *The Daily Show*. The moaning, the clattering.

'Yeah.' I bent forward and reached for the remote, but it had slid all the way to the outlet. I could reach it when I got on my knees. 'But not the kind of all right I'd expected.' I hit the off button. 'I think I now know why we don't get channel four in the room.'

'Oh, really?' The studio audience laughed. Jon Stewart was monologuing, saying something wry about Obama and Biden and an order for hamburgers. 'So there's toilet porn?'

'Could be spa porn. But yeah, it does happen to be directly in front of the toilet.'

*The Daily Show's* channel five.

I left the TV off. There were about a hundred channels and I had missed by one. When we first got to the room, Gillian had flicked through them in her usual high-speed way. Half of them were home shopping, featuring trinkety chains and bracelets that may or may not have healing powers, and presenters with the fashion sense of Imelda Marcos. The other half were game shows in the style that I had thought was Japanese, with primary-colour sets, degrading contests and raucous punishing laughter. We had passed through a few movies too, and CNN, and the local version of *Idol*. I wondered if we had any chance of selling wine here, if it had been the right choice to come.

'We're keeping these pencils,' Gillian said when I walked out of the bathroom. She was holding two yellow plastic pencils in her hand. 'Have you seen them? We're definitely keeping them. Do you think if I take these two they'll give us more in the morning?'

We had arrived at twilight and Taipei had been covered in cloud. By the time we left the terminal building at the airport it was dark. I felt I hadn't seen Taipei yet. We were still in a holding pattern, eight floors above the city, circling with leftover plane motion, a giant hundred-channel TV, and free bottled water and yellow plastic pencils.

On the TV, Obama was indeed ordering a burger. It was a hundred days into his presidency, or close to it, and we were all in awe of him. Even his burger ordering seemed majestic, despite the crush of the media pack or perhaps because of it. It was a fast-food order made oratory. He was the first president my own age. He could order a burger, just like us.

'I like the Roumei,' Gillian said. 'I like it already.' She was sitting on the bed with three pillows behind her, her legs crossed at the ankles and a novel splayed open on the bedspread.

She threw a pencil my way. It had six leads in the chamber, fitted tip to tail, and a curly B for Beauty stamped on the outside, next to the reservations number and web address.
'I'M LOVING THIS,' she said at breakfast, analysing her life in the present tense, as usual. 'Who'd go for the western buffet? I mean, really.'

The Roumelis breakfast room was in the basement, with walls clad in strips of rough stone and several TVs set well above head height, all showing the same game of baseball. The western buffet had a toaster and some unconvincing bread that was bright white and fluffy and had a crust that seemed to glisten. There were tiny yoghurts, mini pastries and a bowl of green apples.

It was the rest of the serving area that had Gillian's attention. There was a bank of bains-marie with omelettes and fish and noodle dishes, and all conceivable trimmings: sliced lotus root, candied chilli, little twisty chewy sweet things, pickles. There were fritters, a pot of congee and steamer baskets full of buns. Gillian was loving all of it but the congee.

'Do you think it'll always be like this?' she said. 'Everywhere we go?'

'I don't know. I haven't been there yet.' We had a short tour of the island booked, following our meetings.

'Play the game,' she said. She had a piece of something in her chopsticks. It was battered and mysterious. 'Humour me.' She was a great anticipator of experiences, and I had forgotten how to be good about it.

'It'll be just like this. Maybe better. This is only the start. After this it gets regional.' I tried to remember our itinerary. I hadn't heard of any of the places on it before we booked. 'Buffet after buffet and always something different. Occasional pieces of animal we'll run scared from, but more amazing options than we could ever eat.'

'What do you think it'll be the best thing on the tour?'

'The quiet.'

'You're such a dick,' she said, pointing her battered thing at me in lieu of hand-talking.

'I meant sharing it. Sharing the quiet. With you. No cellar door buses, no jobs needing to be done, no negotiations with people we owe money to.'

She pretended to think about it. 'I suppose you think you've saved it.'

'To the extent that it needed saving.'

She laughed. She ate the battered thing. We had been together fifteen years, and the trip was a kind of celebration. We'd had the winery for five years, and it was creeping slowly towards profitability, in a low-key way. But we were making good wine, finally making wine of the kind that I had always wanted to put my name to. It was my dream, not hers, the winery.
She looked at her watch. ‘I wonder how they’re going?’

‘Tom will have tried fifteen ways to get out of school, all of which, I hope, will have failed. It’s your mother he’s pitching them to, so they’ll definitely have failed. Chloe will have shed hairclips in the car and will now be doing her best to violate the no-hat-no-play rule. It must be about lunchtime.’

We were the last guests at breakfast, and two time zones west of Stanthorpe. There was one remaining staff member near the entrance, waiting with the patience of a terracotta warrior for us to leave. He was standing with hands clasped, looking straight ahead at the western buffet and at nothing. ‘There’s half a day gone already back there, at home.’

‘You’re about to say that’s half a day’s worth of emails you haven’t read yet.’

‘I should probably take a look.’ Half a day’s worth of emails – I had been going to put it exactly that way. ‘At least the phone hasn’t been ringing.’

‘Maybe they’re coping without you.’

‘Maybe the international roaming’s not working.’

A batter slugged the ball into right field and made it to second base. The coverage cut to a crowd shot, people cheering, but the TVs were all muted. In the kitchen, behind swinging doors, something clanged into a metal sink. Gillian finished her orange juice.

They were coping without me. It was a Thursday in May, a weekday between seasons and after vintage. There were not many tours booked and most tours were no good for us anyway. Too many of the under-stimulated elderly with palates like shoe leather and a preference for sweet artless wine I didn’t want to make. Just about every winery I knew was kept afloat by a cheap line of reds and whites called Serenade or Fiesta or Passionata, sold by the single bottle to people who didn’t like wine but who wanted a day out in a bus and a change of scenery.

‘Put the brakes on the fermentation and look away when you throw the sugar in,’ our winemaker, Terry, said to me when we consigned an early vat of merlot to the day-trippers. It had been our first vintage and I was marking it hard before it even had a chance. The shiraz would be okay, the merlot would not and the rest were in between. ‘Tell them it’s perfect for summer barbecues. Tell them they can even chill it.’

We shifted it all, at fifteen dollars a bottle. Twelve if you bought a dozen. No one bought a dozen, not that I ever saw. I wanted to call it Sucrosia but Gillian wouldn’t let me. We called it Arpeggio. I looked away for that, too.

There were still omelette remnants on Gillian’s plate, and a few uncoiled noodles, but she put her chopsticks down.
‘Well, Mr Indispensable,’ she said, ‘what are you waiting for? Go and check your email and save the planet, and I’ll talk to the front desk about how to get to the Trade office.’

She was already standing, folding her napkin and setting it on the table. She led the way out, xie-xieing the waiting staff member and giving him something between a nod and a small bow.

‘I loved that breakfast,’ she said on the stairs. ‘I think the lotus root was my favourite new thing.’

GILLIAN HAD A taxi waiting by the time I had finished in the business centre, with the fare already negotiated for her by the concierge.

‘We’re going to Taipei One-O-One,’ she said as she climbed across the back seat. ‘That’s the one like a stack of takeaway containers, the tall one. Remember the pictures? The office isn’t far from there.’

The taxi turned left out of the laneway into traffic, and left again at the first set of lights. The driver had the air conditioning turned up but heat still forced its way in.

‘Why would they make it that shape?’ Gillian said. She was holding a city map with a picture of Taipei 101 on the front. ‘Is it just design?’

I took a close look, as much as the photo would allow. ‘I think they might have used something called re-entering corners. It’s a wind thing. They’re saw-toothed. It makes it sway less.’

‘I’m not sure I’d like it swaying at all.’ She took the map back and looked at the picture again. I could tell that she was imagining it bending like a stalk in the wind.

‘Anything that big has to sway,’ I told her. ‘It’s better than the alternative.’

We pulled up at a red light and scooters slid by us, one after the other, and into a box marked for them on the road ahead of the cars. There were single riders dressed for business, one woman with her two children gripping onto her, another in an old coat with a bundle of clothes strapped down behind her. One passenger wore a pink helmet and carried a microwave in a box. The scooter zone filled up and when the lights changed they were off like greyhounds, the microwave box and pink helmet ducking and weaving in and out of traffic ahead of us.

‘No crises in Stanthorpe?’ Gillian said, half question, half statement. ‘How were the emails?’

‘Nothing too dramatic. One from Ewen at Symphony Hill reminding me we’ve got to get back to him about bottling.’

‘Are you still thinking we should do a reserve shiraz this time?’
'I'd like to. We'll see how it travels. You liked it, didn't you?'

'It's good. It'll be the best.' She opened the map up and tried to work out where we were. 'So, the premium claret bottle, then? In French green? I think we should.'

The premium bottle had thirty extra grams of glass. Thirty-three. It would be our best, this year's shiraz. Wine new in the barrel was nothing like the finished product, but that was where the art came in, and the part of it that was down to magic. And the waiting.

'There it is,' Gillian said. She was pointing ahead and to the left. 'That must be it.'

It was a ghost still, Taipei 101, an outline stencilled on the haze made by heat and traffic, a tower of square-based stacking cups. I wondered at the planning that had gone in to put it there, to lift it confidently and make it a place where thousands of people would spend their days. Taipei was built on a plain and close to the sea. I wondered how deep they had to go to find bedrock.

We would buy the premium claret bottle, I thought. It would cost forty cents more. There were pros and cons. A reserve wine would need a new label.

I had not got into this to worry about forty cents, and here I was doing it. Forty cents times a hundred dozen wasn't even five hundred dollars. Forty cents was two local phone calls, small change.

Gillian had the exact money ready when the taxi turned into a quieter street and stopped across the road from Taipei 101.

'Thank you,' the driver said, taking care with each sound. He folded the banknotes without looking closely at them, and pointed across and up to the building. 'One zero one. Good. Very good. Hugo Boss.'

Gillian took photos of the building from the footpath, contorting herself to get as much of it as possible into the frame.

'Do you want to go up there?' I said. There was an observation deck near the top.

'Isn't it the world's tallest building on a fault line?' That meant no. 'I thought we'd just look around. I want to see what this place is like. What Taipei is like.'

We were outside a department store and, through the tinted glass, I could see teddy bears and electronic games and princess costumes. There was a Starbucks on the next corner, and beside it a place called Ireland's Potato. It looked like a chain. Its logo was a potato with a jagged mouth and eyes, like a Halloween pumpkin, and chunky chips bursting from its scalp. The slogan beneath read, 'Ireland’s proverb says: There are two things in the world that can’t be joked. 1. Marriage. 2. Potato.' Gillian was already lining up the photo. Behind the brushed-steel counter a guy in an apron watched us, not hoping for much.
We crossed the road to Taipei 101. The cabbie was right about Hugo Boss. There seemed to be several levels given over to high-end retailers – Armani, Dior and Louis Vuitton – though not many people in them or even wandering by. Lean shop assistants in sharp dark suits played with their pens and looked blankly at us, waiting for a first move.

We took the escalator down to the food court where the lunch rush was underway at noodle and dumpling shops and a place called Sergeant Chicken Rice.

‘I’m holding out for Captain Chicken Rice,’ I told Gillian as she took the photo. ‘Maybe even Colonel Chicken Rice. Or General Noodles.’

‘Tom should be here,’ she said. ‘He’d appreciate that material.’ She and the camera had already moved on to a Subway-style outlet. She was zeroing in on a bread roll filled with sliced fruit, and a sign that read ‘Fruit’.

Tom would have appreciated it by adding Brigadier Laksa, Corporal Wonton and plenty more, until Chloe started dragging on my arm and begging me to make him stop.

‘I think there’s a wine place here,’ Gillian said. She was looking around for it, but it wasn’t appearing. ‘I wonder if there’s a map. A floor plan.’

‘Do you think that’d help you?’

‘You’d be navigating. I’d just be telling you where to go,’ she said. ‘It’d be like life.’ She laughed, and the camera buzzed and turned itself off.

The wine place was next to a supermarket. It had premium French reds and champagnes on the shelves at the front, with other wines behind from Australia, the US and Chile.

‘They’re mostly the big companies, but not all,’ Gillian said as she went through the Australian reds. ‘Funny prices. What’s the tax?’

I had seen it written somewhere, and played around with some numbers before we confirmed the trip. ‘Fifteen per cent import and sales, plus a tax per litre for each percentage point of alcohol. I think the alcohol tax would come to about three dollars a bottle. Our dollars.’

‘I could see us in here,’ she said. She was holding a bottle of Wirra Wirra Scrubby Rise. ‘Hey, we should make a move. I think there’s a walkway on level two that should take us just about right there.’

I retraced our steps to the escalator and we did a lap and a half of the second floor before Gillian noticed the sign pointing us in the direction of the World Trade Center. The walkway took us over the road and brought us down between an exhibition centre and the Hyatt Hotel.
They preferred reds over whites in Taiwan – strongly preferred. I knew that from the report I had been sent. They preferred warm climate over cooler, French oak over American over no oak at all. We had sent three reds, a rosé and two whites, with tasting notes in English and Chinese. They were our better wines: I thought we should go with our strengths, and demonstrate some kind of range. I was trying to remember the taste of our shiraz. It had left my head for a moment. The taste and the words for it. I could feel the muscles in my forehead tightening, and the back of my neck.

‘Optimism,’ Gillian said. ‘We make good wine.’

‘Yeah.’

We stepped out from between the buildings and into the light.

‘It’s somewhere here,’ she said, handing me the map. ‘The World Trade Center office building.’

THE TASTING STARTED well enough. It wasn’t the same as the cellar door or a trestle table set up among the barrels, but Booth Hseung had done what he could with the Trade Queensland conference room. He had set out more bottles than we would need, and kept straightening them up in rows on the pale laminated table. He had on a crisp white shirt that looked too large and a patterned tie with a gold thread through it, and his hair fell in a floppy fringe that he kept brushing aside.

‘I am looking forward to tasting your wine,’ he said, sounding very serious. ‘I particularly like red wine. I hope we will do well for Feldspar Wines.’ He was Taiwanese but he had studied in Brisbane, at QUT.

We had nine acceptances, a mixture of wine journalists and buyers for retailers and restaurants. They arrived early, all of them. I could see them in reception through the vertical blinds, sitting or pacing around with plastic cups of water. They were talking, laughing. It was clear that they knew each other.

Booth brought them in exactly on time and introduced them to us one by one. They shook my hand and then Gillian’s, and gave us each business cards that had English on one side and Chinese on the other.

‘We like Australian wine,’ one of them said. ‘Moss Wood. Very good.’

Booth spoke to them in Mandarin and gave them the folders we had sent, showing them that the tasting notes were in both languages. We had checked the PowerPoint presentation before they arrived, and I took them through the images of the winery at work: the vines at bud burst, the cellar door, the barrel room with Terry tapping an early red for the two of us to taste.

‘So perhaps we should taste,’ I said, with that image still on screen.
Gillian opened a verdelho and poured tasting serves. I took my glass and tried to clear my head while I swirled the wine. I held the glass to my nose and breathed in.

‘You’ll pick up tropical fruits on the nose,’ I said, and Booth translated, pointing to his nose. ‘Then you might notice the palate has passionfruit and lychees and a fresh, citrusy finish.’

I tasted it, and the flavours were all still there. It still amazed me that a grape could hit so many marks, that taste was such a complex thing, subtle and precise. Booth translated and the tasters nodded methodically, as if to confirm that they were paying attention. They tested the wine, nodded some more. The only woman in the group pursed her lips.

I moved on to the chardonnay and its new French oak, then to the rosé. They were tasting with the enthusiasm of tax auditors reconciling ledger entries, tasting and nodding and clearing their throats, and waiting politely for whatever I would dose them with next. One of them took out a pen and made notes in his folder after the rosé. Gillian was pouring and smiling and saying ‘hen hao’ a lot: very good, very good.

‘They are finding it very interesting, Craig,’ Booth said to me after the rosé. ‘Very interested, I think.’ He had put a lot of work into this.

‘Tempranillo,’ Gillian said, and started pouring.

They held their glasses up to the light. I willed them to see deep inky redness, and to say something.

‘You’ll notice black cherries and savoury spices on the nose.’ I tested my glass. ‘Then, when you taste it, you might notice new leather and black cherries again, and a savoury gaminess.’

Booth was sniffing his glass. He stopped and looked my way. ‘Gaminess?’

‘Gaminess. Like deer. Venison. Deer meat…don’t translate that bit.’

‘So, leather and black cherries?’ he said. ‘But not like meat.’

‘Not like meat. And savoury for the nose. If there’s a way.’

I wondered what was in the written notes. The English version – my version – mentioned game or gaminess. The translator hadn’t asked me a thing.

However Booth put it, they tasted it in the implacable way I was getting used to. Gillian picked up the next bottle. We were four wines down, two-thirds of the way through.

‘The nose of the merlot is like fruit steeped in port,’ I told them. ‘Mulberries and currants. Steeped in port.’

‘Craig,’ Booth said, ‘steep is like soak? Or is it like steep?’ He indicated an incline with his hand, knowing it didn’t make sense.
The winemaker, who dressed the Shiraz, ... 'It was like a grape,' he said ...

... and toasted the man with a glass of wine. He nodded again. One of the tasters spoke to the man next to him and they both took another sip. 'Soak it good,' I told him. 'Soak for a long time. And the palate shows cherries and fruitcake, with a slightness to the tannins at the finish.'

I wanted to look away when they all tasted, at the dirty photo of Daintree rainforest on the wall or through the vertical blinds to the empty foyer. Heads nodded again. One of the tasters spoke to the man next to him and they both took another sip. And how the Shiraz, Gillian stepped in before anyone could say grape. The Shiraz... I was trying to remember it, to get back on track. The Shiraz has berries on the nose and a pepperiness. On the palate you might notice dark chocolate, vanilla and firm tannins from new French oak. This time there was more talk in Mandarin, nodding that seemed almost real and about more than manners. I had irrational fear that someone was going to mention grapes...

'Good,' he said once he had thought about it. 'Good Merlot. Taste like fruit.' 'Very,' the man said again, still smiling. 'I picked up a medal in Melbourne and won a gold at the national small winemakers. I said I wanted to get in first.'
The last two stood by the conference table, holding up bottles of shiraz and tempranillo, talking to each other as if they had discovered something of real interest. One had his thumb in the punt at the bottom of the shiraz bottle. He was doing most of the talking.

I asked Booth to explain and he said, ‘They think it’s good. Very good. Very happy with it.’

‘With the wine?’

‘Possibly,’ he said. The man was tipping the shiraz bottle up and down, making a point. ‘Possibly also the wine. Definitely the bottle, with the dent in the bottom. It’s very deep. Deep is good. You made a good choice, going deep with that dent. Very good in Taiwan.’

‘OH GOD, GRAPES,’ Gillian said as soon as the lift doors closed and it was just the two of us. She gave a horrified kind of laugh. ‘I have no idea what they thought of it. No idea.’

‘Suddenly it all felt so metaphorical. Everything I said. I think they thought I was psychotic.’ I couldn’t see a sale coming out of it. ‘Booth worked for months to make that happen, to get those people there. And I think this trip may end up being all about those little plastic pencils, and stuffing ourselves at any buffet we come across.’

The lift fell. I turned my phone on. We had done a quick post-mortem with Booth, who had been resolutely noncommittal about our prospects. I was trying to shake a feeling that I had let him down.

‘The dent in the bottom,’ Gillian said. ‘Oh my god.’

‘Our best feature. The dent in the bottom.’ I stared at my phone, as if messages might come through in the dead air of the lift shaft and give me something important to do.

The lift stopped and the doors opened. We passed through security and outside. The guards were not too interested in people leaving. My phone made a series of noises. I had missed three calls, and there were two voicemail messages. A squadron of scooters waited for the lights to change on Keelung Road, revving their engines. On the other side of the road, diners eating bowls of noodles sat on red plastic chairs right next to the traffic. I could see the start of an alleyway, laundry hung on balconies at all levels in the grimy air. Ten floors up there was a large pink Hello Kitty towel.

We crossed the paved area back to the quieter space between the Hyatt and the exhibition building. Gillian was telling me how well I’d done, sticking to the script. The script had been the worst of it, though. It had never seemed so elaborate. I had felt like Byron lecturing a bunch of dirty-realist novelists.
I played the messages back. I hadn’t recognised the first number.

There was a lot of throat clearing and then an older man’s voice said, ‘Yeah, g’day. Ron Gittins here. I’ve just dropped over to your place for a look around. I don’t think the earthworks for the house pads’ll be a problem where you’ve pegged them out. I’m guessing you’re thinking gravel for the driveway, but we can also do Ferricrete or road base, so just let me know which. And are you looking for a standard septic or an ATU? Just let me know and I can get the quote together.’

The other message was from home. I could hear Gillian’s mother in the background doing some coaching and then Chloe said, ‘Dad, I need you to help me with my maths homework. So call me.’ There was more noise in the background and then her breath against the mouthpiece again. ‘Please.’ Please was always a lesson, year after year.

‘Let’s get into a cab first,’ Gillian said when I told her there were homework issues. She was leading us into the Hyatt through a side door.

‘It’s just about dinner time for the kids.’

‘I have a plan,’ she said.

We walked through reception, across a polished stone floor and past a white marble fountain. Two men wearing burgundy jackets moved quickly to help us, each taking a door handle in both hands and leaning back to draw the huge doors open. They had gold trim on their epaulettes, and gold buttons.

One of them stepped outside with us and said, ‘Sir, madam, you need taxi?’

‘Yes, please,’ Gillian said. She took the Roumei card from her purse and showed it to him. ‘We’re meeting friends here.’

There was a cab further down the driveway and he waved it over.

‘How much?’ Gillian said. ‘Two hundred?’

He looked at the card again, at the small map on the back. ‘Yes. Two hundred.’ The cab pulled up and he took the card and showed it to the driver. There was pointing, discussion. He came back with the card. ‘Two hundred.’

The driver was already out of the cab and opening the door for us. The back seat was covered in some kind of leather-look material, black with a just-buffed sheen.

‘So now you can call,’ Gillian said once we were inside.

Chloe answered. ‘That was ages,’ she said. ‘Ages since I called. Nanny’s making bolognaiise for dinner.’

‘Well, I’m sure it’ll be great.’

There was a pause. She hadn’t trusted bolognaiise since the day she found a rogue bay leaf in it.
'Harry Leggatt is really annoying. He flicks things at me.'

'Things that could hurt you or just annoying things?'

'Annoying,'

The signal dropped out momentarily. I got a sense of how far away from me she was. 'Is it a problem? Do you want it to stop? Is it a big enough deal to talk to a teacher about?'

She thought about it. I could hear her breathing. In the background Gillian’s mother was talking to someone else, probably Tom. 'It’s just flicking, You took ages to call me back.'

We pulled up at a red light, next to a building site. Jackhammers were smashing rock on the other side of a safety fence. I tried to block my left ear and pressed the right closer to the phone.

'We were in a meeting,' I told her. 'In Taipei.' There was a poster on the safety fence, a cartoon of a happy construction worker doffing his yellow hardhat. Beneath him there were four lines of Chinese script and then, in English, 'pardon for inconvenience'. 'Remember how we looked at the globe?'

'Yeah.' She was not really one for globes. She was better in the moment, when things weren’t so abstract. Taipei might as well have been five minutes down the road, or the second on the left after Mars. It was out of sight. Ebony is half her mother’s age. How old is Ebony’s mother if Ebony is twenty-seven?

I was about to ask who Ebony was when I realised we had segued into the first maths problem. I took her through the process, as always asking questions so that she would come up with the answer. There was a clunk as she moved the phone to her left hand so that she could write the numbers down.

The second problem required her to add the legs of nine flies and twelve spiders. She was suspicious when the answer came to an even one-fifty.

'Sometimes that’s just how it is,' I told her. 'You get a number that feels as if you’ve rounded it up or down, but it happens to be the exact number. I’m pretty sure you’re spot-on.'

In the final problem, Jade and Ben were pooling their money to buy ice-creams. Gillian pointed to her watch. The problems were costing us several dollars each, maybe more. Chloe had put the phone down and I could hear the pencil scraping. She was at the division stage of the problem. There was a rustling noise as she picked the phone up again.

'Six ice-creams,' she said. 'And two dollars change.'

'That’s great.' I was nodding to Gillian, letting her know we were finished. 'Good work. Do you want to talk to Mum?
'Who gets the change, though?' Chloe said. 'I think it should go to Jade, because she had more money to start with.'

'Okay.' She had moved on from the maths problem to an ethics problem of her own making. 'Do you want to talk to Mum quickly?'

'No,' she said. 'I want to talk to her slowly. I want to talk to her at bedtime. Not now.'

We had turned off the main road into an alley. There was a market at the next corner and we drove right through it. The ducks hanging on hooks were almost close enough to touch.

'We’ve got another meeting then.'

'A meeting at bedtime?'

'I’ll call her after dinner,' Gillian said. 'Tell her I’ll talk to them both after they've had dinner. That can’t be far away.'

She had two hundred dollars in her hand. A cyclist swerved to avoid us. I could see the Roumei ahead.

GILLIAN DECIDED WE should do laundry, even though there was very little to do. She said we couldn’t know when we would next get the chance. I offered to sit with it while she went to the gym. There were new armchairs in the laundry room, and a TV. Someone had tried to make the room welcoming by putting a mounted picture of a pagoda on the wall and a bud vase with a sprig of small red flowers on the coffee table. Gillian was right: there was a lot to like about the Roumei. Most hotels I had seen picked a useless room for laundry and thought that whitewashing the exposed pipes was all the decorating required.

It was too late in the day to call the earthmoving guy. I had worked out that the other missed call was the council, probably to do with planning permission. That could wait until tomorrow, too.

I went through the Austrade notes about selling wine in Taiwan and wondered if we had been right to come. We were fighting for the hardest segment of the market. On paper, we had got a lot right but not everything, and sometimes you needed everything right to sell one bottle.

I took another look through the business case for our diversification. It would mean borrowing a lot, but it made sense. We had the land for six guest cottages. We could bring in old cottages, small two-bedroom places, for around fifty thousand dollars each, delivered and stumped but unrenovated. Then there was the road and the water, and we would need a new generator.
At the same time we would upgrade our winemaking capacity. We would put in a bottling machine – there was room for it – rather than outsourcing that to Symphony Hill. The Stelvin-capping business was growing and there would soon be plenty of room for another operator. So, in any lean years when we were hit by bushfires or a December frost, people who weren’t would still need bottling and we would have an income stream. It definitely made sense. The best-case scenario made a lot of sense, anyway – the others, less so.

Gillian came down the stairs with a towel over her shoulders and a free bottle of water in each hand.

‘How’s it all going?’ she said, looking at the machine. It was up to the rinse.

‘It seems to be doing what it should.’

She noticed the plans open in front of me and the new notes I had made with one of that day’s free plastic pencils. ‘You’re not looking through those numbers again, are you?’

‘Just thinking it all through.’ I had run some new maths on a less-than-best-case bottling scenario and patchy cottage occupancy. It was better than a guess, but not a lot better. I could find numbers that would make us Warren Buffett if I wanted to, and numbers than would see us bankrupt and on the run, or at least put me back in a coalmine in a hardhat and fluoro jacket.

‘When did you learn to be so cautious?’

‘It’s a big roll of the dice.’ I went to put the cap on the pencil, but it fell in my lap. ‘I was seven and I put money on the Melbourne Cup. That was my introduction to risk. Fifty cents. My father was clear about the pros and cons. But I expected to win, or that he would void the bet if I didn’t. I didn’t and he didn’t. That was the lesson. I don’t remember the horse. I don’t remember what won. All I remember is what the fifty-cent piece looked like the last time it was in my hand.’

‘And if you’d kept it in the bank it’d be a whole dollar by now.’

‘It’d be over four dollars.’ The numbers weren’t hard. ‘At an average interest rate of six per cent, compounding for thirty-seven years. It would probably have stayed just ahead of the price of a cup of coffee all that time.’

‘I don’t know how you do that,’ she said. ‘Are you making that up, that four dollars?’

‘Compound interest. Divide seventy-two by the rate and that’s how long it takes to double.’ It was a well-worn approximation, and not mine.

She tuck a bottle under one arm and wiped her face with the towel. ‘Your mouth’s moving but I just hear blah blah blah. But good for you. Booth’ll be here in forty minutes, so don’t get too deep into the maths. Come up as soon as it’s spun. The laundry.’
'That's the plan.'

As she left, the washing machine clunked and the spin cycle started.

A FEW MONTHS before the trip we’d had a visit from Damian Masci. In the early nineties, if you wanted to get ahead in mining you did an MBA, and the company I was working for offered to pay. I met Damian on the residential part of the course and we did some group work together. I wouldn’t say we were friends, but when he contacted me and said he was passing through Stanthorpe, it would have seemed wrong not to suggest he stay a night. All the same, I was surprised when he accepted.

He was newly divorced, it turned out, and had set off on a road trip that wasn’t amounting to much. Perhaps the pleasure of his own company had worn thinner than he’d expected, or those random late night conversations with strangers in bars hadn’t offered him the insights that they do in movies. Insights, or whatever else he had gone looking for. He emailed from Rockhampton through the winery website when he was on his way south.

He put on a load of laundry as soon as he arrived – scooped it up from the back seat of his car and carried it in with him. A big musty load of bachelor laundry, everything in the machine at once. He wanted to look around, so the two of us walked the perimeter of the property, past the rows of vines with their ripening grapes and up among the granite boulders on the ridge. Most of our land was bush.

That night, when Damian talked about the hole he was in – his wife had left him for a woman, his hedge fund had tanked – I suggested tasting a couple of our wines. I thought it would give him one good memory from his hopeless road trip, but he took it as an excuse to drink as much as he could.

He talked about the two weekends we spent together in the nineties, and I was sure we hadn’t had the good time he remembered. He smelled of armpit.

He mentioned an exercise we’d worked on and said, ‘I’m surprised you’re not employing more of that here. This place is full of potential.’ He looked around the barrel room. The exercise had been about re-purposing underperforming assets. ‘But I guess you can’t touch the bush, which is a shame. You can’t clear virgin bush, can you? That’s a law now.’

I told him it wasn’t all virgin bush. Up on the hill nothing had been touched, but most of the flatter ground had been cleared by soldier settlers in the 1920s. I even had a photo of it, a gaunt man in a wide hat at the gate of his failing dairy farm. For me it was a story of how well the bush came back, and that it could hide a farm quicker than you’d ever expect, but that wasn’t how he took it.
The next morning, before he left, he twice called the work that Gillian and I had done on the place ‘a good start’. It stayed with me, and I found myself pacing out an area that had been a paddock on the old farm. Many of the plants that had taken it over were weeds, I realised. The plan for the cottages came from there. I took a closer look at how the winery was working, too.

I SAT BACK in the armchair. The spin cycle was nearly done. I capped the pencil and closed my folder and watched our few items of laundry churning around, plastered to the steel drum of the machine.

One of the hotel staff came in. She was wearing a two-tone grey uniform and looked like she was in her fifties. I thought I might have seen her on our floor earlier in the day, pushing a trolley and restocking rooms. She smiled and ni-haoed me, and I ni-haoed back.

‘Laundry,’ I said uselessly, and pointed to the washing machine.

She looked at the TV mounted on the wall immediately above it and said, ‘It’s okay. You watch.’ She picked the remote up from the coffee table and turned on the TV, smiling, nodding. On came channel four, hardcore girl-on-girl porn, this time with toys. She made a squawking noise and pressed frantically at the remote, turning the volume up.

I had put in some effort to remember two Chinese expressions, one meaning ‘very good’ and one meaning ‘don’t want’. ‘Hen hao,’ I said, with what I hoped was a disarming smile. ‘Hen hao, xie xie.’

She squawked again, this time at me. She turned and hurried to the stairs, hands on her ears, one of them wedging the remote against her head as she fled.

Bu yao. That was ‘don’t want’. That was what I meant to say. Hen hao meant ‘very good’.

In the taxi, Booth managed to find new ways to keep his comments hovering somewhere between cautiously positive and positively cautious.

‘This gentleman, Dr Amberson Tsou, was unable to be at presentation, but is very interested.’ He was sitting in the front passenger seat and had twisted himself around so that he could brief us. ‘He studied in Queensland. UQ. Dentistry. He is in business now. Many businesses. He has a plan. It will be good to meet. A new opportunity.’ His written English was flawless, but when he spoke he sometimes edited himself to sound like a fortune cookie.

Booth had brought our wine and Gillian and I sat with the box between us. The whites were warming up and at the same time chilling the reds. It was close to sunset and still hot outside. I tried to remember any dentistry students from my time at UQ.
'Do you know what kind of opportunity?' I was a mining engineer crossing Taipei to serve wine to a dentist.

'He want to explain to you himself. He needs wine for it and want Queensland wine. He is on our mailing list for all things Queensland. He has seen Outback Spectacular at Gold Coast five times.'

Gillian looked out the window, willing herself not to laugh.

'Taiwan people love that show,' Booth said. 'I have not seen. We will do fresh campaign here when they give away one-millionth hat and serve one-millionth steak.'

The taxi pulled in to a driveway outside a new office building that looked about ten storeys high. I stepped out into the steamy twilight and lifted the box of wine from the back seat.

'Here, let me take it,' Booth said, reaching for the box.

'I'll be okay,' I told him. 'Thanks anyway.' It was only six bottles.

He hesitated, then led us in to the building.

'Dr Amberson Tsou, he has nice office,' he said as we took the lift to the top floor. 'I have been here once before. I think you will like him.'

The lift doors opened to a reception area. The front of the desk that faced us was a slab of polished green and white marble which had three Chinese characters on it in a vivid red. On the wall behind there was a wide dot painting, a series of circles with tracks connecting them, that could only have come from Central Australia. There was no one around.

'Is that Taroko Gorge marble?' Gillian said. 'We're going there on our tour.'

'You know Taroko Gorge?' Booth said. 'I think it is. Probably is.'

He stepped up to the desk and rang the bell.

There was a noise in a nearby room, the thud of a box landing on a shelf, and a woman came out of a doorway. She was wearing a short grey skirt and stockings, her hair held in place by an Alice band.

She talked to Booth in Mandarin, then turned to Gillian and me. 'Welcome. I will check. Mr Tsou.' She went to the desk and picked up the phone. There was a long corridor on either side of us and still no one else in sight. She spoke briefly to the person on the other end and put the phone down. 'Please. Come with me,' she said.

She led us down the corridor, past compact offices and work-stations where people with headsets seemed to be taking calls. She knocked on the door at the far end and opened it.
Amberson Tsou was standing looking out at the view, and he turned as she led us in. Behind him I could see the street we had come down carrying six lanes of traffic in a straight line to and from the heart of the city, now lit up for evening. The distant mountains were becoming indistinct in the growing darkness. Taipei 101 hung in the sky like a pendant.

‘I will take the box now,’ Booth said as Amberson Tsou came to shake our hands.

‘I am very glad to see you,’ he said. Amberson Tsou was about my age, but taller and broader than me. His suit was tailored. His handshake was sure and firm, but his hand was soft – a dentist’s hand. I wondered when it had last been that. ‘I’m very glad you could take the trouble to come here, when I couldn’t make your tasting earlier. Iris will make us tea. A special oolong tea from the mountains. The best. I hope you like oolong tea.’

‘You have great tea here,’ Gillian said. ‘I’m very keen to try it.’

‘Good. Good. I hope you will like it.’ He nodded at Iris and said a few words in Mandarin. ‘Please, sit,’ he said to us as she left. He indicated a group of armchairs arranged in a horseshoe around a low table. ‘I will tell you my plan.’

Booth put the box of wine down on the table as Amberson talked. ‘I was a dentist for some years. I studied at UQ so, like you, I am a Queenslander. We have State of Origin Rugby League on cable. Each year I watch. For years I was a dentist, then I owned dental practices. Eventually quite a few of them. Then orthodontics, cosmetic, here and in Kaohsiung, Taitung, all over. Then we branched out into dental supply. More recently, I think: what is my dream?’

He paused. His elbows were on the arms of his seat and he put his hands together, palms flat against each other, fingers spread apart. ‘My dream is not to make more money out of teeth. Here is my dream. You know Birdsville Races?’

He looked at me and then at Gillian.

‘Yes.’ I had never been, but I was well aware of the event. Every year the Birdsville Races made it to TV for the same three-minute news story, thousands of people cramming into a desert outpost to drink their body weight in beer. ‘I’ve seen it on TV, anyway.’

‘Oh, you should go,’ he said. ‘You should go.’ He turned to Booth. ‘Birdsville Races. One hundred people live in Birdsville, then thousands come for the races. It’s all on dirt, sandy dirt, no grass, the races. They have a boxing tent, whip-cracking. We went at uni two times. Slept in the Diamantina River, in sleeping bags on dry riverbed looking up at the stars. Party every night. One night, on the way back from the party, one of my friends, he said, “This is a fair dinkum crazy town.”’

Amberson Tsou reached into his jacket and took out a remote. He pressed a button and a screen slid noiselessly down from the ceiling. He hit another button and the room lights dimmed.
'So, this is my dream,' he said.

He brought a picture up. It was an artist’s impression of a bar fitted out with corrugated iron and found wood. The bartender was ethnically ambiguous and wore a battered hat with a broad brim. The sign above the bar was designed to look crudely hand-painted and read ‘Crazy Town’.

‘You see?’ he said. ‘All four of us know Queensland and might understand Fair Dinkum Crazy Town, but we had focus groups and it did not test well. I knew that already. But Crazy Town? That tested well. Just enough English. Like 7-Eleven.’

‘Like Ireland’s Potato.’ I couldn’t help adding it.

‘Like Ireland’s Potato,’ he said emphatically, pointing the remote at me.

Our wine box was in front of my knees. I didn’t want to think about him hating our wine, or turning off all his Crazy Town talk the moment he took a sip.

‘Like Ireland’s Potato,’ he said again. ‘You franchise potato, you think of Ireland. You set up a bar, a chain of bars, who do you think of? You think of Australia. If you are Queenslander, probably think of Birdsville. That fair dinkum crazy town.’

For a moment the nostalgia stopped him, then he looked back down to the remote and moved his thumb over the button he needed. He showed us images of the Birdsville Races that he thought he might use for menus and coasters, and design elements he wanted to feature on the walls: coiled stock whips, old windmill blades, dried-out animal skulls with preposterous horns.

‘So you can see where I’m coming from,’ he said. The presentation finished with the Crazy Town sign. ‘You can see the vision. And beer is easy, but I must have more than beer. Here is another thing I got from focus group. Women don’t drink so much wine in Taiwan. Some okay with wine, many not. But men? Here is what I learn. Men – the men who would fit with Crazy Town – want to impress women by knowing wine. By drinking red wine and knowing it. Big red wine. Manly wine. No merlot. I want to try your shiraz.’

He stood up and walked over to a cabinet that ran along the wall behind us. He pressed lightly on a wood panel and a door swung open. There were bottles of spirits inside, and crystal glasses. He brought one back to the table.

Gillian reached into the box and found the shiraz. She took the cap off and gave me the bottle. Amberson held his glass out. It looked small in his hand and he held it by the stem, like a flower. It was sherry glass, probably, and I half-filled it. I started to wish he hadn’t pitched Crazy Town to us yet and reserved us two seats on the ride to his dream, pending this moment. I didn’t want him to compliment me on the bottom of the bottle. I didn’t want to be in a cab in five minutes, heading back to the Roumei with Booth telling us Amberson had found the shiraz interesting.

I started to describe it and Amberson held up his hand and said, ‘It’s okay.’
He lifted his glass up to look at it, in what little light we had. He swirled the wine around and sniffed.

‘We should maybe have let it breathe for a while,’ I said.

‘It’s okay.’

He tasted it – worked it around in his mouth, and swallowed. He took another sip. I could hear him breathing in and out through his nose. He swallowed again.

‘I smell berries and a hint of pepper. Then I taste chocolate, dark chocolate, and vanilla.’ He paused. It was exactly how I would have described it to him. But there was more. ‘And I taste that you use new French oak.’ He nodded to himself, as if reflecting on the oak, its newness. He held the glass up for another look. And then he laughed. ‘I read your website. I read tasting notes. I read all those things. So I know exactly. It is good wine, though. Good Queensland wine.’

The office door opened and the harsh fluoro light of the corridor came in. It was Iris, with a pot of tea and cups on a tray.

‘I like the look of Feldspar Wines,’ Amberson said as she set the tray down on the table. ‘I like the way you use timber. I would want to include that. A photograph.’

Our cellar door had a veranda with timber posts and a tin roof, and upturned barrels as tables. Bougainvillea was in the early stages of growing across some lattice. There were photos on the website.

‘It would be best to have a picture of the two of you outside it, wearing hats like cowboys. Australian cowboys. Birdsville people. Akubra.’

He put a hand on the outside of the teapot and said something to Iris. She smiled and stepped away. He lifted the pot and started to pour.

‘That’d be good,’ Gillian said. ‘A photo like that. I can’t get Craig to wear his hat anywhere near enough. He doesn’t like what it does to his hair. It’s a terrible example to the children.’

THE TEA SMELLED of flowers I couldn’t name, though Amberson said some people singled out jasmine. It tasted fresh and sweet, though there was no sugar in it. He told us there was fog where it grew, every day, so it was always taking moisture from the air. Gillian wrote the name down in case she saw any in shops when we toured the island.

The tea was only the start of our evening. Amberson had plans for us.

‘You will like Shih Lin, I think,’ he said. He was sitting in the front passenger seat of his black Mercedes. The driver was wearing leather gloves. Booth, Gillian and I fitted easily across the back seat. ‘It will be an interesting experience.’
Amberson was taking us to a famous night market. He said we should have dinner together. Iris had made a booking at a restaurant in case, but he had asked her to cancel it because, he said, there were restaurants everywhere and we could eat in one anytime.

‘So you worked in mining, Craig,’ he said. His head was turned against the headrest, as far as it would go. I was right behind him. ‘Mining engineer. Lot of money in mining.’

‘For some people there’s a lot. Everyone involved does pretty well out of it in the good times, though.’ Mining was having one of those good times now, just as wine had hit a glut. ‘I’ve done some contract work while we’ve been getting the winery going. A few months at a time.’ I wanted not to. I wanted never to see a mine again.

We drove under an elevated train line and I could see bright lights ahead of us, and people crowding into the street.

‘It’s funny,’ he said. ‘The things we do. My father was proud of me with dentistry. Lot of money in dentistry.’

The car stopped. Behind us, someone hit their horn and tried to push their way into the other lane. We were blocking half the road, but Amberson’s mind was on other things. His driver put on the hazard lights and came around to open our doors. We were at the entrance to the food market, which was the size of an aircraft hanger and divided into alleyways that, from the outside, looked too narrow to work. The rest of the market – stalls selling clothing and bags and everything Hello Kitty – spread out to our right. There were people pushing in all directions, circles of listless teenagers on the fringes eating out of paper packets, families with strollers unperturbed by the crush. There was music pumping from too many places to pinpoint and, through it all, the clamour and smells of a thousand meals being made at once.

Amberson led the way. ‘First, you try this,’ he said. ‘Shih Lin specialty.’

He took us to a stall that faced out to the street, with the alleys of the food hall behind it. The air was thick with the smell of hot palm oil, even at the back of the queue. I looked around and saw that the Mercedes had gone.

‘I wish I had the camera,’ Gillian said.

At the counter, a thin man with a grey T-shirt and a sheen of sweat on his arms was handing out food in white paper bags. There were grease spots coming through before the customers had even taken them.

‘Everyone comes here for this,’ Amberson said. ‘Very good. Very local. You like spicy or not so spicy?’

‘Spicy’s good,’ Gillian said. ‘Not crazy-spicy, but we both like spicy.’
He ordered for the four of us and, when I took my bag, I could see that it was a chicken Maryland beaten flat, crumbed and dusted with chilli powder. It was straight out of the fryer and almost too hot to hold. I blew on the end and bit into it. It was salty and the chilli heat was just right.

‘I think this is what we’d call in English a schnitzel,’ Gillian said, just to me. ‘I have tissues if you want them.’ She had two wrapped around the outside of her bag, and already the hot oil was showing.

Amberson took big bites, finished his schnitzel in a couple of minutes and licked his fingers.

‘Next one,’ he said. ‘Next specialty.’ He turned to Booth and said, ‘Cho do fu.’

Booth laughed. ‘I wondered if you would do cho do fu.’

‘In English, called stinky tofu,’ Amberson said. ‘Some people think it’s disgusting. But you have to try. You might love it.’

He strode ahead, and the crowd seemed to part for him. He led us inside, down the nearest alleyway of the food market. People pressed past each other, shoulder to shoulder, browsing, eating while they walked. There were hawkers pitching for our business and signs lit up at all levels from knee-high to the ceiling, pictures of bubble tea and fruit and squid. The one English word I could see was ‘peanuts’. It was under a picture resembling a cup of caramel ice-cream.

‘I know the best place,’ Amberson was saying. He started to describe something, but I lost it in the noise.

He took a left turn, waving for us to follow. He eased himself past a woman who was holding out green plates of something knuckle-sized and battered. Beside her a boy – perhaps her son – was scooping the next batch from the deep fryer with a wire basket.

The woman at the stinky tofu stall greeted Amberson like a friend. He explained something to her and pointed to Gillian and me. They both laughed.

‘Amberson’s telling her it’s your first time,’ Booth said. ‘Even some Taiwanese people don’t like stinky tofu.’

‘Australia,’ the woman said slowly. She was still smiling, like someone about to pull a prank on us or begin a humiliating but non-lethal initiation ritual. She was wearing old Nikes and a tartan apron with a line of dark sauce staining at waist level.

‘Se ge?’ the woman said to Amberson, and he replied, ‘Liang ge.’

She scooped tofu from the hot oil and served it on two paper plates, three brown squares on each one. She gave Booth a bowl of pickles and a bowl of chilli sauce and pulled four sets of chopsticks from a plastic bag.
'Sometimes served with goose blood,' Amberson said. 'But not today.'

We sat on stools around an old card table. The tofu had a pungency like a mix of blue cheese, compost and three-day-old road kill. Booth passed the chopsticks around. I pressed the top of a tofu square with mine, and it felt crisp on the outside and soft on the inside. I pushed at it until a corner broke away.

'In Taiwan you can be quite confident it is not made using human waste product,' Amberson said, just as I was putting the piece in my mouth.

Booth laughed, watching me stuck with it in my mouth. 'It's true,' he said. 'You can be quite confident.'

The tofu tasted musty and fermented, but milder than I had expected. The shock was all in the smell. I picked up a pickle and ate it with a second piece, along with some chilli sauce. I wanted the thought of human waste product out of my head.

'Hey, I don't mind this,' Gillian said. 'You just have to not breathe.'

'Very good, very good,' Amberson said. 'You like cho do fu.'

'Like's a strong word,' she said. 'But I think I'm getting there.'

AT THE NEXT stall, Amberson bought four cans of Taiwan Beer and ordered us beef cooked teppanyaki style. I took my wallet out and tried to pay, but he wouldn't have it. The cook looked about eighteen, his cheeks flushed with acne, but he moved the meat and onions around on the hot steel as if he had been doing it forever.

'My father,' Amberson said, 'his first job was projecting movies when he was twelve or thirteen. He learned some English from them. So he decided all his children would speak another language and, if they get scholarship, study overseas.'

'My parents owned a corner shop,' I told him. 'We don't have many of those anymore. I worked there in the holidays. That was them teaching me I didn't want to own a corner shop, I think.'

'Corner shop,' he said, and thought about it. 'How was your meeting today? Your tasting with the others?'

Booth took a mouthful of beer and looked into the distance.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I really don't know. They didn't say much.'

'I think they liked it,' Gillian said. 'But it wasn't like other wine tastings. People at home usually say more.'

The cook lifted the sizzling meat across to us on a sheet of foil.
'Maybe they think the wine is good,' Amberson said, 'but they just don’t know how to tell you they don’t like screw top. You have everything in screw top. Here people still like cork.’ He picked at the meat with his chopsticks. He put a piece in his mouth. ‘Maybe they study in New South Wales and buy Hunter Valley. State of Origin. Not Queenslanders.’ He tapped the steel cook top with his chopsticks. ‘Maybe they were just being inscrutable.’ He laughed.

‘What about the idea that budget is easier here and super-premium French is easier, but the middle market is…less easy?’ I sensed Amberson would tell it to me straight.

‘Oh, sure,’ he said. ‘Austrade study. I’ve seen that. And other studies. So that’s what everyone else thinks, and then it’s what they do. Like cork, even though screw top is probably a better closure.’ He picked up some more meat and onions. ‘But I think Crazy Town. French is good, but a bit obvious. And not Crazy Town. Not Birdsville Races. My guy? My Crazy Town customer? He doesn’t do those surveys. He does Guitar Hero, scuba diving. He has a different…’ He thought about it for a few seconds. ‘Vibe.’

‘This food is amazing,’ Gillian said. ‘I’m so glad you brought us here.’

There were people pushing through behind us, making their way between stalls, but it was hardly a problem. The clamour and crush was part of the place. The cook was passing food over our heads to customers without seats, and money was passing over our heads the other way. Orders were being shouted. On the iron cooking plate meat, prawns and sauces were sending up clouds of steam.

‘There is more,’ Amberson said as Gillian ate the last curled piece of onion. ‘Always more.’ He was already standing. He had his chopsticks bunched in his hand and he was looking around. ‘You can bring the beer.’

He took us back up the alley towards the entrance, then turned left.

‘You want oyster or prawn?’ he said. ‘Or both?’

He had found us a stall where a woman was cooking on top of a steel drum. She made two kinds of omelettes and that was all. She had a crate of eggs, and buckets of prawns and oysters on ice. Near her right hand was a laundry basket full of chopped greens – lettuce and shallots – that she threw on near the end. She could make eight omelettes every couple of minutes. Amberson ordered two of each.

She cracked the eggs while looking away and talking to her friend, and she flicked every shell into a bucket under the table with the same automatic action. She had her hair pulled into a ponytail that poked out the back of her trucker’s cap. Both her forearms had guards on them in case they touched the hot rim of the drum, so perhaps the process wasn’t that automatic after all.
She had about two hundred plastic plates stacked vertically in a cylindrical bag, and she pulled them out one at a time and slid the omelettes on to them. She picked up a ladle from a pot that was simmering on a nearby camp stove and poured a pool of brown sauce on to each omelette.

‘What is that sauce?’ Gillian said. ‘I’ve always wondered. We get it in Chinese restaurants at home.’

‘That’s what we call brown sauce,’ Amberson told her. It didn’t sound like a joke. ‘Also known as Chinese brown sauce.’

He took all four plates and nodded in the direction of a trestle table with mismatched plastic chairs. He served each of us when we sat down. I took a mouthful of my Taiwan Beer and broke off a corner of the omelette with my chopsticks. It had cost a dollar, less than a dollar. I had seen that when Amberson paid for it. It was the best omelette I had ever had, I thought. Cooked on a steel drum with seven others by a woman who didn’t even have to watch while she did it.

There was chaos all around us. Shouting, strong smells I didn’t know, dishes being shared. Diners perched on stools or rickety chairs or stood, having the kinds of conversations people do everywhere. They were getting on with their lives. It was a regular thing and I was a witness to it, and a participant.

I leaned over towards Gillian. ‘It’s not caution,’ I said. ‘The cottages and the bottling machine – they’re just a business plan. They’re not what either of us wants. I should’ve worked it out weeks ago. I should’ve worked it out when I was driving into town and saw Ron Gittins’ team putting a road in for someone. They had a WA250 Komatsu loader. I knew straight away that’s what it was, and straight away I was off in my head working through the numbers. That’s when I should have known.’

She had a prawn between her chopsticks, but she wasn’t eating it. I meant the mines. I had bought and operated and depreciated Komatsu loaders and far bigger vehicles, back in that other life that I was trying to leave for good. The MBA life, the spreadsheet life, the life of sound hard-headed business plans. The life Damian Masci had fouled up for himself but still believed in, in the absence of better. I had better.

‘I think we should can the expansion idea.’ It was a relief for me to say it. ‘It can’t all be about business sense. It’s too abstract. It’s not worth it. We should make really good wine. That’s all that side of things has to be about. That, and not driving us broke. We’re only one vintage away from profit. We should make good wine and bring the kids here and blow their Stanthorpe minds.’

‘We should,’ she said. ‘We should do that.’
WE CHECKED OUT of the Roumei the next morning to go on our tour. The minibus turned up early, before we had made it down to reception. I took our suitcases out to the driver while Gillian fixed up the paperwork.

‘This was delivered for us,’ she said when she came outside. It was a wooden box with a card.

The driver was signalling that we should get on the bus.

‘We’ll go round the other hotels now,’ Gillian said. She ducked so that she wouldn’t hit her head on the way in. ‘I think they pick us all up and then take us to the bus we do the tour in. That’s why he wants to keep moving.’

She chose seats halfway back and the driver slid the door shut. She opened the card as we drove off.

It read: ‘It was a great pleasure. I feel I am one step closer to Crazy Town. Amberson.’

She took the lid off the box. Inside was a solid glass pumpkin sitting in purple tissue paper. I lifted it out with both hands. It was the size of a grapefruit, and bright orange, with a green stalk.

‘Crazy Town,’ she said. ‘What do you think it means? A pumpkin?’

‘I’m guessing prosperity,’ I said. ‘One way or another, pretty much everything in Chinese wishes you prosperity.’

She took it from me and was surprised by the weight, even though she had been holding the box. ‘What kind of prosperity’s a pumpkin?’ She turned it over to have a look at the bottom. Perhaps she was looking for an explanation, or instructions.

‘I guess it’s what you make of it.’
My fall in Calcutta
Marie Darrieussecq

CALCUTTA is a big, middle-class, air-conditioned city. My publisher’s chauffeur was waiting for me at the airport. Through the tinted windows of the sedan, the vast traffic jams warned me that, whether I liked it or not, things could get complicated in the city of Calcutta. But otherwise it was enchanting; I had a dream welcome, and an amazing apartment lent to me by my publisher. She was heading for a spa in Switzerland.

I wanted to take a bath in the jacuzzi on the terrace, but she advised me not to – the bacteria count was high. A few simple precautions would allow me to best enjoy Calcutta: never drink the tap water, and use the toilets as sparingly as possible.

I actually never shit. But she was at pains to explain that, despite the luxury of her home, the toilets tended to block up. And finding a plumber in Calcutta is difficult: they are extremely sought-after. Calcutta, like most Indian cities, has a British water mains system. The drinking water pipes follow the same path as the grey water pipes, at first underground, then reaching up to the highest storeys, the penthouse level, which are also the least well serviced – because of the bad water pressure. But the real problem in the Indian mega-cities is that these colonial pipes have aged, and their metal, cast iron or copper, has become porous. The so-called drinking water becomes unfit for consumption, by virtue of its capillary action. ‘Capillary’ is an inaccurate term – so says my Bengali publisher, who speaks French with extreme precision. You have to imagine the subsoil of Calcutta as a swamp that never completely dries up: the trenches where the pipes are lying fill up with water that is semi-drinkable, semi-treated, let’s say untreated, and that can back up at any moment, through any old pipe, suddenly and mysteriously.

My publisher left me the addresses of some friends with whom I spent a marvellous week, at house parties and nightclubs, in the hyper-networked city that is Calcutta, drinking only cocktails and never water. She also left me her chauffeur, who was part of the family, and who lived so far away, on the outskirts of the suburbs, that he had managed to get permission to camp out in the sedan. So he was available at any hour of day or night, which was handy for nightclub life.
From time to time, as I looked through the tinted windows, Calcutta made me feel uneasy: half-naked children, one-legged cripples, legless cripples, one-armed cripples and quadriplegics. To my insistent requests to see Mother Teresa, I received the response, between two gin and tonics, that the holy lady had done a lot of harm to Calcutta; Mother Teresa had definitely given a completely false image of Calcutta, but, if I insisted on pasteurising my conscience, there was a rival leprosarium that was much more up to speed with the modern world.

A worldly and exuberant American woman at the leprosarium explained to me the technicalities of hugging – rather than my euros, they were expecting a true gesture of good will. I should kiss these unfortunates whom no one would touch, and give them back their dignity with an embrace. You could only catch leprosy, explained the American woman, if you were malnourished. So I kissed seventy-four lepers of all ages. Then we drank the (boiled) tea of friendship together.

As soon as I was back behind the tinted windows, I rubbed myself frenetically with my alcohol gel. I needed a shower, some antiseptic, some chlorine, some antibiotics! The traffic was terrible, the chauffeur announced innocently, while I was in the middle of dying of leprosy. And right then it started to rain.

The water reached halfway up the tyres within five minutes. ‘We’ll have to continue on foot,’ said the chauffeur, guileless and laconic as usual, as he opened the door, locked the car and disappeared with a ‘good night’ that seemed to me a bit cheeky.

I was immediately drenched. The water reached my calves. When I say water, it was the untreated type. People were running; I followed the flow. In the midst of the monsoonal din, we reached a little temple which stood out like an island. A cow with long horns, sacred from head to tail, was looking at me, vacantly chewing her cud. It was so picturesque that for a moment I forgot my misery. The temple looked out over the river Ganges, which was black from the rain and the storm, broad and cloudy like a sea. I thought of Duras and sighed. Yes, despite the difficulty I would have in finding a taxi, there was rapture here. I left the shade of the temple to let the hot rain run through me. The opaque water was swirling; I felt like I was falling into an ecstatic trance; and then from beneath my flooded feet the ground suddenly disappeared. I was engulfed by the mouth of a sewer.

I was completely covered in shit; no taxi would ever pick me up. Next morning, when I arrived back at my publisher’s apartment, the concierge didn’t want to open the door to me. As for the chauffeur, he had gone home to bed.

The fever
Yan Lianke

The dusk settles over a day in late autumn. The sun sets above the East Henan plain, a blood-red ball turning the earth and sky a deep shade of crimson. As red unfurls, slowly the dusk turns to evening. Autumn grows deeper; the cold more intense. The village streets are all empty and silent.

Dogs are in their dens.

Chickens at roost in their coops.

The cows have returned early from the fields and are snug in their sheds.

The silence is intense. Yet even in the absence of voices or sound, Ding Village lives on. Choked by death, it will not die. In the silent shades of autumn, the village has withered, along with its people. They shrink and wither in tandem with the days, like corpses buried underground.

The grass upon the plain has turned brittle and dry. The trees are all bare; the crops have withered. The villagers are shrunk inside their homes, never to emerge again.

Ever since the blood came. Ever since the blood ran red.

Dusk had spread across the plain by the time my grandpa Ding Shuiyang returned from the city. He arrived on the long-distance coach that travels between Wei county and the distant city of Kaifeng, the bus dropping him at the edge of the main road like a fallen leaf.

The concrete road linking Ding Village with the outside world was built ten years ago, when everyone in the village was caught up in the blood-selling boom. As Grandpa stood at the roadside looking towards the village, a gust of wind seemed to clear his head and restore order to his muddled thoughts. Things he hadn’t understood before began to fall into place. For the first time since he’d left the village early that morning to meet with the county cadres, the fog seemed to lift. There, standing at the roadside that linked Ding Village to the rest of the world, realisation...
dawned on him. The realisation that with clouds come the rain. That late autumn begets winter’s chill. That those who had sold their blood ten years ago would now have the fever. And that those with the fever would die, as surely as the falling leaves.

The fever hid in blood; Grandpa hid in dreams.

The fever loved its blood; Grandpa loved his dreams.

Grandpa dreamed almost every night. For the last three nights, he’d had the same dream: the cities he’d visited – Kaifeng and Wei county, with their underground networks of pipes like cobwebs – running thick with blood. And from the cracks and curvatures of pipes, from the l-bends and the u-bends, blood spurts like water. A fountain of brackish rain sprays the air, a bright-red assault on the senses. And there, upon the plain, he saw the wells and rivers all turned red, rancid with the stench of blood. In every city and every township, doctors wept as the fever spread. But on the streets of Ding Village, one lone doctor sat and laughed. Bathed in golden sunlight, the village was silent and peaceful, its residents behind locked doors. But, day by day, the doctor in his white lab coat, his physician’s bag at his feet, would sit perched upon a rock beneath the scholar trees and laugh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. The sunshine would be filled with the sound of laughter. A big, loud belly-laugh, ringing out as clear as a bell, strong enough to shake the trees and make the yellow leaves rain down, as surely as the autumn breeze...

And when the dream had ended, the county bigwigs – the higher-ups – summoned Grandpa for a meeting. Since Ding Village no longer had a mayor, it was left to Grandpa to go instead. He returned to the village with an understanding of certain facts, like a series of links in a chain.

The first thing Grandpa had learned was that the fever wasn’t really a fever at all. Its proper medical name was Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. The second thing was that those who had sold their blood so many years ago, and who had come down with a fever within a fortnight of selling it, would now have AIDS. The third thing was that the first symptoms of AIDS wouldn’t appear until eight, nine, or even ten years later. Most people, mistaking the symptoms for a common cold, would take medicine to bring down their fever and before long, they would be back to normal. But a few months later, the disease would flare up again, and the symptoms would be much worse: weakness, skin sores, ulcers on the mouth and tongue, dehydration and weight loss. By then, you had only a few months to live. You might manage to hang on for six months, maybe even eight or nine, but very few made it through a year. In the end, everyone who got sick died.

They died like falling leaves.

Their light extinguished, gone from this world.

The fourth thing was something Grandpa already knew: that for the past two years, people in the village had been dying. Not a month went by without at least one death, and nearly every family had lost someone. After more than forty deaths in the space of two years, the graves in the village cemetery were as dense as
Died like falling leaves, their light gone from this world... Afterwards, the other villagers would claim they had died of gastritis or hepatitis, of tuberculosis, or of a disease of the stomach or liver or lungs. But, in fact, it was the fever. Every one of them had died of AIDS.

The fifth thing Grandpa learned was that AIDS had originally been a foreigners’ disease, a big-city disease rumoured to affect only deviant people. But now China had it, too. It was spreading across the countryside, and those who were getting sick were normal, upstanding people. The sickness came in waves, like swarms of locusts descending over a field and destroying the vegetation. If one person got sick, the only certainty was that many more would soon follow.

The sixth thing was that if you got AIDS, you died. AIDS was a new, incurable disease, and no amount of money could save you. But the sickness had only just begun: that was the seventh thing. The real explosion wouldn’t come until the next year, or the year after next. That’s when people would start dying like moths to a flame. Right now they were dying like dogs, and everyone knows that in this world, people care a lot more about dogs than they do about moths.

The eighth thing was about me, buried behind the brick wall of the elementary school. I was only twelve, in my fifth year at the school, when I died. I died from eating a poisoned tomato I found on the way home from school. Six months earlier, somebody had poisoned our family’s chickens. Not long after that, my mother’s pig had died after eating a poisoned chunk of radish. It was just a few months later that I found the tomato sitting on a rock by the side of the road. Someone must have put it there, knowing I’d see it on my way home from school. As soon as I’d eaten it, my belly started to ache, like somebody was stabbing my insides with scissors. Before I could walk more than a few steps, I fell down in the middle of the road. By the time my dad found me and carried me home in his arms, I was frothing at the mouth. By the time he laid me on my bed, I was already dead.

I died not from the fever, not from AIDS, but because my dad had run a blood-collection station in Ding Village ten years earlier. He bought blood from the villagers and resold it for a profit. I died because my dad was the biggest blood merchant not just in Ding Village but in Two-Li Village, Willow Hamlet, Yellow Creek and dozens of other villages for miles around. He wasn’t just a blood merchant; he was a blood kingpin.

The day I died, my dad didn’t even cry. He sat at my bedside and smoked a cigarette. Then he went out into the village with my uncle, his younger brother. My dad carried a pointed shovel; my uncle had a chopping knife with a gleaming blade. They stood at the village crossroads, cursing and screaming at the top of their lungs.
‘Come and show your faces, if you’ve got the guts!’ shrieked my uncle, Ding Liang. ‘Don’t think you can hide, you poisoning bastards! Come out and see if I don’t chop you in two!’

‘So you’re jealous of me, is that it?’ shouted my father, Ding Hui, planting his shovel in the ground. ‘Can’t stand it that I’m rich and didn’t get the fever? Well, fuck you and all your ancestors! First you kill my chickens, then my pigs, and now you think you can get away with poisoning my boy?’

Shouting and cursing, the brothers stood at the crossroads from noon until the sky grew dark, but not a single villager came out. No one wanted to answer to my uncle, or face up to my father.

In the end, all they could do was bury me.

They put me in the ground and buried me.

By tradition, I was too young to be buried in the ancestral grave, so Grandpa carried my little corpse to the elementary school, where he lived as a caretaker. He made me a narrow wooden coffin, filled it with my schoolbooks, notebooks, pencils and pens, and buried it outside the schoolyard, behind the back wall of his house.

Grandpa had always fancied himself as a scholar. He’d gone to school, spent a lifetime as the school caretaker and bellringer, and was known throughout the village as Professor Ding. So it was only natural that he’d want to bury me with my books: a favourite storybook, a collection of folk tales, a few volumes of Chinese myths and legends, and a Chinese and an English dictionary.

After I was gone, Grandpa would sometimes stand at my grave and wonder if the villagers would try to kill anyone else in our family. Would they poison his granddaughter, my younger sister, Yingzi? Or his only remaining grandson, my uncle’s boy, Little Jun? He began to think about making my father and my uncle go to every house in the village and kowtow. Make them kneel in the dirt, knock their heads upon the ground three times and beg the villagers not to poison any more of our family. Beg them not to leave us without descendants to carry on the Ding family name.

At about the same time Grandpa was mulling this over, my uncle came down with the fever.

Grandpa knew that it was retribution. Uncle was sick because he’d once worked for my father, buying blood from the villagers and reselling it at a profit. When Grandpa found out that Uncle was sick, he changed his mind about asking him to kowtow to all the villagers, and instead decided to have my father do it alone.

The ninth thing my grandpa learned was that within a year, perhaps two, the fever would spread across the plain. It would burst upon us like a flood, engulfing Ding Village, Willow Hamlet, Yellow Creek, Two-Li Village and countless others in
its path. Like the Yellow River bursting its banks, it would surge through dozens, maybe hundreds of villages. And when that happened, people would die like ants. The dead would litter the ground like fallen leaves. In time, most of the villagers would die, and Ding Village would vanish forever. Like leaves upon a dying tree, the villagers would wither and fall to the ground, to be swept away by the wind.

The tenth thing Grandpa learned was that the higher-ups wanted to quarantine all the sick people in the village so that they wouldn’t spread the fever to the healthy ones, to those who hadn’t sold blood.

‘Professor Ding,’ the cadres said. ‘Your son was the biggest blood merchant in the village, so it’s only fair that you step up now. You have to use your influence to convince everyone who is sick to move into the village school.’

When he heard this, my Grandpa was silent for a very long time. Even now, it makes him uncomfortable, makes him think thoughts that are better left unspoken. When Grandpa thought about my death, he wanted to force my father, the blood kingpin, to go down on his knees and kowtow to every family in the village. And when that was done, my father could throw himself into a well, swallow some poison, or hang himself. Any method would do, as long as he died. And the sooner, the better, so that everyone in the village could witness his death.

It was a shocking thought to imagine my father grovelling before the villagers and then being made to commit suicide, a thought Grandpa hadn’t thought himself capable of. But when the shock had passed, Grandpa began walking into the village in the direction of our house.

He was really going to do it. He was going to ask my father to apologise to everyone and then to kill himself.

Because the sooner my father died, the better.

This is an extract from Yan Lianke’s *The Dream of Ding Village*, translated from the Chinese by Cindy Carter, to be published by Text in 2011.

Yan Lianke was born in 1958 in Henan province, China, where most of his novels are set. He has won two of China’s top literary prizes. His other books include the erotic, satiric masterpiece *Serve the People!* (Text Publishing, 2007).
OUR father, who survived the Killing Fields, would never let me travel to South-East Asia when I was a student, so the first time I visited Cambodia was when I was twenty-nine, with him and my sister Alison. In the plane, he warned us about the smallness of the airport, the dirtiness of the streets and the poverty of the people. He described the landmines and the lepers. It was as if he had raised us the way Siddhartha was raised – safely ensconced from all the possible perils of the world – so that the first time we saw sickness, ageing and death, we would feel like our insides were sucked dry. He wanted us to be prepared.

Our father was twenty-three when Pol Pot’s army marched into Phnom Penh, on 17 April 1975. They were an army of children. Their skin was brown. Their hair shone orange. Their eyes were oysters in two moons. They looked around, moving slowly, as if they were lost. Theirs was the breath of small animals in the night. It was as if they had not been taught how to walk, eat or laugh, but had learned these things by doing them. Every sense woke up when they reached the city. Many of these boys had never been inside a city before, so every stimulus could only be predatory. Their uniforms were pyjamas dyed black as night, and some carried their AK-47s upright, as though they were going to set off fireworks. They were children who had never tasted candy, to know that this was the stuff you were meant to steal from the shops. Instead, they smashed things up. Children with guns, children with bang-bang-shoot-them-dead-I-kill-you-long-time-Mister minds. Kill was a long time; dead was even longer. This was the only truth they knew. When they looked up at the sky they did not see the fingers of God; they saw the direct cause of death of their parents, the American bombs.

The only modern marvels they had seen were the stick of a gun, the iron bird in the sky and the green disc on the ground. But what was a stick of gum? A block of paper fastened at one end? What was a globe of the world? A balloon? What was a cinema? A grandfather clock inside a house? If you didn’t know anything, how did you know it was not a new sun that crawled up over the fields every day? How did you know
that the earth was not flat? They didn’t, but they were assigned the task of taking over
the only world our father had ever known. And during their reign, they had assigned
our father the task of burying the dead on higher ground when the floodwaters came.
During peacetime, the yearly floods would wash over the vegetation, leaving behind
rich level soil. But during the reign of slavery the floods that came completely washed
away the sweet potato leaves, wild weeds and grasses that the people had come to
depend upon for food. People would just collapse in the fields and their bodies would
be there days later, next to the workers, beside them, beneath them, as they worked. In
the village next to our father’s, the whole collective of more than three thousand
people – except their four Khmer Rouge soldiers – had perished.

In his own collective, half-living people were assigned to carry off the dead to
elevated ground and bury them. Our father was assigned the task with another
man. With a blanket between the two of them, they would hoist the body out of the
floodwaters and onto the blanket. He and his companion would then each take an
end of the blanket and heave it onto their shoulder. A walking hammock. One last
free ride for the dead. Except it wasn’t a very stable ride. They were so malnour-
ished and weak that they kept slipping and falling into the water. Each time they
fell, the blanket would become more waterlogged and heavy.

‘Don’t worry,’ our father’s friend told him, ‘just look forward to the day when
others will be carrying you off wrapped up nicely in a blanket and getting more
attention than the living ever did.’

‘Maybe I’ll be the one giving you the special treatment,’ our father replied.

‘What do you mean? Sweet Bodhisattva, I hope you’re not going to be this heavy
when it’s my turn to heave you out of the floodwaters!’

A few weeks later, our father was assigned with another man. They were both
silent on their first journey, carrying the blanket containing his nameless friend
whom this new companion had replaced. They walked uphill, dug a shallow grave,
placed the body in carefully, and then scooped a light mound of dirt over it.

NOW, THIRTY-ONE YEARS later, we were heading back to the field where our
father had buried all the dead. We came in a convoy of SUVs and Mercedes-Benz,
all owned by our Uncle Kheav. Uncle Kheav was our father’s older brother. He had
also survived the Killing Fields and was now an immensely successful bank CEO
and property developer. Former soldiers who were now my uncle’s personal
bodyguards surrounded us wherever we went, because our uncle did not want any
of us to be kidnapped for ransom. The cars stopped in front of an empty white field
and we all got out: our father, sister, Uncle Kheav and our auntie.

My senses stretched, working their hardest to take in the world. At first there was
the field. And the heat, when the sky breathed its fever breath over the field. Then
back to the field and its unyielding dust. Nothing grew on it. Yet once death here had hot halitosis that withered away the bodies much faster, and the field was used to plant crops during each following season. ‘The best fertiliser in the world,’ our father told us. ‘When I was digging up the ground to plant the next season of rice, I unearthed the small wooden marker of your auntie’s mother’s burial spot.’

‘Did you stow it away and keep it?’ I asked.

‘No, of course not. If you even picked up a handful of dirt from the ground, you were stealing from the revolution.’

‘People dug the graves up, over and over again, after the liberation,’ Uncle Kheav told me. They were looking for rings and gems looped around finger bones and wrists.

‘There was nothing,’ our father said. ‘When I buried those bodies, they didn’t even have proper clothes.’

Now there were not even any bones left. None of those people seemed to have existed, and yet the SUV played a slow Cambodian dirge, and our auntie was kneeling on the floor in front of an incense urn she had placed on the soil, with three sticks of incense clutched in her hand. When she rose up after her third bow and turned around, her shoulders were shaking with the memory of her mother.

It hit me at last: Dad buried bodies here, I realised, bodies in each handful of dust. Bodies of strangers, and people he had worked with, known as family, and loved. Bodies that needed to be held, that needed to move and exhale and blink, just as we were doing. Bodies no one will ever remember, not like the skulls in stupas that westerners always wanted to visit. By now our father was looking elsewhere, away from our auntie, who was weeping over her dead mother. He pointed to the trees. There weren’t many, and they were skinny coconut or sugar palms huddled by the edges of the yellow field, as if afraid to step into the soil of a million souls.

‘Look at those bamboo ladders attached to the trees,’ he said. ‘They’re used for climbing to the very top, to collect coconuts or the juice of sugar palms.’ I grabbed on to the ladder and started up.

‘Only the first few rungs,’ he said, ‘or you could fall and die.’

I let go, and didn’t bother to try.

I felt that the country was something precious – brutal, split open like a pomegranate, with a million hidden red and buried eyes. It was a visceral land, a land that gave me strange dreams at night: dreams of Job sitting in the middle of his burnt-out house, his children dead, scraping at his skin with bits of broken pottery, set in a prelapsarian paradise. It was a land of earth and water where the living people lived; and a land of wind and fire where the dead were cremated and malingered over hot fields.
I watched as my uncle’s bodyguard carefully dug a hole in the ground and lit a fire in there, so that my auntie could burn heaven banknotes for her mother. My auntie wanted to make sure her mother, stripped of everything in life, had enough in the afterlife.

‘You must remember your ancestors,’ said the ex-soldier who was now my uncle’s bodyguard, ‘and honour them.’
GORDON never runs his own errands but he banged on my door at 4 am and ordered me to catch the under-the-radar dawn flight to Emergent.

‘I don’t know if you’ve heard,’ I said, standing in the doorway in my underpants, ‘but there’s a civil war going on over there.’

‘You’ll thank me later. This is the job of your life.’

‘But I don’t even have a passport.’

‘Good. That’ll prove that you were never there. Hurry up, I’ll give you a lift.’

He drove like a maniac and dropped me with minutes to spare at an airfield I didn’t know existed. It was a place I’d driven past once or twice, out near the abattoirs, but I’d always assumed that the twenty-foot stone wall hid a housing estate.

THE STORM STOPPED and the menacing cloud retreated over a hill. Steam rose from the drenched ground and fogged up my glasses. I took them off, wiped them, and when I put them back on I saw that a dirty old woman had stepped out of a hut.

‘There she is,’ the bloke in charge said. He’d been friendly, solicitous even, since he’d collected me from the tarmac of a base that didn’t officially exist, but he refused to tell me his name. ‘Spread out, you lot. Except you, doc. You know the drill, guys: no sudden moves, no loud noises. There’s minefields everywhere and we don’t want a stampede on our hands.’

‘But…excuse me?’ I said.

‘Yes, doc?’

‘That’s not Dr Penn.’

‘Mate, I’ve been tracking her for weeks. That’s her.’

I looked again. The woman’s hair was bone white. It set off in every direction, as if each strand was lashing out at the world. Her eyes bulged. The right one was bloodshot, and a rivulet of golden pus ran from it down her nose to her cracked
upper lip. Her cheekbones were sunken. Veins criss-crossed her forehead. Her nose looked as if somebody had cut it up and glued the pieces back in random order. From the look of her, she might have done it herself.

I took a step forward.

‘Whoa there, doc. She’s not stable.’

‘Isn’t that why I’m here?’

‘You just gotta let me neutralise the target first.’

‘Neutralise her? What does that mean, exactly?’

‘Nothing too awful, mate. I’m just gonna assist her to decide all by herself to come quietly.’

‘Well, try not to hurt her.’

He looked pained. ‘Mate, I’m a Cultural Liaison Officer. I…’

‘I know what you are.’

‘Our government operates under a strict non-aggression policy. I’ve got no jurisdiction to hurt her, even if I wanted to, which I don’t. Not unless she tries to kill me.’

‘Any idea what happened to her nose?’

‘I didn’t do it. Is that what you’re asking me?’

‘No, I…sorry.’

‘First time in a warzone, eh? So let’s do this quick, and get you home for dinner.’

He took several steps forward, arms outstretched. ‘Dr Penn, don’t be scared. I’m here to help. I’m entirely unarmed.’

‘You should strip off,’ I said. ‘Then she’d trust you.’

‘Trust? She trusts nobody. That’s why we need you to get her out of here.’

Dr Penn opened her mouth. Her breath turned to a sigh, then a sob, then a scream. But although her mouth was open so wide I thought her cheeks might split, she stood perfectly still, her face a mask, arms limp by her side.

‘Dr Penn, this is Dr James Gass. He’s come especially to look after you. If you’d care to come with us, Dr Gass can fix you up.’

She stepped back into the doorway of the hut. Her bloodshot eye lit up the gloom enough for me to see that her shoulders were heaving. ‘Careful,’ I said. ‘She’s crying.’

‘Dr Penn, I must formally advise you that we are taking you into non-military custody. Your government-in-exile agrees, our government agrees, the Americans agree, and I’m sure deep down you agree that you need a rest. Best to get away from all this.’
She launched herself forward and in an instant she had the Cultural Liaison Officer pinned. She clawed at his face but, one by one, her fingernails snapped and flew harmlessly about. The tips of her fingers began to bleed. She groaned, rolled onto her back, closed her eyes and allowed herself to sink into the muddy ground.

The officer quickly freed his arms and wrapped them tight around her. The others gathered around and chanted in unison, ‘Desist and stand down. Desist and stand down. If you persist in being violent and aggressive, I am authorised to act in lethal self-defence. Desist and stand down. Desist and stand down.’

They picked her up by the legs and arms, and carried her to the chopper. I trailed along behind, still not really believing it was her.

AFTER DR PENN and the Great Birde played themselves in To Steal Away in the Night, the film based on Dr Penn’s memoirs of the first civil war, they possessed the most famous bottoms in the world.

We see them crouched behind a makeshift barricade, preparing to lead the assault on Parliament House, fondling each other’s arses. It’s one of the great love scenes in motion picture history. And then the Great Birde stands up and raises his arms like wings. He stares down bullets and bombs. His loyal followers, the peasants, the intellectuals who make up the Emergent Democratic Revolutionary Army, also stand. Dr Penn stands. To the sound of a thousand trumpets, they storm the building in slow motion. Their enemies, overwhelmed by this courage and conviction, give up the fight. Some of them throw their weapons away and dance in the street. Some of them turn and become the Great Birde’s forward deployment.

I’ve watched that scene a thousand times. I’ve read every book, article and review ever written about the film, even all those impenetrable cultural studies theses. And I’m almost certain I’m the only person who knows the truth.

In the film, a second before the Great Birde rises, Dr Penn stops digging the fingers of her left hand into his buttocks. She flattens her palm and gives him the tiniest of shoves. Only then does he stand up, grasping his moment to become a crazy-brave legend.

‘I DON’T BELIEVE IT,’ I told Gordon. ‘I simply don’t believe that the Great Birde and Dr Penn would allow atrocities to occur on their watch, or endorse them, or benefit from them. Or that our government would help. Or the Americans, even. Or the French or the English or the Singaporeans or...’

‘Trust me, it’s true,’ Gordon said.

‘She’s seen some terrible things, that much is plain. It’s obvious she’s suffering. But she’s not crazy. Just exhausted.’
‘Okay, okay.’ He pulled a form from his desk drawer and handed it to me. ‘I thought you’d be like this, so I went ahead and got you clearance. Limited clearance, mind you. But you’ll be sorry – you’re part of it now,’ he said cheerfully.

He turned his monitor so I could see the screen. An image appeared of the Emergent village where I had collected Dr Penn. In the clearing adjacent to the communal hut, a row of peasants stood in rows waiting for boy and girl soldiers, grimy-haired thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds in black fatigues, to strike them down one by one with machetes. Because the film had no sound, the bloody carnage seemed unreal. Staged. Still, I felt ill. People shouldn’t have to look at things like that.

‘What did they do?’ I said.

‘Hmm?’ Gordon asked. He was looking out the window.

‘What did those people do wrong? Support the enemy?’

‘No. No, I don’t think so.’

‘Then what?’

‘It’s hard to say.’

On the screen, a group of villagers turned and fled, straight into a minefield. ‘Freshly laid,’ Gordon said. I closed my eyes but Gordon turned the volume up and forced me to listen as the mines pop-popped and the people called out to the lost feet.

‘Is this an isolated incident?’

‘Isolated? If they ever win their war, I’m not sure there’ll be anybody left to rule.’ After a moment, he added, ‘You’ll want to see this bit.’

I opened my eyes. The camera swung from the minefield back to the clearing. It zoomed in on the Great Birde. He sat on a log, watching the killings with a look of utter boredom on his face. Beside him, Dr Penn sat cross-legged on the ground. Her hair was still black. Her eyes were dull, as if her mind had fled the scene and left her body behind. But there was a half-smile on her lips.

DR PENN SAT on the edge of her bed for two days, still dressed in her bloodstained fatigues. She stank the place out. She ate nothing but she sipped water often enough for her lips to stay moist, and for an invisible cocktail of drugs and remedies and electrolytes to leech into her bloodstream. She couldn’t bear to capitulate entirely, but she surrendered to me when she drank the water.

On the third morning, I pumped lavender air into the room for two hours and then sent in Jenny and Carol, my best two Rehabilitation Officers.

‘You’re safe now,’ Carol cooed in Dr Penn’s ear. ‘No one can hurt you now. No one can find you.’
'It’s true,’ Jenny said. ‘We don’t know anything about you. We don’t even know your name. We’re just here to make you feel better. But just so you know, if you resist, we won’t hesitate to protect ourselves.’

‘We’re good at it, too.’

‘But we’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to help. We’re here for you.’

‘So how about we start with a wash. Everybody feels better after they’ve had a nice warm shower.’

Jenny began unbuttoning Dr Penn’s shirt. Dr Penn lifted an arm, as if to push her away, but left it there hanging, waiting for Jenny to pull her arm free of the shirt.

As I watched from the monitor in my office, Gordon bustled in accompanied by a red-faced man in a pinstripe suit.

‘I’m in the middle of something here,’ I said.

‘Don’t I know it,’ Gordon said, winking. ‘Carry on. I don’t think you’ve met the Director before, have you? Minister, this is the Bright Young Spark I told you about.’

‘Excellent, excellent,’ the Director said. ‘Keep up the good work. And pretend we’re not here. Ah…is that the famous Dr Penn?’

Gordon and the Director crowded the monitor as Carol and Jenny went to work. First, they eased Dr Penn’s shirt off. Underneath she wore a terribly soiled sports bra. They struggled with the straps for a moment, then Jenny produced a pair of scissors and cut the straps.

‘Oh my,’ the Director said.

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ Gordon murmured. ‘We’re witnessing history, gentlemen. History at its finest.’

Carol untied the knot that held Dr Penn’s trousers up and they dropped to the ground, revealing a jagged scar that ran the length of her right inner thigh.

‘What a tragedy,’ the Director said. ‘Do what’s necessary to fix that.’

Carol tugged at Dr Penn’s briefs, which ripped as they pulled free of her skin. The men either side of me breathed in perfect unison, heavy and warm into each of my ears.

Jenny led the naked Dr Penn to the shower. The water ran hot, and steam quickly filled the room.

‘Oh no,’ Gerard said. ‘No, no, no.’ He lunged forward and rubbed the monitor with his hand.

I pushed a button. ‘What’s happening in there?’ I asked Carol.

‘She’s fallen asleep.’
'YOU'RE SAFE NOW,' I said.

Dr Penn looked up from her T-bone steak. ‘Liar,’ she said.

‘Who do you think I am?’

‘You are an interrogator for the illegitimate government of Emergent. You are going to break me and then dump me in the trash. So let’s get on with it.’

‘Come on. Let’s go for a drive.’

I took her through suburban streets to the café district where she’d once held court, through the leafy grounds of the university where she’d gained her doctorate, past the bookshop where she’d worked (it was now a Nike seconds shop). She stayed silent until we turned onto Gray Street, Goosfield.

‘No. I don’t want to see this.’

‘It’ll be good for you.’

I pulled up outside a cottage. The sign attached to the white picket fence read: HERE IN THIS HOUSE, THE FAMOUS EMERGENT REVOLUTIONARIES, THE GREAT BIRDE AND DR PENN, LIVED WHEN THEY WERE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. OPEN 10 AM – 5 PM, CLOSED MONDAYS.

We stepped into the front hall. A grey-haired woman appeared. ‘Welcome, welcome. Would you like a personalised guide for ten dollars extra?’

‘Definitely,’ Dr Penn said. ‘He’s paying.’

We took three steps down the hallway before the guide stopped us.

‘Here we have a hatstand. Notice here the Great Birde’s trademark conical hat. He wore it everywhere as a mark of solidarity with the peasants and to demonstrate that he knew how lucky he was to be studying here in this country.’

‘He wore that thing to parties as a joke,’ Dr Penn whispered to me. ‘He used to bow and poke woman in the bum with it. He stashed his dope in the tip.’

‘You’ll also see a traditional Emergent scarf, a replica of the scarf Dr Penn wore to her university classes. Dr Penn wove all her own clothes in the traditional Emergent style.’

‘501s and black T-shirts,’ Dr Penn murmured, ‘and a sundress for special occasions.’

We stepped into the kitchen. Laid out on the bench were two plates of papier mâché rice and sweet-sauced pork. ‘Here you see the staple food of the Emergent peasantry. The Great Birde and Dr Penn made a point of eating only what poor people from their country would eat.’

‘Ha! The Birde wouldn’t have been caught dead eating such muck. Not without a decent bottle of red to wash it down with. Me, I preferred it. It brought back
memories. But, then, I was actually born a peasant. Whereas the Birde…’ She paused, and rolled her eyes affectionately. ‘Well, he was born an aristocrat and he’s never forgotten his roots.’

We moved to the bedroom. It was completely bare except for a candle.

‘Everybody knows that the Great Birde and Dr Penn slept on bare floorboards to train their bodies for the struggle they knew was coming. Here, on this very wood, they held each other and plotted their people’s future.’

‘We had a queen-sized futon,’ Dr Penn whispered. ‘And Birde bought an antique chandelier. I used to lie there and stare up at it, counting the pieces of crystal until I fell asleep.’

In the lounge room, Dr Penn gazed at a fiercely coloured oil painting that covered one wall. In the painting, Dr Penn, bleeding profusely from a cut under the eye, her hair shimmering, her shirt tastefully ripped to reveal an appropriate amount of heaving bosom, crawls through heavy gunfire to retrieve a wounded colleague.

‘I had that poster on my wall when I was a teenager,’ I said.

‘I’m not surprised,’ the guide said. ‘Isn’t she pretty. People say they are doing terrible things over there but I don’t believe a word of it. Do you?’

A faint smile appeared on Dr Penn’s face. She’d had the same smile when she watched the massacre of the villagers. ‘I guess we’ll never know,’ she said.

I PULLED UP outside a pleasant-looking sandstone house in the leafy suburb of Dulwich.

‘Are you going to let me go home?’ she said.

‘You can’t go back. You don’t want to go back.’

She nodded, wearily.

‘Anyway,’ I said. ‘You haven’t recovered. Not yet.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ she said, but her shoulders slumped and I knew the last of her resistance had dissolved.

‘So, what now?’ she said.

‘Now, I’d like to tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a woman called Mavis Fletcher. She was an English schoolteacher. In certain lights, from certain angles, she bore a passing resemblance to the famous revolutionary Dr Penn.’

‘No.’

‘Hear me out. Mavis and her late husband, Lester, could not have children. After Lester died of a heart attack, Mavis kept working for a couple of years and then took
early retirement. Mavis now lives a comfortable life. Everybody says she is the friendliest of souls. And gentle. She wouldn’t hurt a fly – that’s what people say.’

‘These friends, are they old friends or new friends?’

‘New friends. Her old friends think she’s dead.’

‘All of them?’

‘All of them... Mavis lives in renovated house in a tree-lined street in a quiet suburb called Dulwich. She takes pleasure from the accessories in her new kitchen and the heated floor in the en suite, not to mention the simple joys of running water and flushing toilets. And she is free.’

‘Free? It sounds like a prison to me.’

‘But the room in the centre of Mavis’s house is a study. She enters this room through a hidden door in the back of her walk-in wardrobe. In this room, she can be herself. Her real self. In this room, she can keep mementos and personal papers and books.’

‘Does this room have a window?’

‘No window. But it might have a skylight.’

‘A skylight that opens?’

‘I’m sure that’s possible.’

Dr Birde sighed. ‘Okay, okay… do you have the key? If this is no prison, I can let myself in.’

‘The fridge is full. I’ll visit in the morning.’

She was halfway across the lawn, junk mail from the letterbox under her arm, when I got out of the car and called out to her.

‘You pushed him. Didn’t you?’

‘What? Pushed who?’

‘You know what I’m talking about. Him. The Birde.’

She peered at me suspiciously and then smiled a full, open smile. ‘I guess we’ll never know,’ she said.

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Patrick Allington’s debut novel, *Figurehead*, was published by Black Inc. in 2009 and longlisted for the 2010 Miles Franklin Award. His short fiction has appeared in *Griffith REVIEW*, *Meanjin*, the *Big Issue* and *Southerly*, and his criticism has appeared in *Australian Book Review*, *The Advertiser*, *The Monthly* and the *Weekend Australian*. He is commissioning editor for the University of Adelaide Press and blogs at http://patrickallington.net.au/slapdash.
The two judges sat on an enclosed veranda. The apartment at the end of the peninsula looked over the West River to a row of ugly factories on the Chinese side. This was the less fashionable side of Penha Hill, although when Judge Luis Oliveira moved to the apartment sixteen years earlier the all-night ferries from Hong Kong would dock at the wharf below. The view then had a certain charm. There were no factories across the river in those days, and no need for the security bars welded across his windows. Now all Macau’s manufacturing had moved across the border and he had to protect himself from the city’s only remaining industry – gambling and its criminal baggage. Civil servants in the higher echelons occupied mansions on the other side of the hill, which enjoyed the quieter view over the Pearl River. Quieter, until the recent massacre of the bay.

On this Tuesday Luis had invited his colleague Henrique Gomes to lunch. They looked out through the bars.

‘It could rain again,’ Luis said, his voice rising to a hopeful note. He did not want to go to the opening of the new High Court.

‘Even if we have a typhoon it looks bad for us not to appear,’ Gomes warned. He cut himself another slice of goat cheese. At forty-five, he was the youngest of the Portuguese judges on the bench, though more than a decade older than any of the new Chinese judges. He reminded Luis of Pavarotti, not only because of his thick black beard but because he was large and loud. Gomes was generally amusing company, though on this occasion Luis wasn’t looking forward to spending the afternoon with him at the opening.

What a spectacle it would make, all the territory’s judges revealed for what they were: sycophants, fawning around the president. Each of them, Gomes included, wanted to impress the president of the republic with their great importance in this tiny fishbowl. They sought to improve their prospects for senior appointments when at the end of the year they returned to Lisbon.

Luis had no intention of returning. A few experienced judges would still be needed here.
He’d been invited by members of the Sino-Luso Joint Liaison Group to stay on after the handover to train the new Chinese judges. This was a task the current government had overlooked. Until a decade ago, no one had seen the need for a law school in Macau. After all, all the Portuguese interested in studying law went to Lisbon. Now the first crop of local Chinese students had graduated from Macau’s new law school. They were young and too inexperienced to make sound decisions about people’s lives. Someone had to help them. Someone had to instil in them the beauty of the law. To administer Portuguese law, you first had to understand how Portuguese live in the world. They had to learn to think like Portuguese.

He would begin with lessons on how to recognise good wine. They would listen to music, talk of history and literature, and come around slowly to other things that mattered. Only when his students had the feeling for what it was to eat and breathe and live in the Portuguese world would he mention the law.

He would prefer to stay home today, listen to opera and finish the good bottle of red wine he had opened.

As well as cheese, the plate he had put out for lunch held Parma ham, chouriço, artichokes, olives and, in honour of Gomes, pastéis de bacalhau, small parcels of creamy shredded cod with a crisp deep-fried crust. Luis watched his colleague slice yet another hunk of cheese and add it to his plate. The meal was too small for him. It was Luis’s habit to eat only a light lunch, but Gomes needed something more substantial.

‘This is too simple,’ he apologised, making to rise from his chair. ‘I will cook pasta.’

Gomes laughed. ‘Sit, sit, sit. I don’t need to add extra weight to my judgements.’ He patted his stomach. ‘I worry about you, Luis. You should find a nice girl to cook for you. It doesn’t matter, Chinese or Portuguese.’

‘I like to cook. I’m good at it.’ He gave Gomes a satisfied smile.

LUIS HAD DISCOVERED that many nice women in late middle age liked to take cooking classes. He had flown to Paris, Japan and Thailand to attend cooking courses, as much to meet pleasing women as to learn new culinary skills. Women who liked to cook generally liked to eat too. He’d had no trouble at all finding pleasant dinner companions, some of them willing to try something more adventurous than coq au vin or sushi rolls. He had no great passion for any of these women, but they made life alone tolerable. He was happy alone. Besides, Luis had felt more alone in his marriage.

He’d had just one great love in his life. That marvellous and brief affair ended his marriage. He’d made the mistake of following the tradition of men in his family and marrying a much older woman. The partnership had worked the way he expected it
should until, on a trip back to Portugal, he met a Brazilian dancer in the transit lounge of Frankfurt Airport. He changed his flight and flew with her to Paris, abandoning the Lisbon leg. It was the only time in his life he’d made a decision that he didn’t weigh.

Thinking back to that affair, he had no regrets. It was the only time he’d lived what he thought of as a Big Life. The small things no longer mattered, the daily realities that ground him down, the predictability of an otherwise scripted life. In the end, though, all it freed him from was his wife and beautiful children. She took his son and daughter and returned them to Portugal. Often Luis reminded himself that he believed in just punishment.

These days his life and needs were not complicated. With a good job, relieved by the occasional cooking holiday, he was content. Besides, a little discomfort made life more interesting. Although, of late, he had read and pondered the poetry of Camilo Pessanah, the lawyer-poet who’d lived in Macau and was buried up the road. His poems spoke of men who ‘wander and languish in distant climes’.

Gomes wiped his mouth with a napkin. He went on, heartily, ‘You are not yet fifty, Luis. Yet you are like someone ready for the grave. Look how you live! This is too sad.’

The room, Luis admitted, was charmless. Uncluttered to the point of bare. But he had no need to fill the apartment again with plants, art, antiques and Chinese rugs. Why recreate a life he’d already lived? His furniture now was government surplus: two green vinyl sofas, a dining table of unremarkable wood, half a dozen hard-backed chairs, two of which they now sat on, and an ugly glass-fronted cabinet that held small gifts people gave him which he wouldn’t otherwise know what to do with. On display was a plastic model of a British Airways plane, a cut-glass rooster that caught rainbows of light, three small porcelain figurines of the Chinese immortals, a tiny Eiffel Tower and the three bronze monkeys: speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil. On either side of the cabinet were the speakers of his most valued item: a good stereo. Playing as they ate lunch was Turandot, which he had flown to Beijing to see performed in the Forbidden City.

‘It’s time you found somewhere more cheerful,’ Gomes suggested.

But Luis was listening to the music. ‘Perhaps the opening won’t last too long,’ he said. ‘It is time we went, if we must. Are you ready?’

LUIS LEFT THE room to slip on his judicial robe. When he came out, Gomes was also robed, examining himself in the hall mirror. He held his head high in profile, as if practicing a theatrical role.

They went outside and waited in the wind, their robes flapping around them. The security guard spoke into a walkie-talkie to summon Felix, the driver. Luis’s silver-grey Mercedes pulled up beside them.
Felix drove them down the hill, past the governor’s gelato-pink house and onto the Praia Grande. It turned onto the new reclamation and squelched across the mud to the new High Court building. Fellow judges lined up along the road, their gowns lifting and flapping like crows, greeted them as they stepped out.

Behind his colleagues a group of photographers and journalists blocked the entrance. One reporter, a big man with unkempt straw-blond hair, came towards him. ‘Asia Review,’ he introduced himself. Luis was stuck between Gomes and the road, unable to move quickly along.

‘I’d like to get your opinion, judge, about Beijing’s challenge to Hong Kong’s court of final appeal?’ The reporter had him pinned. ‘How will that affect Macau’s legal system?’

‘The situation is different,’ Luis said. He was conscious of his rusty English and wished Gomes would move his large frame out of the way so he could move on. ‘The same thing can’t happen here.’ He was ninety-nine per cent sure of this.

In truth he knew that Beijing’s intervention in the case in Hong Kong was serious, but he was conflicted. He expected that Macau’s incoming administration would ask him to sit in the new court. He didn’t want to jeopardise his chances or cast doubt on the authority of the court. In any case, the situation in Hong Kong, which involved mainland Chinese overstaying their visas and claiming residency rights, was unlikely to happen in Macau. ‘People go to Hong Kong because they want to make more money,’ he told the reporter. ‘Here, they make less than they can on the other side of the border.’

‘Unless they’re involved with the casinos and Triad activities,’ the reporter said.

The sound of the motorbikes saved him. The official party was arriving. Luis excused himself and, with a swish of his robes, joined the other members of the judiciary lined up like birds on a wire. He knew his evasion reflected poorly on him. Later, he’d like to find the reporter and explain the situation more thoroughly, he told himself, following the procession into the building.

The parade continued down the centre aisle of the courtroom, around the horseshoe-shaped bench where he and Gomes took their seats on tall black leather armchairs behind brass plates engraved with their names. Only then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his reading glasses. In front of him was the president’s speech, which he began to read. By mistake they had given him the English version.

Luis ran his eyes over the text. It announced the final separation of the courts from Portugal.
...I signed the decree published today in the Diário da República which as from June 1 gives the courts of Macau full and exclusive jurisdiction. This guarantees that the residents of this land will find not only sufficient supervision of their rights in Macau and its courts but justifiable motive to trust them, as it is the courts that will guarantee that Macau is a territory under rule of law and its unalienable underlying principles. These courts are, and will continue to be, served by judges who are independent, irresponsible and unremovable…

‘Irresponsible!’ Luis began to chuckle. He pointed out the mistake to Gomes. ‘It should say not responsible, which is different.’

Gomes frowned, reminding Luis of the solemnity of the occasion.

Luis caught the eye of the reporter from Asia Review. He nodded at the paper and winked.

In slips of the pen there was often a grain of truth.
AFTER the initial impact, Eiji’s feet slide backwards, carving tracks through the salted clay until his toes grip the straw bales at the edge of the ring. Everything stops, as if he has thrown out an anchor. His skin is wet with sweat. Cameras flash at the edge of his vision, and the air shudders with the cheers of ten thousand people.

The two wrestlers pause. Their bellies jam against each other and their chests heave. Fat undulates across the muscles in their backs and thighs. Their cauliflower ears are mashed together. The sweet stink of his opponent’s perfumed hair fills Eiji’s nostrils. He cannot see very much, just flashes of colour. He concentrates on the position of his hands. One grips his opponent’s belt behind the man’s kidney but the other is flailing in space, trying to grab hold of something.

Four seconds have elapsed since the bout began. Eiji has only a few moments left to decide whether to throw the fight.

EJI’S EYES ARE closed behind an eye mask. He cannot see the dawn light seeping round the edge of the curtains but he can guess the time from the faint clatter of the first trains rattling toward Ryogoku Station, three blocks south. The stable master doesn’t require him to be up for another two hours but he can’t get back to sleep. He lies on his futon, limbs flung out in a star shape, belly rising and falling, bare feet poking from an enormous lilac futon comforter. His fingertips idly trace the bumps in the tatami mats.

Strapped up with white tape, his shoulder is sore where it struck the floor of the National Stadium at the end of yesterday’s bout, but he is unconcerned; he is still young enough that injuries heal quickly. The slow-motion replay confirmed that his opponent struck the floor a fraction of a second before him; the backward pivot throw – utchāri – is a crowd-pleaser, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, and spectacular to watch. That he nearly lost doesn’t matter: he posted his eighth win of the fifteen-day event, and that is what is important. He is guaranteed promotion at the next tournament in Osaka, even if he loses today. His career has just taken a huge step forward. But he still can’t sleep.
Eiji gives up and rips the eye mask off with a sigh, farting loudly. Hauling himself up, he kicks off the comforter. He barks through the closed door of his room at the apprentice appointed by the stable master to be his personal servant.

‘Oi! Tea!’

Startled, the kid cries out apologetically and his footsteps go thudding down the corridor.

Since his promotion last year to the maku-uchi division, Eiji has joined the top five per cent of professional sumo wrestlers and now has his own room a world away from the desperation of the trainees’ communal dormitory. The distant clink of crockery downstairs in the kitchen tells him the junior wrestlers are awake and preparing the meal that all in the stable will consume after morning training. Other new recruits will be training by now, having risen in the freezing pre-dawn to steal a few minutes in the practice ring before scurrying out to buy cabbage and onions and tofu for the chanko pot.

Eiji sits cross-legged on the tatami, staring at the list of scheduled bouts for the final day of the tournament. He has never wrestled the man he will meet today but, although Eiji is less experienced, he knows he can take him.

His adversary must agree; he has offered Eiji money to take a dive.

The opponent is ten years Eiji’s senior, and his body will not hold up much longer. The older wrestler has been moving up and down the ranks of the maku-uchi division for years without winning consistently enough to crack the ceiling to champion status. Small, muscular and quick, he can outmanoeuvre many of the slower, fatter wrestlers but he lacks the bulk to resist the best wrestlers, who are both large and fast.

Eiji examines his opponent’s record for the tournament so far: seven wins and seven losses. If the man loses today he will be demoted for the next tournament, and if he drops out of maku-uchi to the juryo division below, his salary and status will plummet. Now thirty, he has been competing in the maku-uchi division for a decade and Eiji knows a return to the junior ranks would be humiliating for a man his age. His longevity has made him popular among sumo fans – more so than Eiji – and if he falls to juryo he’s likely to have no option but to retire and save face.

Eiji lies back down on top of his crumpled comforter, arms crossed behind his head, and stares at the ceiling.

The moral implications of the offer do not bother him and he doesn’t give a damn about his opponent’s career. But there are other practicalities to consider. He worries about how he will be treated by the man’s fans, other wrestlers and the media if he terminates the veteran’s career this afternoon. Eiji has already done enough to win promotion for the next tournament. To beat him when the older wrestler needs only
one more victory to avoid demotion may be seen as somehow...uncharitable. To be branded an upstart might cost him the likeability factor he’ll need to get invited to appear on television variety shows. But an accusation of cheating could end his career. What puzzles him most is the suspicion that many of his supporters, even the stable master, seem content for him to lose today.

There is a quiet knock at the door. He grunts once in reply and slides the match list out of sight, beneath the futon. He sits up and gazes at nothing as his valet enters and places a cup of steaming tea on a small wooden platter. Eyes on the floor, the boy withdraws. Eiji ignores him.

Eiji thinks of his home in Tottori City, just west of the sand dunes that stretch along the northern shore of the Sea of Japan. He is not homesick; he thinks of home to remind himself how much better off he is here, how far he has come. Tottori is the stick he beats himself with. He doesn’t visit home much these days, but each time he returns he finds Tottori has bled out a little more. Each time, heavy steel shutters are drawn down over more of the shops that line the main street. Each time, Sanyo has announced another downsizing of its local factory; much of its production has moved to China, where costs are lower. His old schoolmates – those that haven’t already left for better prospects in Osaka, two hours to the south – like to be seen with him in the local bars, but after he leaves for Tokyo he knows they turn the channel to the baseball or soccer. They would sooner listen to their iPods and play video games than watch sumo, which to them is as irrelevant as the imperial family. Sumo isn’t cool anymore, hasn’t been since Chiyonofuji retired, when Eiji was not yet two.

Eiji lifts the hot tea to his lips and sips before placing it carefully back on the platter. Elsewhere in the building, other wrestlers are stirring. A toilet flushes at the end of the corridor and a door slams.

For the first time in years, perhaps for the first time ever, Eiji wonders what his father would think. His father is a farmer who grows nashi pear, sometimes some watermelon too. He adores sumo, is addicted to the national sport for all the ritual and pomp that adorns it, the icing on a magnificent cake. During tournaments, his mother switches the television to NHK in the early evening even before his father returns home, wizened and smelling of fertiliser, so he can hear the broadcast from the front door as he wipes the mud from his boots.

Eiji preferred basketball to sumo at junior high but didn’t excel at anything and had no aspirations. By the time he was fifteen he stood five feet nine and weighed eighty kilograms. When a recruiting agent from a Tokyo stable insisted he could be good at something, it was a novel concept. The decision was easy. Sumo wrestlers on television looked dignified and noble, and he knew some of them got to marry singers and actresses. And in the end, sumo just looked better than the prospect of life in Tottori. His father was ecstatic, like a giddy fan drunk on shōchū.
Months later, his father’s gap-toothed grin flashed into his mind as he sat on the earth, sweat streaming down his face, his legs spread wide. Older wrestlers pushed down on his back until his chest touched the earth and the tendons along the back of his legs erupted in flame. The iced cake Eiji’s father so admired was made with salt.

JUST AFTER SUNRISE the training room has the air of a jail cell: dirt floor, windowless walls, dim light. The straw bales of the practice ring embedded in the floor in the centre of the room are old and discoloured. Four sets of rusted dumbbells lie against the wall, and a timber pillar juts from the floor in the corner like a torture chamber prop.

Eiji arrives at the practice ring before any of the other senior wrestlers have descended from their rooms. During tournaments the morning training session is light; the stable master prefers the wrestlers take it easy and nap before their bouts in the late afternoon. After two-dozen leg lifts, Eiji spends a few minutes whipping the backs of four junior wrestlers with a bamboo cane as they take turns shoving each other around the ring. He bellows at them to thank him for toughening them up, and they comply in muffled grunts. He hits them again. Their coarse black belts are filthy from rolling on the dirt floor, and their sweaty chests and shoulders are coated with dirt. Their straggly hair hangs loose, not yet long enough to tie up into a topknot. Some are barely fifteen. They are still pristine and undamaged, features blurred and indistinct like soft clay figurines yet to be sculpted. Bellies have not filled out and hardened. Noses are not yet broken, and there is hardly a dislocated shoulder among them.

Eiji doesn’t recognise himself in them, although he was one of them barely four years ago. He has shed his skin, metamorphosed, and his memory has thinned out, fading like a quilt washed too many times. He now inflicts as much torture upon the youngsters as he received, because he is expected to. The memories of his apprenticeship are as faded as the cigarette burns the stable master left on his thighs.

Eiji started winning when he managed to disconnect from the pain and go somewhere else in his head. There was nothing spiritual about it. When the stable master struck him over the head with a beer bottle, he chose to feel nothing, just to get through the training session without puking. The following day he was unaware of the welts the stable master had raised on his back when he pushed an older, senior wrestler out of the ring twice in successive practice bouts. When he did it a third time the air tasted different; the universe had shifted a little. He felt he was sliding to a dimension in which indifference to pain and humiliation lit the path to a better place. Within eighteen months he had taken the juryo division championship and advanced to the maku-uchi division.
‘You know,’ said the stable master, ‘I never actually thought you’d make it this far.’ He was almost sheepish.

‘I know,’ said Eiji.

A former yokozuna, the stable master has lost little weight since his retirement twenty years before, and what muscle he once carried has dissolved into fat. He is deflating slowly, as if through a tiny leak somewhere on his body. His tightly curled perm makes him look like a gangster; all he needs are the mirrored sunglasses and white shoes. He tells a visiting television crew that physical punishment of young wrestlers is part of tradition, and necessary to instill spirit. One day the stable master crammed a handful of sand into Eiji’s mouth, called him a lazy sonofabitch, and walloped his calf muscles with a baseball bat until Eiji could not walk and had to be dragged to the dormitory. He lay on his futon waiting, wondering if he would know when spirit had been instilled.

AT EIGHT, GAO appears in the practice room and the trainees scurry from the room like cubs that fear being eaten by an older member of the pride. Misery seems to drip from their naked backs, their pain lingering in the air like mist.

Gao is from Mongolia. His full name is longer but neither Eiji nor anyone else in the stable can pronounce it. At twenty-one, he is a year older than Eiji but entered the stable at the same time and reached maku-uchi three months before him. Eiji likes him because he has worked harder than most of the Japanese recruits, tolerated more abuse and doesn’t complain as much. He has a robotic determination that Eiji admires. Like Eiji, Gao cannot afford to fail at sumo. There is nothing to go home to.

Three years earlier, Gao had been baffled when one of their fellow trainees, a Japanese kid, had buckled under the humiliation of the daily bullying and deserted the stable. They had woken before dawn to find his futon rolled up and his belongings gone.

‘Why would he want to leave?’ he asked Eiji, perplexed.

Eiji shrugged. ‘The training, this lifestyle.’ He gestured around vaguely with his hand. ‘Couldn’t take it, I guess.’

Gao shook his head slowly and turned his black eyes on Eiji. ‘It’s pretty good here. He should try spending a little time in my village in Mongolia.’

Eiji looks up at Gao, remembering how spindly he had seemed when he first arrived at the stable. Nearly two metres tall and now weighing more than a hundred and eighty kilograms, he reminds Eiji of the colossal statue of a guardian deity he once saw at the gate of a Buddhist temple, scowling down at mortal visitors
with fists clenched. His smooth white belly hangs out over his belt but is rock-hard to the touch. Gao spends hours in the weights room after the wrestlers’ post-lunch nap.

‘One day I call my friends in Mongolia,’ he says, ‘tell them all to come here and be sumo wrestlers, then we take over the place.’ His face is impassive for a moment, his eyes hooded, then he barks out a huge laugh. His eyes seem to disappear between his eyebrows and cheeks, and Eiji can see the back of his throat, pink.

‘So how much has he offered you?’ Gao’s voice drops a notch but is not quite a whisper. Gao does nothing quietly.

Eiji frowns and glances around at the door. They are alone. He briefly considers feigning ignorance, but Gao’s black eyes are boring into him. Eiji drops his gaze and mutters a reply.

‘Hmm.’ Gao smiles again and tilts his head to one side, as if mildly surprised. ‘Sounds about the going rate. It’s no insult, at least. He’s taking you seriously.’

Eiji wonders if he should be pleased.

‘What if somebody finds out?’ Eiji asks.

Gao seems astonished. ‘You’ve got to make it look convincing, haven’t you? Then nobody will say anything.’

‘But people will know,’ Eiji says.

‘They’ll suspect. They always do. But they still won’t say anything if you do it right. It’s important to pretend. Everybody has too much to lose. Besides’ – Gao shrugs – ‘it can’t hurt to have somebody owe you one, in case you’re in a tight spot yourself one day.’

Eiji stares at the Mongolian’s back as Gao lumbers away.

UNDER THE LIGHTS at the National Stadium, Eiji’s adversary has both hands on Eiji’s belt, but can’t push him backwards any further while the younger wrestler’s toes remain jammed against the straw bales at the edge of the ring. The kimono-clad referee hovers around the pair, egging them on, his shrill voice cutting through the storm of noise from the crowd. The red and white tassels on his fan swing back and forth, and his black gauze hat bobs in the air like a tethered bird. The two men remain locked together, immobile. Each second drags out, longer than the last. Eiji senses his opponent is waiting for him.

Eiji’s eyes focus for a moment and, over the shoulder of his opponent, he can make out the portraits of past yōkozuna, most of them long dead, hanging high on
the far wall above the highest row of spectators. They glare contemptuously
down at him, bellies thrust forward, shoulders pinned back. Eiji shuts his eyes and
decides this will hurt less than other things he has had to go through.

He is going to have to make this look good.
THE rigger coiled the line of wet rope around his hand, reeling in the sea crate they were using as a makeshift raft. ‘Look up,’ he said, pushing down on one edge of the crate, seesawing the man lying on top.

‘Where are we?’

‘Look up.’

The man, a journalist, sank lower into the boards of the raft, tightening his grip on the stupor he had resigned himself to. ‘Why don’t you just tell me?’

Ahead, across the last stretch of marbled ocean, a wall of cliff signalled their destination. Beneath it stretched a long line of beach sand, pale in the morning light. ‘I can see the beach,’ the rigger said.

The journalist turned over, revealing his mask of sunburn. ‘How far is it now?’

The rigger counted back from the shore in sets of waves. From the cliff top a litter of grey angles shot into the sky: seabirds scattering across the noisy water like loose change. A fragment of the flock landed in the nearby swell.

‘Are they birds?’ asked the journalist, edging to his elbows.

‘Yes.’ The rigger stared into the thin bead of the nearest bird’s eye. ‘Seagulls.’

‘A good sign.’ The journalist reached over his head and separated his shirt from his poached skin. He lay back down and, moments later, sat up. ‘Is it empty,’ he asked quietly, ‘the beach?’

The rigger looked along the coast. A single bone-white tree stuck out against the dry brush marking the escarpment, its featureless limbs needling upwards like a hand signalling stop or hello – he couldn’t tell which. An unremarkable coastline, he thought. Dry, aching sand interrupted by confusions of limestone rock and flotsam. ‘It looks empty,’ he said, eyes fixed on the leafless tree. The tug of the rope brought him back into the water. ‘We’re close now,’ he said, easing two fingers between the rope and his ringbarked flesh. ‘We don’t need the crate.’
‘Just a bit further,’ said the other, as he touched the pulpy mess of his eyes. ‘Anyway, I’m not sure I would know which direction to swim in.’

The rigger glanced again at the man’s face. ‘It’s not so bad,’ he said. He could smell the ripening stink of diesel on their skin. ‘Your eyes, I mean.’

‘Are you a doctor?’

‘No.’ The rigger looked at his shrivelled hands.

A wave passed through looking for the shore, the crate lazy on its back. The birds moved off towards the tip of the beach, where lines of surf gathered to pound the scrap yard of jagged reef. In the opposite direction, the coast softened into emerald shallows and immature belts of reef and weed. The sands of a new country moving between the rigger’s toes. He dug in his heels, gathered up the slack, and headed towards the weed.

THE RIGGER PULLED the raft between the mats of weed that pricked the surface of the water. ‘Do you think they’ll look for us?’ asked the rigger.

‘Not for a while,’ said the journalist as he retrieved his shirt from the water and covered his face, letting the wet fabric seal around his mouth like substitute skin. ‘There’ll be plenty of others to deal with. We need to move off the coast, though. They’ll watch the beach.’

Each drag of the ocean current rearranged the mossy continents around them. The rigger waited for the weed to shift its weight away from his legs. ‘Are you worried?’ he asked.

‘Worried about what?’

‘About the boat.’

‘What about it?’

‘The rest of them. What’ll happen to them.’

‘Don’t take on other people’s pain. You can’t fix it.’

‘I guess so,’ said the rigger, starting to move forward again. He came up against a perimeter of reef running parallel with the shore and pulled the crate along it, trailing his hand until he found the grip to lift himself clear. But once he was up out of the weed, the weight on his feet forced a barb of rock through his skin and he dropped back down, the salt tingling the wound. Through the glassy water the slit was as pure and neat as a petal. His blood pillowed out in a fine mist. ‘There’s a reef here,’ he said. ‘It goes between us and the shore.’

The journalist sat up, not aware that he faced the opposite direction. ‘Did you try to climb it?’
‘Yes.’ He gazed down the shelf of reef to where it tapered off into a clear run of water, the shore maddeningly close. ‘We can go around.’

‘Good.’ The journalist leaned over the edge of the raft and passed his hand through the water, cupping it. ‘You said we were close, though?’ He spooned the seawater over his face.

‘Very. I can see where the wet sand dries.’

‘You can? That’s good.’

As the rigger walked them alongside the reef, he called out the details to the other man: the ivory sand netted with charcoaled weed; driftwood piled near the point – more than enough for a small fire. There were glimmering pools where the tide had come and gone and left part of itself behind. And back against the cliff face, a dark fissure where they might seek shelter.

‘And there,’ said the rigger pointing, ‘part of the cliff has come away and there is a slope. It is steep, sure, but I should be able to climb it.’ As he talked, the reef beside them broke away and now only a short stretch of shallow water led up to the dry sand. ‘I’ll start a fire,’ he started to say, before another detail drew his gaze. Near the point, some distance from the shattered crest of the scarp, a sharp finger of shadow that he had somehow missed. Clear now against the jet blue sky, a black mark rearranged itself in minute detail. The triangle of an arm shading an unseen face, looking out across the ocean.

THE RIGGER SURFACED behind the crate.

‘What is it?’ the journalist cried. ‘Are we there?’ The crate took a sharp turn in an unfamiliar direction.

‘Quiet!’ said the rigger, doubling his grip on the rope. ‘There’s someone there.’

‘There is? Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ said the rigger and put his hand on the other’s shoulder, forcing him back down. He moved to the edge of the crate and peered beyond at the shore. The silhouette had gone from the crest. Relief broke over him. And then he caught a flicker of movement closer to the shore: the sharp lines of a figure coming towards the water.

‘Have they seen us?’

‘Yes.’

‘How far are we?’

‘Too close.’ The rigger dragged the crate up the face of an oncoming wave, forcing the journalist to grab hold to stay on.
'What are you doing?'

The rigger blew out his cheeks as he urged the crate over the lip. 'We have to go,' he said, and a moment later they fell into the dead air behind the wave, landing heavily.

'Stop!' the other man shouted. 'We can't go back.' The next wave broke over them, the journalist stunned by the unexpected drenching. 'Where are they now?'

'Him,' the rigger corrected, glancing over his shoulder. 'He's waiting.'

'Waiting? Just one?'

'Yes.'

'Can you see what he's wearing?'

'A hat.'

'What kind?'

'Square. With a wide brim.'

'Does he have boots?'

'Yes.'

'Trousers?'

The rigger squinted against the nickel flashes jumping off the waves. 'Yes.'

'A uniform, then.' The water seemed to close shut around them. 'How could they have found us so fast?' Another wave, larger than the rest, rolled forward, its foamy lip gleaming under the sun. 'What is he doing?'

'He's just standing there,' said the rigger, as he dug out a clump of weed and flung it away.

'He hasn't come into the water?'

'No.'

'He won't come in the water. He doesn't have to.'

The ocean threw another wave at them. 'What should we do?' asked the rigger.

'Nothing.'

'Is that possible?'

'We're safe as long as we don't go to shore,' said the journalist slowly.

'How do we know?'

'When it is dark…'

The rigger glanced up at the sun and shivered. 'But it's only just finished morning.'

'When it is dark,' the other continued. 'We have a chance.'
AS THE DAY edged forward, a steady wind built beyond the point and eased itself across the calm bay where the two men waited. The rigger removed his shirt and covered his face as the sun stood over them. ‘Do you think…’ he started, before the other man cut him off.

‘Maybe.’ The journalist touched his face. ‘There were a lot of us. Who knows. Somebody would have come. Eventually.’

‘There was a woman. I saw her go down into the galley. Did you see her?’

‘No.’

‘I saw her go down there. Just before it happened. I didn’t see her come up.’

‘Don’t,’ said the journalist, putting away his fingers. He sat up. ‘Tell me what our friend is doing now.’

The figure on the shore had sat down and placed his boots beside him in the sand. ‘He’s getting comfortable,’ the rigger said as the figure uncapped what looked like a bottle and poured a small amount of clear liquid onto the sand, gesturing towards them. It’s cruel,’ he said. ‘To wait like that. I wish he would just come in and be done with it.’

‘Do you?’

‘I don’t know…’ The rigger felt the weight of the sun bearing down on his poached skin. Above on the cliff, the limbless tree flared white in the noon sunshine. ‘Do you think there will be others?’ he asked.

The journalist took the shirt off his face to answer. ‘Can you see a radio?’

‘No.’

‘Then no. If there was a radio, he wouldn’t stay. He would just push a button and…’ He snapped his fingers.

‘Maybe.’ The rigger crossed his arms on the side of the crate and lay his head down. ‘I don’t think I will ever sleep again,’ he said, wiping his eyes.

‘It will pass.’

The rigger looked across at the other man’s face. ‘Maybe.’

THE SEAGULLS LOOSED themselves from the panicked surf and rallied above the two men, motionless on the strengthening wind. ‘We need to move,’ the journalist called out over the jumpy sea.

The rigger looked ahead down endless reflections of the beach. The figure was still on shore, his face lost in the deep shadow cut by his hat. ‘Where to? Where do we go now?’
'Further down the coast. As far as you can go. Maybe he will tire and give up.'

But as the rigger dragged them along the bleary shoreline, the figure effortlessly matched their pace. *There's only one of him*, the rigger thought as he glanced behind him. The journalist rocked back and forth with the swell, his head tilted like a bird listening for the next point of attack. The burden of the crate tugged at the rigger’s mind and he picked absently at the knot securing the rope to his wrist. ‘I’m sick of being a dog,’ he said, and bit down on the knot, trying to pry it loose. ‘The water is shallow. I can guide you.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the other, ‘if only my leg…’

‘Your leg?’

‘I was afraid to mention it earlier. I think it’s broken.’

The rigger waded to the side of the crate and, as if sensing the need for inspection, the journalist carefully rolled up his trouser leg. A mast of bone struck through the skin. ‘Is it bad?’ he asked, turning his face away. ‘I thought you would leave if you knew.’

The rigger stared down at the gleaming bone in disbelief. ‘It’s not good,’ he said softly.

‘I could try standing.’

‘No. You can’t walk,’ he said, and shuffled the man’s trouser leg back down. On the shoreline the figure had paused to watch the exchange. ‘We should keep going,’ he said. On the beach the figure kicked the dry sand from the soles of his boots and walked on.

‘HE’S MOVING AHEAD of us,’ shouted the rigger, his voice quavering in the deep afternoon chill.

‘He’s impatient. He’ll tire soon, I’m sure.’

The word released a wave of exhaustion over the rigger. ‘He will?’ With each new set of movements the rigger witnessed another line of skin stripped from around his wrist. Further up the beach the figure stopped and was peering out at the water ahead of them. *Now he stops*, the rigger thought. The figure looked at the surf and back at the men, then took off his hat and waved.

‘I think he’s signalling us.’

‘A trick,’ the journalist said angrily. ‘I told you. He’s reached his limit. Not long now and he’ll go off and get help and then…’ He put out his hand and felt for the other man’s shoulder to squeeze it. But the space between them was too great and instead he groped a passing wave. ‘We’ll have our chance,’ he finished.
A thin voice bounced towards them from the shore. ‘He’s shouting now,’ said the rigger, trying to make out the stray vowels.

‘Good,’ the journalist replied, ‘let him shout all he wants.’

As the men walked forward the figure waved with more urgency. ‘He really looks bothered about something,’ said the rigger, nervously coiling the rope around his hand. He looked about him in the water. ‘I wish we could hear what he’s on about.’

‘It’s a trick. He wants us to go closer.’ The journalist tugged lightly on the rope, hoping to snap the rigger out of the lure.

‘He’s pointing at the water now,’ said the rigger.

‘Is he?’ They both peered out ahead of them.

‘Maybe we should stop for a while.’

‘And let him rest? No, I don’t think so.’ The journalist edged forward. ‘Can you see anything?’

The rigger stood on his toes, but the way ahead was locked beneath the sea. ‘It all looks the same now.’

‘Nothing, then?’

‘Nothing.’ The rigger stepped forward and, save for a tightening of the ocean current, there was no change in the water. He reeled in more slack on the rope, bringing the crate close beside him in case he needed to board it quickly. A few steps on and the seabed dropped sharply, the water edging up above his shoulders. He loosed himself from the ocean floor and swam on.

‘What’s happening?’ the journalist called out. The current doubled its pull. More shouts ricocheted off the waves.

‘It’s okay. The water is just deep here,’ said the rigger as he fumbled through the frenzied swell, surprised at the weariness of his limbs. ‘I’ll have to swim us across.’ He looked towards the shore where the figure had suddenly shrunk. ‘I think we are drifting,’ he shouted over the din of the surf. His wrist called out sharply as the journalist grabbed hold of the rope and tried to reel him in.

‘Are you there?’ shouted the journalist into the space between them.

‘Yes,’ he called back. The shore thinned out as they drifted further away. ‘The current,’ he gasped, struggling to stay above the chop, ‘it’s so strong.’ He rolled onto his back and used his legs to kick them back in the direction of the beach. But the power in his limbs quickly gave out, his muscles cramping. He decided to rest for a moment and sank under water. When he kicked back towards the surface he came up against the underside of the crate, the journalist’s shadow sprawled atop. The rope became tangled on a snag in one of the boards and the rigger tried again to loosen the knot, his numb fingers refusing to follow instructions.
‘I can’t see you,’ the journalist shouted above. The air in the rigger’s lungs ran out. A whine filled his ears as he fought back the impulse to breathe. ‘I can’t see you!’ screamed the journalist again, his voice as dim and pointless as the choke of a dying engine.

THE FIGURE ON the beach waded into the knee-deep water and called to the body lying across the raft. There was no movement. He went in further and dragged the crate back to the shore, up to where the sand was dry, and turned the body over and stood back. There was breath, light and ragged. ‘Water,’ the journalist said. But it was in a language the figure couldn’t understand. ‘The other one,’ he said, ‘my friend.’ He reached out and grabbed a clump of dry sand, rubbing it between his fingers. His hand touched the firm bind of the rope that was fixed to the boards still and he reeled it in, the end of it frayed and loose.
Ringing on a Sunday your
London doorbell holding the book
our friend Max insists
you must have by hand
I find you like Everyman rumpled
between one week’s end and
the start of the next, forgetting
yesterday was Paris and tomorrow
your flight
to Sydney. So while Lizzie
(whose beauty Time won’t lay
a hand on) cooks lunch, you tell
of Boxing Day in
Melbourne stuck in a lift
while peritonitis did its worst;
and of your friend Dutton
whose suitcase-size memoir made
none of the cuts you’d told him
were needed, but recommended
itself as recommended
by Barry Humphries –
and how he died on the
doorstep (more or less) of the Ex
he’d treated so badly.
Teller of tales you are, with
sharp eye, quick tongue, and such
a sense of pace and timing
one is held at the crossroads,
and the end when it comes is
worth the wait. Finding you
in this gap between
appearances I see that nothing
is not an appearance –
you have become your Art.
We hug at the door because
men our age are prone to deaths
on doorsteps, and who can say
when the lift will stick again and
the last curtain come down.

CK Stead is one of New Zealand’s foremost writers. He is the author of eleven novels, two story
collections, fifteen poetry collections and six non-fiction works.
'THIS is how it was, when I saw you for the first time.'

When Mackenzie Lachlan butted up against the side of Australia he was twenty-five, with nowhere in particular to go and no one in particular to be. Walking up from his ship’s anchorage on the too-bright, too-blue harbour, he turned at the sound of a Glaswegian accent – more angular than his northerly Scots, but still friendly for being familiar – and found himself talking to a rosy man called Ewan who’d been ashore a month and found a job on the railways. ‘It’s way away, laddie,’ he’d said to Mac Lachlan, ‘out in the space where your family must be from,’ and he punched at his shoulder and laughed as Mac frowned. ‘A river called Lachlan, man; I’m taking engines out there, out to the plains.’ And Mac Lachlan, who liked a good story, thought he’d like to see the river that ran along in his name.

At the yards, with Ewan still pummelling his shoulders, he was told there were no jobs for the run, but – a nod, a wink – he might as well travel out with his mate. ‘Off we go, lad,’ Ewan boomed as he took a train – and Mac – out through the city’s suburbs on their first run. ‘But y’picked a lousy place to come looking for work, or a lousy time.’

They left the coast the next day, the engine hauling them south and west through green space, blond space, dust-dry space and white space that seemed to hold pure emptiness. ‘And you’ll see your family’s river,’ Ewan promised again and again, and Mac laughed too, this great space and all its potential blossoming inside him. He’d dreamed of places this open, this broad, this flat and inviting. This warm – teothadh, his gran would say.

The ranges and the hills, the slightest inclines and hummocks behind them, he could feel his imagination stretching out, wider and wider, trying to span not just this intoxicating stretch of open land but the very curve of the earth he could make out at its edge. He saw birds high in the air; he saw animals bounding along beside the line. He saw mirages and shadows that loomed where there was nothing to throw them, and strange figures that seemed to rise out of the tiny gap where the dirt met the sky, that ran with the train awhile before folding themselves back into
that liminal rut. He saw different shapes picked out in stars, and different colours marking the phases of dawn, day and dusk. And when he arrived, he rode out to see this river that was somehow his, its water khaki, its edges soft with khaki gum leaves. He even passed a tiny place that bore his grandmother’s Christian name, Maude, to match the river that marked her surname, Lachlan. And he took all this to mean that this was the place, in all of Australia, that he had been meant to find.

Back in town, he put out the word for any work and was told to meet with a carpenter early the next morning for a roofing job that was needed in a hurry.

He slept at the pub, his dreams spiked by tall thin figures that darted, all silhouette, along the horizon. And when he woke it was still dark, a frost on the ground, and the sound of snoring all along the hall. He washed his face, shaved, wetted down the worst of his hair, ate porridge in the pub’s kitchen, drank a huge mug of tea, and was out in the clear, cold air as the first birds began to call.

He liked the town, the way it pressed together in a single clump rather than spreading wide in all the room it had. He liked the sound his boots made on its gravel roads. And he liked the river, had sat by its waters and written back to his gran on the other side of the world. Now, he followed the instructions the publican had given him, humming here and there, singing now and then – a snatch of ‘Speed Bonnie Boat’, a premature snatch of ‘Morning Has Broken’ – and entranced by the possibilities of all this dry space.

He did miss the coast, that wide surge of the water and the way its blue ran out towards the blue of the sky. He was an ocean boy – the cuan, he loved it – mucking along beaches for whelks and crabs, out on trawlers whenever he could, and swimming out as far as the grey Scottish water would let him, peering down at what was underneath. His gran had told him so many stories of the ashrays and the selkies and the blue men of the Minch, and he had wanted any glimpse of them he could get.

How cold it was, how cold, as Mac Lachlan swam through his childhood until his fingers were numb, then his hands, then his arms right up to his elbows. He never managed to stay in longer than a few minutes, shivering back across the rocks and home to find his gran with the fire high and the soup on the stove. She’d warm him up – teothadh – and fill him up, and tell him the next round of stories about the water lovers to make sure he wanted to go back.

But the water that lapped around this country, the water his ship had sailed through into Sydney: that had looked warm, welcoming, like you could swim for days towards its horizon. Whatever he found here, in this inland, with names that he recognised, and a span of sky as wide and as blue as the sea itself, he still wanted to get back to the shore, to the sand and the ocean. He wanted to see what its water held.
'My bonnie lies over the ocean,' he sang softly, as he rounded the last corner. He'd reached the edge of the town without realising it and before him lay the shape of a house, low and spreading, with its roof, triangular and partial, open to the morning. The road dipped down a little towards it, the first brightness of sunrise beyond in reds, pinks, golds: he was walking directly east. 'My bonnie lies over the sea.'

'Good morning, Mr Lachlan,' a voice called from up in the air, and as he looked to see where it had come from, he made out two figures perched on the roof's narrow frame. 'The kind gentleman in the public house said you'd be along early in the morning.' It was an odd accent, soft, with the first syllable of each word leant on a little, like a strangely rhythmic march. It was unlike any he'd heard before, and as his eyes adjusted to the changing light he made out the man, tall, fair, with a tanned face and a thick blond beard and moustache.

'Mr Kalm,' he called, 'I hope I've not kept you,' and as he raised his hand to wave it shaded his eyes for a moment, so that he saw her just as the ball of the sun came over the crest. Anikka Kalm, standing next to her father, watching the earth roll forwards into a new day. Tall and fair, like her father, her feet were set apart to balance on the beam – he thought, she'd stand well on any ship – and the bright rose-gold of the moment seemed to make her shimmer with light.

'The first time I saw you,' he would whisper to her afterwards, when he told her the story, 'it was just getting light. I took you for part of the sunrise.'

But at that moment, in that morning, he simply stood and gazed up at her while she stood above him and gazed out towards the sun.

Oskar Kalm swung down onto the ground, talked about frames and nails and slate and hours, and Mac agreed to everything, paying no attention to the conversation. He heard himself say, 'I'm more an ocean man than a carpenter'; heard Oskar say that one would have to be an ocean man to find oneself so far from home and in this part of the world at all. But then the shape of those words, too, disappeared with the sound of Anikka's voice.

'I've never seen the ocean,' she said, her voice halfway between the roundness of her father's Nordic accent and the stretch of every Australian voice Mac had encountered in this place so far. 'It must be so wide, so blue, so...' She fumbled for a word, fingers worrying at the air as if she might find it there. 'So wet.' And she blushed.

'My daughter,' said Oskar Kalm, 'was born rudely landlocked with my ending up here.' He swung a belt, a hammer, towards his new assistant, calling up to the girl that they needed to be getting on with the job they were there for. And Mac watched as she swung herself down – bending easily to grip the framework near her ankle, dropping down until her toes found the shape of a window below that, and then springing back to arrive standing, next to him, and almost as tall, on the grass.
'Mackenzie Lachlan,' he said, holding out his hand.

‘Anikka Kalm,’ she said, shaking it firmly.

‘I could take you to see the ocean one day,’ he said, and blushed.

‘I could come with you to see that,’ she said, laughing – although he wasn’t sure if the laugh was for the suggestion of the ocean or the red flush on his cheeks. ‘It’s nice to meet you, Mr Lachlan. I’ll bring some lunches out later in the day.’

And as she strode away, it seemed that the sun kept pace with her movement across the ground. Her blond hair was so bright it looked lit from within.
WE didn’t know so much; we knew how to touch. We unpacked our boxes in the box on the cliff. We thought we had time. We stayed for a season. Salt crystals bigger than sugar cubes formed on the spoons. Stereo circuitry went mushy in that air, where the light refracted and sparkled, stark and saline. The waves boomed into sleep until dreaming was booming. Often all this would continue till morning. We would wake entangled; but you were already commencing the elsewhere. You were starting to audition for untangling.

We knew warmth, and we had history: long before, when our friend the architect had said, ‘Terrain One Situation,’ we said, ‘What do you mean?’ and she said, ‘There is nothing between you and the weather. Nothing built.’ I felt the top of my head come off at night, because space grew so greatly, and drowned in that roaring, as the sandstone wore down one electron a decade, and the difference between inside and outside was warmth.

The earth spun on its axis; for one whole season you cooked. The guests all said you loved me. When the wind whipped the windows, the windows went white with the spray. That the world could contain the taking of tea with the watching of whales: we knew that kind of giving, and rejoiced.

Do we know each other? you had once said in a supermarket aisle. We do now. I live on the edge of the world; would you like to see more? In winter, nothing between ourselves and Antarctica. Gratitude at high volume; even the roaring surf was drowned in that. Nothing but wind, nothing but windows vibrating. The endless humming soothed us into sleep. The bed so bunched and rumpled with love.

But we were racing to get ready. You had to audition for the thing that would come. I thought that architecture and landscape had finally made way for the eternal; you thought you were in a bowl of wind. When the windows salted over, you thought you were in an invisible bowl of wind.
For a season we thrived, and all went thrivingly. In the rugging-up we knew that always later on, after the adventures, after the flat tyres and the high-wire acts, all that endless world outside the story: after everything, in the unrugging, when only unrugging was left, we were home, and our clothes fell soundlessly to the floor. For the world outside the story was left behind. One season. It was all one season there.

One to laugh and one to lose you, and white sheets of water sprayed up from the rocks when the southerlies blew. What was it with space? You auditioned for untangling. We were weatherless, and the waves boomed as we slept.

Always a return, always to a headland. We were mostly weather station, though sometimes, the sun slanting through us as through an hourglass, we were lighthouse too: we gathered light. It is not a lost place if you settle, I said. We would juggle the groceries. We would meet time and circumstance. The difference between inside and outside was warmth. For a very long season, even as we slept, the sun was coming, always first, to us. It is not a lost place if you settle.

This was the companion piece for a photograph by Stuart Spence, *Tonight Show Over Claude*, exhibited in 2009. The photograph shows the interior of an apartment perched on a cliff at Ben Buckler Point, in North Bondi. When Luke Davies was shown the photograph, he realised he had lived in the apartment years earlier.

Luke Davies divides his time between Los Angeles and his home town of Sydney. He is the author of the novels *Candy* (1997), *Isabelle the Navigator* (2000) and *God of Speed* (2008), all published by Allen & Unwin. He is also a film reviewer and the author of five collections of poetry, the latest of which will soon be published. *Candy* was made into a film by Neil Armfield in 2006.
THESE were three things I knew then that time has never erased.

We made a triangle, back when we lived on the curved banks of the Murrumbidgee. My mother was the angle on the top, and my father and I were the two beneath.

‘Ten minutes,’ she’d warn us each night at bedtime.

My father carried books into my room, and spread them over my bed as an eiderdown. I picked each one up, in turn, and considered. My fingers crept between their covers and opened them wide. Some of his books were so old that the dye on the cloth had seeped into the pages, making them colour and curl.

‘Choose,’ he said.

Our favourite was about a child who got so cross with his mother that he was sent to bed without supper. My father read how Max’s room turned into a forest and an ocean tumbled by. Max sailed off to the forest where the wild things are, and conquered them, but found that what he wanted most in the whole world was to be back home. My father liked to pretend he didn’t remember what happened next.

‘Did Max find his supper waiting for him?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Cold?’

‘Hot!’ I liked to do the punch line.

Once my father was reading, I examined him, soft in the light of the lamp. His blue eyes swam across the lines of words and down the pages. One hand cupped the book and the other motioned in the air. He knew the best parts of the story by heart; he’d smile at me as he recited them. He gnashed his terrible teeth and roared his hideous roars, but I drew close – for his scent was the musk of paper, print and glue. I rested my head on his chest, over the beat of his heart, to slip into the book.

‘Time’s up.’ She banged on the door.
We rolled our horrible eyes.

Books were his passion. Rare books, curious books. He kept these mostly in the lounge room, on shelves of honey-coloured wood that soared to the ceiling. In the morning, the light spilt through the bay windows and made the words on their spines blink. I looked for him there when I woke.

He didn’t say good morning. He read to me from whatever book he held. He might greet me with a line of poetry. Or mathematics. A rhomboid is a four-sided figure with oblique angles and opposite sides of unequal lengths. Botany or biography. This was the first thing I knew for sure. When I was five, my father read books to me each morning and night.

He mused about the classification of his books, weighing up the pros and cons of various systems: alphabet, subject, colour. He explained to me that in China, at the start of the third century, books in the Imperial library were divided into four subject categories, each bound in a specific colour. I heard the concern in his voice; he wanted the books he loved to be kept safe.

He had one precious manuscript: a Book of Hours. He would part its creamy pages to show me the text. Capital letters were illuminated in red and sepia, with brushed-gold highlights. ‘I could shelve it by period.’ He positioned the book up high. ‘Or with the art books. Here. Or over there, with books the same colour.’ My gaze followed his hand, so I could see his quandary. But the book was bound in rough brown leather: I knew I could track it by its spine alone.

He liked one volume that had full-colour plates of iridescent fish and blue endpapers, with two bands of silver curved across its spine. He had a battered edition of Struwwelpeter with a picture of a tailor snipping off a boy’s fingers with his scissors. He kept this one low in the Fairytale section. Or up high, sometimes, with the other green books. I rescued Struwwelpeter once, spotting its olive spine in a teetering pile of books outside by the rubbish bin.

‘Too many books,’ my mother said with a shrug. ‘They’re heaped by the bed. They’re strewn in the hallway. Au revoir.’ She liked to speak French because she was a dancer.

WHEN MY FATHER left for work, I guarded his collection. Outside, I heard the girl next door chanting. Her rope swished; her feet slapped the concrete in time to the beat. Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep / And doesn’t know where to find them. The tut-tut of toe shoes drifted from the shed, where my mother taught dancing to girls in black leotards. But inside the lounge room, all I could hear was the sweet silence of books waiting to be read.

Every night, when my father returned home, he selected a title for himself and lifted it down carefully from its resting place on the shelf. He settled in his chair,
smoothing the book open with his palm. His long fingers traced the edges of the covers as the text drew him in. From the floor where I sat to watch him read, I saw stray columns of books rise like a forest all around us and grow, and grow. When he sighed, I imagined leaves dropping from the pages of his book and falling on his lap. If he frowned, I saw tangles of roots and deep, dark shadows. I heard the rustle of paper as he turned the page.

‘Dinner time,’ my mother sing-songed.

MY FATHER AND I sat on either side of the laminex table while she sat on one end. First we formed the triangle, but the curtain was open and my mother looked out. Bruce was pushing a hand-mower, shredding green grass. He was the teenage boy from next door with the throwback Elvis haircut and shirt tied around his waist. I saw his arms and face were tanned a rich brown, but his chest was an unexpected white.

We made a rhomboid.

My mother grasped the stem of her wine glass and drew an arc in the air with it. Her arm was long and bare. When she tilted her head back to swallow, the tracery of veins at her throat was visible. Her backdrop was the wall behind, hung with photos of her dancing. In one she was dressed in top hat and tails, complete with twirling black cane. She wore a red flamenco dress in another, fingers snaking above her head.

When my father moved over to the window and snapped the curtain shut, we made a triangle once more.

‘Eat your carrots, Eve. They’ll make your eyes bright,’ he said.

I thought of the Polaroids on the side table in the lounge. I liked the one of the three of us laughing together on the banks of the Murrumbidgee, where the water flowed dark and deliberate.

‘Louis.’ She indicated her glass was empty.

‘Remember when we went down to the river?’ I pointed in its direction with my fork. I’d watched her shake her wet hair out in the sun, sparks of water piercing the air.

She glanced back at the curtains.

I repeated my question, quietly.

‘Remember you got bikinis, Mummy?’

I saw she wasn’t listening; she dangled her glass. I turned to my father to see what to do next.
‘Pass it to me.’

My mother passed her glass to him across the table. He clutched her wrist hard, skin and bone.

‘Pay attention to us.’

‘Let me go or I’ll scream.’

I held my breath until he loosened his fingers, and she put her glass down to nurse her red wrist. We watched when she walked over to the window and ripped the curtains wide. My fork slipped into my bowl; I heard its faint ceramic bleat.

IT WAS OUR job to dry the dishes after dinner. I climbed up on the wooden stool so I could reach. I lifted the warm, sudsy dishes from the rack and passed them to my father.

‘Don’t let them drip,’ my mother said.

When it got down to the cutlery, my movements faltered. I left the tongs until last. First I passed the tablespoon, then the spatula. The knives. A fork.

‘Hurry up, Eve.’ She undid her apron.

I lifted the tongs up high in two hands like an offering. Ta da.

My father whisked them from me and brandished them, dripping. That was my cue to wriggle down from the stool. I backed away; he followed.

‘I’ll roar my terrible roars…’

I shivered with delight.

‘Don’t rev her up,’ my mother said.

I stepped sideways; he did too.

‘I’ll show my disgusting claws…’

I turned and ran, screeching. He pounded after me on heavy monster feet.

I sprang through the door. He snipped the air. He chased me out of the kitchen, through the lounge, up the hall. He snapped at my nightie. KitchenLoungeHallHaHa. Round and round we went. HallKitchenHaHa. The walls became trees. The carpet, green moss. My heart careered in my chest. He doubled back and growled.

‘Stop!’ I squealed.

He stopped. ‘I’ll eat you all up.’

But I was Max, and I said, ‘N-o-o-o.’

He hurled the tongs in the soapy sink water.
‘Ten minutes,’ my mother said.

I moved back down the hallway and in and out of the bathroom to clean my teeth; through the kitchen to kiss my mother, who was drinking her wine; and into the dark of my room, where I waited for my father to read to me.

NEXT MORNING, THE lounge room was empty. My father was not waiting in his chair with his book. I could see gaps in the poetry section, and also in fiction. His favourite titles were gone from the shelves. There was no copy of Struwwelpeter. No Book of Hours. The long, drawn curtains muffled the sun.

‘Where’s he gone?’ I plucked out a random book and held it to my ear. ‘Where is he?’ From the pages, no answer. ‘Where is he? Where is he?’ He had left Where the Wild Things Are behind on his chair. I pelted down the hallway to the bathroom, Sendak in hand. I hammered on the door. My voice bounced from lino to wall. ‘Where is he?’ Kitchen. HallKitchenHallOh. KitchenLounge. LoungeKitchenBedroom. Hurry. Hurry! I searched his wardrobe. I checked beneath his bed. Behind his curtain. Under his blankets. BedroomHall—

‘Eve.’

My head snapped towards the dining room door. My mother used the mantelpiece in there as the barre for her warm-up.

‘Where’s my father?’ I rushed through the doorway.

‘Où-est mon père?’

‘Where is he?’ I gnashed my terrible teeth.

‘Grand plié,’ she announced, bending both knees deep.

‘Wh-e-e-re?’ I howled.

She tilted my chin with her finger until our gaze met.

‘I won’t lie to you, Eve. He’s gone for good.’

I saw a circle of bruise round her left eye, but that didn’t matter.

‘He never said goodbye.’ I jerked my head free.

‘Frappé,’ she announced, beating the floor with her foot.

‘If you don’t say goodbye, that means you come back.’

‘Pirouette.’ She held my gaze for each spin until she couldn’t hold it any longer, then whipped her head back and held it again.

‘I’ll wait for him.’ I knuckled the tears out of my eyes. I’ll wait. I said it each time she spun back to me. I’ll wait. Over and over. I’ll wait. I knew he’d come back; I knew
it for certain. I'll wait. I'd find him there in his chair with a new book wide open on a page with pictures lit by the sun. One of his hands would cup its spine; one would motion in the air to the rhythm of the words that he read. I'll wait.

‘Changement,’ she announced. ‘Plié. Jump. Switch.’

Her feet and her French made me so dizzy I fell.

‘Changement.’ My mother sprung high, feet flipping in midair.

I'D SEEN QUICK shifts in my parents' sleeping poses. On restless nights, I tiptoed down the dark hall and nudged their door open. First they slept together on their sides, like a crescent. My father's stomach pressed into my mother's back; their hips and knees bent softly together. One of his arms curled under her, holding her close.

In the morning I mimed the shapes they made in their sleep.

‘You were like this, Dad.’ I curled my arms.

‘Even in my sleep I hold her close.’

‘He crushes me.’ She sighed.

One night they slept in a polygon. His arms were folded to his chest, while hers were up like a crown. The bedclothes had fallen low so I could see my mother's petticoat and her legs, bent like she was running. His legs ran after her.

‘We were chasing our dreams,’ he explained when I described what I saw, but she said nothing.

One morning I told them they'd slept with their backs to each other, on opposite edges of the bed.

‘Like parallel lines that don't touch?’ My father looked at my mother; she shrugged.

The last night when I slipped out of bed to watch them, rain was falling – a soft, whispering rain, like pages turning. A dog howled far off in the darkness. I pulled our book out from under my pillow and tucked it under one arm, slipped out of bed and peered down the hallway. Door handles glinted in the half-light. Ten steps. I paused to listen. Twelve steps more. The door of my parents' room was ajar.

My father sprawled on his stomach in sleep, arms and legs flung out over the bare expanse of mattress in a star shape. My mother stood at the window in her slip: pearly moonlight shone through the open curtains. I followed the slow circles she drew with her hairbrush, up through the air, down through her hair. The fingers of her free hand eased one thin strap over her right arm, then her left, until her petticoat slipped down to her hips. The brush traced more circles. Up through the air, down through her long hair. The Sendak thudded to the floor. She turned to me,
startled, nipples red. When he sat bolt upright in bed, she made a quick cross on her chest with her arms and backed into the window. I fled.

After he’d gone, my mother drank her morning tea in his lounge room. She sat in his chair with a china cup in her left hand, the saucer in the palm of her right. When she raised the cup to sip, it made a snout on her face. Her yellow wolf eyes watched over the top. I crossed the floor in my bare feet; those eyes, that snout, they tracked me.

‘He’s not there, Eve.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Oubliez-le!’

I shut her door behind me and scanned the bedroom for clues. Her hand mirror, brush and comb floated across the glass top of the dressing table on doilies. I saw her bottle of Diorissimo, with its crystal stopper to touch to the pulse. Under the bed I found the Polaroids in fragments in a lacquer box: half of his mouth, his fingers, my legs and the riverbank. I hid pieces of him under my singlet. I scrawled through drawers until I heard the doorknob turn.

‘Eve. Play outside.’

Outside was bare grass, except for the Hills Hoist, arms stretched wide. She wouldn’t let me leave the yard, but there were vantage points. I climbed the back fence to scan the surrounds for the blue Farnes bus; I heard her say on the phone that my father had left on it. I saw the outline of the bus depot on Hearnes Hill from the top of the fence. I cupped my hands and called, ‘Cooee!’

‘Eve. Breakfast.’

When I finished my cereal, my mother made me sit at her dressing table to brush my hair for a hundred strokes. My legs dangled from the stool. I saw the brush in her hand rise and fall in the silver mirror; I counted. One. Two. Three. Four. Up and down, and up and down. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. A sparrow landed on a branch of the tree in the front yard. The boy from next door watched the window. I knew he shouldn’t do that. Sixty-nine. My mother’s wrap grew loose and gaped on the upstroke. I knew it shouldn’t do that. Seventy-six. I glimpsed her white throat. Ninety-nine. Her armpit.

‘One hundred.’

I made a beeline for the curtains and dragged them shut. She split them back open.

‘Go to your room, Eve.’

I took to watching the street from my window when I was kept inside, boxed tight between curtain and glass like an ornament. I was on the lookout out for the blue bus. It might stop; he might exit.
The girl next door ate an icy pole, watching her brother watch our house. I jiggled my legs when they ached from being bent under me. I wanted to get inside our book and wait for my father there, in the forest hung with vines. I turned the pages and buried my face in his scent. Crossed my legs, folded them; splayed my feet out, held them together. The grey rows of houses bruised the soft sky, birds on powerlines turned black before dusk. *I'm waiting.* I whispered to him. *I'm waiting for you.* I whisper this still.

There are but three things I know for sure. The year I was five, my father read to me last thing at night and first thing in the morning. He disappeared before I turned six. The body’s geometry never lies.
CEDRIC Marchant left England for the first time at the age of forty-one. He travelled to France by train and boat at the insistence of his sister, Freda, who had gone to live in the Dordogne with a painter from Leeds who called himself Roberto.

Freda, who was forty-three, seemed to think that Roberto was a younger man. How she could tell was beyond Cedric because Roberto had a shaven skull and an orange beard covered his face up to his small close-set violent eyes.

The hairy artist came with two offspring, a cheerful boy of eight and a fat teenage girl with rings in ears, nose and lower lip. She communicated by snarling and was not seen to eat anything except a breakfast cereal called Poppo, taken directly from the box. Marchant avoided looking at her lest this appear provocative. He enjoyed his short stay abroad, although he formed the impression that there were more French people living in his own village of Lower Roebuck than in the hamlet of La Bastide-St-Maurice.

When he arrived home, Cedric found the letter from Australia waiting. It was addressed to the school and re-addressed by Mrs Cuthbert in her slashing, vindictive hand. Marchant was surprised that she hadn’t returned it to sender marked: NOT AT THIS ADDRESS.

He dated Mrs Cuthbert’s antagonism from the day he politely declined an invitation to speak to her book group on the subject of the postmodern English novel.

‘I didn’t know there was a postmodern English novel,’ he said. ‘Isn’t modern now?’

She stared at him. ‘For some reason,’ she said, ‘one expects senior English masters to be abreast of their subjects.’

Cedric saw the hand of the treacherous sycophant Mathis in this. ‘Mr Mathis,’ he said. ‘He’s your man. Person. I saw him with a copy of The Line of something. Won the thingy prize. Least Resistance?’
'It's called The Line of Beauty,' Mrs Cuthbert said, showing her upper teeth and a broad vista of pink gum. 'I can see that you have no interest in widening the intellectual conversation.'

Cedric had no idea what the intellectual conversation was and he was sure that he would never get a word in anyway. But, because he didn’t like any exchange to end on a sour note, he tried to start a new topic. Mrs Cuthbert was determined to be offended, however, and he limped away.

Letter from Australia in hand, Cedric thought about the looming term at the Gollop School. The prospect gassed him with the same gloom and foreboding he had felt as a boy on the last day of the holidays. He went down the dark and narrow passage into the kitchen and sat at the table.

The envelope bore two bright stamps, Australian stamps, featuring a child’s drawing of a sheep and a cow. The animals were the same size. Had the faraway country produced a super-sheep? Or was it possible that the cows were smaller? The place was said to be very dry. It could be an evolutionary adaptation.

He opened the letter with the breadknife. Two sheets of paper with the letterhead:

Girton, Thomas & McGnarr
Barristers & Solicitors
St Arnaud VIC 3351

Dear Mr Marchant,

The occasion for this letter is the official declaration of the death of our client Mr Cyril Rodney Marchant, of Orpheus Downs Station, Victoria, Australia. Mr Marchant disappeared from his boat in the Gulf of Carpentaria in September 1999. He was then 76 years of age, divorced and without issue.

In our client’s will of July 1996, Mr Roger Marchant of Manchester or his oldest male descendant is named as the sole beneficiary of his estate. We have ascertained that the aforesaid Mr Roger Marchant is Mr Roger Clement Marchant, formerly of 23A Ludlow Street, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester, deceased 15 October 1998. Our inquiry agent informs us that you are the sole male heir of Mr Roger Clement Marchant and, therefore, the heir to Mr CR Marchant’s estate.

We would be grateful if you could forward to us certified copies of your birth certificate, passport, driver’s licence and any other documents that would assist us in confirming your identity.
The letter went on to say that Mr Cyril Marchant’s estate contained ‘the freehold of the unencumbered property known as Orpheus Downs; the freehold and contents of the business premises known as the Guardian building at 12 Carbine Street, Halls Well; $133, 654.00 dollars in cash on deposit at the Bendigo Bank, St Arnaud; a 1983 Toyota LandCruiser; a Jeep of unknown date; a Massey Ferguson tractor; a four-metre aluminium boat; two trail bikes; workshop equipment, farm equipment and sundries; seven firearms, thirteen fishing rods, assorted other fishing equipment, six saddles and assorted saddlery, household and personal effects, including furniture and books, a stuffed crocodile, nine large stuffed and mounted fish, and a buffalo head’.

It was signed BJ Thomas, LLB.

Cedric looked out of the window at a dismal scene: rain falling on a small overgrown garden, running down the roof of a listing shed held up only by ivy and other creepers.

A stuffed crocodile.

He was the owner of a stuffed crocodile.

And many stuffed fish. And a buffalo head. And guns, saddles, trail bikes, a LandCruiser and a boat.

Thank you, Uncle Cyril.

Cedric’s father had often spoken of his brother, always in tones of mild disapproval. Cyril had gone to sea at sixteen. As far as Cedric knew, he never came back. He could clearly remember his father reading out letters from Uncle Cyril, commenting as he went:

‘Dear Roger (no comma) Hope this finds you and your’s (apostrophe mistake) well. Im (no apostrophe) on a ship on the Sydney Yokohama (no hyphen) run and generally (spelling mistake) living the life of Riley (spelling wrong, no comma) at least when Im (no apostrophe) on shore (no punctuation) nudge nudge wink wink take my meaning (no commas).’

Cedric’s father’s occupation as a typesetter and proofreader had given him an eye for lapses in spelling, syntax and punctuation. Every evening, Wally Marchant brought home copies of The Times and the Daily Telegraph. After supper, he sat at the kitchen table, glass of Hinchbottom’s Old Tawny Port to hand, and examined the newspapers line by line, column by column, crying out at a discovery of a mistake or infelicity.

‘That’s a bloody who, not a bloody that. Tory illiterates. Born to bloody rule, the buggers don’t even have a grip on the English language. Come here, boy. Look at this.’

Marchant had always sat with his father at the table and done his homework. His sister, Freda, always sat in the front room, watching television.
One hundred and thirty-three thousand Australian dollars. How much money was that?

And a station called Orpheus Downs, Victoria, Australia. A station. He liked the sound of the word.

O Lord, could he stop teaching at Gollop’s?

Well, why not?

Marchant felt a surge of joy at the prospect of never again driving up the Gollop School’s dripping avenue to park the Austin A40 on the balding gravel behind the toilet block, of never again tiptoeing fearfully past the headmaster’s office, of never again opening his own cell-like chamber’s door to release the sad smell of a suitcase closed for fifty years.

Cedric got up, paced the room. Goodbye to trying not to offend people: the flushed and venomous headmaster; the dreadful Mrs Cuthbert; the parents who somehow believed that paying school fees made him responsible for turning their dim offspring into what Mathis called ‘fluent communicators’; and Mathis, the oleaginous assassin.

Could he do it? Could he write a letter saying that he would not be returning next term? Gollop’s was the only job he had ever had. It was the only school that would give him a post when he left York with his miserable second-class degree. He was offered a term’s teaching, then another, and another, and finally a permanent position.

Resign? Oh yes he could. He got out a lined pad and dashed off a letter.

Dear Mr Purdon,

It is with pleasure that I inform you that I will not be returning to the Gollop School next term. My solicitors will be in touch regarding my entitlements.

Yours faithfully,

Cedric Marchant

He read the letter, put it aside, and thought for a while. Then he wrote another one.

Dear Mr Purdon,

It is with great regret that I write to inform you that, for personal reasons, I will not be returning to the Gollop School next term. I would like to say that my feelings towards you and the school are of admiration and gratitude.

My solicitor will be in touch regarding my entitlements.
Wally Marchant had always cautioned against bridge-burning. You never knew. You might have to ask for your job back.

Cedric put on his raincoat and walked down to the high street. In the butcher’s window, he glimpsed himself: thin face, wet seaweed hair, sad-dog look. He stopped, pushed his floppy hair off his forehead, lifted his chin, smiled the bold smile of an adventurer – a man setting out for Australia to claim his inheritance.

Going to Australia? What a lunatic idea. But looking at himself in the window, he thought, for the second time in half an hour: why not?

Cedric became aware of something ghostly beyond his reflection. It was the butcher, Bertie Stockton, inside the shop, moving his head and waving a hand like a fan of pork sausages.

Cedric passed on quickly, bought a stamp, put spit on his finger and transferred it to the stamp, pressed it down, went outside and, with a flick of the wrist, sent his resignation into the post box. Halfway in. He had to give it a little push.

Cedric walked down the street feeling like a free man. A man of private means. A man with seven firearms, two trail bikes and a stuffed crocodile.

CEDRIC HAD NEVER been on a plane before and, waiting to board, he felt a terrible anxiety. Scalp prickling with sweat, he was considering fleeing the terminal, going home, when he became aware of a boy in an Arsenal bomber jacket staring at him.

The brat had detected his fear. Cedric had much experience of this phenomenon among boys, the bullies. Without thought, he fixed the child with a gaze of pure slit-eyed menace.

The boy packed it in smartly, turned sideways and went back to his electronic game. Cedric found that his anxiety had abated, and then his flight was called. Rising, he thought of a line from Henry Esmond: ‘The wine is drawn, M. le Marquis…we must drink it.’

That was the spirit. Wine drawn, dies cast, swords unsheathed, Rubicons crossed, eggs scrambled. There was no going back.

Inside the plane, shuffling along behind an extremely fat young man wearing a slouch hat, stooping to avoid bumping his head, a child pushing at him, Cedric wished very much to go back. Given the chance, he would have undrawn, uncast, sheathed, uncrossed and unscrambled in an instant. It had never occurred to him that aircraft could be so frighteningly narrow, so crammed with people, so lacking in air.

He walked right past his seat and, panicking, had to fight his way back against the flow.
When he found his place, Cedric’s small but heavy bag fell on his head as he tried to put it in the overhead locker. He put it back and it fell on him again. The third time it remained in place. Tears of pain in his eyes, he was climbing over a fat man and a woman with a big head of frizzy blond hair to reach his window seat when his stomach rumbled thunderously in the way it always did when he was creeping past the headmaster’s study. Cringing with embarrassment, Cedric sat and tried to obey the instruction to fasten seatbelts. But he couldn’t find the buckle.

The plane would take off and he would be thrown from his seat. Cedric felt alone and scared, the way he had felt on his first day at school.

‘Jesus, I’m sitting on something…’ The woman put a hand under her right buttock and extracted the buckle.

Cedric took it gratefully and joined the two bits. Then he clasped his hands, put them on his chest, closed his eyes and tried not to think about the roaring engines.

‘I wouldn’t give a bugger if we crashed on take-off,’ said the woman.

Cedric was not cheered by this devil-may-care attitude to a flaming death. He wanted to be at home in Lower Roebuck, listening to the BBC early evening news on the radio, sipping a glass of the excellent homebrew of his neighbour, Mr Barrow.

‘Not a bugger,’ said the woman. ‘No, I don’t really care…’

‘This is my faith’s time of prayer for the souls of dumb animals,’ Cedric said without opening his eyes. ‘I would appreciate silence.’

He had no idea where the words came from but they shut the woman up until the aircraft was definitely airborne and on an even keel. Cedric opened his eyes. The woman patted his forearm.

‘You’re spiritual,’ she said. ‘I’m like that myself sometimes. I can feel at one with nature.’

How long did it take to get to Australia, thought Cedric. He should have asked the travel agent.

‘Jesus, I need to be spiritual, the stress I’ve had,’ said the woman. ‘Stress you will not believe.’

‘Stress,’ said the man on the aisle in a rich Irish voice. ‘My dear child, people often don’t understand the toll it takes.’

Cedric got a look at him. He was wearing a dog collar, he was a priest, a large Irish priest.

‘Father O’Brannigan,’ said the priest, offering his left hand to the woman. ‘Father Camus O’Brannigan.’
‘Cindy Tomacic,’ said the woman, taking his fingertips in her right hand. Cedric thought she was going to kiss the ruby ring on O’Brannigan’s middle finger.

The priestly hand disengaged and was offered to Cedric.

‘And you are?’ said O’Brannigan, a tilt of head.

‘Cedric Marchant.’

Cedric hated shaking hands. Wally Marchant once said that you could tell a lot about a man by the way he shook hands. Cedric had long regretted not asking him for more information. And this handshake was even worse than usual. He was being offered a big hand, palm down. Then it turned sideways. He gave it a glancing feel, knew he’d got it wrong again.

‘Welcome aboard, Cedric,’ said O’Brannigan, as if he owned the aircraft. ‘Off to the penal colony, possibly for the term of our natural lives.’


O’Brannigan said, ‘And a fine joke, my dear, but I sense pain in you.’

Cedric felt pain developing inside his head. He found a magazine in the pocket below his knees and opened it at an article headlined: ‘EXTREME HOLIDAYS: CRASHING THE FEAR BARRIER’. Was that what he had embarked upon?

‘Pain,’ said Cindy. ‘You are so on the money, father. Absolutely. I’m up to my…chin in pain.’

‘Unburden yourself, child,’ said Father O’Brannigan. ‘Cedric will be a sympathetic listener. In him I sense the compassion that only sufferin can bring. Not so, Cedric?’

Cedric didn’t respond, looked at his magazine. He would not be drawn into this.

‘Cedric?’ The name now had a steely sound.

Cedric’s resolve melted. He felt compelled to look at the priest.

‘You are a listener, are you not?’

Cedric tried to use his face to be non-committal without speaking. The Sri Lankan cleaner at Gollop’s had been able to say yes while shaking his head.

Failure.

‘Of course you are, Cedric,’ said the priest. ‘Today so few people want to form the bond of listenin.’

Cedric didn’t want any such bond. Father O’Brannigan was welcome to form it. Catholic priests were probably trained in bonding. The Catholic Church had always been a mystery to Cedric. As a boy, he had asked his father what the Holy See was.
‘Well,’ said Wally Marchant, ‘there’s the Holy See and the Holy Hear. Then there’s the Holy Taste and the Holy Smell.’

Cedric had probed no further. Early in life, he developed an instinct for when his father’s answers were not to be taken seriously.

‘Tell us, Cindy.’

Once Cindy got going, Cedric found himself caught up in her story. A New Zealand girl working in Brighton – well, she wasn’t exactly a girl – met an Englishman called Derek in a pub. In what seemed to be an indecently short time, he had moved in with her.

‘He wanted to be a personal trainer,’ said Cindy.

‘A what?’ asked Cedric.

They both frowned at him. Cedric realised that the question revealed his ignorance. ‘I meant to say where.’

‘In London,’ said Cindy. ‘He reckoned London was full of rich fat people who needed someone to kick their arses around a park. Sorry, father.’

Cedric nodded, no wiser.

‘Anyway,’ said Cindy, ‘he wanted me to be a partner in the business. I’d do the books and a bit of training. When I got fit. He was going to get me really fit.’

She was silent. Cedric peeped at her. She was looking at the roof.


Cedric looked at her uneasily. Rockpucks. Sexpeck. Mentalets. Bunchprussafudge. What did these terms mean? Was this why Purdon had dismissed Wayne Watkins, the sports master from New Zealand, after only five weeks at Gollop’s? Perhaps the boys couldn’t understand him. Although Mr Barrow had told a story about Wayne taking off all his clothes in the Prince of Orange and running around the green with only a rugby ball to hide his privates.

Father O’Brannigan was nodding at Cindy, interested.

‘I’m an idiot,’ she said. ‘I put in my six thousand quid.’ She sniffed, tried to smile. ‘All I had. That’s four years of savings. Thank Christ, I had the return ticket.’

‘Derek?’ said Father O’Brannigan. ‘Are you sayin…’

‘A total shonk,’ said Cindy. ‘Took off with the money. The cops say I’m number four. And that’s the ones they know about.’

She was really rather pretty, thought Cedric. She had a brave, sweet smile. ‘You poor dear,’ he said without thinking.
Cindy squeezed Cedric’s left hand and held it. He blushed but his attitude towards the long journey had improved immeasurably.

ON THE LAST leg of the flight, Cedric found himself reluctant to have it end. Once he had got used to the cramped space, he enjoyed being immobile and having food and drink brought to him. It reminded him of being mildly ill as a child, when his mother was still there to look after him.

He also found himself enjoying the company of Father O’Brannigan and Cindy. They included him in their conversations, asked him lots of questions, and they both told funny stories. Some of the priest’s were quite rude, which made Cedric even more puzzled about Catholicism. A film was shown about a man who turned into a woman but was actually still a man, which was interesting even if he didn’t catch all the jokes. But he laughed along with Cindy and Father O’Brannigan, and enjoyed being part of the laughing.

Cedric also listened through his earphones to music, some of a kind that he did not know existed. Some of it probably should not exist.

It was true, Cedric concluded as he savoured the last meal’s main course, Veal Krakatoa: travel did broaden the mind. The veal came with dwarf vegetables, something else new to him. He had not even reached anywhere and already he was broader in the mind.

‘Ceddy, I’m going to miss you so much,’ said Cindy, putting a hand on his thigh and looking at him with her big blue eyes. ‘Where were you when I needed a man I could trust?’

Cedric almost choked on the veal. Only his mother had ever called him Ceddy. ‘I’ll miss you too,’ he said before he could think about it. He felt a blush rising and it didn’t go away until they were almost on the ground in Melbourne.

After they had collected their bags from the conveyor belt and were looking after Father O’Brannigan’s while he went to the toilet, Cindy said, ‘Well, Ceddy, I walk from here.’

‘Walk?’

‘This’s where my return ticket’s from,’ she said. ‘And I don’t have a cent to my name.’

‘But you’ve got to get to New Zealand.’ Cedric wasn’t sure how far that was from Melbourne but the water in between certainly ruled out walking.

‘I’ll find a way.’

This poor wronged and brave woman, thought Cedric. All the way from England, she had known that she would be destitute when she arrived in Australia. And she had never breathed a word of it. She had joked and laughed and pretended that all was well.
'How much does it cost?' he said.
'The plane ticket? It's just a few hundred dollars. Four or five, I suppose.'
'Wait here,' said Cedric.
He had traveller’s cheques, it had all been explained to him. He found the exchange booth and cashed four hundred pounds.
‘Fifties okay?’
‘Fine.’
The man gave him far more notes than he expected. Cedric went a short distance away and counted out ten of them. That would pay for the plane ticket. He added two. Three.
He went back to Cindy. ‘Here you are,’ he said, offering the money. ‘Put this in your purse.’
‘Ceddy, don’t be a dill.’
‘You can repay me,’ said Cedric. ‘It’s just a loan.’
‘You darling man. I can’t.’
‘Yes, you can. Please.’
Cindy blinked rapidly, touched his cheek. ‘Well, I feel like blubbing. You are just so, just so…’
She took the money, put it in her bag, scrabbled around and found a scrap of paper and a pen. ‘Give me your address, Ceddy.’
Cindy wrote down Cedric’s address and then wrote hers on the paper, tore off the piece and gave it to him. ‘I’ll pay you back as soon as I get a job,’ she said. ‘And then I’m coming to see you.’
She took him by the shoulders and kissed him on the lips, a long kiss of a kind Cedric had never experienced. He felt weak in the legs, giddy.
And then she walked away. At the sliding doors, she looked back and blew a kiss and then she was gone. Cedric looked around to see if anyone was looking. He adjusted his trousers.
Father O’Brannigan appeared.
‘Cindy’s gone,’ said Cedric.
‘And isn’t that what always happens with the darlins,’ said the priest. ‘Love you and leave you. Not that I’d know anythin about it. Now, how’re you gettin to this property of yours?’
‘I thought I might take a train,’ said Cedric. ‘Or a bus.’
O’Brannigan laughed, slapped his shoulder. ‘Train? Bus? It’s out the back of buggery, man.’
'The back of…'

'Bloody miles from anywhere. No buses or trains out there. You’ll need a reliable vehicle, the four-wheel drive, the bullbars, the water tanks, the extra fuel tank, the snorkel exhaust for the flooded creeks. The flash-flooded creeks.'

Cedric had not considered anything like this. He had thought of Australia as a much bigger England. And drier. Much drier. With larger moors. As in the fabled Outback. A large and dryish moor was the way he had seen the fabled Outback. Sunny too. Obviously. There was no dryish without sunny.

'Well, I don’t know,' he said. 'I’m not a very good driver.'

'It’s an Austin A40.'

'A fine rugged conveyance. Perfect preparation. Now you want to be careful where you buy your vehicle, a world of sharks out there. I’m goin to do you a favour, put you on to a former parishioner of mine, honest as the Pope. Fella’s a beacon of honesty in a sea of duplicity.'

'Thank you,' said Cedric. 'I’m very grateful.'

'What I suggest,' said Father O’Brannigan, ‘is that I give the boy a ring, see what he’s got in stock. And if there’s a suitable vehicle, one of them never left the city, your doctor’s wife’s car to pick up the kiddies from school, we might be able to snap up a bargain.'

'Why would she need water tanks and extra fuel tanks to pick up the children?’ said Cedric.

'Very cautious people, doctors,' said Father O’Brannigan. ‘Take no chances with the nearest and dearest.'

‘And what are bullbars?’ said Cedric. ‘I don’t…’

'For the animals generally. There’s a massive death wish in the local fauna. They travel for days and weeks to find a road to die on. And the bigger ones, the hoppers and the like, well, they can take you out with them. Come right through the windscreen, a bloody huge great thing like a cow with a big tail. Lands on your lap.'

'I see,' said Cedric. 'Yes.'

Father O’Brannigan nodded. ‘Dangerous place, Australia. Probably better never inhabited. Now you put your bones down over there and I’ll be on the blower to this fella of mine.’

IT TOOK NO more than two hours for Cedric to be on the road to the interior, albeit in a state of high alarm.
Father O’Brannigan’s parishioner turned out to be a dark man called Shane, thin, with gold rings in his long earlobes and on his thumbs. Cedric had difficulty understanding him because it was hard to detect the words that conveyed meaning in the torrent of speech.

Motorlikeafuckformulaonematenevermindacoupleafuckinscratchesthisfuckinthing’ltakey atofuckinbuggeryandbacknofuckinprobs…

The yellow vehicle he brought certainly had the snorkel exhaust and the bullbars. It also had a roof rack reached by a ladder, a winch, four aerials, six spotlights, seats for at least a dozen, and far more dents and scratches than one would expect a doctor’s wife to incur on the school trip.

Cedric had looked helplessly at Father O’Brannigan. ‘How many children did the doctor have?’ he said.

‘A good Catholic family, practisin the rhythm method,’ said the priest.

‘It doesn’t look very…cared for,’ Cedric said.

The priest nodded in agreement. He took Shane aside and spoke to him in what looked to Cedric like a teacherly manner, finger wagging. Shane looked contrite.

When he came back, Father O’Brannigan said, ‘Nothin to worry about, my son. Shane’s been naughty, loves the vehicle so much he’s been takin it bush himself, runnin into a few trees and animals and the like. As you do. So he’s now givin a written guarantee, thirty thousand kilometres, any mechanical trouble, your money back, no questions asked.’

‘Um, how much?’ said Cedric.

‘He was askin twelve. Reckons the tyres are worth three.’

‘Three what?’

‘Thousand. Amazin, not so?’

‘I don’t think,’ said Cedric, trying to speak firmly, ‘that I can afford more than the tyres.’

‘Course not,’ said the priest. ‘Outrageous sum. I’ve had the word with him and it’s now eight thousand, your GPS thrown in.’

‘Your what?’

‘Magic of technology. There’s a satellite watchin over you. Tells you where you are at any given time.’

‘I usually know,’ said Cedric. He had no idea what Father O’Brannigan was talking about but it sounded vaguely religious.

The priest put a hand on Cedric’s shoulder. ‘Well, son, I’ve done my best to save you from the mongrels. But Shane’s got another buyer wants this magnificent vehicle so you’ll have to get a wriggle on.’
Cedric hadn’t bargained for his savings vanishing at this speed, but he went back to the foreign exchange desk, got the money and handed it over. Then Shane gave him a driving lesson.

‘Hop in,’ said Shane. ‘Giveyafuckindrivinlesson.’

Driving the old A40 around Lower Roebuck had no more prepared Cedric for the troop carrier than riding a tricycle prepared a toddler to enter the Tour de France. During the lesson, and afterwards, Cedric thought that he would have nightmares about the experience for the rest of his life: the unnaturally bright daylight, the deafening noise of aircraft seemingly passing metres overhead, the bumper-to-bumper traffic, the near-collisions – four or five of them – the yellow monster stalling, the hooting and the rude shouting and the gesturing of fellow road users.

And, all the while, Shane shouting incomprehensible instructions about changing gear. Cedric had not known that a vehicle could have so many gears and in such a complicated arrangement. Changing them required standing on the clutch pedal to get it to the floor and desperately pushing the gear lever around in search of the right place. Often the stick went into the wrong notch, engaging the clutch brought a loss of power or a hideous scream from the engine. Shane would shout, Cedric would panic, stand on the clutch pedal, try another slot.

Usually that too was the wrong move: the same things happened or the vehicle jerked and the engine stalled.

The end finally came.

Father O’Brannigan and his parishioner departed. Seated side by side, they waved as their bright-red open convertible spun its wheels, left marks on the ground and the smell of burnt rubber.

Cedric was now alone, blinking rapidly, a middle-aged English schoolmaster sitting at least four feet above the greasy tarmac of an Australian airport parking lot, sitting behind the wheel of an old yellow troop carrier with many aerials and spotlights and a ladder to the roof and a steel barrier before it, designed to protect the machine and all who rode in it from the country’s suicidal fauna.

In his recent decisions, he thought, was there the possibility of some errors of judgement? Too late.

_The wine is drawn, M. le Marquis…we must drink it._

Cedric studied the maps for a long time, plotted his course. Then he sat up straight, moved his shoulders, turned the key. The monster whined, shuddered into loud life. ‘Oh Lord, make haste to save us,’ he said and stood on the clutch pedal.
THE FIRST PART of the journey was much worse than Cedric had believed possible. He was bound for a town called St Arnaud, about two hours’ drive from Melbourne, but he soon despaired of ever reaching it. Across the city’s freeways he blundered, always in the wrong lane, always taking the wrong exit, always in panic, hooted at, many drivers making rude finger gestures at him, their faces contorted with rage.

After what seemed like hours, a hopelessly lost Cedric found himself in a street of low brick houses without fences, trim lawns, a suburban backwater, nothing moving. It was a cul-de-sac with a big circle to turn in. He turned, drove a short distance, pulled to the kerb and switched off. ‘Shit,’ he said, and put his head in his hands.

Knocking on the window.

Startled, Cedric looked into a face. He recoiled in fright, then realised it was an old woman wearing a knitted skullcap pulled down to where her eyebrows had once been.

She knocked again. He found the winder and rolled down the window.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she said.

‘Ah, nothing,’ said Cedric. ‘I’m just a bit, ah, lost. Yes. Lost.’

‘Lost? How can you be lost?’

Cedric thought that she had remarkably good teeth, wash-basin white, for someone so ancient. ‘Don’t know my way around,’ he said. ‘I’m English.’

The woman stepped off the door platform, back to the pavement, retreated a few paces and looked at the troop carrier. Left, right, up, down. She was wearing mechanics’ overalls and she had a plastic bottle with a nozzle in her right hand.

‘Pom,’ she said. ‘Where’d ya get this vehicle?’

‘A priest sold it to me,’ said Cedric. ‘No, that’s not correct, the friend of a priest. Well, not so much his friend as one of his…’

The woman looked at him with eyes so knowing that Cedric felt no need to say any more. She knew that he was a complete idiot, she had known it from the moment he spoke his first word.

‘Where ya goin?’ she said.

‘In the first instance, a place called St Arnaud.’

‘Where?’

Cedric repeated the name. The woman shook her head. He took the map book off the seat next to him, held it out the window and pointed at the dot that was St Arnaud. She came close and peered at the page.
‘Snarnid,’ she said. ‘Why didn’t ya say so?’

‘Snarnid, yes,’ said Cedric. ‘That’s the spot.’

‘Hang on,’ said the woman. She turned and went up the driveway of the house.

Cedric wasn’t sure what to do. Perhaps she had gone inside to draw a map for him. Yes, that was what she was doing. How helpful. He felt much better. At least all the driving around was giving him the hang of it. He studied the street. Very neat. Not so much as a leaf or a twig or a scrap of paper to be seen. He hadn’t expected Australia to be like this.

The old woman came down the driveway. She was carrying a small suitcase and a long leather case. She went around the front of the troop carrier, just her headgear showing, opened the rear passenger door and put her bags in. Then she slammed the door, opened the front one and climbed in, fixed Cedric with her commanding gaze.

‘Get movin,’ she said. ‘Had enough of this place.’

Cedric obeyed, started the machine.

‘Down to the corner, turn left, first right, keep goin. I’ll tell you what to do after that.’

With a profound sense of relief, Cedric did as he was told.

GUIDED BY THE curt commands of Mrs Dot McPhee, as she announced herself to be, they were on the freeway, heading west, in fewer than twenty minutes.

Cedric found himself in a mood he had not experienced since sitting on his grandfather’s lap on the small grey Massey Ferguson tractor. Up and down the field they had gone, ploughing the chocolate soil, Cedric’s hands on the bottom of the wheel, his grandfather’s at three and nine o’clock. From time to time, his grandfather took his hands away, put them on Cedric’s shoulders and Cedric was in charge of the machine, steering.

In charge but with grown-up support on hand.

That was the way he felt now, tooling down the highway in the massive vehicle, looking down on most of the traffic, windows open, Mrs Dot McPhee beside him with a small cigar in her mouth, knitting. She hadn’t asked him if he minded but that didn’t matter. He would have said no, that’s perfectly all right. It was all right. He rather liked the smell of her smoke.

‘What’s ya business in Snarnid?’ she said.

Cedric told her about the need to see his late uncle’s solicitor in St Arnaud concerning the will.
‘A will, eh?’ she said. ‘Need ya wits about ya when it comes to wills.’

Cedric brooded. ‘Why, exactly?’ he said.

Silence. Mrs McPhee’s smoke drifted past. ‘Pass this bug,’ she said. ‘Idiots clutterin up the road.’

Cedric did as he was told, overtook a small purple car, alarmed at the speed he had to reach. He sighed with relief when he could return to the left lane.

‘Little Jap cars,’ she said. ‘Made of tin.’

‘Isn’t this a Japanese vehicle?’

‘Cruisers are different,’ said Mrs McPhee. After a while, she said, ‘Not exactly unknown for ya solicitor to be on the fiddle. Trade’s got more’n its fair share of shonks and shicers.’

Nothing more was said until they were approaching a town called Ballarat. ‘Keep right,’ she said. ‘Don’t have to go through this place, always rainin, mystery, like that Bermuda Hole.’

The sky was blue, cloudless. It could obviously change in an instant. A micro-zone of climatic instability. Cedric had heard about these places from Fiona Greentree, one of the science teachers at Gollop’s. Fiona asked him around for a drink once but, frightened by her moustache, he had made a very clumsy excuse and offended her.

‘Gotta be careful with lawyers,’ said Mrs McPhee, reinforcing her point. ‘Could be a shonk.’

‘Shonk,’ said Cedric, trying out the word. He liked the sound.

Shonk.

It had everything you wanted in a short word: the sibilant opening, the consonants closing like a safe door slamming.

Shonk. Cedric said it to himself a few times. Shonk.

‘Knew this fella, his nanna left him the house in Goondi. Bloody lawyer charged him more’n the place’s worth.’

‘Charged him?’ said Cedric. It had not occurred to him that he would have to pay the solicitor.

‘Charge like Mallee bulls, some of em.’

Malley bulls?

A vicious strain of bull bred by someone called O’Malley, the O lost at some point. An O’Malley would have surrendered the O to move up the pay queue. Cedric’s grandfather had told him of being in the army with a Patrick O’Dowd who became Dowd and jumped from near-last to near-first.
Malley bulls. Irascible animals, prone to charging. Did they have the running of the Malley bulls?

A signpost said St Arnaud was 40 km away.

‘Will you be staying on in, um, Snarnid?’ said Cedric.

‘Snarnid?’ said Mrs McPhee, opening her window and flicking out her stub. ‘Gotta be mad to stay in Snarnid.’

They travelled in silence, Cedric thinking about what the staff of Gollop’s would think if they could see him in charge of this massive vehicle, cruising along this Australian highway, overtaking purple Japanese bugs, Dot McPhee’s needles clicking.

St Arnaud arrived. There was not a great deal to the place: houses with flaking paint and straggly gardens, a main street with shops that did not appear to be prospering, a war memorial of pitted volcanic stones topped by a piece of marble.

‘What’s the address?’ said Mrs McPhee.

Cedric saw a long piece of unoccupied kerbside and eased the Cruiser in, hit the kerb, mounted it with two wheels, jerked the steering, returned to street level with a bump, stood on the brake pedal, stopped. He expelled all his breath loudly.

Not bad, he thought, all things considered. He looked at Mrs McPhee.

‘Shoulda bin a hearse driver,’ she said. ‘No danger to the passengers.’

Cedric found his papers and the address of Girton, Thomas & McNarr, Barristers & Solicitors. ‘Twenty-seven Napier Street,’ he said.

Mrs McPhee lowered her window and waited. An elderly man in a grey double-breasted suit came shuffling along the pavement. ‘G’day, mate,’ she shouted. ‘Where’s Napier Street?’

‘What?’ said the man. ‘What?’

‘Napier Street,’ shouted Mrs McPhee.

‘Yeah,’ said the man. ‘What about it?’

‘Well, where is it?’

The man came closer, inspected Mrs McPhee, peered at Cedric, stood back. ‘Bloody innit,’ he said. ‘What’s bloody wrong with you?’

‘No need to swear,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘Be on your way.’

The man walked off, shaking his head.

‘Want me to come with you?’ said Mrs McPhee.
Cedric was now seized with the fear that it was all a hoax, that he had made a
terrible fool of himself. There was no inheritance. He had thrown away a secure job,
spent huge amounts of money. He could be ruined. He would have to go home and
live in the dank cottage, on the dole, grow his own food, starve.

‘No thanks,’ he said. ‘I think I can manage.’

‘Don’t sign anythin. Tell em you need a think.’

‘Yes.’ Cedric hesitated, uncertain whether to ask about her plans.

‘I’ll be waitin,’ she said. ‘Might get a few pies. Gotta be a half‐decent pie in this
place. I’ll ask around.’

‘Fine. I enjoy a pie.’

‘IF ONLY EVERYTHING in life were simple,’ said Bertrand Thomas, barrister and
solicitor. He was a thin man of unguessable age with a deep cleft between his
sprouting eyebrows.

‘Indeed,’ said Cedric. ‘In the matter of my uncle’s will, I’d like to know…’

‘But it’s not simple,’ said Bertrand Thomas. ‘The web of our life is of a mingled
yarn, good and ill together.’ He eyed Cedric. ‘All’s Well that Ends Well. You’d be
familiar with the Bard, wouldn’t you, Mr Marchant?’

‘To some extent. Not entirely.’

‘Not in his entirety, you mean?’ said Thomas.

‘Definitely not in his entirety.’

Cedric was no longer anxious. His anxiety had gradually lessened during his
half‐hour wait in a room with nothing to read except a publication called the Weekly
Times. It had a picture of a cow on the front page and many mentions of something
called dry sheep equivalent. Cedric brooded over what could be the equivalent of a
dry sheep. Finally, the ancient horse‐haired woman behind the desk responded to
some silent signal and rose to open a door with BJ THOMAS BA LLB painted on it.

BJ Thomas now looked at the page in his hands. ‘A teacher of English language
and literature.’

‘I am. I was. Well…’

‘To teach English language and literature, you’d need to be pretty well up on the
Bard, I imagine. A bit of an authority, really.’

Cedric coughed. ‘There’s actually quite a lot of other writing in English,’ he said.

Thomas took on a narrow‐eyed wolfish look. ‘And well there might be, Mr
Marchant,’ he said, ‘but what’s it built on, what’s its foundation, man? Answer me
that.’
Cedric couldn’t think of another foundation, couldn’t think of a single brick in any alternative foundation. ‘You may have a point,’ he said. ‘My uncle’s will…’

Thomas rose behind his desk and took up the declamatory position, hand on heart.

_Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars_  
_That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!_  
_Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,_  
_The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,_  
_The royal banner, and all quality,_  
_Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!_  

He stood silent, eyes on Cedric.  
‘_Othello,_’ Cedric said.

Thomas wasn’t pleased. ‘All English writing since Shakespeare,’ he said, ‘is a poor, halting postscript to the Bard. I quote no less a personage than Sir Morpeth Hardwicke QC.’

Cedric had never heard of Sir Morpeth Hardwicke QC but he sounded like old Mr Plowright at Gollop’s. Plowright thought Western history was a poor, halting imitation of what the Chinese had done. He credited the Chinese with discovering everything from toilet paper to nuclear power.

‘Old hat,’ he said when someone in the staff room remarked on the news of a British breakthrough in gene technology, whatever that was. ‘Chinese were manipulating genes by two-sixty BC. Earlier probably. Much earlier.’

‘I have someone waiting outside,’ said Cedric. ‘So if it’s possible…’

Thomas sat down. ‘Yes, well, can’t sit around nattering about Shakespeare. To the matter at hand. Your identification, please, Mr Marchant.’

Cedric passed over his passport, his driver’s licence and an envelope containing a copy of his birth certificate. Thomas put on large glasses and made a show of examining them, holding them to the light from the dusty window. Cedric looked around the room. It was like the library of a Victorian mansion, piles of folders and document boxes on tables, dusty glass-fronted cupboards, shelves holding peeling leather-bound volumes. Two moulting stag heads looked on the room from the wall behind Bernard Thomas, and on a deep wooden windowsill stood a stuffed creature. Somewhere between a small bear and a large badger, thought Cedric.

‘Apparently in order,’ Thomas said. ‘Apparently.’

Cedric found that he was holding his breath. ‘Well, that’s who I am,’ he said, short of air.
'Documents,’ said Thomas, ‘can be obtained.’

‘Yes,’ said Cedric. ‘I obtained these.’

Thomas had another go. He held up the passport, looked at the photograph, studied Cedric over the top of it. Then he did the same with the driver’s licence. ‘This could be anyone,’ he said.

‘It didn’t look much like me when it was taken eight years ago,’ said Cedric. ‘At least I didn’t think so. Although I suppose one isn’t much of a judge.’

Next the copy of the birth certificate. ‘A copy,’ said Thomas. ‘Could be unauthorised.’

Cedric found himself sighing. ‘On the other side,’ he said, ‘it’s been notarised.’

‘Ah,’ said Thomas. He put on glasses. ‘Well then, I will now read the last will and testament of Cyril Rodney Marchant, late of Orpheus Downs station, State of Victoria, Australia.’

It was a short document but Thomas made it last, pausing between words, stalling between sentences, meditating between paragraphs. Finally, he said, ‘Do you understand the import of that, Mr Marchant?’

‘Um, I have to live on the property for twelve months?’

‘That is correct. You are to receive an allowance of five hundred dollars per calendar month from the estate for the period. As executor, it will be my duty to establish that you are in fact in residence throughout the aforesaid period. Short absences will be permitted. Longer absences will require my permission.’

Thomas took off the glasses and rubbed his eyes. ‘Are you willing to abide by this condition, Mr Marchant?’

Cedric thought it didn’t seem like an onerous condition. A year on his outback station before he inherited it and the money. And then he might choose to stay on, round up the animals on horseback. He would have to learn to ride of course. He could start on a small horse, an older small horse. Perhaps a retired horse, small and placid. Gentle. Yes…

‘I am,’ he said. ‘When does it start?’

‘Now, if that suits you.’

‘It suits me, yes.’

Thomas opened a drawer and from within counted twenty fifty-dollar notes onto the desktop. ‘We will begin with two months,’ he said. ‘If you supply me with a bank account number, the allowance will thereafter be paid into the account.’ Pause. ‘While I am satisfied that you are in residence.’

He pushed the stack of notes across the leather. ‘An interesting man, your uncle,’ he said.
'His spelling wasn’t too good,’ said Cedric and regretted it.

‘Yes. He wasn’t a bookish person. I suppose you know he narrowly escaped prison on a number of occasions.’

‘Uncle Cyril?’ Cedric felt a tingle of alarm. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘Never out of trouble, really.’

‘What kind of trouble?’

‘Oh, prohibited substances, firearm charges, driving under the influence, goods believed to be stolen, arson. Attempted murder. And kidnapping. The prosecution dropped that early in the piece, though. She changed her story.’

Hesitant, bewildered, Cedric said, ‘I somehow thought he was a farmer.’

Thomas looked around his chamber as if seeking something. ‘Not a great deal of agricultural activity on Cyril’s property, Mr Marchant. Of a conventional kind.’

He rose, offered a hand like a plucked wood pigeon. ‘Good luck,’ he said.

Cedric stood up and took the hand, determined to assert himself. He squeezed. The hand was cold. It was also hard. And it did not yield. He desisted instantly. Oh God, he thought, another handshake failure.

Then the hand squeezed him. Cedric thought his knuckles were collapsing, the pain went up his forearm.

Thomas released his grip. Cedric choked a sob of relief.

‘Miss Smolett will give you a copy of the will and the inventory and a map,’ said Thomas. ‘Goodbye.’

Cedric was at the door when he said, ‘I take it your own affairs are in order, Mr Marchant.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your will, that sort of thing? Since you’re so far from home.’

‘Of course,’ Cedric lied.

MRS MCPHEE WAS in the Cruiser reading a paperback book and eating an apple. Cedric got behind the wheel.

‘Well?’ she said. ‘Well?’

‘There’s this property,’ said Cedric, ‘and I have to stay on it for a year.’

‘What about yer inheritance?’

‘I get it after the year. The property and the money and the…the belongings.’
‘Shoulda come with you,’ she said. ‘Sounds shonky to me. Where’s the place?’
‘I’ve got directions.’
‘Let’s see.’

Cedric handed over the photocopied page from a map. Someone had circled a dot at the end of a thin snaking line.

Mrs McPhee whistled.
‘Far from here?’ said Cedric tentatively. Despondency was descending.
‘My oath.’
‘That’s about how far?’
Cedric thought he saw pity in Mrs McPhee’s antiques gaze. ‘Bout as far as you can go, goin that way.’
‘Ah. That far.’
‘You hungry?’

Cedric realised he had not eaten since the plane. How long ago that seemed. How safe and comfortable. He was ravenous, his belly was concave with hunger, he felt lightheaded. ‘I am a little peckish,’ he said.

‘Got us some pies. Lady at the op shop put me on the place.’

They ate their pies sitting on a bench in a small park outside the municipal offices. The ground was covered in dark pieces of bark. Mrs McPhee provided paper napkins and plastic cups from her bag. During his ingestion of pie number one, Cedric had to remind himself to chew before swallowing.

‘Don’t know pastry from a pig’s bum,’ said Mrs McPhee, handing him another pie. ‘But not bad for a town like this.’

Cedric nodded, bit. He was slowing down and his spirits were improving. After a bout of chewing and some milk, he said, ‘My uncle seems to have been a bit of a character.’

Mrs McPhee gave him the eye. ‘What kind of character?’
‘In trouble with the law a lot.’
‘What, out there?’
‘Apparently.’
‘Dunno how they’d notice. Wouldn’t be a copper in cooee.’

Was that the nearest town to his uncle’s property? Cooee. Cedric liked the sound of it. ‘Cooee,’ he said. ‘Cooee.’

Mrs McPhee looked at him with one eye narrowed, swallowed the last of her pie.
‘You all right?’

‘Why isn’t there a copper in Cooee?’

She recognised his ignorance. ‘No, no, not a place. Cooee. It’s a sound. Hear it to buggery.’

Mrs McPhee made a trumpet with her hands: ‘COOOEEEE. COOOEEEE.’

The thin vibrating sounds went up and down the street, freezing the few pedestrians in mid-stride.

‘From the war,’ said Mrs McPhee, ‘the first one.’

Cedric thought that there was much more to learn about this country than he wanted to learn. And he was far from sure that he wanted that learning to include travelling a great distance into the parched interior and spending months there, alone.

Alone. He was no stranger to being alone. He was alone at home in Lower Roebuck. He could handle being alone. He had been alone all his adult life, really. It wasn’t a problem.

Alone in Australia? On a property hundreds of miles from anywhere?

That was not quite the same thing as being alone in Pringle Lane, Lower Roebuck.

No.

On Orpheus Downs, there would be no nipping down to the village to buy a few pork bangers from Bertie Stockton or a loaf of bread and a carton of milk from the surly Mrs Bull at the shop.

Alone. He would be quite alone in a strange land. Cedric shivered. This was the time to make an excuse and go home.

Mrs McPhee stood, crushed the brown paper bag in both hands, rolled it tight. ‘Well, let’s get goin,’ she said. ‘Be long dark before we get there.’

A cloak of relief draped itself over his tense shoulders. He would not be alone. In the short term at least, there would be Mrs Dot McPhee.

They were walking when Mrs McPhee spun on a heel and kicked the balled bag back. It travelled four metres, hung in the air, dropped into the dead centre of the litter bin.

‘How do you do that?’ said Cedric, consumed with admiration.

‘Practice,’ she said. ‘Talent and practice. We need supplies. Flour, yeast, tea, sugar, that kind of thing. Should be a bit of meat out there. Your burrow chooks. Live off the land.’
'Right,' said Cedric. ‘Live off the land.’
Burrow chooks?

THREE HOURS FROM St Arnaud, Cedric saw the body from a great distance. ‘My Lord,’ he said.
‘Give him a lift,’ said Mrs McPhee.
‘What?’
‘Just nappin. Stop.’
‘Does he want a lift?’
‘Course he does.’
Cedric knew all about Britons being murdered on the back roads of Australia. ‘Is it, um, safe?’
‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mrs McPhee.

He slowed the Cruiser to walking pace before he edged onto the shoulder. Outside St Arnaud he had found out what happened when you put two wheels on the gravel at speed. For a terrible moment he thought that they were going to die hanging upside-down in a flaming wreck.

Cedric stopped about twenty metres beyond the man. In the rear-view mirror, he saw him get up. Then a shock of ammoniac-sour wind rocked the Cruiser, bringing tears to Cedric’s eyes. When he opened them, he saw a B-double sheep transport disappearing over the rise.

‘Gidday.’

The man was at the window. He was tall and thin, sallow-skinned, somewhere north of fifty, his mouth marked off by deep cuttings. An impossibly battered hat was pulled low.

‘Good afternoon,’ Cedric said. ‘May we offer you a lift?’
‘Decent of you,’ the man said in a deep, ruined voice.

He walked around the Cruiser, opened the passenger-side back door, put in a canvas-covered roll and a guitar case and got in. ‘Name’s Oliver,’ he said. ‘Greg Oliver.’

‘Cedric Marchant.’
‘Dot,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘Where ya goin?’
‘Same way you’re going,’ said the man.
‘How far?’
‘Drop me when you turn off.’

‘Headin for the scrub, us,’ said Mrs McPhee.

Cedric had to wait for three trucks to go by before he could get the Cruiser back on the road. Then he had to worry about a truck tailgating him.

A hillock arrived, a mere incline. Cedric put his foot down, left the truck standing. He felt relieved and more than a little smug.

Mrs McPhee punched the radio, fiddled with the controls. Classical music filled the vehicle – Beethoven.

‘Happy with this?’ she said.

‘I’m very happy,’ said Cedric, thinking of home. He listened to classical music on the BBC every night, tucked up in his bed with a book and a mug of hot milk and honey.

‘Ollie?’

‘Me?’ said Oliver. ‘Don’t have to ask me.’

‘All in here together.’

‘Then I’m happier than I can say.’

With Beethoven and Brahms, Schubert and Mozart, Mahler and Chopin, they drove through the day and into the encircling gloom. They passed through towns that grew smaller and more desperate – one street, a pub, a few pinch-faced people, an old dog or two. When, in the last light, they stopped at a settlement that was just a garage flanked by two sagging houses, Mrs McPhee had to knock on the garage’s dirty glass door, go around the back. She returned with a man in a dressing-gown who unlocked a pump and filled the Cruiser without saying a word.

At 7 pm, Mrs McPhee ordered a stop and produced cheese and tomato sandwiches and three bottles of Victoria Bitter.

‘Kind of you,’ said Oliver. He had a snowline across his forehead where his hat sat.

‘Extra sanger never goes wasted,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘Dry around here.’

‘Not godzone, no,’ said Oliver.

‘Bin this way before?’ said Mrs McPhee.

‘Not that I can remember. But there’s lots I don’t remember.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘There was the drink,’ said Oliver. ‘And the drugs.’

Mrs McPhee gave him a look and a few nods.
They set off again. Oliver went to sleep, his head on his canvas roll. Mrs McPhee gave directions, reading a map on her lap by a dashboard light. As they approached a crossroads just beyond a dark farmhouse, she said, ‘Stop.’

Cedric pulled over. Oliver sat up instantly, wide awake.

‘Turnin off here,’ said Mrs McPhee to Oliver. ‘Not much chance of lifts after this.’

‘Don’t need lifts,’ said Oliver. ‘I like a walk.’

‘Left,’ said Mrs McPhee to Cedric. ‘There’s Turnback Creek, be a coupla shacks, and then, far as I kin work it out, it’s first right after that. Sign should say Home Rule Road.’

‘Home Rule?’

‘Ireland,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘You Poms bin oppressin the poor bloody Irish for centuries. Of Scottish descent myself.’

Cedric thought himself innocent of oppressing the Irish but made no comment, drove. He seemed to have sand in his eye sockets, the skin on his face felt tight, he had a headache, his shoulders and his forearms ached, and a dull pain in his right ankle was moving up the calf.

It took another forty-five minutes and the clock on the dashboard said 11.47 when they passed through Turnback Creek. There was no discernible creek but more than a couple of shacks. A dozen or so shops and a pub stood dark.

Five kilometres out of town, a sign said Home Rule Ro. The end of the sign appeared to have been shot off. After four dead-straight kilometres, the Cruiser’s headlights lit up tree-trunk gateposts at least three metres high. A rusted arch of welded steel bridged them. Cedric could make out the remains of letters – an initial O, the top of a P, the bottom of a U, a D, most of an N and the middle of an S.

‘What’s the place called?’ said Mrs McPhee.

‘Orpheus Downs,’ said Cedric.

‘We’re here.’

Cedric jolted over a cattle grid and drove down a long rutted avenue of gum trees. It curved and the headlights passed over tin sheds of all sizes and then revealed a huge ramshackle house with a deep veranda. He stopped on the packed-dirt forecourt.

‘Someone livin here,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘The lawyer say that?’

‘No,’ said Cedric. ‘How do you know?’

‘I kin feel it. Hoot.’

Cedric hooted, a surprisingly feeble sound. Nothing happened.
‘Reverse a bit, switch off the lights, keep the engine runnin.’

Cedric backed up five or six metres, cut the headlights. The world went black. They sat in silence, the diesel thumping. Then Mrs McPhee reached up.

‘Look over the right,’ she said.

Cedric looked into the darkness. Mrs McPhee clicked something.

Pure white light violated the inside of a tin shed. For an instant, Cedric saw something.

A face. Pale as a lily.

THEY GOT OUT, the spotlight on the shed entrance. Oliver leaned against the Cruiser, yawned. Mrs McPhee came around the front of the vehicle and advanced towards the shed, a small and slightly bandy-legged figure.

‘Come out, dear!’ she shouted. ‘Nothin to be scared of.’

They waited. Cedric became aware of a cold wind pushing his hair. It smelled of something. He sniffed and the connection came: his old gardening jumper, never washed and holding in its fibres the smell of every autumn bonfire until the practice became frowned upon.

‘Come on then!’ shouted Mrs McPhee. ‘Don’t muck about, girl.’

The face appeared at the left of the opening, an anoraked woman with dark hair pulled back, squinting against the glare. ‘Whaddaya want?’ she shouted.

Mrs McPhee looked over her shoulder at Cedric. ‘Tell her who you are,’ she said.

‘Who am I?’ said Cedric.

‘You’re the owner of this property.’

‘Yes. I am. In a sense. I will be. All things being…yes. I am.’

‘Come over here and tell her,’ said Mrs McPhee.

Cedric advanced into the light, eyes on the woman. She looked frail, unwell. ‘I am the, ah, owner of this property,’ he said. ‘Since my uncle’s death. I am the owner.’

‘Who’s your uncle?’ said the woman.

‘Cyril Marchant. He owned this.’

‘Sailor?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The old bloke. Sailor.’
‘Well, he was a sailor once.’

The woman turned her head, offered her hands. ‘Come, it’s okay.’

Two children in pyjama-like clothing appeared, different heights, both long-haired. They took her hands.

‘Why you hidin?’ said Mrs McPhee.

The woman looked away, her hair flicked. ‘Bit nervy,’ she said. ‘Just me and the kids here.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Erin Donelly.’

‘Doin what here?’

‘Livin here.’

Mrs McPhee turned to Cedric. ‘Squatters on yer land,’ she said.

Cedric looked at the threesome, motionless in the icy light: a tall adult and two small ginger-headed children, all blinking, standing stiffly.

‘I’d love a cup of tea,’ he said, tired beyond endurance. ‘Perhaps we could sort this out in the morning?’

‘How many bedrooms in there?’ said Mrs McPhee to the woman.

‘Heaps. Like five, six, I dunno.’

Mrs McPhee put back her head, tilted it in an inquiring way. ‘Dogs?’ she said.

‘Yeah.’

‘How come they’re quiet?’

‘Boy can keep em quiet.’

‘Let em go.’

‘Big one’ll rip your heart out.’

‘Let em go,’ said Mrs McPhee.

‘Ben,’ said the woman.

A slight figure appeared at the right of the doorway, curly hair on his shoulders. He held three dogs on leashes, straining but silent. The one in the middle was table-high, head like a petrol can. The others could pass beneath it without touching.

The big dog showed its canines: boar tusks.

Cedric said, ‘They don’t look friendly, I think.’

‘Just dogs,’ said Mrs McPhee. ‘Let em go, son.’
The boy bent, unclipped the big dog. It came at them, all open mouth and gleaming hog teeth.

Cedric was returning to the Cruiser at maximum speed when he heard Mrs McPhee say, ‘Good dog, SIT!’

He did not look until he had almost reached the Cruiser. Then, shamed by the way Oliver was leaning against the bonnet and smoking a cigarette, he stopped and turned.

Mrs McPhee was standing over the big dog. It was seated and trying to lick her hand. The smaller dogs had also arrived and were dancing around trying to get her attention. She turned her head.

‘Pull it up next to the house, Ceddy,’ she said. ‘Let’s get the swags out and have a cup of tea and a bikkie.’

CEDRIC DREAMT HE had fallen into a giant bin and was being buried alive in old clothes that smelled overpoweringly of camphor. He awoke in sweat and panic.

He was on his back, sunk in a mattress, impressed in it.

A shaft of sunlight from an uncurtained window went to a wall a good five metres away, to the base of a bookshelf whose upper reaches were in darkness.

He fought his way out of the mattress’s clutches and put feet on the floor. No feeling in his feet. Oh God, some antipodean virus. He looked down. Shoes. He was wearing his good leather shoes, the once-bright toecaps now dull and a little scuffed.

He had been too scared to go to sleep with bare feet. He had sat on the edge of the bed and thought about the possibility of an emergency in the night, something that could call for quick action. Indeed, flight.

Cedric felt shame. He had slept with his shoes on, afraid to be caught bare of foot.

‘The foot,’ said Mr Plowright one morning in the common room, pitilessly observing the gym mistress hopping into the room with a foot in plaster. ‘Most neglected body part, the foot.’

‘Usually found in matched pairs,’ said Mr Carstairs, the science teacher, not raising his eyes from a paperback with a gold swastika embossed on the cover.

‘Ignored until it’s too late,’ said Mr Plowright.

‘Not by the Chinese though, I’ll be bound,’ said Mr Carstairs and laughed, sniggered, really.
But for the violence of the pigeons on the roof, there was a silence so deep that when Plowright ran an index finger across his brutally disciplined moustache, Cedric could hear the knife-sharpening sound.


‘A dim light should be enough for a small room, shouldn’t it?’ said Carstairs.

‘So proving my point ad unguem,’ said Plowright.

Keeping his shod feet on the floor, Cedric lay back on the mattress. It claimed him like quicksand, but now in a comforting way. He studied the ceiling. It was a shade of pink, with dark patches where bits of plaster had fallen off. He saw a woman’s face, just an eye and a nostril and a fall of hair. And breasts, not the same size. Big breasts.

He felt removed from the world. He was certainly removed from the world of the Gollop School and the cottage in Lower Roebuck. Not insular he, not any longer.

What did ad unguem mean? Was he under-educated too? Well, he’d tried to be educated. He was probably the most educated Marchant of his line. But what did educated actually mean? Knowing about China? About the postmodern English novel? Latin? How much did you have to know before you were sure you were educated?

Dogs barking, on the veranda. He turned his head and dimly saw the big animal looking at him through the windowpane its breath was fogging.

In the sitting room, by the light of a gas lamp, Mrs McPhee had interrogated the pale woman. Erin’s smaller children pressed themselves to her like leeches, the boy ignored the proceedings, sat on a cracked leather sofa and tried to pick out a tune on a guitar with two missing strings. Oliver had taken his tea outside.

‘How’d you get here, Erin?’ said Mrs McPhee.

‘Came with these blokes. Vern and Starrey. And this girl. Donna. Yeah.’

‘Came from where?’

‘Met em in Sydney. Met Vern and he said there’s this place we can stay, be a good place for the kids. In the country like. So we came here. Didn’t know it was gonna be this. Back of buggery. Yeah.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Four months. Near that. Yes. Kids should be in school.’

‘And where are these blokes now?’

‘Took off. About a month ago. Goin on. Just got up one mornin and Vern, he said, goin to town, see ya later. They done that before but they came back in a week or so. Yeah.’
'That's enough yeah,' said Mrs McPhee. 'And the girl?'

'Went off with em the first time, she never came back. Didn’t miss her, I can tell you.'

'No one here when you arrived?'

'No,' said Erin. 'Vern said Sailor didn’t mind people stayin here. Generous old bloke. Yeah. Sorry.'

Mrs McPhee got up and prowled around the room, stretching her arms above her head, fingers interlocked. 'So,' she said. 'These little ones, they got a dad?'

The boy stopped picking at the guitar.

'No,' said Erin. 'He drowned. Fishin. This Christmas four years.' She was about to say yeah when she caught herself. Silence.

'Livin off soup and baked beans here the last two weeks,' said Erin. 'There’s like twenty boxes of soup packets. Just mushroom and tomato.'

'Town’s not far,' said Mrs McPhee.

Erin wouldn’t look at her. 'Got no money,' she said.

'What about the pension? Bein a single mum.'

'Don’t want the pension.'

Cedric had not been able to keep his head up or his eyes open. 'I think I might toddle off to bed,' he said. 'Find somewhere to toddle off to.'

'Give us a tour, Erin,' said Mrs McPhee. 'Got any candles?'

'LOOKIN TO HAVE a hot shower?' said Mrs McPhee. 'Somethin wrong with the boiler. Doesn’t get water from the tank. I kin tell you nothin much works in this place.'

Cedric looked into the bathroom. He could see a yellowish cast-iron bath and, above it, a shower rose the size of a dustbin lid. There was a loud noise from the roof, then a series of clangs.

'Ollie’s up there,' said Mrs McPhee.

'Does he know much about plumbing?''

'We’ll see. No knowing what he knows.' She went into the room and turned on a shower tap. Nothing happened.

A faint keening sound grew, accompanied by serious hammering in the pipes.

'Ah,' said Mrs McPhee.

Water descended from the shower like a small rust cloud bursting.

'Could know somethin about plumbing, Ollie,' said Mrs McPhee. She closed the tap. 'Get out there and fire up the boiler.'
Cedric obeyed. He found the boiler in a room off the veranda. It was a massive riveted thing that could supply a hotel. He could hear water running into it. Firewood was stacked against a wall. He got to work balling copies of the *Inland Guardian* from a pile in a cardboard box.

‘What you doing?’

It was the boy, Ben, tentative.

‘Making a fire,’ said Cedric. The date on the second paper was 12 May 1997. Did hot water stop around then?

‘Why?’

‘So that we can have a hot shower. Should we wish to do so.’ He opened the boiler door. The ash inside was at least a foot deep. He took a piece of wood and poked around until he could see the grate. He put paper on top of it. ‘Pass me some of those twigs,’ he said.

‘What’s twigs?’

‘The small branches.’

Ben handed him kindling. ‘Mum hots water on the barbie,’ he said. ‘Have to wash with a rag.’

‘This will be an improvement,’ said Cedric. ‘See any matches?’

The boy found a box with three matches in it.

‘Very small margin for error,’ said Cedric. He opened the bottom door. ‘Going to need all the oxygen we can get.’

‘You talk a bit funny,’ said the boy.

‘Really? Here goes.’

The match snapped at the head. ‘Situation perilous,’ said Cedric.

The second match fizzled glumly, died. ‘Now desperate.’

Match three flared. The paper and twigs ignited like rocket fuel. ‘An inflammatory organ, the *Inland Guardian*,’ said Cedric. ‘Hand me some larger pieces.’

It took fifteen minutes to get a big enough fire going, the boy silently handing over wood. Cedric closed the door and stood and became aware that Oliver was leaning against the doorpost, adjustable wrench in hand. Leaning seemed to be his natural stance, he could probably lean without support.

‘Good work on the plumbing,’ said Cedric. ‘Excellent work.’

‘Losing my head for heights,’ said Oliver. ‘Inner-ear thing.’

‘I thought that was balance.’

‘That’s right,’ said Oliver. ‘What’s your name, boy?’

The boy looked down. Cedric thought he saw a shiver in him.

‘Ben.’

‘How old?’
'Ten.' He didn’t look up.

‘Man of the family?’
Silence. ‘Dunno.’

‘Dad not with you?’

‘He’s dead. He drowned.’

‘Sorry to hear that. Lost my dad when I was your age, bit older.’

‘Did he drown?’

‘No, he shot himself. Well, shower time. Got the boiler in the shearers’ quarters going. Christ knows when that last happened.’

Oliver left.

‘You might want to tell your mother there is now water that is hot,’ said Cedric.

‘Hot and running.’

‘Mum’s pretty scared,’ said Ben.

Scared was a terrible word, a child should not speak it. ‘Why’s that?’ he said.

‘We got nowhere to go.’

Cedric thought about this. These people had no right to be on his land. They had no right to be on the place when it was his uncle’s. It was like coming home from France and finding a family inhabiting his house in Lower Roebuck.

‘Tell her not to worry,’ he said. ‘You can stay here if you like.’
Circumstances
CK Stead

Lee Miller’s Famous Foto

She was in the bath
beautifully ready
when the phone rang.

Her boots, blooded
with the mud of Auschwitz,
stood to attention.

There was a picture of Hitler
and other knick-knacks
lined up against the wall
to be shot.

He pressed the shutter
and raced to answer.

Richard Farrell

The car had wrapped itself
(but caringly)
about an oak.

He was lying in grass
among disks and tapes
of his famous concerts.

Everything was broken
dislocated
dead.

At home where
dawn was just breaking
our mothers wept.

CK Stead is one of New Zealand’s foremost writers. He is the author of eleven novels, two story collections, fifteen poetry collections and six non-fiction works.
ONCE I had to bury a cat. She was a beautiful cat, lithe of limb, delicate, a great leaper. Slender and brown, a long-legged, silky-furred Burmese. She was called Dido, for reasons important at the time. When my neighbour knocked on the door and said, There is a cat in the middle of the road, it looks like yours, I said, Oh no, I don’t think it would be. Because she was young and quick and clever and would not get run over. But it was her. I still cannot understand how it could have happened. Mine is a quiet street, going nowhere, the traffic is always local, and not fast. I had no fears of her wandering the neighbourhood, crossing the road. I wonder if it was somehow deliberate, a wanton act of destruction.

I went and picked her up. She was already stiff, her fur dull, all the fluid movement gone out of her. She was whole, unmarked, there was no evidence of the blow that killed her. I lay her on the table on the terrace and sat beside her and mourned. There was a place down the backyard for a grave, where the soil was friable and leaf-littered. Tree roots made digging the hole hard, but with a mattock it was soon done. In the linen press was an old sheet of fine linen that had worn through and got a great split in it. I tore off a whole bit and wrapped her in that, and lay her in the earth. I could not bear the thought of earth clogging her fur, sitting in to her ears and nostrils – it seemed too cruel, too careless, to bury her without a shroud. She was a cat, but I understood why people need to perform certain acts of burial. A loved creature cannot be tossed away like rubbish. When I was a girl I played Antigone, a sister who risks her ruler’s displeasure and indeed incurs death at his hands, because she cannot bear not to bury her brother, though the king considers him disgraced and has forbidden it. Her punishment is to be buried alive, and still she believes she must perform her sacred duties.

So I lay her in the earth, and wept, and spoke the words of Hamlet’s mother over Ophelia’s grave: and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring. I did not think them in any way too grand for my Dido. And I knew violets would grow there, because they were all about, and I pulled some runners across and tucked them into the newly dug soil. I put a small rock to mark the place. Not a cross, she wasn’t a Christian cat, her rites were not those of that church. The violets spread, vegetation encroached, I remembered her grave, and never dug there.
I SAY THESE things to make it clear that I am a person who takes burial of the dead seriously. So it will be understood that when I found myself with a human body it was by no means easy to work out how to dispose of it. I should say we: I was not alone in my dilemma. Well, to an extent I was, since my companion in the crime (no, not murder, oh no, I deny there was any murder involved) did not have my deep desire for dignity in the matter. He’d have found a pit and chucked it in, dug a shallow grave and raked it over, even put it in a skip. We argued about this. I pointed out that ground dug over like that bears the evidence for years. How do you know? he asked. I told him I had read an article about shallow graves, how they remain as evidence for a long time (years, I think it was), it is clear that the ground has been disturbed and something has been buried. He was prepared to listen to this argument, since he was keen not to get caught disposing of a body, which of course is a crime.

I suppose I should say how this came about.

We had not long come to live in a house in the hinterland, a handsome old Queenslander that had seen better days, its paint worn away to bare boards, and those much attacked by white ants. It was up on stilts, with wide verandas and a lot of fretwork. From its back veranda you could see the distant misty towers of Surfers Paradise – forlorn was always the word that came to my mind. We never went there, except to a supermarket on the outskirts, and to one of the remoter beaches to swim. It seemed a devious sort of place; even the beaches had a habit of disappearing. In Surfers I always thought that life was elsewhere; in the hinterland you could believe it was quite nearby. The landscape was green, there was a creek. We had some goats, and chooks, vegetables, mango trees. Not self-sufficient, not at all. We worked from home, often congratulating ourselves on our luck at being members of the generation that could use computers to earn a living far from a workplace. Not a rich living, we weren’t interested in working the hours necessary for that, but comfortable enough with the aid of our farmlet. I was teaching myself to make goat cheese, and was pleased with my success. We ate it very fresh, the way I like it, aged goat cheese not being a favourite of mine. In the mornings I sat on the veranda drinking coffee and idly thinking, staring at those towers that distance robbed of their usual shabbiness. Thinking: I did a lot of it. Not I suppose like a philosopher, with an orderly set of useful conclusions, but for the pleasure of it.

Until his brother found us. Found us out, perhaps I should say. Turned up with a backpack and settled in for a nice long visit. So he said. Muttering about the only family left to take him in. Raymond hated his brother. I could see why. So did I, after a short acquaintance. But that’s not my story, I do not want to waste my brain on hatred. That last night, he’d drunk nearly our week’s supply of wine in just a few hours and was slurring and aggressive. With a resentment age-old and cultivated,
revealing depths and refinements that made you feel sick. He grabbed Raymond
and was trying to put his hands round his neck when Raymond shoved him away,
hard. He reeled back, fell against the railings, the white-anted railings, which broke
and sent him tumbling to the ground.

He might have been all right, the drunk sometimes fall safely, had it not been for
one of several large terracotta pots placed just where he would fall on it. The pot
broke, and the pieces smashed his head in. There was a lot of blood. He died
straightaway.

Tell me we should have called the police. Raymond wouldn’t, didn’t. By the time
he might have changed his mind, and I am not sure that he did, it was too late. To
me it was so clearly an accident, a tipsy falling off a dodgy balcony, but Raymond
said no, the police would see more sinister meanings, and I suppose he knew things
I didn’t. Best just get rid of the body, he said.

We rolled his brother in an old tarpaulin and put him in that famous under-the-
house of old Queenslanders, so useful for so much detritus. In the morning we
would decide what to do with him.

Raymond had various ideas. Dropping him from a road bridge on to the railway
line was one. Putting him on the highway, just round a sharp bend, where trucks
pass. I said he’d be found immediately and it would be clear that he had been dead
much longer than the accident allowed. Do you reckon, said Raymond, doubtfully. I
said I was sure, and I was, fairly. Take him up to Springbrook and push him over a
ciff. Find a mineshaft and throw him in.

I’m as fond as the next person of reading and watching crime dramas; I asked
myself what they did, what foolproof means did they have of getting rid of
bodies. Trouble was the whole point of these narratives was that there were no
foolproof methods, people always got caught.

If you go up to the top of one of those devious towers, not that high, thirteenth or
fourteenth floor, to have a drink, or maybe a meal, to visit somebody staying in a
hotel, you can look out at the ground spread away all around you, and what you see
is the canals. People like us who live in the hinterland despise the people who live
on the canals. Bottle-blond women in cats-eye sunglasses, with enamelled make-up
and lashings of gold jewellery, dressed in designer clothes and high-heeled sandals
that turn their pudgy ankles. Dwelling in their equally tacky McMansions with
water frontages, clumsy little jetties and even imported sandy beaches, edged by the
sullen canal waters. Nearly all of these canals are wrongly designed, for they are
man-made, without sufficient tidal flow to keep them clean, flush them out. The
water sits brownish and filmed, near enough to stagnant, and the blue sky cannot
find its reflection there. The first time I saw this, when we were staying in a hotel,
before we’d found our house, I looked down and remembered all the things I’d
heard about canals. Bodies on towpaths. Stinking industrial sludge. Shopping
trolleys half-immersed. Rapes, murders. Bodies surfacing years later. Rubbish floating. Canals in these circumstances are never pretty, and looking down at these terrifying houses cheek by jowl and the dark water lying around them I thought, evil resides here.

Raymond said, drinking coffee on the veranda, pretending to take no notice of the body tucked away underneath us: We will put him in a canal.

Yes?

We’ll weigh him down naturally somehow so that he doesn’t surface. When he does it’ll look as though he fell in, hit his head and drowned.

No, it won’t, I said. He won’t have any water in his lungs.

Well, hit his head and died and fell in to the canal.

We can’t do that, I said. We can’t do that with a dead body. We have to treat it with respect and dignity.

I remembered my cat, wrapped in a fine linen sheet and buried beneath violets.

Raymond was shaking his head. Don’t you see, he said, if we bury it properly people will know we have done so, they’ll think we killed him. To make it look like an accident we can’t bury him respectfully.

I could see the logic of this. It is one of my problems, that I can see the logic of other people’s arguments.

Leave him where he is. We’d soon start noticing him.

Of course I hadn’t meant that, really. I was expressing my despair at ever finding a solution.

Anyway, said Raymond, he doesn’t deserve a proper burial.

You can’t say that, I said. In death everybody deserves respect.

He wasn’t a nice person. Throwing him to the sharks would be too good for him.

It’s not him, it’s us. It’s us behaving well. That’s what matters.

We got a boat and puttered along the canals. The big ugly houses were all so close together there was no room for gardens, just terraces and swimming pools and this grungy water. The houses were too horrible to look at and the water wasn’t attractive either.

What would you put in his pockets? I asked.

Beer bottles?

Oh, very Kenneth Slessor.

I suppose that could be dangerous, said Raymond. A literary reference. It’s just that it’s appropriate, given his enthusiasm for emptying them.
What about a telescope? He was walking out on a jetty to look at the stars – perve on the girls in hotel bedrooms – tripped, hit his head, died, fell in.

Telescope? Clever. But we don’t have one. If we bought one it could be traced. And expensive.

Binoculars?

Same thing.

You’re overlooking the main thing, I said. That very thing – the overlooking. Every window you can see, every house along the banks, they can all see us chucking our body in the water.

We looked around. I imagined couples in darkened hotel rooms, making love, gazing out at the view.

The thing is, I said, your genuine industrial canal, of film and literature, is a dark and secret place. It slinks along its hidden path.

Okay, he said. We give up on canals.

I suppose I got my way in the end. Decent burial. Some way from the house, down the slope, we dug over the soil in quite a large area. In one part we made a deepish hole. In the night we rolled brother down in his tarpaulin, stopped beside the hole.

The tarpaulin’ll take a long time to rot, said Raymond.

So I got a sheet, a perfectly good one, I didn’t have any ripped ones at that moment, but it was polyester and I hate polyester, never use it, and was glad to see the back of it. We wrapped him in that, holding our breaths, tipped him in the hole. We covered it over. It did indeed look dug up, but not just the grave, the whole bed. We planted nine olive trees. Olive trees mean continuity, long years of peace, they take seven years to come into production, so if your enemy destroys them you are without livelihood for all that time. Raymond and I may go, die or depart, but the olive trees will remain. No one need dig them up to harvest them. I expect they often grow in soil with corpses in it. You can sit on the veranda and watch the silver turning of their leaves in the mild winds, and think of fruitfulness and order. And unpleasant brother buried beneath. The most use that bloke’s ever been in his life, said Raymond.

Marion Halligan lives in Canberra. Her short fiction has appeared in most major anthologies and journals in Australia, including Griffith REVIEW, and she is an acclaimed essayist, winning the inaugural Pascall Prize for Critical Writing. Her novels include The Point (2002), Murder on the Apricot Coast (2008) and The Valley of Grace (2009), all published by Allen & Unwin.
Return of the moonbirds

Migratory paths

Lyn Reeves

THE wind off the sea blows hard and it is savagely cold, despite it being midsummer. It is 8 pm, but here at the southern end of the world night won’t fall for more than an hour. We’ve parked the car in the quarried-out gravel patch at the end of the dirt road and pulled on our jackets, distributing warm scarves and hats between the four of us.

A dozen or so people are already assembled near the barrier gate. They form a straggly semicircle around a young park ranger. Dressed in a red polar fleece, striped beanie snug on his sandy hair, he introduces himself as Rod and welcomes us into the group. People shift positions to make room for us and continue to pass a stuffed white-bellied sea eagle from hand to hand. When I hold the huge bird, I’m amazed at its lightness: it weighs less than a newborn child. A juvenile, its feathers are still brown, but the rigid body is as large as that of a full-grown bird. The feel of its feathers, soft as talcum powder, elicits a light stroke from curious fingers and expressions of tender awe. The talons are tightly curled. The red glass eyes glimmer.

But we are not here for the sea eagle; it is just the infotainment before the real show begins. We have come for the shearwaters, to watch their return flight to their burrows after their day’s fishing out at sea.

More cars disturb the dusty road through the heath and our numbers swell to about forty: families with young children in tow, and couples with grey hair and stooped shoulders.

We’ve brought Sadako, our son Tom’s partner. They are spending the Christmas holidays here; it is her first visit to meet us. We want to show her some of the rarities of this island, Tasmania, where we’ve made our home. The wind blows through us – our parkas can’t keep it out. We shelter Sadako as best we can, standing in the way of the blast.
Rod opens the barrier gate and leads the way along the sandy track lined with sagg and bracken fern. The yellow cones of the grevilleas, candle-bright by day, are dim; the honeyeaters that flit among them like sparks of light have gone to their nests.

At a turn in the path a fox is crouched among the coastal heath. This, too, is a stuffed specimen, placed there earlier. Rod instructs us on the dangers of foxes, reputedly introduced to the island only recently. They would devastate the native wildlife if their numbers increased. Some within the group express cynicism about whether the fox exists in Tasmania, with no proven sightings yet, though scats have been found. But Rod stresses the need for vigilance. He marshals us at a stand of pines on the leeward side of the hill’s crest. For a little while we are protected from the full force of the wind as we wait for daylight to fade and hear more about the shearwaters’ habits.

‘Is this the spot?’ I ask Paul.

‘No, further round.’

Rod takes from his box of props a stuffed adult muttonbird, as the shearwater is commonly known, and stretches out narrow tapered wings to their metre-wide span. He passes the grey-brown specimen around. The underwing, a paler brown, is soft to touch. The long beak is horny and slender with tube-like nostrils, the end hooked for gripping fish. Rod tells us about the birds’ clumsiness on land, shows us the webbed feet adapted for swimming. When they dive for fish they appear to fly through the water. The way their legs are positioned makes it difficult for them to take flight without the help of the wind, which is why they build their burrows on exposed headlands like this.

ON THIS SAME headland, years ago, a man and his lover buried the man’s wife. By torchlight or faint starlight they dug a grave beneath the pines, planted as a buffer against the wind when this was grazing land, before the area was reclaimed as a conservation zone with tracks maintained and interpretation panels set in place.

A difficult place to get to back then, it was visited only by the occasional surfer or hiker or clandestine lovers. The grave went undiscovered. The pines spread their shade over the dune. Tussock grass and purple-flowering succulents resumed their hold. Some time in the 1980s the woman, out of guilt or fear for her own safety, led police to the site. The story of the murder haunted the hill for years, and became folklore among the surfers who climbed the slope to read the swell of waves or share a bong.

ROD IS EXPLAINING that the colony here is one of about 285 in south-east Australia where short-tailed shearwaters, around twenty-three million of them, breed. Between September and November each year the adult birds arrive at their
rookeries after months at sea on a migratory journey that has taken them as far as the Bering Strait. Since their departure the previous autumn they will have flown more than thirty thousand kilometres in a northward dispersion, across the tropics to the Arctic regions via the Aleutian Islands. Their southward flight, in a rapid and direct movement across the central Pacific Ocean, leads back to their breeding ground, where they finally touch down. Only during the breeding season do they come to land.

It was because of these long periods of flight that a Melbourne scientist, Professor F Wood Jones, avowed in 1933 that the ‘moonbirds’, as he called them, were proof that the moon dislodged from the earth, creating ‘the Pacific Void’. He argued that the space it left behind, the Pacific Ocean, was just the right shape and size for the now orbiting rock to occupy, and that when it fell away from the earth and spun into the ether the creatures that had lived on it became homeless. His notion was that these birds of St Peter, the petrels, shearwaters and albatrosses, continue to circle the moon void, searching for their former terrestrial habitat, landing only to breed on the sandy headlands and offshore islands.

Exhaustion, starvation and storms all take their toll, especially on newly fledged birds. The bad weather of 1999 led to hundreds of dead shearwaters washing up on the Tasmanian coastline. Every day, walking my dog on the beach, I would find the drowned bodies with their sad hooked beaks and oily feathers half-buried in the sand. Many become entangled in gill nets. The Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement is now in place to monitor their population and try to protect them.

On return from their astounding flight shearwaters reunite with their mates, recognising each other by voice and gesture. They refurbish the burrow they left the year before, repairing it and lining it with grass and leaves. If their nest has been destroyed – by fire, storm or off-road vehicles, or by cattle or people trampling the areas where they nest – they will dig a new one in the soft sand, amid the succulent vegetation. They then set out for the Antarctic on a feeding trip lasting almost three weeks. Back at the colony, the female lays a single white egg that both parents will, in turn, incubate. Like many birds, they remain faithful to one partner.

WE LEAVE THE treed area and head closer to the bluff, where the burrows are clearly visible a metre or so apart. The ground is sparsely covered with fleshy-leaved plants. Little openings, like rabbit holes, slope downwards. A week from now, all the eggs secreted here will hatch. What appears to be a barren headland is pulsing with hidden life. The air is heavy with a strong fishy smell.

I remember the Sydney summers of my childhood: crowding onto the beach with other sun worshippers, roasting our bodies to achieve a perfect tan. We would line up to be sprayed with tanning lotion whose special ingredient was muttonbird
oil from the Bass Strait islands. The smell of coconut predominated; I doubt the lotion would have been so popular if the muttonbird reek prevailed.

Muttonbirds are still harvested for their oil, used in pharmaceuticals and as a food supplement for racehorses. Their under-feathers are filling for pillows and doonas. Their salted flesh is considered by some a delicacy, with a taste similar to mutton. Early sealers in Bass Strait called them ‘flying sheep’.

Each year the state government allows the Tasmanian Aboriginal population recreational and commercial harvesting of the chicks on the grounds that the practice is a link with their traditional past. It is the only Australian state that continues to allow birding. More than a million are killed each year. The chicks, fattened on the oil-rich diet of molluscs and krill their parents regurgitate for them, are pulled from their burrows and their necks broken.

Those chicks that survive their precarious beginnings, threatened by predation and damage to their burrows, soon begin to transform from plump fluffy bundles. The body fat that has nourished them since their parents left two weeks earlier for the northern hemisphere has melted away. Flight feathers replace the soft down.

Then, in late April or early May, under cover of darkness to evade marauding gulls and ravens, the fledglings will waddle down to the sea. Without any guidance from experienced birds they will spread their sooty-brown wings into the wind, lift off, and instinctively follow the flight path mapped out in their cells.

THE SKY IS darkening. We walk out onto the viewing platform that extends over the dunes towards the beach. Sadako is wrapped in Tom’s arms. He has given her his woollen scarf. I notice the tenderness they display towards each other.

It is a strange feeling to watch my son, now grown, finding his own way. His journey has already taken him to another hemisphere. Letting go, especially letting a son go to the care of another woman, is not easy, though Sadako has won our hearts as well. I wish these young lovers safe passage.

We are huddled together facing a sea the same slate colour as the sky. The headland at the southern end of the beach is a deep-grey shadow. Strips of light, like polished steel, band the horizon. While we wait, hunched into the collars of our jackets, Rod shows us a blade-shaped wing.

‘It’s because of this aerodynamic shape,’ he says, ‘that the birds can glide above the water with no effort. Even when they are flying at high speed they appear to hover just above the surface. That’s how they get the name shearwater.’

He offers a prize to the first person to see a returning bird. Our eyes search the water. There are a few false sightings. We think we can make out rafts of them on
the ocean’s surface as they wait for darkness before coming in to land. Or is it the wind patterning the waves? There is no moonlight. A star flicks on, and then another.

Sadako calls out, ‘There!’

Suddenly, the sound of wings swishes through the air; a dark shape swoops above our heads, so close. The soft thud of a bird landing, followed quickly by another and another. Before long there’s a rush of movement all around us as thousands of birds descend. Their loud wing beats fill the sky, now dense with their swift shadows and drenched with their fishy odour. We hear their crooning, kooka rooka rah, as they call to their mates, and their shuffling progress through the tussock to their burrows.

And then, just as suddenly, it quiets down. People begin to talk among themselves again, occasionally spotting a late arrival stumbling through the vegetation.

Elated and exhausted, we make our way back to the car. Paul shows me the place. The pines that grew there have been cut down to clear more space for the burrows and the remnant stumps are overgrown with pigface.

I relate the murder story to Tom and Sadako.

‘Why would anyone do that?’ Tom asks, mystified.

‘Who knows?’ I say. ‘Passion. Jealousy. Only last month the courts have been trying the case of a lovers’ triangle that ended in murder and a beach burial just north of here. In the same bay, in fact.’

We are all shivering. ‘Who’s for a mug of hot cocoa?’ Paul asks. We hurry out of the bitter night, eager for the warmth of home.

As we leave, there’s a rustle in the bush beside the path and our torchlight catches the glint of eyes. A creature – most likely a feral cat – is stalking the moonbirds.
Shortlisted, 2010 NSW PREMIER’S LITERARY AWARDS, 
Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction

‘A fine example of an endangered literary species, the scholarly history that engages the general reader.’ Canberra Times

‘As well as exploding myths and raising consciousness about the current national water crisis, The Water Dreamers reminds us of the degree to which the writing of history is shaped by ideology.’ Age

‘Both rollicking yarn and scholarly essay…exhilarating to read—intelligent, wry and compelling.’ TOM GRIFFITHS
POEM

Sorry Rocks
Anna Krien

At Uluru
the postman returns rocks
that look like they’ve been
chipped off a sunset.
They arrive in padded bags,
shoeboxes, take-away containers
from all over the world,
apologetic tourists trying to make good
or simply finding the rock
lost its strange orange glow
in the European light.
Some are stopped en route,
quarantine confiscating the little Australian boulders
and making a kind of Red Indian burial site
in the middle of the airport.

In a light plane
you see a different migration of rocks
moving like black caterpillars across the state.
Miniature grand canyons to the sea where
smelters spit fire at the sky
and mechanical donkeys
sip at troughs of oil.

At night men bang
empty cups on the pipelines
while neon women change positions
on a three-second timer.
Backpackers dance on tables
lightning bolts shaved into their pussies,
the phone numbers of temping agencies
scrawled on the back of their hands.
A Hillsong group
plays Celebrity Head with names
from the Old Testament,
a man screaming, 'Moses!
I'm Moses! I'm fucking Moses!'
And in hotel lobbies,
people fall to their knees
fingers in the weave
to gather the dandruff
of rich men.

On deck,
a man taps his cigarette
into an upturned abalone shell,
watching the sun come up.
The hulls of the cargo ships
are heavy with rocks like the
suicide coat pockets of poets,
As they push off
– the port easing
back onto its stumps –
all the needles on
all the compasses
twig north
in the direction of iron ore
and a swarm of bees
dives into the Timor sea,
sizzling like a thousand appliances.

Anna Krien has been published in the Big Issue, The Monthly, The Age, Best Australian Essays, Voiceworks, Going Down Swinging, Frankie and Dazed & Confused. Her book about the protests to save Tasmania’s old-growth forests, Into the Woods (Black Inc.), was published recently and her story ‘Still here’ appeared in Griffith REVIEW 28: Still the Lucky Country?
They come clattering down the stairwells and surge onto the platform around her: revoltingly young, for the most part, and energetic too, striding, laughing, chatting, texting, bouncing and bobbing to the music in their earphones. Marilyn feels exhausted just looking at them. She presses the manuscript to her chest as if it were an amulet.

She wishes the manuscript were about vampires. If it were, she’d be that much more confident that Xiaojun would like it. But it’s not. She wishes she were a vampire. If she were, she’d stick her fangs into one of these horrifying young people and suck up some of their appalling vitality. But she’s not. So she looks at her shoes instead.

Bugger.

She’d cleaned them before leaving her rented flat but the short trot to the subway station at Andingmen left them coated in a fine layer of yellow dust. They appear to her as hazy as the buildings across the street on a bad air day.

Marilyn believes in the power of positive thinking and visualisation. She does not think that the universe will shine her shoes. But she does think that, if she asks nicely enough, it will get Xiaojun to make her screenplay into a movie. She pictures an opening night, a red carpet, a cinema screen, a film, her name in the credits, applause. While she’s at it, she visualises her purse as containing more – much more – than the hundred and four yuan she has to get through the rest of the week. One hundred and two, now that she’s paid for her train ticket.

Pathetic. She is forty-seven and she has little more to her name than a bundle of dreams in a plastic folder. She thinks of the lyrics to that Chinese rock song popular back in the ’80s: *But all you ever do is laugh at me, ’cause I’ve got nothing to my name.* It mocks her.

She’d first come to Beijing in 1985, to work as a ‘foreign expert’ – a fancy name for an English teacher. She was twenty-two then, freshly graduated from a course in literature, clean of slate. She’d had nothing to her name, but no one else in China did either. Blond hair, youth and a smattering of Chinese had been currency enough.
She drew crowds, attracted job offers, pulled invitations simply by buying a yoghurt, strolling through a park or waiting for a bus. Beijing’s cool kids, smart kids, its avant-garde – poets, musicians, artists, filmmakers – sought her out. Ordinary back home – an average university graduate of average grades, average looks and average blondness – Marilyn became special in a China hungry for the exotic, the new, the foreign, and she basked in that specialness.

She began hankering to become an artist herself. She sang in a little band with some Chinese girlfriends but it broke up; she tried drawing but couldn’t get the knack. She began keeping journals and, tentatively at first but with increasing confidence, started dropping phrases like ‘the novel I’m writing’ and ‘my screenplay’ into conversation. Her Chinese friends called her a writer and said they wished they read English so they could appreciate her writing.

And so a gap year abroad turned into two turned into three turned into four, and journals turned into tentative drafts. After the Beijing massacre of June 1989 she returned weeping and pale to Australia, but felt oddly lost, disoriented, invisible, just one more average blond in a sea of average blonds. Several pointless jobs, a marriage, a divorce and years later she decided to return to China, now generally acknowledged to be, if not quite the centre of the world, a very happening place. Six months ago she’d boarded a plane to Beijing with her savings, her computer, her drafts and her hopes crammed into a purse, a carry-on bag and 23.2 kilograms of checked luggage.

Marilyn was bewildered by the changes to ‘her’ city, now brimming with possibility in a way no one could have foreseen back then.

She looked up old friends. Most of the poets had emigrated; one who hadn’t worked in advertising and was very busy but delighted to hear from her and wanted to do lunch. It was short. A muso whose rebellious lyrics, long hair and wiry physique used to make her faint with desire had grown paunchy and bald; as an enthusiastic new Christian, he was on a mission to bring Christian rock to the masses. She fled his attempts to convert her. Of her painter friends, those savvy enough to ride the art boom had built huge studio-residences in the suburbs, where they lived with their twenty-year-old mistess-assistants. After she’d admired their latest work and they’d all reheated some funny anecdotes from the ‘80s, there wasn’t much left to say. As for the filmmakers, she couldn’t even get past the secretaries to their personal assistants.

Meanwhile, a new generation of cool kids had sprung up. They knew everything about social media but cared nothing for poetry. And there was a dismaying number of foreigners: entire settlements and malls and bar districts full of them. Blonds were myriad and mostly Chinese. Marilyn was almost as invisible in Beijing as in Sydney.
Xiaojun had seen her, though. He approached her that day in the wi-fi café on Nanluoguxiang: tall, good-looking and trendy, with a floppy lock of hair over one eye. She’d been job-hunting on the internet. He asked if he could sit down with her. If she were twenty, she might have thought he was flirting with her.

He asked what she was doing, and she bluffed: ‘Working on my screenplay.’ It turned out Xiaojun was in film. His company, Young Lion, had a few projects in production. She should come talk to them. He dealt her his name card and punched her number into his phone. He had to be older than he looked, she guessed, for he projected confidence and authority.

Xiaojun called later that afternoon, and the day after, chasing an appointment. She’d feigned a busy schedule, in truth needing a few days to polish her draft. It had all been very random. It was also the most exciting thing that had happened since her return. It could be – she visualised – it was, her big break.

SHE DOUBLE-CHECKS THAT she is on the correct side of the platform: one track on the circle line, the Number 2, traces the route of the old city wall clockwise, the other counter-clockwise. Xiaojun’s office is five stops counter-clockwise.

A shudder, a muted roar, a breeze and the train arrives in sync with its digital timetable and aligns with the markings on the platform. The doors slide open, and the packed carriage expels passengers who instantly gain in volume, like decompressing files. A dozen people who had been behind Marilyn a second ago stream into the car in front of her. She injects herself into the mass. On board, as the doors hiss closed, she inhales the fruity perfume of the girl next to her, the garlic breath of the man behind and her own trickling sweat. She feels her lipstick feather. She dishevels.

On the flat-screen TV by the door, chopstick-thin models swing down a catwalk in wok-shaped skirts. A friend who was a model once told her that the trick to staying cool while being photographed in winter clothes on a beach under the summer sun was to curl your tongue and breathe in. She tries this but senses two young men staring at her – an eccentric foreigner making funny faces. An eccentric old foreigner. She hugs the manuscript tighter.

Her sweaty thoughts fly back to Xiaojun.

Something a Chinese girlfriend said when she’d mentioned Xiaojun: ‘Maybe he’s looking for a sugar mama.’

‘No way,’ she’d said, stung.

‘Well, he’s probably after something. Besides, who is he? What do you know about him?’

‘He’s cool.’ Marilyn was not going to admit she knew nothing.

‘Just be careful.’
The train sidles into the station at Fuchengmen. She follows Xiojun’s directions, stumbling along side streets, the view blurred by construction, until she finds the address. She checks it. She isn’t sure what she was expecting. She tells herself that the place is – she scrabbles for the right word – edgy. There is no sign but a door pushes open. She finds herself in a courtyard where a boy in a T-shirt advertising his taste for the indie band Brain Failure stands smoking a cigarette and staring into the distance.

He eyeballs her, pulls on his cigarette and in the choked voice of inhale drawls, ‘Zhao shei?’ Who’re you looking for?

She notices a table behind him, at which are seated four or five other apparently aimless and affected young people. Xiojun is not among them. They swivel their necks to look at her with incurious expressions. One of the girls manages half a smile. ‘Ayi,’ she says. ‘You shi ma?’ Something we can do for you, ayi?

Marilyn has never been called ayi before. Auntie. She flounders, winded. When she first arrived in China, she learned the word as meaning either ‘maid’ or ‘auntie’ and serving as a respectful but familiar address for older women, the sort who have stepped off the path of life to rest on its park benches, occasionally handing out snacks or cheering on those still racing ahead.

‘Zhao shei?’ the standing boy repeats, as though to someone of limited intelligence.

‘Xiaojun,’ she answers, wavering. Is she even in the right place?

‘Xiaojun!’ the boy bellows up at the building.

Xiaojun comes clattering down unseen steps. He seems younger here, as he shakes her hand with an uncertain expression and urges her to sit down while falling into another chair. He fails to introduce the others.

No one speaks. She wonders if she is the only one who finds this awkward. After a few minutes Xiaojun stands and invites her to come inside. There are several signs inside the office. She is reassured to see that one indicates it is the headquarters of the Young Lions. An eclectic series of film posters is tacked to the walls: The Matrix, Toy Story 2, Breathless, Rashômon and Lust, Caution. She is still wondering what Young Lion might have to do with any of these when he leads her up wooden steps to a mezzanine. A fleet of desks occupies one end of the room. Another inexplicable selection of young people sit at these, staring into computer screens or eating instant noodles. One or two glance their way but don’t say anything. A conference room with a view of the computer crew runs along the other side and tinted windows at the back demarcate a closed office. He shows her into the conference room and they seat themselves at the long table. ‘So,’ he begins.

‘So,’ she echoes. She sets her folder down on the table. A silence blows in like the breeze heralding a train’s arrival on the platform. Please mind the gap, she thinks, taking in the movie posters that here too are plastered around the walls: Clueless, The Mummy, Flashdance, Casablanca. She pushes the folder a centimetre in his direction.
He opens his mouth to say something and a pop song bursts forth from his pocket. Meile meile meile, wo zuile zuile zuile. Beauty beauty beauty, you make me drunk drunk drunk. He tosses her an apologetic glance and answers the call. He listens for a moment and, mumbling something about being in a production meeting, hangs up.

‘Perhaps you could tell me something about your company,’ she says, wondering if the boss will emerge to join them. ‘Then we can talk about ways we might work together. As you know, I’m a writer…’

‘We have writers,’ he assures her.

‘Oh.’

‘I’m thinking something bigger.’

Her hopes soar.

‘Co-production,’ he says.

She is confused.

‘We’re looking for investors.’

He does not seem to comprehend what she tells him about her interests and her finances. She is not sure whether this is the fault of her patchy Chinese or something more fundamental. He switches tack, proposes to be her agent and to sell her work for huge amounts of money. He claims to be the agent of three famous pop stars whose names mean nothing to her. When she doesn’t respond, uncertain as to what she could possibly say, he asks her if she is married, if she has a boyfriend. Panic rises in her chest; the room is stuffy and she feels beads of sweat forming on her upper lip.

She is still trying to think of what she should say when Xiaojun suddenly deflates. Bravado escapes him like a gas. Even his gaze appears to collapse inward. He stares at the table.

‘Whatever happens, it’s fate that we met,’ he tells his hands, glancing up at her with suddenly pathetic eyes. ‘It’s karma. And we’ll be friends forever, won’t we?’

‘Of course we will,’ she answers, feeling guilty at her insincerity. She realises that he has an accent from somewhere in the south, in the countryside. She realises he’s probably one of those kids who has come to Beijing chasing dreams that haven’t quite come good. They are not wholly dissimilar, she and him. The thought is not comforting.

*Best of friends.* He holds out his right hand with the pinkie extended. Numbly, she hooks her own pinkie around his and they bring the flat of their thumbs together, as though stamping and sealing the promise. She tries to smile.

‘Look. It’s like this,’ he blurts. ‘Could you loan me a hundred yuan? I can’t pay my phone bill.’
ON THE TRAIN home, Marilyn finds a seat, a small miracle in a day in which wine has turned to water. Her mind feels both empty and full, a zen koan with no hands clapping. Her manuscript rests, unclutched, on her lap. No one is looking at her and she is grateful for her invisibility. The next stop is Xuanwumen, says the recorded announcement, and she realises she’s going in the wrong direction. She doesn’t have the energy to disembark. She decides to ride the circle line the long way back to Andingmen.

On the television screen, a cartoon blob imparts cheerful aphorisms on the subject of courtesy and manners. The train slides into Qianmen and an old couple gets on. As though from a different universe, they are tiny, their clothes patched and threadbare. The man’s eyes are gone from their sockets, and they both bear terrible burn scars. The old woman grips her husband’s thin arm with a three-fingered hand. In the other hand nests a small collection of worn one-yuan notes. There is scarcely enough for a bowl of noodles.

Passengers focus on their phones, their books, their iPods, their laps. Some brusquely add a note or coin to the pile and quickly avert their gaze, accepting the woman’s thanks and blessing with impatient smiles.

Marilyn, staring at her dusty shoes, senses the moment the old woman spots her: the atmosphere shifts.

‘Money, money, sank you, sank you.’

Marilyn is aware that she has become the focus of the entire carriage. Cheeks flushing, she fumbles her wallet out of her bag and opens it without thinking. The woman’s eyes brighten at the sight of the red banknote with Chairman Mao’s face. The hundred-yuan banknote. Marilyn does not know what to do except hand it to the old woman. The woman bows low, and bows again.

‘Sank you, sank you, sank you, sank you.’

They shuffle off, but the carriage’s attention lingers on Marilyn. Marilyn feels foolish, certain that everyone is thinking that foreigners are too rich for their own good, gullible, dumb. When she glances around, she sees all that but she also sees friendliness, empathy, and small nods of sympathy and recognition. She is visible. She is special. She breathes. She will be okay. The circle line will take her home.

Linda Jaivin is the author of eight books (six fiction, two non-fiction), many of which have been published internationally and appeared on bestseller lists; countless published essays, short stories and other pieces; several plays and a number of translations from Chinese, including movie subtitles. Her most recent novel was A Most Immoral Woman (HarperCollins, 2009).
‘Glad you made it,’ said my friend. ‘I cannot but believe,’ said I to myself, ‘that when the history of my famous achievements shall be given to the world, the learned author will begin it in this very manner, when he comes to give an account of this my early setting out.’

I AM in Shanghai for a holiday to visit a friend and he has shanghaied me: no return ticket, a job interview, a contract to teach business English to executives. He is being kind; I cannot refuse. While I do a job I cannot perform, to students who don’t care, I live with his colleague, Fang Fang. The apartment belongs to her lover, or one of her lovers; it is not clear which. The lover’s elderly father lives with us. He sleeps in an armchair in the living room. I have a room to myself and a mattress on the floor. The ayi, the maid, also sleeps in an armchair—except when she wakes to tend the old man, whose face is like something from a fairytale, who has lived through the Revolution and remembers nothing. He and I smile at each other; we converse in the two major languages of the world; we understand nothing. I have offered him my bed but Fang Fang refuses on his behalf. I am forbidden from doing housework: ayi will do it. The thin young woman from the countryside smiles and blushes and takes my soft hand with her rough one.

When I am not asleep or in class I am expected to be at Fang Fang’s office. It is not clear why. There is no seat for me there, no place to be. I lie on the bed in the other room and read. On the bookshelf, an assortment of classics in English: The House of Mirth, Siddhartha, Don Quixote. Not what I would have chosen. I smoke out of the window. I stare. I wait.

From this high place I can see a fog of pale pink and grey, the concrete freeways and apartment blocks that crowd to the horizon. A flock of seagulls is helixing in the twilight, mirroring the swoop of the traffic as it flows onto the vast strips of the elevated road and Nanpu Bridge. Red lights bead in the grey haze.

The city stretches vertically as well as horizontally. They say that ten years earlier half the world’s cranes were in Shanghai. Citadels reach to the sky; no matter how high the viewpoint, you can never see the horizon. Along Nan Jing
Road, along Hua Hai Road, the city is supernatural with glass: gleaming, smooth, perfect. A cone of ice cream costs a labourer half a month’s wages.

In the French Concession the city is still low. The streets are lined with plane trees and behind them are walls with Cité de Bourgogne 1929 on the lintel, French town estates enclosed within. In two-storey gabled houses bare light bulbs swing. People do not rise high here; they squat in the street, bring themselves close to earth. Down a dark and rancid alleyway is a glimpse of the citadel’s gloss, reflecting a clouded sky.

‘How was the trip?’ he asked. I left my horse to go which way he pleased; firmly believing that in this consisted the very being of adventures.

People stream though Dapu Qiao. Bicycles,rickshaws, taxis, buses and trucks pour on to the freeways and flyovers, nudge through narrow streets. On the shores of every road are deal tables for cards and mahjong,boiling cauldrons and bakery trays, dozens of tiny matched-set schoolchildren. I walk past old women selling handfuls of spring onions or lottery tickets, past cartloads of cardboard boxes and fruit, tangles of black bicycles, shoe-repair men squatting on the footpath, trays of festive moon cakes, old ladies shrieking gossip, families strolling in their cotton nightwear, lean young men in construction helmets and dusty old jackets, the phone-card seller on his seat by the side of the road, noodle-shop delivery boys, young women in lipstick and high heels, piles of watermelon and pale peaches big as cantaloupes, the spiralling red and white columns of innumerable hair salons, swathes of washing drying on poles outside every shop, stalls of old plumbing fittings and fresh pastries, sheaves of bamboo poles for scaffolding, and the local Communist Party stooge who sits sourly all day at the entrance to Fang Fang’s office building and refuses to notice as I buy contraband English cigarettes from under a tarpaulin. I nearly trip over a woman selling crabs at the entrance. They lie there feebly crawling in plastic buckets. Even the gutters are wriggling.

‘Where did you go today?’ asked my friend. I sallied out into the fields, wonderfully pleased to see with how much ease I had succeeded in the beginning of my enterprise.

I am part curiosity, part intruder, part celebrity in my neighbourhood. There are good days, when I feel welcomed, hailed as I pass, greeted with quaint pleasuances in English. I smile and wave and feel exhilarated. There are bad days, when I catch people gesturing: foreigner, Big Nose. Some days the people stop and stare. I imagine them – the phone-card guy, the sardonic fruit-seller, the woman who knits all day at the entrance with the Party man – commenting, ‘Here she comes; look at the funny way she walks! So fast! So big!’

I am no taller than many Chinese women but I feel large and clumsy, bosomy and barbaric. It is the first time in my life I have understood what racism feels like. It prickles to have no reply.

I try to learn the language. ‘What’s the word for table?’ I ask one friend, from the north of the city. She tells me the word; I cannot repeat it.
'What's the word for table?' I ask another friend, from an island off Shanghai's coast. She tells me the word: it is different.

'What's the word for table?' I ask a third friend, from Beijing.

I cannot even say: I don't understand.

'What did you do?' asked my friend. I travelled almost all that day without meeting any adventure worth the trouble of relating; which put me into a kind of despair.

The streets are microscopes of life: a man showering on the corner of a busy intersection, his body wet and pale like pork fat; an ancient man with child's limbs carrying a bundle of sticks on his back as large as a car; a shop which sells only disco balls, plumbing supplies and guitars. It is familiar and strange, mundane and hallucinogenic. I take no photographs: where to focus?

Through dirt to paradise. I have a business meeting in the café of a luxury hotel. Mai is so beautiful, I feel so ugly; she takes my hand; is this friendship Chinese-style or something more? There is a string quartet playing modestly and the waitresses, wearing green satin cheongsams, bring twenty-dollar pots of exquisite jasmine tea and change our ashtray every few minutes. The jasmine flowers open up in the warm water; we peer into our cups and sigh.

On the way home I stop at the wet market. At the stall beside me a man thumps a machete through the limb of a turtle. As I leave I can hear the caged pigeons cooing. When I eat pigeon, the head flies from my chopsticks and lands in my lap. I have never been taught to eat a head, but Fang Fang will suck out the eyes of a fish.

The dishes of one meal are all covered in dried chillies. The next day I am served soup, Shanghai-style: a potato and a carrot in boiled water. My friend and I travel an hour by taxi to buy Australian meat pies from an entrepreneur for nine dollars each. We steam them on a platform of crossed chopsticks and scoff the tepid dough furtively, with delight.

On the weekends we go to the shopping malls, in through the entrance, around ground level, up the escalator, around the first level, up the escalator, all the way to the top; down, out, into the next store. It is almost impossible to find something I might wish to buy.

'Why so many hairdressers?' I ask Fang Fang.

She looks at me, amused. 'So many heads, la!'

'Friend Sancho,' said I... 'learn of me, that one man is no more than another, if he do no more than what another does.'

In a fashionable mall Fang Fang stands in a hairdresser's cape and fluffy slippers, munching rice crackers. There are cottonwool balls festooned around her forehead and curlers in her hair. She is completely unconcerned with her appearance as we slip-slop down the street for a noodle break.
Fang Fang chews her way through a bowl of sunflower seeds and studies the Chinese chequers board. She plays fast – aggressively, fluidly. Her pieces swoop around the board in bursts of intuition. Holding a cigarette between crooked white teeth, she grins in victory.

Fang Fang arrives at the office in a 1950s dress suit, high heels as crisp as her hair. She has a silk scarf knotted around her neck to hide a savage scar. As it gets colder, she puts on a garish orange plastic jacket with writing on the back: ‘A thing of goodness is beautiful. Let’s go out to the town!’ She picks up her fluffy white dog and licks its nose. Her eyes are as moist and gleeful as the crazy dog’s.

‘Say it,’ cried Don Quixote, ‘but be short, for no discourse can please when too long.’

The city’s summer heat has breathed out; it is freezing even in the sunshine. I have been here four months. The hot water system breaks; there are no plumbers in Shanghai, Fang Fang says. I am warm only when I wake in bed.

Every day, to check my email, I must wait patiently until 11 pm for Fang Fang to get off her computer. I must wait until past midnight to call my lover in Rome. At a phone box in a freezing, dark side street in Shanghai, as blue rubbish trucks crunch past, as police on bicycles drift near, as labourers work by floodlights, I jam coins into a slot and shout Italian into the Chinese telephone. Sometimes my lover cannot stop to talk. Sometimes the computer will not show Yahoo and there is no email. Sometimes I think that among fifteen million people I am the loneliest. Marry me, my lover says, but perhaps he says something else, the traffic is so loud, and I am tired. Yes, I say to whatever it is that he asked.

In any case, it is nearly time to leave.

‘You shall not need to sigh nor be melancholy,’ quoth Sancho, ‘for I will undertake to tell you stories.’

Fang Fang says she is sorry it has been hard for me, and that I am a good friend. She winks, tilts her head back, clenches a cigarette between her teeth. I laugh. She takes my hand. I am sorry too, not to have understood. She lets me win at chequers. I let her lose.

All italicised lines are adapted or quoted from Don Quixote (1615), by Miguel Cervantes, translated from the Spanish by PA Motteux.

Kate Holden is the author of the acclaimed memoirs In My Skin (Text Publishing, 2005) and The Romantic (Text Publishing, 2010).
MY NAME is Fredericka. Every night, I find myself in the same room. Thankfully, it is coloured to my taste: black wallpaper, and the glow of a red light bulb. It is too dark to read, but I like the ambience.

I light raspberry-rose incense. The smoke drifts carbon smudges across the curtains. I eat chocolate-covered Turkish delight, and squash the dark-red jelly equally with both of my fingers. Once, a man mistook me for a Turkish girl, but I am Maori. If I look in the mirror to check that everything is in place, I will see a girl with black teeth, two of which are missing, and a monobrow. She will be wearing a black T-shirt dress, and up her arms she will have red roses with dark shadowing tattooed into her skin. Roses are for remembrance. She must remember to check, count and sort. She will have her sisters’ names tattooed there too: one on each shoulder. My sisters and I used to be so pretty. I am not pretty now. The reverse.

When I first got the tattoos done, blood oozed from the flowers like water seeping up through the footsteps that you leave behind when you walk in wet sand. Best not to think of wet sand: untidy, messy and a symptom of a world out of control.

The lino on the floor is red and black, like the squares of a chessboard. I wonder, if I move from this square to that, can I take my enemy’s queen? Will they die, or will I? Chess is a game to the death. I listen to Reb Fountain on my iPod. I warm myself with the tones in her voice. My shotgun leans up against the wall. I have strings of rabbit skins drying, dark-chocolatey brown, some with flecks the colour of sand, heads down, ears still attached. Somewhere, I have a black felt hat with a floppy brim that I have threaded a pair of rabbit ears on to.

When I come in, I straighten things. I don’t know how they have slipped, but somehow, while I’ve been away, they have. Infinitesimally to the side – a millimetre here, a millimetre there, and it all adds up. Before I know it, things have moved right out of place. I count the ovals on the black lace curtain. I like dark colours. My thinking has become dark. I count the ovals in case one has disappeared during the day. I do not want to be where things are going to disappear, here one day and gone the next.
I vacuum for an hour or two, in case any dust has settled on the floor. The universe is constantly making dust out of nothing at all. Dust can get out of control. I vacuum the left side of the carpet with my left hand, and the right side with my right. Then I turn around the other way, and do the opposite, just to keep things even.

After that, I set out the cards. There are four packs, because there are four suits, and each must have a pack where they dominate, where I place that suit on top of the pack. I mix them up. Then I sort them out, all over again, to check that every card is there. I don’t know what I would do if one was missing.

Shuffling cards keeps memory in order, and in its place.

Hearts, spades, diamonds, clubs. Spades, hearts, clubs, diamonds.

I bring order to the chaos. I rearrange the universe so that it is safe, and I am safe. Everything is in its place, and nothing is out of control. The nine of clubs is the wishing card. I find it four times. When I find it in the pack where clubs are dominant, I make a wish. Always the same wish. I wish that they would ask me the right questions.

I take my pills. I’m not sure that they’re working, I haven’t noticed any change. They say that I should have. They ask me, ‘Do you feel sad? Does your heart race? Can you see things that aren’t there? Do you want to harm yourself?’ These are the wrong questions. ‘We can only help you if you tell us exactly what’s happening for you,’ they say. For people who think that they have all the answers, they don’t seem to know the rules very well. And the rules are that they have to ask the right questions before I can give them the right answers. You would think that they would know what to ask, but maybe not, because they don’t seem to know so much.

They ask me, ‘Do you think that you might harm someone else?’ I say that I am not sure, but I laugh as I say it, and they laugh too. No one says, ‘Do you straighten things?’ (And isn’t that wise, to prevent accident and loss?) ‘Must you always do everything equally?’ (And who wants the world to become unbalanced?) ‘Are you trapped like a soft, furry creature in a maze, performing the same rituals in the same way, night after night, as if you are stuck in the Mad Hatter’s never-ending tea party, where the most you can do is to move around a few place settings and get a fresh cup?’

These are the questions that they should be asking, but they don’t. You really would think that they would know the rules. But maybe there are rules that I don’t know about. Maybe they are trapped in their own little rituals: of coming into the room and asking the wrong question, of keeping me on the wrong medication, of resolving nothing and then leaving the room. Doing the same thing, week after week.
If there are rules that I don’t know about, the world really is out of control.

I am good at taking my pills. One, two, glass of water. The first to my mouth with my left hand, the second to my mouth with my right. Sometimes, I do it one, two, with a glass of dark red wine; it just depends on my mood.

At first, I had such hopes for the potency of my pills, but even my dreams are still the same.

My dreams are as dark as my room. I don’t remember a lot of colour, other than blood. The tones are shadowy: blacks, darks and greys. I have a knife and a club. Clubs, hearts, spades, diamonds. At first, I think it is for killing rabbits. But somewhere in my dream, I realise that it is to protect myself, and that it is inadequate, because the other person has a gun. I don’t see them at first, but they are always there. I know them from the others in my dreams because they have a shimmer, as if their being is created with some sort of smudged diamond that marks them as special. Diamonds, spades, hearts, clubs. They are killing off people, and they have chosen me to be next.

Sometimes I wake, and the nightmare comes with me into the room. I can see the shimmer of my assassin in the dark. My heart is contracted and frightened. Hearts, spades, diamonds, clubs. I am so scared that I have a pain in the left side of my chest. I thump the right side with my fist, to provide an equal and opposite pain. Then I will myself to relax, and the shimmer fades. If it is a good day, I wash myself clean in the knowledge that it is Sunday, and I can go shooting. During the week I hold down a job, and on weekends I walk to the edge of town with my gun, and I kill rabbits.

I prefer to hunt them at dawn, before a human footstep has disturbed them, under the apricot glow of the sky, when the grass is dark in silhouette, and they do not expect me. They gather brazenly in huddles, and their fur is soft and relaxed, free of fear as they gently sniff each other with their dark quivering noses. My sisters and I used to think they were cute. Snuffle-nose and soft, perpetually late and flustered.

But then they got out of control. They became a threat, as things that get out of control always do. Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades. Sometimes I wish I had a spade to dig the rabbits out from their underground burrows, where they lie, fucking themselves silly, even the ones who are little more than babies. It is always night, or half-light, between dusk and dawn, underneath the earth where the rabbits are snug, moulding their bodies to fit against the curved walls and each other.

Soon, their burrows will all join up beneath the ground, and the surface of the earth will collapse.

The eyes of rabbits are so big and dark, velvety and glassy. I lock the sights of my gun into the glassy reflection of myself. There are too many of them, and they must die. I touch the trigger, they drop, and life just stops. As if it has a switch that is
suddenly flicked, and permanently off. Clubs, diamonds, spades, hearts. The heart of a rabbit, still quivering with warm blood, quivering with biology, and the need to produce new young. Biology is out of control. As if rabbits could build a spaceship, and colonise the stars.

We are like rabbits, using up all the space and all the resources, and soon we will be like them, starved of nourishment, because it will all be eaten, and the earth will be raped and despoiled by holes. The world will collapse from the weight of overpopulation, because we are replacing ourselves too fast. If we could see past our noses, we would have no more than two children, and preferably only one. Three is too many. We are no different to rabbits.

There are too many people on the planet. We are out of control. It only takes one too many to cause a catastrophe.

Today, I saw a new psychiatrist. The old one has gone back to Whakatane. Her room has no windows. ‘They’ve put me in this little cupboard,’ she said. ‘All the other rooms are full. There is a rush on mental health.’ Her big, dark, velvety eyes locked on mine, and she leaned straight into me, as if I was the only thing in the world that mattered. She asked the right questions. Do I check things, count things, sort things? Yes, yes, yes, I do. What am I afraid might happen if I don’t? That the world will be out of control. That it won’t be a safe place. That bad things will happen. She said I have obsessive-compulsive disorder. I am obsessed with order and control, and compelled to check, count and sort. ‘Why hasn’t anyone realised this about me before?’ I said.

She told me that it is mostly to do with the frontal cortex of the brain, the last part to develop, and the part that governs empathy, and the ability to understand the pain of other living things. It is also the part in charge of planning. Often, when the brain isn’t working properly, we get different clusters of symptoms, each responding to different therapies and different cocktails of drugs. But sometimes, psychiatrists realise that what looked like one cluster of symptoms is actually another, because they have so many symptoms in common. And sometimes, there are several disorders at once, all overlapping, which confuses them too. The most that psychiatrists can say for sure is that my brain isn’t working properly.

There is so much overlap, she said, that psychiatry is like forecasting the weather, or predicting earthquakes. An inexact science. We may know a lot, but mostly we know what a lot there is that we don’t know.

She gave me some new medication. Serotonin, she said, should help.

EVERY NIGHT, I find myself in the same room. Thankfully, it is coloured to my taste: black wallpaper, and the glow of a red light bulb. It is too dark to read, but I like the ambience. I take my new pills (soon I will be well again!), follow my rituals,
and I go to sleep. There are so many dreams, but they are all the same. I am never sure which one I will find myself in. Tonight, I am in my secret garden. The flowers among the dark leaves over the water are the colour of blood. At first, all is well. The flowers in the trees are the hearts of rabbits that have been shot by me, and everything is under control.

There are people in the dream. Too many of them. The world cannot stand it. I know that they must die. I have a club and a knife. But my assassin appears. They want to kill me. They don’t say why, and I don’t know if they are culling the population because there are too many of us, or whether they hate me especially. I don’t want to be the one who dies, so I run from them. And I hide in dark places where they couldn’t be expected to find me: dimly lit streets, the corridors of buildings, the rabbit warrens of the human world. I curl up small in an empty cupboard, trying to mould my body to its walls.

But there is no escape from them. They find me, and they kill me. I do not remember pain, only fear. People say that if you die in your sleep, you will die in reality. But how can I be dead if there is some sort of dream self to observe my dead self? Red roses are sprouting from my body. Roses are for remembrance. The assassin is laughing.

I cannot bear it any longer. I go back to the beginning of my dream. I am in my secret garden. The dark leaves glow fiercely with the red hearts of rabbits. People are everywhere. I search for the assassin. I know that they will be there, at the centre of any crowd, alone with me on a dark street, or rowing me across the river of my dreams. It takes me a while to see the shimmering mark, and then I know just who they are. Except that I don’t, because I have never seen their face.

But tonight in my dream, I don’t just have a knife and a club. I have a gun. And I raise it, and shoot straight at them. As the bullet hits them, I see my own dark, glassy eyes. I am the assassin. I am killing myself every night. I laugh. My blood is still warm. There is a spade nearby to bury me. Spades, diamonds, clubs, hearts.

Everything that I don’t want to remember returns. It plays like a movie, and I can’t stop it, no matter how careful I have been, no matter how many cards I have counted, or which hand I chose to pick up the spade with.

It is dark. My sisters and I are in a small dinghy. The water is black. The mopokes are calling across the river to say how very far away each is from the other. I am the oldest, and I say that there are too many of us for the tiny boat to hold, but none of us wants to be the one left in the dark while the other two row across, or the one left alone on the other side while one of us comes back for the one left behind. We are captured by the delicious thrill of fear.

So we all get in, three instead of two: one too many. One of my sisters – Marama, I think – is wearing a red jersey. I can see it, even in the dark. Afterwards, I know that I should have checked the boat more carefully. I should have counted; I should
have sorted. One on the bank, two in the boat, one in the boat, two in the boat. Never three. If there had been fewer of us in the boat, there would have been enough room. Overcrowding is a dangerous thing.

But I am more afraid of the dark, and what might happen to me alone in it. The boat begins to fill with water in the middle of the black river. The moon is behind a thin cloud, but it still reflects on the water like the shimmer of a smudged diamond. Diamonds, clubs, hearts, spades. When my parents find my sisters, they are not warm but cold, as if life had a switch that was suddenly flicked, and permanently off. A rabbit with big glassy eyes is sniffing at Marama’s red jersey. The world is out of control. Three becomes one.

I wake. I go to work. I come home. I take my pills with some red wine. Soon I will be well. I want to be well.

My name is Fredericka. I am an inexact science. Every night, I find myself in the same room. Thankfully, it is coloured to my taste: black wallpaper, the glow of a red light bulb. It is too dark to read, but I like the ambience.

Alice Tawhai is the author of the acclaimed short-story collections Festival of Miracles (2005) and Luminous (2007), both published by Huia. She lives in New Zealand.
The infernal wood
Eva Hornung

The footfall of the horse was muted in soft ground and leaf litter. The path ahead glimmered with an undersheen of pale clay – forgotten gold, maybe. The forest was riddled with tunnels, had once teemed with frenzied digging, shaking, boring. It had been felled, a long time ago, and now was porous, treacherous with sinkholes, shafts, mounds and hollows. Trees teetered on the brink of unstable heaps; others spanned dark man-made holes. It was an all but silent forest, as if contemplating its survival and recovery. From the peaks you might hear lawnmowers or chainsaws, depending on which way the wind blew, but in the valleys there was nothing of this – only the occasional gang-gang, yowling lazily through the treetops.

What a totally trashed place, she thought happily. No virgin forest, this. More like raped and stabbed and left for dead. No one could possibly care that she was bushranging on her horse, seeking out trails at random with an EPIRB in her pocket and a compass in her pack. Who would bother to regulate a place that had seen so much destruction? Nothing of what it once was remained. Had been, still was, a free-for-all. Criss-crossed with trails, some with cruel or shining names – Morning Star, Dawn Gold, Broken Neck, Deadmans. Several tracks named Nuggety. No incomprehensible Aboriginal names, with the vague unease they carried. Nothing sacred here.

And for all that, the forest was huge, and beautiful. The trees rose in straight lines, rough-barked yet glimmering with strange greys. They took and held the light in a way that wove them together and illuminated them, yet up close they were a monotonous brown. You could not know, looking at them, that each straight-limbed stand was a coppice that grew from the still-living roots of a felled forest giant.

This place had never given up everything.

The horse under her was happy. She could feel it through the relaxed, swinging loins, the easy gait and the alert yet unworried set of those black-tipped ears. This was an aloof, independent mare, who could separate with equanimity from other horses. It had taken time to develop trust between them. She nudged the horse’s ribs, and the little mare responded with a buoyant canter.
Two hours in, then a break in a secluded spot, some tucker, unsaddle for respite, then on to a waterhole to cool down. The week stretched ahead, yawning like a cave of wonders, sucking her in.

She was heading roughly east, but it didn’t matter how or when.

SHE FELT THE sudden chill as she entered a thermocline, and the horse baulked slightly at the dark shadows of the fern-filled gully. She smiled. Densely packed trees and the moist cold air were alien to this desert-and-rocks horse. Ferns threatened, could hide anything.

A bird called with a sweet and penetrating note, drawn out and twisted sharply at the end. It went unanswered. She cooed to the horse, reassuring her.

She had never really heeded birds before, but their long silences drew attention. The horse’s footfalls rang hollow here. The quartz-speckled ground was not what it seemed, with its honeycomb beneath. No wonder wombats alone thrived here.

They scrambled down a gully towards a gurgling creek, the horse resigned but disapproving. When she slid to a halt at the bottom, the horse snorted, ears pricked. Two men, one young and in road worker’s fluoro, the other bearded and with a DIY air, were perched above her in a cutaway. They were silent, their movements as furtive and shamed as clandestine lovers.

‘G’day,’ she said, and they smiled uncomfortably.

She crossed the creek, grateful that the horse didn’t pick a fight, and headed up the narrow trail away from them. Out of sight, she checked her map and compass, which swung wildly and wouldn’t settle – more nervous than the horse. The map showed nothing of the network of trails – only a single dotted line variously named Rum Track, Whisky Track, Square Bottle Track. Perhaps she had just crossed Gin Creek. From below in the gully she could hear the men now, the amplified voices, and the ringing of metal striking metal.

A LONE BELLBIRD called, and the horse jumped. She laughed at the horse’s one concession to instinct: gullies were traps, the ridges safer. The horse obeyed her, but – loins taut, ready for flight, and ears swivelling wildly – clearly didn’t trust her judgement.

She held in the reins in a sun-spangled clearing, the horse knee-deep in October green and gold. She listened. The gurgle of running water, and a steady drip into a pool. Something that sounded like a cat. An aeroplane engine, remote, off-screen somehow. A breath of wind, and a restless stomp and shuffle in dry leaves from the horse. A rustle of her own clothing, and canvas, creak of leather. A stomach gurgle. A fly. The bellbird again, cut short on the second note.
It was eerie to hear so little in a space so big. She gave the horse her head and let her pick a path, which turned into a mad scramble up a steep slope, sliding and angling for purchase. It was dangerous to leave the trail, but the horse seemed to know what she was doing. There were no mines here and it would be hard for the horse to stake herself going uphill. They crested the ridge, the horse dripping with sweat and breathing hard, but much happier.

THROUGH THE LONG hot afternoon, as the horse picked an easy path for them along the unmarked and overgrown ridge trail, there was time to fantasise – about devising a computer game that involved riding a horse across such a forest, and about being a longrider, with more than a thousand kilometres continuous riding to boast of. How unusual that would be! Her blog counter would go over ten thousand. Maybe she could ride the whole Bicentennial Trail. In fact, this trip could be seen as training for that sort of escapade.

The only thing wrong with this trip was she couldn’t maintain her blog, and, next to the horse, blogging was her main recreation. She had quite a following among young people. To be good, though, the blog had to have immediacy. She had her Moleskine notebook, and would try to handwrite something, then type it up on her return.

IT WAS A long time since she had heard an aeroplane or chainsaw from these heights. The country was all seamed and forested folds.

The horse, strangely, now wanted to go down into gullies. She could feel a leaning, a pull towards valleys in the horse’s movements. It was as faint as a falter, a hoof placed consistently just to the left of the line she was asking with thigh and knee. Then, as she sipped some water, she realised the horse was thirsty. No doubt hungry. How long had it been since they saw golden grass heads in a glade? All around was grey and silver and, to a horse, barren. Every two hours, at least, a horse should eat something. They can get ulcers. She left the ridge trail to head downhill into the greener gloom, speaking kindly, soothingly, guiltily all the while. This was her adventure: the horse was just obeying her, learning from her. Green.

Not so green that she didn’t know water lay in scary places. Despite a lifetime of stables and improved pastures, her little horse knew a thing or two.

Her first major difficulty was at the creek. It was too rocky and steep to lead the horse to water. The horse snuffed the sweet air, but didn’t trust the slippery route.

The water trickled and gurgled. The pool was deep and clear, but no path led up or down stream. They would have to return to the higher track and find another way down. The horse’s flanks were sunken with thirst.
Then she remembered her hat. She tied the horse to a tree, and, laughing with relief, carried brimful after brimful to those yearning lips. It distorted her new felt Akubra but she didn’t mind. Afterwards, the horse relaxed, and let her rub sweaty ears and face with water trickling between her fingers.

She unbridled and loosened the girth, and the horse grazed peaceably on a tether while she ate her own lunch. Cold steak sandwiches. The only time on the trip she’d be having something so indulgent. She was ravenous. It would be her sachets of freeze-dried Oriental Noodles and Hearty Bolognaise in boiled water after this. Ten bucks a sachet, but so light to carry and easy to prepare.

She lay back against her swag, watching the horse eat. What a beauty she was. Her pale coat, dark as copper where it was wet, glittered with a rare gold iridescence, enhanced by copra and sunflower seeds in her feed mix. Her long mane and tail, nose, points of ears, and fine legs were all black with a silvery sheen. And along her spine she had a black dorsal stripe, a hint of a wild horse ancestry. Together, they always turned heads, especially now she wore an Akubra, not an ugly helmet.

Back when she fell in love with that little buckskin yearling, she had wondered whether the glow the horse seemed to cast over her every thought and endeavour would wear off, a mere novelty, but it didn’t. She had acquired an expensive lust for all things to do with horse care and horsemanship, pursuing her own education and the horse’s together. It had fed her conversations and her blog. She wasn’t one of those who spent all their money on clothes and clubbing. Not anymore. And although her class of boyfriend had not improved, she found herself far more interesting than she had before.

THEY WERE BOTH mellow on the late-afternoon ride. We are truly bonding, she thought. Already! What a horse. She squared her shoulders, corrected her riding position, self-consciously moved with the horse. What had once been so hard was becoming second nature.

An ominous sound broke in on her thoughts. A faint tink, now and then, as the horse’s hooves struck. The trail was rocky now. The rocks. That was all it was. Clop, tink, clop. Then she didn’t hear it anymore, and she forgot about it.

But an ominous tink is an ominous tink. The horse stumbled badly as they descended towards a shaded defile, a shoe scraped rock with a ringing sound, then sheered off and bounded down the scree and into the bush.

Fuck! Fuck!

The near fore.
She felt dizzy for a moment. Where was she? Where was a farrier? She mentally zoomed out from an imaginary spot on Google Earth, as deep and lost in the forest as one might be, to zoom into a Town and Country farrier in some far regional centre. The horse kept shifting her weight, feeling the uneven, lightened foot – even to the eye she looked odd, lopsided.

She slapped the horse. How could she cast a shoe? They were new! Just last week, in preparation for this.

She couldn’t think. She led the horse into the shade, unpacked the halter and tied her to a tree.

A longrider would have farriery skills, or…fuck. Ordinary things like this didn’t happen.

She really had no idea where she was. The straight way through was lost. Her finger trailed aimlessly over the map. Maybe on this track, leading off Deadmans, somewhere between Chinamans Hole and Wideskirts.

What did people do? It must have happened. Ride on and lame the horse?

The EPIRB. To be used only as a last resort. Oh, but how embarrassing. TV, the Emergency Services. My horse lost a shoe. It sounded ludicrous. I broke a nail.

She closed her eyes. Expand your chest. Inhale. Exhale. As you exhale, tense your core strength muscles, lift your pelvic floor, count to ten. Hold. Feel your heart rate, steady and regular. Inhale.

It wasn’t so bad. It was October. The ground was soft, especially down in the gullies. She just had to avoid rocky country, stick to edges, stay in the green. Head out of the forest, slowly, either find a farrier or end the trip early. This wasn’t a disaster.

She had to even up the horse, though. Get the other shoe off.

She found a sunny spot near the head of a running creek. It had enough grass, so she stripped the gear from the horse and picketed her to graze. Best to be systematic about this. She laid all her gear out in a line, to work out what tools she had. Good to let the afternoon sun soak in and dry up the sweat on everything, in any case. Maybe warm her bedding up too, as she knew the night would be cold.

Farriery was not one of the things she had studied. She had held her horse while the farrier bent his back, tapping and rasping away at a hoof out of her line of vision. She had admired her horse’s trim hooves, and the glint of new metal when she was freshly shod, and had basked in the farrier’s praise for her horse’s hoof health. She tried to remember how he removed old shoes: the tools he used, the sequence of his actions. She picked up the off fore and studied the shoe. Yes. The ends of the nails,
after being tapped through the wall of the hoof, were bent down, forming hooks to hold the shoe on. She had to bend them back up, then lever the shoe off. There were just six.

She tried. Her only tool was her pocketknife. Its puny spikes and gadgets, its multipurpose screwdrivers – none of them had the leverage to straighten the nails. She was dripping with sweat. Then she remembered the farrier lifting the foot forward, pinning the leg between leather-clad knees, resting the hoof on a stand, and, with firm blows with a hammer and some heavy tool, shearing the nail ends off.

The file on her pocketknife was a glorified nailfile. It took an hour, but it worked. Then she carefully levered the shoe off with her hoof pick, and bevelled the bare hoof edge with what was left of the file. She sat back, exhausted but proud. The horse had stood patiently all the while, munching on supplement in her nosebag.

She was filled with quiet satisfaction. They might as well camp here. Her swag was toasted in the sun, and there was enough grass, water and some trees for highlining just below the trail.

DAY WAS DEPARTING and the gully below exhaled a thick mist. She sighed happily and pulled out her notebook. It had been a great day. She mentally ticked off her checklist. No sign of girth galls or soreness on the horse – gear preparation and expense justified. Feeding and watering managed to plan – training for rope picketing of proven utility. Feed supplements and electrolytes administered. The cast shoe, well, she had nutted that one out. The hat and the water – that was a good one! For sure, that matched up with the private unrecorded experiences of pioneers and diggers.

31 October

I goeth well-mounted, methinks. Mine steed hath no ill effects sustained on this, the initial day of my trail ride. Provisions adequate so far.

And, commentariat, bloggers and blodgers all, mine own behind is holding up remarkably well, thank you for your concerns.

Ten pages later, the light failed. She wriggled down into a swag still warm from the sun, slithering into her silk sleeping-bag liner. Had anyone ever done this before? Not likely.

Well, very likely many people had in the distant past, but none had written a blog.

This trip, so long planned, was real!
SHE SLEPT DEEPLY at first. But after a while her right hip and thigh hurt, whether she lay on that side or on the other. The horse was uneasy, less settled than she had expected. They had practised overnight swagging and highlining in the agistment estate yards, and once in her backyard, but now the horse swung and stared and spun on the line like a novice. The stench of fresh, trampled horseshit was almost intolerable and the grass she’d found for the horse to graze was ruined.

She rolled onto her other side and gasped from the pain in her thigh. She rolled again and curled up, tucking her knees to her chest, but relief was fleeting. The horse strained at the lead and highline, making one of the trees groan. She opened her eyes. The horse was looking straight at her.

They’ll catch us, at this rate, the horse said, flicking her ears and tossing her head. We shoulda kept going. Big holes in the moonlight like black mouths waiting for us, but we shoulda kept going. Big holes be blowed. You sure you know what you’re doing?

She could feel a hard, steady suction flattening her to the ground. She couldn’t keep her eyes open.

HER SCALP CRAWLED with sudden weightlessness, and she could move again.

The horse was very quiet, watchful, and that was worse than all the tromping and swearing of earlier. She looked up at the silhouette of those pricked ears, and the horse turned a glistening eye her way.

Shh, the horse said.

Danger, the horse breathed.

Run? The horse suggested, sotto voce.

After that the horse stood still. Occasionally she sighed and dropped her head for a few minutes, only to throw it high again, breathing carefully, ears pricked.

Sleep was impossible.

I’d like to go home, the horse told her.

SHE WOKE THE third time with her thigh throbbing. The horse was next to her, resting one foot, head low and eyes closed. The forest was filled with confusion and noise. It wasn’t dawn.

She sat up and shrieked from the stabbing pain in her thigh. The horse woke with a start and took off, leaping, spinning wild-eyed, to be brought up short and hard by the extremity of the highline and lead rope. The trees holding the highline shook with the impact, and their leaves tinkled slyly, saying something she couldn’t hear.
She looked around and found herself in a dark wood. A bird called with two hollow notes from inside a weathered cuckoo clock nailed high on a tree, but it didn’t come out. The clock dangled pinecones. Its pendulum was motionless. In the distance someone was cutting wood with an axe with blows of greater frequency than she would have thought possible.

‘Hoo hoo,’ the bird said.

The horse, blowing hard, gradually settled, urinated, and then eased closer to her.

I’m hungry, the horse said, and I really don’t like this gully.

The fucking horse was still talking. She had to wake up. She opened her eyes again and struggled to stand, supporting herself on a tree. She nearly passed out from the pain in her thigh, and the tree bark was so abrasive it hurt her fingers. She could hear the dull tink of metal striking metal, and a cranking sound. Voices. Shouts. A steady rip-and-sigh rhythm was amplified from somewhere further downstream. Someone far on the other side of the gully was singing a Russian Christmas carol, one her grandfather sang.

She scabbled with shaky fingers for her torch, peeled down her jodhpurs, and tried to hold the light still to look. Her whole leg throbbed. On her buttock, near her hip, was a large raised hillock, much darker in the torchlight than the pale glimmer of the rest of her. Shadowy subcutaneous streaks radiated down her leg. Her hand shook as she tried to touch the area, and she dropped the torch. The pain was too great. All she could think was that this wasn’t on the message boards or chat lists or happytrails.com. It wasn’t even part of her that was in contact with the saddle.

Well, someone here would know what to do. She couldn’t find the torch, and gave up on it. She struggled with the gear, got the saddle and blankets ready on her arm. She reached out and tugged at the lead rope, and the horse, mercifully, came straight to her. She was giddy with pain.

If getting outta here’s the plan, I’m in, the horse said.

SHE SHOULDN’T RIDE in the dark. They had never done night riding, and there were holes all around them. But walking hurt too much. She couldn’t bend her right leg. It would have to bear her weight while she mounted. She gathered the reins and lifted her left foot to the stirrup. The horse eyed her, uncertain, and swung away.

What’s wrong with you? the horse said uneasily. You’ve never got on me from this side. You are acting very strangely.

She tried again, but the horse swung away from her wildly, showing the whites of her eyes, and trying to tear the reins from her hands.
The mullock heap next to them was a stark, pale mound in the gloom. She dragged the unwilling horse towards it. She would use it to mount from the correct side. It was loose soil and rocks, and very hard to scrabble through. She gave up. They would have to walk for help, at least until the horse settled down. Then she heard a tiny hollow whimper, and she forced herself to crawl to the peak of the mound, gasping with pain and drenched in sweat.

‘Help,’ cried a voice, unmistakably a child’s, faint and deep in the shaft. ‘Oh sweet Jesus, give me succour!’

The square shaft was pitch black, straight-sided. It breathed a strange odour, a blend of death and honey. Its tailings rose around it, pale mounds of crushed and sifted pay dirt. Unlike the shafts she had seen during the day, this one had no trees growing from the tailings – in fact, it looked fresh.

She tossed a tiny pebble into the maw. It was long seconds before she heard it hit the bottom.

Her highline and lead were way too short. She fumbled through the horse’s gear, threw a chocolate bar down the shaft. She threw down her water bottles, her freeze-dried food. Then she sighed in relief – her fingers found the EPIRB. She broke the safety seal, pulled the antenna out and threw that too down the shaft.

The child was silent, and she hoped she hadn’t hit it. She threw the first-aid kit down.

There wasn’t much more she could do.

Can we go, now? the horse said, I don’t like these big holes.

NO, NO! THE horse said. Not down river! Up! There is nothing down there, nothing good! Only holes to fall into and things to shy at.

She had to stay away from those yawning holes – the horse was right about that. Some exhaled disturbing moans or the smell of death; others whimpered with piteous cries, and she soon had nothing left to throw down to them. She headed for the hubbub. The horse made it difficult, baulking and snorting at everything. The now-muddy trail descended and the air cooled suddenly. The noise intensified. She stumbled around a bend, tugging the horse after her. Fucking horse had been taught to lead on a loose rein, but training was not showing just now. The camp spread below her was buzzing. Trees were falling, mounds rising, earth being shifted, sifted, sloshed, tumbled. Men scrambled hither and thither among motley tents and gunyahs. Horses and dogs and kids and chickens and rubbish everywhere. The tink and clink of broken glass and bottles underfoot. It was a scene of war, or of a tsunami. The forest was being systematically eaten, processed, digested and discarded, its marrow sucked out and its bones pulverised.
I wish I hadn’t thought about shying, the horse muttered. I can’t get it out of my head.

A pale gold moon glinted eerily through the trees at the far ridge, sending a cold light over everything. Now she saw the wonders of the gully exposed. The glittering seam of water, the pale tents and the stark and frenzied movement of men. The only eddy in all that mad activity was around a tent with Coffie stitched in careful lettering on the canvas, where men lounged or sat, drinking from bottles. The noise was a cacophony, arrhythmic, percussive. Metallic blows resounded through the unlit air, over the scurry of water and dirt in cradles. Voices, unknown tongues and accents. Then the full moon rose above the far ridge, yet by its light she found she could hear clearly but her sight was dimmed, as if by a vapour. She could smell the gully, now, a stench so overpowering she gagged. What a re-enactment! The dim thought intruded. Everyone has just shitted any old where, and every drunk person has vomited. Then, through the stench, near at hand, she could smell a seared steak.

‘Connor’s horse – delicious. Beats mutton and damper.’ The voice below her became indistinct with chewing sounds.

‘Exhaustion! Not bloody likely. Chinaman bled ‘im in the night, keeled over next day. Chinaman bought the carcase for a licence fee, butchered ‘im and sold ‘im for a quid a slice, bob-thrippence a knuckle. Made a killing.’

‘Chinaman hit a jeweller’s shop at the end o’ Cavanagh’s shicer, d’ya know?’

‘Gawd, won’t the Yankee see red!’

‘All the gold beneath the moon will never give them Celestials what they want. There’ll be blood, mark my words.’

IT WAS HOPELESS. No one could hear or see her. She picked her way through the tents, holding her nose.

Behind a tent she saw one she thought she knew, although his clothes were part of this strange performance and he had a beard. Then she saw he had undone his buttoned fly, and his penis stood lambent in the night air. His eyes were closed, and the sight of him stroking the length of himself, with his coarse linen shirt open and his olden-day trousers falling, was erotic, shockingly arousing. Then he bent, reached down, past her, to a child’s face. She was sure a child had not been there before but now a child twittered like a bird and now his hand was clamped tight under terrified eyes as he parted small writhing legs. She stood, frozen, unable to take her eyes from his face, unable to stop him. His face was beautiful, both when contorted and at peace. And when it was over, he paused for a moment, then put one hand behind the child’s head, one on her chin. She saw his shoulders move; there was a sharp crack, and the cry of the bellbird was cut short.
The horse stood quietly all the while, then heaved a sigh.

I miss horses, the horse said. I even miss my horse float.

She vomited and stumbled away, catching her ankles in guy ropes. The horse trotted after her unwillingly, head outstretched and eyes rolling. But all trails led downward, none away, and mullock heaps had erupted like pustules everywhere. The ground was perforated, porous, rubbish- and death-filled, and the trails were impossibly narrow. Then, below her, a swelling shout went up, and a young man waved and danced, the nugget glittering between the bars made by his fingers. His mates gave a great hurrah, and raised him on their shoulders. Diggers popped up from holes, and converged to join the parade. They ran towards her as a crowd, some faces happy, some filled with a moonlit envy.

"Gott sei dank!" the boy-man cried, tears laying silver trails down his cheeks and into his fairy beard, and he raised a beatific face to the vaporous moon. He too had an unearthly beauty. A ripple went through the crowd, then dispersed quickly. People turned and leaped down their holes or manned their cradles and sluices with a fiery fervour.

The earth gave way beneath their feet and the horse shrieked in terror.

They flailed together as the cave-in swallowed them. She could hear wood splintering and someone chuckling. Her mouth filled with clay. The earth was falling all around them. The horse, powerful haunches striking out, scrambled with furious energy, mouth wrenched by the reins to the side, forelegs reaching for the crumbling lip of the hole.

The horse was silent. Her powerful hind legs drove again and again, propelling them up through the mud and rocks and glittering quartz of that sliding wall. She clung, both hands locked to the pommel, and was shaken and battered like a loose rag. The Chinaman stood at the edge of the hole, peering in, twirling his pigtail in one hand like a lasso.

Somehow the horse scrambled out. Somehow dragged her dead weight too, over the broken teeth and lip of the hole. As soon as hind legs gripped firm ground, the horse reared and spun, pulling her to the ground. It took all her strength to yank the horse round, and round again, as the horse went on leaping and snorting.

Run! Run! Run! Run, they’re on us. Run! Go now, go now, go now, go now! the horse shrieked.

She was sobbing as she pulled the horse up with harsh hands.

She reached out to the horse and brought her in closer. The horse was shaking, sticky and steaming hot. She rubbed the horse’s neck, and steadied her own breathing. Slowly the horse’s breathing too slowed.

I’m hurt, the horse said, they’ll eat me now.
And as her hand slid through thick warm sweat down to the horse’s chest, she realised that the horse was bleeding. Black blood ran from a wide hole – the smooth surface was torn open and hung as a flap of thick and floppy skin. The horse was shaking hard, getting cold fast.

She moved without thought. The Chinaman came and stood by her, fingerling a string of beads. She ignored him. Her hands leapt. She had nothing. She took off her coat, rubbing the horse’s neck all the while. She put the coat over the horse’s shoulders and neck. In her saddle bags there was nothing. In her front pockets, just her journal. She ripped out page after page, and clamped her hand to the wound. The horse stood quietly, shaking and silent, lifting her bloody foreleg now and then. A black pool formed at her feet, mashed and muddied and glistening under the moon.

The night seemed soundless and still and endless. The horse trembled and the Chinaman moved his lips, traced his thumb slowly around each bead on his string, clicked it, and passed to the next. She felt nothing, just the beating heart of the horse under her hand.

The bleeding slowed to seepage, and, shuddering, she stretched the now-swollen skin flap back over the wound. She crumpled the last of the book into a pad, took off her shirt, tied one sleeve to the blood-slicked girth, pulled it tight over the shoulder, and tied the other sleeve to the pommel D-ring. She tightened the breastplate to help hold it in place. Then she rubbed the horse, rubbed and rubbed all over with her bare hands, until, slowly, the horse turned her head to be held and rubbed too. They stood, her arms and body pressed to the horse, each gaining warmth and comfort from the other while the cold congealed around them.

There really is nothing here except holes, the horse murmured. Can we go?

At the lip of the cave-in a seam of gold lay spread out like the Milky Way. The Chinaman, the children playing now around the hole, that woman in wide skirts furiously scratching herself – none of them paid it any heed. A haunting tin whistle played a dance tune in a minor key downstream.

The horse was right.

She patted the shaking shoulder of the horse, begged and urged her to find a path, any path, out. The horse limped forward with purpose, an eager guide. They left the trail and headed up among the mullock heaps and into the scrub. She stumbled after, grabbing a stirrup to let the stronger beast pull her out. She looked back towards that maelstrom of windlasses, cradles, cranks and pumps, all the sweat and songs of hope, and the screams of failure and sudden death. But the gully was misty, dark and deep.

A bell rang through the leaves. She couldn’t hear anything else – not her own breathing, nor the ginger, uneven footfall of the horse. She saw the horse push through rotted timber, scramble, clamber, but it was all in silence.
On the ridge they both stopped and rested. The horse was bleeding again, not so heavily. Her own leg bothered her less: it was numb and swollen, but bearable. They were out.

But not alone.

On the gleaming ridge track a stooped figure suddenly stood and sniffed invisible fingers. He had no face or hands.

She screamed and the horse crouched in fright.

Oh! said the horse. Get a grip! What are you shying at! You scared me stupid.

He was the blackest Aboriginal man she had ever seen, dressed as the troopers one, two and three. His uniform hung loose on his bony frame. He took two paces, then squatted, touching the clay and leaves lightly with fingers that now caught the moonlight on their ridges and bumps, and looked like bones.

Her scalp crawled. She looked around and could see nobody, but felt the trees each had a silent companion, a witness – not of her, but of something else that she couldn’t fathom. She crept up and peered over the black man’s shoulder.

He was tracking a horse with two shod and two unshod hooves.

IT WAS DAWN. The trees around them faded to a muted silver, then sharpened with a mote-ridden gold. They heard an inexplicable duet of lawnmowers.

Ahead through the severe lines of the last coppices was an open, shorn green. Flashing blue and red lights parted the trees like fingers, and she could see cars, a blessed horse float.

The blood-covered horse beside her neighed – a long, swelling, desperately hopeful sound.

As they shuffled out into the open, she looked back. The forest was lovely in the dawn light. Pristine. A rolling, resplendent panoply of treetops, joined to form a single entity, the hidden gullies marked only with faint ripples and folds. There was no one to be seen in there, but she couldn’t shake the sense that they were followed, that she had brought something or someone of the forest with her, or had left something of herself behind.

The horse nudged her ribs impatiently and quickened their hobbling steps.
MY SISTER likes ponies and showjumping and arenas. Sometimes I jump with her because she wants me to. I throw my head back and make the horse’s sound but it is never the right sound. She corrects me with her perfect whinnying, neck exposed, knees kicking high, a canter. I am not a good horse. I have not studied them as she has, reading every book where the beasts gallop, turning the pages of photography collections thick with taut flanks and staring eyes. I jump over the obstacles that she sets for me but I never receive a ribbon for my effort. Sometimes she whips me with a hickory stick which is not made of hickory at all, but a branch fallen from the ghost gum in the corner of the yard. She tells me that I am a bad horse, a lazy horse, a slow horse, and I take the whipping silently because it is true. I am a bad horse. I am not any kind of horse at all.

After the show is over and the imaginary audience has trudged home, I check to see that no one is looking. The place I have found is secret. It is a hollow where the fence between our yard and our neighbour’s yard has fallen away. My sister’s world is the bright open arena, but this is the place where I like to play. The hollow smells of damp earth and honeysuckle. I have to push through a curtain of the vine to enter. I pull off the white and yellow flowers and bite their stems and suck them. I like the yellow ones best, although there is probably little difference between one flower and the next. Sometimes I have to race the bees to the nectar. I am never stung. The bees hang heavy and fat, a buzz in the air. I watch the pollen collecting on their legs. I imagine that I am becoming drunk on flowers, like the bees, although I know I would have to drink a vat of pollen to feel so heavy with juice that I would sway as they sway, and crash into the leaves as if I had lost the ability to fly.

Under the honeysuckle there is the space where the besser bricks have fallen away. There is rubble like some grand place that has gone to ruin. There are treasures here, coins and bottle tops and scraps of ribbon from Christmases past. There is a smell of mouse and possum. Snails spell out secret messages that glimmer when I lift the drape of branches and let the sunlight in. I pick the snails off the bricks and line them up on my arms. They slip stickily along my flesh and the skin prickles on the back of my neck.
It is wrong to do this, but there is no one to see, and I hike my skirt up and herd the snails across my thigh. Their tickling fingers, inching up my leg, are my secret things. More secret than the bees and the gold chain I pulled from the damp soil. The snails are the things I come for most of all.

When they hike themselves across my thigh and edge towards the elastic of my knickers, I chicken out. This time, I think, I will let them track across my pants over the private places that remain unnamed. This time I will be braver than before. I giggle as the odd top-heavy creature lumbers closer. Its shell tips to the side and it is only the suction of its wet foot that keeps it steady along the inside of my thigh. I almost let it complete its journey. My heart is pounding as the snail makes the slight transition from flesh to cotton. If I didn’t have knickers on it would be there on my skin. My finger darts out to catch it. When it has climbed onto my hand there is a shining line to point out where it has been.

THE STEEPLECHASE IS dangerous. My sister outlines the difficulties to me, brow furrowed. Horses fall, she tells me, riders die. She says that sometimes a jockey will fall off on a particularly difficult hurdle. The horse will be landing, its feet chopping the soil up into clumps. The rider must not fall into the path of the hooves or his head will split.

‘It happens too quickly,’ she tells me. ‘The cameras are all watching the jump and then the hoof clumps down on the rider’s head and the brains come out and it is too quick to stop the filming.’

‘They could cut it afterwards, before it goes on TV.’

‘They film it live. The steeplechase is always live. But they don’t replay the jump in slow motion if the rider has been trampled to death, out of respect for the family.’

I am sceptical but she is older and her description seems real enough. She describes the way the man flips up and over the front of the horse. Too quick for him to scream or register surprise of any kind. The hoof thumps down on his skull and his head snaps open like a grape when you press it between two fingers. The brain comes out and it is like grey pudding splattering up out of a dropped bowl. The other hooves tramp down onto the rider’s chest and legs and stomach, and the horse falls forward, bending at its knees, its chin sliding across the choppy turf.

‘They shoot the horse in the head.’ She leans in conspiratorially to tell me this, eyes wide, breath sweet with the Redskin lolly she has just eaten. I can see the traces of the candy like lipstick on her mouth, and for an awful second I imagine her taking my head between her hands and kissing me firmly on the lips.

‘That is the tragedy.’ She leans back and grins, all blood-red teeth, my crazy demon of a sister. ‘They shoot the horse. It never was the horse’s fault, but they
She has set the hurdles to reflect a great degree of difficulty. Some of them are too high. One is perched over what she calls a ditch, the edge of a garden bed with flowers spread below it. One is a sand trap, and another is a leap through the arms of the swing. Two of them are too close, only a single galloping step between them. We walk the course, which is apparently what they do in real steeplechases, bringing the horse’s nose to touch each hedge and ditch and creek that they must ford. She mimes her horse, pulling the reins and gently patting the air where its nose would be. Sometimes she makes the noises of it huffing and sniffing, getting the scent of the course that it will soon tackle.

I have no such invisible horse to lead. I walk the course and imagine my own legs snapping as I trip over the swing set, falling into the pit of marigolds. When we are back at the starting line she has stepped into her horse. Her legs are high-kicking. She sidles forward, back, kicks at the ground. I imagine that it will be my fall that is televised, and my sister’s hooves, shod in her black school shoes, that will be stamping on my head, popping my skull like a grape.

‘Riders, mount your stallions.’

They are always stallions. My sister rides a black one, or perhaps inhabits is a better word for what is happening beside me. Head lowered, pawing the thirsty yellow lawn, she snorts and stamps and grunts. More like a pig than a horse, it seems – but she would know, she has watched enough documentaries for any method actor.

‘Ready, mark, go.’

We are off. I run towards the first hurdle, a chair upended. I have to jump far enough to clear the back of it, which is lying flat on the ground. I run and leap and I have passed the first test, but I am already a good three metres behind.

I want to play her games. I want to love horses with the same simple passion. I try to mimic her drawings, but my horse’s legs are never sturdy enough, the elbows of a horse seem to bend at an uncomfortable angle. My horse always looks as if it is broken, fallen from her steeplechase and waiting on the page for that fateful bullet in the head.

I clear the second jump and the third, but the leap through the swing seems quite impossible, even as I watch my sister grab the chains and swing herself up and through, pulling her knees up tight against her chest. I stop at the base of the swing and step through, one foot after another. And this is the end of the race for me. I bypass the marigold trap and climb over the ladder instead of jumping it. She stands panting at the finish line and she is still a horse, sweating, panting, nostrils flared, eyes too wide for a human stare. And as she watches me walking, bypassing the last
few hurdles, there is all the animal derision she can muster in that one look. I am not
good enough. I am not fast enough. I am a slow and ugly disappointment. Horse
becomes rider as she turns and flicks her ponytail in my direction, and steps
gracefully in her jodhpurs towards home.

I LINE THE snails up at the starting line. I have given the course a high degree of
difficulty. I have stolen a string of my mother’s pearls, clipped them around my
knee. The beasts will have to climb this, vault over the sharp edge of rusted beer
bottle tops. Around my thigh I have made a mudslide, which has begun to dry and
crack at the edges. There is a chain of flowers threaded one through another.

I hold the delicate shells between my fingers, bend and whisper to them, feeling
the tug as they struggle forward, eager to begin the steeplechase.

‘It is very dangerous,’ I tell them. ‘One of you may fall and die. They film it and
we’ll watch it back in slow motion on the TV.’

The horses inch forward on their slippery sucker feet and I release them. I hold
my leg still. There are enough obstacles to hurdle without the quaking of the earth.
There is the insect rattle as cicadas shriek in the summer heat. My skin is all sweat
and prickle from the other race that I ran only minutes ago. There are beads of sweat
growing heavy beneath the bend in my knee. I feel one slide discreetly down the fat
curve of my thigh, pooling in the crease where my bottom begins.

The pearl necklace diverts one of the snails. I feel the slow slide of the beads
against my flesh as it is diverted from its path. The other snail climbs over and it is
on track. Fast horse. Good horse. I feel a sudden sense of sadness for the snail that
has been led astray. I pick it off the beads. Its stalk eyes snap closed. It lifts its
slippery foot into its shell. I lift it over the next hurdle and the next, making the shell
canter, tapping it against the exposed skin of my leg. I have hiked my dress up to
my waist and removed my knickers. This time it is the most dangerous path for the
horses in my race. This time they will traverse uncharted terrain. I settle the
snapped-shut shell into the hollow where my leg becomes my body. I hold it gently
there and in a moment there is the tentative unfurling of the eyes, the head slides
out, the long slip of the foot.

Someone might see me. There is a dark coolness in my hiding spot where outside
it is bright and hot and dry. Pinpricks of light settle on the place where my skirt is
hiked up. You should never sit like this without your knickers on, with your legs
wide and the place between your legs marked out by specks of light, like pointers.

Suddenly my breath is shallow. My heart goes faster. I might be whipped for it. If my sister found me she would whip me with a ghost
gum crop and drag me by the sleeve to Mother. I have overstepped some line but I
am not sure what it is.
The snail trail is wetter than a finger. There is the tiny weight, the almost imperceptible contractions of the muscular foot. It is easy to see its path. The sticky line dries quickly to a translucent ribbon of silver. The second snail is way behind, only halfway up my thigh and struggling over a line of flowers. The losing horse will win, is winning. And suddenly, at the finish line, it is not about winning and losing at all. The snail has found the little lips. I call them lips but they cannot speak. They smile silently, pushed mutely shut as if over a secret. The little foot of the snail tracks across the smile, silver lipstick, dipping into the space where the lips gently part under the slippery probing. The winning snail. It slips off course, makes its slow, sure way towards my other leg. The race is run. I could wait till the other horse completes the smile, two silver lips. Two horses, one grin, and the awful secret of this day throbbing low in my belly.

Suddenly I am frightened. What if my sister knows about this place? What if she has followed me, is crouching low, watching from the safety of the safe white glare outside?

I struggle to a crouch. The pearls slip from my knee and form a circle around my ankle, a loose shackle. I slap at the steeplechase course, the hills and hurdles, the mud slick and the snails. Snails that aren’t horses. Snails that would never win against a sleek black stallion. My foot finds one and then the other. The horrible crack of their skulls as one hoof then another tramples them. Brains in the damp dirt, split like grapes. A bullet in each brain.

‘Lazy!’ Just a whisper. ‘Slow! Bad horse! Bad horse!’ They must be trampled for the sake of my sister. Because my snails will never be as good as any horse. My snails, her stallions.

My knickers are covered in dust but I pull them on anyway. There are arrows marked out on my thighs, half a silver smile. I slip out of my secret place and I will never be back.

Next time we race I will be a better horse. I will be braver, faster. I pick up a branch fallen from the ghost gum and I hit my flank twice, sharply, and I whinny suddenly, kicking my legs high in a canter.

And I, good horse, set a pace for home.

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WALKING on train tracks is unnatural. The distance between the wooden sleepers is just longer than a normal footstep, so you have to look down constantly to make sure you don’t stumble. Staring along the railway line is disorienting, almost sickening. When you look up at the clouds, they seem to be moving inwards towards a fixed point on the horizon. The eye has become accustomed to the railway track, and struggles for a moment to adjust to the rest of the world.

The dog snuffled through the undergrowth, a wild look in her eye. I called her to heel but as usual she ignored me. I had let her off the leash on this section of track, as there were no sheep on the surrounding properties. She had almost been shot by a neighbour last week for spooking his lambs. If she had mauled one, I would have let him do it. I was only looking after her for friends who had gone overseas, and I hadn’t realised she was untrained. She was a stupid mutt and would strain at the leash, her tongue lolling out as she slowly strangled herself. When I let her loose she would disappear, and it irritated me to call after her all the time.

She trotted towards me with something in her mouth: a prize she had scrounged from the scrub.

‘Drop it, Jess,’ I ordered. ‘Come on, let me see that.’

Reluctantly she let the object slide from her slobbering jaws. It fell on the track. She sniffed at it uncertainly, trying to determine if it was edible.

I crouched to examine what I thought was a gnarled piece of wood. It was the foot of an animal, intact. Three rough claws protruded in a toe formation. The rest was covered in a downy, close-set fur. It looked like the limb of a small kangaroo, severed neatly just below the knee. The dog pushed at my hands with her snout, excited at my interest in her find and trying to grab it from me. I stood up and held it away from her.

‘You can’t eat that, Jess. Go on, piss off.’ I shooed her away and she lost interest, resuming her scent-hunt through the nearby bush. I placed the leg in my jacket
pocket and had a look through the grass to see if the rest of the carcass was around, sniffing like the dog for the smell of dead flesh. I couldn’t find anything, and neither could Jess.

I showed the find to Tom Grainger at the butchers. He knew his beasts of the field and confirmed it was a roo, but was puzzled how the leg could have come off so cleanly. Apart from a hardened scab of blood, the clawed foot seemed fresh.

‘Probably the panther.’ He winked and we both rolled our eyes. The neighbours out near Trentham who owned a herb farm had tried to convince me of a local panther’s existence when I moved up from the city. As the tale went, a few big cats had been abandoned in the bush during the forties. Servicemen brought them back as mascots and when the cats got too big and aggressive, rather than shoot them, the men simply let them go.

It was a nice story, fine for scaring the kids on a dark night, but it didn’t stack up. I had no idea what the average lifespan of a panther was, but I was pretty sure they would have died out by now. Some believe they mated with feral cats, but the difference in size made me sceptical. Farmers occasionally reported the gruesome mauling of a sheep and a few people claimed to have seen one of the beasts, but it was generally held to be a rural myth.

The sleepers were slick with moisture on the way back. When I saw the forest canopy up ahead I broke into a light jog. The rain was coming down hard, but I knew it wouldn’t last. Tins of soup dug into my back as I ran, and I had to take it easy so I wouldn’t crush the cereal. I chose my steps carefully, trying to land between the wooden slats.

My breath fogged the air as I rested under overhanging branches. Even boisterous Jess seemed subdued, and sat down to wait for the rain to ease. I slipped off the pack and stretched my shoulders, pushing back my hood.

Heavy drips fell on me intermittently. The close forest smelled strongly – a natural damp. I went in there sometimes to pick up firewood, and I had to dry it out for days under the house before it would burn. I could get in trouble for collecting it, but at least I only took the dead wood. I was probably the only two-legged creature to go in there in years. The feeling of being alone in the forest made my stomach churn, but in a good way.

Branches shifted noisily above and I ducked my head reflexively. I looked up and saw an eagle dropping from the canopy. It spread its wings and glided over my head without seeming to notice me, flapping once to gain height as it headed out into the rain. I had heard there were two of them living in the forest, but had never expected to see one. Locals were worried they would be driven out of their habitat by logging contractors.
The dog stood up, ears perking at the sight of such a huge bird, but even she had more sense than to bark. We watched together as the eagle silently flew up into the heavy clouds, unhindered by the rain. A drip rolled down my neck as I kneeled to pat the dog. She nuzzled me, then trotted away, heading in the direction of the farmhouse. I threw the pack back on and followed her.

ANGELA ARRIVED LATER than expected on Friday night. I heard the Datsun struggling to get up the lane, its engine whining as she over-revved it, searching for traction in the mud. I turned on the porch light and went outside with the torch. It was drizzling again. I shook out my gumboots and pulled them on before running down the angled driveway to help her with the bags. She jumped out of the car and slipped straightaway, pinwheeling to catch her balance. The initial look of shock vanished as she threw her arms around my neck, cackling. Her musky scent made me giddy as she mashed her lips on mine, exaggerating the smack. I could feel her warmth through the waterproofs and any anger I had at her being so late quickly faded.

‘There’s a basket of goodies in the boot,’ she told me as she leaned in to retrieve her bag from the back seat. ‘Come on, make yourself useful. Can’t believe how wet it is up here.’

‘Been raining all week,’ I said. I was temporarily frozen at the sight of her backside poking out of the car. I shook myself and opened the boot to fetch the basket of food. It had been a lonely week.

Unable to resist, I grabbed at her on the couch as she was showing me what she had brought up for the weekend. We rolled around for a bit but she pushed me off, saying she was starving. I made her a sandwich as she warmed herself in front of the fire. She wolfed it down with a glass of wine, which I refilled at her request, and then showed off a new beanie she’d bought me. I put another log on the potbelly. The heat in there was so intense that my eyes dried out immediately after opening the door. Winter would have been tough without it.

Ange pulled off a layer, one of the skimpy cardigans that she seemed to wear three of at a time. She leaned over and stuck her tongue in my mouth, running her hand down into my crotch to cop a squeeze. She bit my ear hard and jumped to her feet, heading for the bathroom. I leaned back against the couch, finishing off her glass of wine.

She walked back in naked and scurried to the fire. I breathed in the scent of her skin and hair, the lotions she covered herself in every morning. She laughed as she watched me undress awkwardly.

The heat from the potbelly was almost unbearable. I tried to roll over to get away from it, but the floor on the other side was freezing. We alternated positions to stop
from burning up, but by the time we had finished we were slicked with sweat. My foot touched the stove as I tried to disengage myself from her, and I yelped. Ange padded into the bedroom to pull the doona. We wrapped ourselves in it and watched the flames withering away the wood. Sparks snapped against the glass.

I held her in front of me, one hand on her stomach. My fingers idly played with her pubic hair as I kissed her neck.

‘It’s good to see you,’ I told her.

She looked around at me and I was caught off-guard by the expression on her face. I usually only saw that one before she cried.

‘Everything all right?’ I asked.

She nodded, kissed me and slipped out of my grasp. She turned to lie on her back, facing me as I sat up. She lifted her legs and placed them on my shoulders, opening her thighs so I could get a good look. To my mild surprise she let her hand wander between her legs and began stroking herself. I had not seen her do such a thing before, but it had the desired effect. She stopped to turn over and kneel on all fours, displaying her rump to me. Her voice was deadly serious, a tone I had not heard for a long time.

‘You can do whatever you want to me tonight. I mean it. I want you to fuck me really hard.’

I pushed her buttocks out of the way, confused.

‘Jesus, Ange, where’s all this talk coming from? I know we haven’t seen each other all week, but…’

Abruptly she spun around and buried her head in my groin, clutching at me desperately, trying to take me in her mouth. I watched her in stunned silence for a moment, then had to take her by the arm and pull her away when I felt teeth grating on me.

‘What’s got into you?’ I demanded, unconsciously pulling the doona around me. I could see from the shaking of her shoulders that she was on the verge of tears. Her mouth drooped and a second later the flood started. I reached out to pull her into the doona with me.

‘Hey, what is it? What you crying for, baby?’

She pushed my hands away, squirming back closer to the fire, which must have been roasting her back. It was a struggle making out what she was saying amid the sobs.

‘I just wanted you to… I can’t… It’s hard for me, you know… I don’t see you all week… And I’m sorry, all right, I’m sorry…’
I may have been many things, but I was no fool. I sucked in a deep breath and composed myself.

‘One of the guys on your course?’
She nodded, wiping at her eyes, watching my reaction.

‘How long?’
She hesitated, and looked scared.

‘Three weeks,’ she sniffed.

I nodded, giving her a cold stare. ‘Jesus, Ange, you kept that one quiet.’

We sat there in silence for a while, the only sounds coming from the wood crackling in the fire.

‘I’ll leave tomorrow,’ she whispered. Her crying had subsided. She wiped smeared eyeliner on the edge of the doona. I nodded.

‘Is that all you’re going to say?’ she blurted out angrily.

I gathered the doona around me and snatched up my clothes.

‘Yeah. I guess it is.’

THE RAIN HAD stopped and a hunter had come out. A thick-necked kookaburra perched on the Hills Hoist, preening himself. He could not see me watching him at the window, or perhaps he didn’t care. Droplets of water catapulted off the washing line as he bounced up and down on it, shaking the rain from his feathers. I sipped tea, staring up at the clouds. It was a good opportunity to take some wood from under the house and chop it on the stump up on the hill. The two cows were probably hungry. Not much grazing in the top paddock. There were a few hay bales left under the house. I decided to take one up and feed them.

Ange had left that morning. She tried to get a rise out of me again before leaving. She wanted me to shout at her, call her names, maybe even throw a punch. It would have fitted the template in her head, made it easier to walk away, run to the new guy for comfort. I wasn’t playing. This was all on her. She had to wear it; she had done wrong, not me. I wasn’t going to provide her with a convenient male stereotype to help her forget. Not that I wasn’t hurting. But pleading for her to stay didn’t have much dignity.

The kookaburra launched himself off the washing line, towards the stumps under the house. I pressed my face against the window to try to see what he was doing. Seconds later he swooped back up, a mouse in his beak. He looked at me and threw his head back, gulping down the creature in one swallow. Then, with a beat of his stubby wings, he took off towards the trees in the top paddock.
I went up there an hour later with a wheelbarrow full of wood and a hay bale on top. The lonely cows wandered down when they saw me, but they were skittish and would not come too close. I cut open the hay and spread it out in a clearing between the trees.

The axe was sharp and it was easy going cutting the wood, although I missed badly at one point and hit the stump with the handle. The impact shuddered into my fingers, which began to ache with the cold. I didn’t like handling the axe with gloves. Too easy for it to slip and do me an injury. It would have taken me a while to get to a hospital.

I warmed up quickly, and had to stop. I peeled off my jacket first, and my new beanie. After chopping another few logs I was still sweating, so I took my jumper and T-shirt off too. Steam began to rise from my bare back. I started laughing, and had to put the axe down. I looked over the miserable twelve acres spread out before me and threw an off-cut of wood over the fence for the dog to wrestle with. I had never felt so manly. It was funny.

IT WAS PITCH black by five o’clock in winter. I had spent the afternoon experimenting with ingredients and a cookbook the lesbian couple up the road had lent me. Baking wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. You just had to follow the instructions. It was like changing a spark plug, or an air filter. The brake pads on the Datsun had been more of a pain than banana cake.

By ten I had downed a few beers and the rest of the previous night’s wine. The reception on the television was terrible and there was nothing to play music on, except a tinny radio that only picked up some commercial station. On a Saturday night they played non-stop bump ‘n’ grind. I listened for a while, then shut it off. There was little else to do but go to bed, and it was cold out in the bedroom.

The dog began barking incessantly. I sat there for five minutes staring at the fire and was just about to shout when I heard her yelp and go quiet.

I looked at the door, and listened: not a sound. I reached over and scooped up the poker, pausing by the door for a second. Still nothing. Stupid dog had probably strangled herself. I stepped out onto the porch.

I could smell something in the air, a heavy scent, like Ange when she worked up a sweat. I flicked on the lights.

The panther stood six feet away, lapping at the dog’s water bowl. It was huge. Almost two metres long and pure muscle. Its hide was sleek and black, immaculate and healthy. I did not move. Even if I tried running back inside and slamming the door behind me, I knew I would not be fast enough.
The cat paused when the lights came on and turned its head to look in my direction. Its pupils shrank to pinpricks in the glare. It fixed me in its gaze, then opened its mouth to let out a snarl that sounded like the whipping of a snapped electric pylon. My fingers went white around the handle of the poker.

With a low, guttural growl, the panther turned and loped away. I took a breath and stayed where I was. I could see it moving against the night like some shadow cut out of the earth, an ancient cave creature come to investigate what the mortals were up to. It moved silently across the top paddock and stopped to sniff the air, looking back over its shoulder defiantly at me. All I could see was its eyes, punching through the dark like stars.

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The moon and sun cohabit the sky. The world turns.

Outside the citadel, a child climbs the tamarisk. From the topmost branch with strength enough to bear her, she offers up her song. Under this sun, she sings, it were better to be born a bird.

Every falling star sends its shadow to earth ahead of itself.

Not far from here, a woman prays for peace and covers her face, opens a door and walks into it.

Thrown into a river, a stone wears smooth with repetition.

In a run-down farmhouse, two brothers quarrel over a poor inheritance.

Waves sound a renewed breaking of faith upon faith.

Through the streets and along the highway, boys exchange bottles and rocks, loading their slingshots with spent ammunition.

No desert counts the sand grains taken by the wind.

The girl by the well draws water for her bath and pours it back into the darkness, listening to the echo of its fall.

Keeping to the shadows, doubt waits out the day.

In an orchard, a woman watches the last leaf fall, baring the gnarled form of the fig tree. More than one wall wears the grief of devout men. Deep in the wadi, healers resurrect a date palm from a grave sealed two thousand years. The Tree springs from a single seed.
On a rise overlooking the rift, a scholar sifts the grist
of countless wars, finding no answer.

The salt of the earth corrodes the history of the world.

Outside the coffee house, tempers flare
over chessboards
and concise translations of dead languages.
Old men recite the law by rote.

The one standing on the west bank bears the weight
of each stone for a breath before he throws it. Hooking
the practised tip of a forefinger around the curved rim,
he casts it, a prayer skimming the water’s healing skin.

Here the dead float among the living.

Beside the river, a man’s heart opens
like a pomegranate.

Not all truths wear their true name.

From the roundness of mosques,
from the upward thrust of minarets,
the muezzin cry out to God.

How easily the light of long-dead stars deceives the eye.

The song continues. The question remains.
Only one thing is certain: somewhere, not far
from here, an olive ripens and falls.

Why burden this moment with the weight of others?
IT WAS the farmer who built the shack, when he was a young man, long before I was born. By the time I knew him, he was an old man, his hair so white that it was impossible to tell its original colour. His eyes had faded, too, by then. The blind one had the colour of bruised milk, but even the good one was pale in a way that only comes with age. In order to imagine him as a young man, I have to keep him at a distance. Or else shade his face with the wide brim of a hat. In my imaginings, he is a figure that forks out of the horizon on the far side of a thirsting paddock; young and strong, but as lean as everything else on this brittle, rain-shadowed peninsula.

He’d not long been the farmer when he built the shack. When his father died, he inherited the whole property, but only by eighteen minutes, which was the exact margin by which his twin brother missed out. The only two pictures I ever saw of the twins were taken when they were children; I used to look at them, on the sideboard in the farmhouse, whenever we visited. The family portraits, the wedding groups, the babies in their christening caps, all seemed to me to have come from some unaccountably ancient time, when people were more serious, with fates that were more precarious and interesting than ordinary modern people. Perhaps it was just because I knew most of the people in the pictures were already dead that I imagined in their faces some presentiment of doom. In one picture, the twins were babies, curled like white lacy worms inside their matching wicker cribs. In the other, they were grubby boys in overalls – only as tall as the rifles they held with butt-ends to the ground – standing either side of a pile of dead rabbits.

‘They were that thick, those bunnies,’ the farmer told me once, when he caught me looking, ‘that you could shoot seven with one bullet. No kidding.’

I did not believe him.

‘Which one is you?’ I asked.

‘That one,’ he said, pointing. ‘Can’t you tell?’

‘No, you look exactly the same,’ I said, blushing with frustration that I didn’t know a better way to behave when people joked with me.

‘Come on! Have a heart! That’s me. That one – the handsome one.’
When I got older, he stopped kidding around so much, maybe just because I was older, but maybe because he knew me better by then.

‘Which one is you again?’ I asked, some years after the first time.

‘Give us a look,’ he said.

I held the frame out to him and he took it into his hands. He looked at the picture for a while, then put it back down on the sideboard and tweaked its angle to just right.

‘Aren’t there any pictures of the two of you when you were older?’

I’d seen the kinds of pictures I was thinking of, the ones of clear-faced young men still on the right side of everything that would happen to them. I thought that somewhere in the house, in an album perhaps, there’d be a picture of two boys in identical slouch hats, smiling bravely.

‘No, mate. This one, and that one – that’s it.’

‘You forgot to tell me which one’s you.’

‘Tell the truth, Sal, I don’t know for the life of me. Never have.’

HE WAS TWENTY-TWO when he took over the farm, and unhurriedly waiting for life to deliver him a wife and kids. The big house was full with his mother, and his brother, and all the younger ones. He built the shack because he wanted a place of his own, at least until the little ones were grown and gone. In the days, he’d work the farm, and in the kindly, sideways light of evening, he’d walk the crumbling rim of his property, carrying a little green hut in his heart. It took him a long time to choose the place, but he set it down eventually in the crook of one of the smaller bays, a bare mile from the big house with its deep verandas and shaggy windbreak of pines. Right on the shore, at the top of the sand, he drew the floor plan on the ground with the toe of his boot. There would be two bedrooms on either side of a narrow hall, and a main room that would do for everything else.

After he framed the place, his raw timbers boxed the landscape of paddock and sand and seawater, making windows through which he sometimes thought he saw the ghosts of his future. There was a woman, pretty enough. A girl he’d lift onto the back of a pony. A boy he’d teach to fish. They were there with him while he bricked in the fireplace and hammered on the roofing iron and hoisted the water tank onto its stand. They flickered in the corners of his eyes as he crafted the box bed in one bedroom and shelved the narrow bunks in the other. He had no lush fields, but to a family he could give this. This stretch of fine, squeaking sand, this safe curve of bay, this wedge of rocks barnacled with mussels, this clear water swimming with silver perch and parrot fish, this hillside pocked with the burrows of muttonbird and rabbit.

The day he dug the long drop, he roped in his brother to help and the pair of them sweated as sandy soil dribbled back into whatever hole they made. Mid-afternoon, his twin cursed him from beneath a film of grime, chucked his tools and
stormed back to the big house. But the farmer just leaned on his shovel, gave a halfway smile and shifted his hat on his head. The job was near enough done, and he could see a day when the bunkroom would be stacked with his brother’s kids as well as his own.

Two bullets shot it all down. The first one killed his brother on a foreign battlefield. I want to say France, but I never could bring myself to ask him directly and gossip only tells so much. The second one was fired by the farmer himself, back home, on a royal-blue day in summer. In the noon sun, he walked the mile from the big house to the shack. By the barely used fireplace whose bricks he’d laid with his own hands, he nestled the muzzle of his rifle up under his jaw and pulled the trigger. For a time, there was blackness. Only for a time, though, because somehow the bullet missed almost everything. Up behind his face it swam, forging a path through muscle and sinew and bone. It shot up to the ceiling and lodged in a knothole that might have been ready-made, and he healed with one eye blind and turned inwards, and a dent like a convict’s thumbprint in his forehead.

After the next-door farm was subdivided for shacks and the shop opened on the main road, I heard the woman behind the counter talking about him. The word she used for him was simple. I was old enough to understand her euphemism, and also to know that she was wrong. If he was simple, it was only in the raw form of the word, for he had the mildness of those few who find a way to remove themselves from pointless complexity. He’d succeeded in what he set out to do – he shot the ghosts right out of his head. Only he hit the harmless ones, too.

IT WAS MY father who wrote to the farmer and asked if we could come and talk to him about the shack on the sea edge of his property. But it was my mother, my brother and I who appeared to him from the windblown dust of the kitchen garden on the sheltered side of the farmhouse. With the roads the way they were, it took longer to get there in those days, and we were late. Dad was back along the road, changing the tyre that had blown out on the corrugated dirt, and to keep us out of his hair my mother had walked us the last mile or so to the farm. Standing there on the path, with our black shoes turned golden-brown, we must have looked as apologetic and thirsty as the geraniums and the sage.

My mother reached out to knock on the slender frame of the screen door. Beyond the mesh the kitchen seemed dark, and in the coming years, that is how I would always find it. It was a cave of a kitchen, with flagged floors and several mismatched dressers and a meat safe that gave off the same smell as the one that clogged your nostrils in a butcher’s shop, only less fresh.

She knocked a second time and we heard shuffling within. The screen door swung towards us, but it was not until the light from the doorway fell upon the rest of him that the farmer took shape against the darkness. The way he squinted against
the glare turned his eyes into pits of wrinkled flesh, and the dent in his forehead looked like a third socket from which an eyeball had been plucked. His white hair plumed like a cockie’s crest and his rumpled clothes were covered with dust.

The farmer’s good eye was mobile as he studied us, but the blind one stayed still. Then he lifted a hand, thickly caked by its own skin, split into bloodless cracks at the knuckles. And with this hand he touched my mother’s face. He touched her tenderly, wistfully, just above the line of her jawbone. His fingers were so rough that I doubt they had the sensation to feel my mother’s softness. I think that although he reached out and touched her, he felt precisely what he expected to feel, which was nothing at all. He let his hand drift upwards from her jaw to the wisps of her windblown hair, nodded a smile. Then he withdrew, and let the door swing its way back to closed.

I looked to my mother for a cue, but her face wore the dispassionately interested look that she had whenever anybody did anything odd. It was a closed look, one that did not admit intruders, and I remained bewildered as she walked us back down the path to the road.

‘What happened to that man’s head?’ my brother asked.

‘Shh,’ I told him, though I hardly knew why.

‘Look, here’s Daddy,’ Mum said, pointing to our car as it turned into the farm driveway with one tyre blacker than all the rest.

Mum told Dad that perhaps the front door would be best. Perhaps she told him later about the screen door and the hand that touched her face, but somehow I doubt it. Our father took the small flight of sandstone steps up to a wide, shaded veranda while we waited by the car. And this time, the farmer opened the door and smiled warmly, like a normal person. He took a hat from a hook by the side of the door, and when he put it on, it covered up most of the puckered dip in his forehead.

‘Got here all right, then?’ he said, pumping Mum’s hand in greeting.

‘Sorry if we’ve put you out,’ she replied, smiling.

Mum ushered him into the front seat of our car and squeezed into the back with Rob and me. As the car began to move, the farmer whistled through his teeth and a black and white collie streaked out from under the veranda to leap at the wound-down passenger window. She had to scrabble her claws on the duco to get her back end into the car, but then she settled down on the farmer’s lap and dangled her tongue out the window for the drive down the rough track to the water’s edge.

I DON’T REMEMBER going inside the shack that day, though I suppose we did. I recall picking my way in winter-soft feet over the spiny rocks to find pools lined with anemones and sea-lettuce. There, I amused myself in the innocently cruel way that children do, filling my pinafore pocket with the tiny blue triangles of
periwinkles, pushing my fingers into the soft centres of fringed anemones, bursting leathery pods of Neptune’s necklace, using my fingernails to hold flailing crabs by their shells, un-suckering starfish from their sleep.

When I’d had enough, I made my way up to the ridge where my father stood, nervously driving the brim of his hat. Now and then, he would point, presumably adjusting the four corners of the allotment that would eventually be ours. Beside him, the farmer nodded inscrutably into the brewing sea breeze.

‘You wouldn’t have to trouble yourself with the paperwork,’ said my father as I came to stand beside him, my feet and ankles reddened and itchy from the cold and the salt of the sea. ‘We’d pay lawyers to see to all that.’

The farmer nodded.

A sum had been mentioned in the car. Another sum, a larger sum, was mentioned now. I’d not ever seen my father like this. He was usually the one who held open the silence into which everyone else poured their secrets and confessions. I expected him to send me away, but instead he drew me to him.

‘This is Sally,’ my father said.

I looked up at the farmer and I doubt there was anything covert in the way my eyes probed his blind, canted eye and peered up under his hat brim to interrogate the dent, inlaid with pearly pink scar-skin.

‘That’s a pretty name,’ the farmer said. ‘I bet you like ponies.’

‘Not especially,’ I said, truthfully.

‘Of course you do,’ said my father, jostling me.

Again the farmer said nothing, and there we stood as the breeze blew the bay into a mottled blue chop. My mother sat at the top of the beach, framed by dune grass, her eyes closed and her hands making circles in the fine white sand. At the tide line, the dog barked and danced while Rob waved a slobbery stick in front of her face.

I’m sure now that we reminded the farmer of something lost, that never really was, and that that is why he finally said: ‘I don’t suppose it’s any good being the dog in the manger.’

It was inexplicable to me, but my father smiled, and the two men shook hands.

This is an extract from The Shack, a forthcoming novella.

Danielle Wood is the author of a novel, The Alphabet of Light and Dark (2003), which won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award, and a collection of stories, Rosie Little’s Cautionary Tales for Girls (2006), both published by Allen & Unwin. She lectures in English at the University of Tasmania. Her story ‘The disappointment’ appeared in Griffith REVIEW 26: Stories for Today.
Scene from a window
Sandra Goldbloom Zurbo

FRIDAY morning. Greenwich Village.

The industrial dumbwaiter, jam-packed with a two-day accumulation of tenants' rubbish, made three trips from the basement of the elegant apartment block to the street.

A team of janitors removed a pile of dark plastic rubbish bags to a corner wall of a raised garden bed that ran along the north face of the building and shaped a mound from them there. The plastic glinted in the pale winter sun.

On the fourth trip, a different type of rubbish: a battered wooden wardrobe tied around the middle with thick yellow string, a stroller, a child’s car seat, a wooden chest of drawers covered with plaited white plastic and topped with a bright-blue lid, one double and two single bed bases, a single mattress, three crocheted cushions in perfect condition, a variety of wooden boxes, shoeboxes tied with string, and a turquoise vinyl golf bag trimmed with scarlet piping. And more plastic bags, these tied at the neck with strips of brightly coloured fabric.

The janitors balanced these leavings on top of the mound, piled them up around its edges.

More was to come. Two chairs with woven cane seats (one badly frayed), a styrofoam box filled with pots and pans, and four wooden trunks of the type once used by travellers embarking upon sea voyages: dark-green painted timber, with locks, decorative round studs laid in patterns and protective corners, all made of brass. Another, orange and of a size that would hold, say, two trombones side by side, was thrown on the top.

MINUTES AFTER THE rubbish was placed on the street, a young couple who had been walking by lunged at it. What treasures might they find here? How much of it might be worth selling?
Reams of documents and file cards tumbled out of the first green trunk, the smallest of the four. The man, after a cursory glance, flung the wads of papers in the air, careless of where they landed.

The second trunk held scores of books, hard-covered and soft. His body stiffened with excitement.

‘Oh, man, look at this!’

‘Don’t take those shitty trunks,’ the woman called to him. ‘Leave them.’

He tried to argue with her, but she was resolute, so he filled his arms with books. When he could hold no more, he placed them in piles on the footpath. He looked around. How to carry all this?

He spied the chest of drawers. ‘What about this?’ She looked up and nodded her assent.

Opening the chest was not as straightforward as he had anticipated. Perplexed, he tugged at each drawer handle in escalating frustration, until he discovered that the drawers opened when he raised the lid and turned it, like a key, thereby opening every alternate drawer – three in total – at right angles to the other three. Magic!

Frenzied, he dumped the books into drawers, then moved to examine the next trunk.

In the meantime, his girlfriend kicked and prodded, then rummaged through the fabric-tied bags.

‘Books here!’ she cried out.

Each time she called ‘books’, he would leave the trunks to fetch the bag of books down to the street.

‘Whoa! Look at this,’ she whooped as she displayed a voluminous pair of white rayon bloomers against her chest. He was too preoccupied to look up but that didn’t dampen her delight.

Next, she found a multicoloured raffia beach bag with long red leather straps.

‘This!’ She waved the bag in circles, lasso-style, high in the air.

Into the beach bag she stuffed a many-coloured skirt, a pair of shoes, two rayon singlets (dresses for her), two scarves, more bloomers. Discarded clothes lay scattered wherever she threw them, their colours gaudy against the dark rubbish bags.

BY NOW A crowd had gathered. Were these voracious first arrivals going to take everything? Would there be worthwhile second pickings?
A woman wearing a camera around her neck sauntered onto the scene. She spoke to the scavenging woman. They laughed; the young woman nodded, then climbed to the top of the mound, queen of all she surveyed. She stretched the bloomers against her chest, then modelled them: draped around her neck they became the finest silk shawl, a gleaming white turban wrapped around her head. The photographer shot away. Click. Click. Click.

Garbage bags, boxes and trunks lay open, their contents sprawled everywhere. A light breeze lifted sheets of paper and carried them off. A lemon-coloured chiffon scarf was blown down the street, a citrus tumbleweed.

‘Hey!’ the young woman cried out. ‘Grab it. Get-that-fucking-scarf, man!’

Her shout brought two women to their windows, one in an apartment block on the north side of the street, one on the south. They were aware of the other’s existence, these two women. Both writers (though neither knew this; they assumed it), each worked late into the night, sometimes peering into the other’s lit-up window across East 11th Street, which separated their buildings. Each woman threw open her window and perched on her sill. Each looked across at the other, hesitated a moment and, as if they’d made up their minds simultaneously, nodded hello.

They looked down to the street.

In time to see the photographer pick up a black cloth-covered book, possibly a diary, that lay on the ground, and riffle through the pages; nothing of interest there. She tossed it back, cast a desultory look around, waved goodbye and ambled off.

Now the couple approached the wardrobe. Unable to break the yellow string, they carried the wardrobe – from the ease with which they hoisted it, it seemed empty – to the footpath, stood it upright and rolled down the string. As the door swung open, a hibachi tumbled out. It looked new. He went to claim it.

‘No,’ she shouted. ‘No! I don’t want that. I don’t want any junk in the apartment.’

He hesitated, but only for an instant; defiant, he claimed it.

A teenager cruised up on rollerblades. He spied the trunks and twirled to a stop.

A middle-aged man was examining the golf bag as if he were considering whether to spend his last penny on it. He turned the golf bag this way and that, fondled it tenderly, held it at arm’s length. The rich dark brown of his skin and the brilliant turquoise of the vinyl made glorious harmony. For this alone he should have whisked the golf bag away.

A woman dressed in a business suit and sneakers inspected what remained of the underwear. It would have fit but perhaps it wasn’t her style.

A modish grey-haired woman in her sixties poked an elegantly shod toe into the single mattress. Too hard? Too spongy? She wrinkled her nose, rummaged around, and inspected and claimed a saucepan and an omelette pan, and departed.
There was a bonus for the couple: the chest of drawers was furnished with a set of wheels. That would take some weight off. She closed the book-filled drawers; he secured them with the yellow string. They stacked bags filled with clothes and books on top of the chest. Each slung a bag over one shoulder, hoisted another under their arms, clutched others in their fingers. Packed to the gills, they departed briskly, the sound of metal wheels on concrete clacking in their wake.

Two English tourists, who had been watching, disgusted, turned to each other.
‘What do you think they do with it?’
‘I can’t imagine.’

He shuddered, offered his companion his arm and they walked off in the direction of 5th Avenue, heads shaking in wonder at the likes of what goes on in New York.

The middle-aged man, as oblivious to the scavengers’ departure as he was to their presence, continued to contemplate the golf bag, a small smile lighting his face.

THE ROLLERBLADER WAS more decisive. He removed his skates and strode straight to the green trunk in best condition. After he’d dragged it onto the street, he gathered up the orange trunk, tipped out the remaining contents from both of them, and pulled them onto the road where, at the command of his pointed finger, a shiny yellow cab pulled into the kerb.

The cab driver’s shouts of indignation resonated up the sides of the surrounding buildings.
‘No way, man. They won’t fit. You’ll wreck my cab. Uh-uh. No way!’
‘They will fit. They will, I tell you.’

More windows opened; faces peered out from both sides of the street. Passersby, more interested in the potential brawl than in the rubbish, slowed their pace, stood and watched. The two writers grinned at each other.

Still yelling about his new cab and the damage that the trunks might wreak upon it, the cab drove off, leaving the hapless rollerblader to try again. In quick succession, three more cabs pulled up, spied the trunks and slipped back into the traffic. An older cab, more battered, came to a stop. When its driver saw the trunks he too began to drive away.

‘They’ll fit,’ shrieked the young man, holding the cab captive by gripping the rim of the roof. He softened. ‘Columbia, man. I wanna go to Columbia. They’ll fit. Trust me, man. Columbia.’

A handsome fare from the Village.
Onlookers discussed it among themselves. Would the trunks fit? Some nodded their agreement with the rollerblader; others thought not. Standing on the sidelines, the crowd called out their opinions.

‘Five bucks says they fit,’ said a man in a fluoro-pink beanie and matching mittens, but there were no takers.

The driver stepped out of his car. Sceptical, he eyed the green trunk, then the boot of his vehicle.

‘See? They will,’ the rollerblader said, prancing between cab and trunks.

‘Yeah, well, maybe this green one.’ The driver pointed accusingly. ‘But what about that other one?’

‘It’s okay, man. I’ll take it on the back seat. Come on.’

‘Okay,’ the driver relented. ‘You take one end.’

‘Yesss!’ The rollerblader punched the air.

Several onlookers applauded, then went about their business. Wood slammed against wood, metal against metal, as apartment windows closed in front of disappearing faces. The two women waved goodbye and returned, smiling, to their work.

The middle-aged man hugged the golf bag to his chest and wandered off into the afternoon.

AS SUDDENLY AS it had begun, the febrile scavenging was over. Almost over. An elderly woman stopped. The black cloth-covered diary, rejected by the photographer, caught her eye. She picked it up from the footpath, slipped it under her arm and walked off, a proprietary look on her face.

The janitors re-emerged from the basement to set the rubbish in order once more. When they finished, they lit cigarettes; each stamped his feet and hugged his upper body against the cold. Smoke and warm breath rose in clouds in front of their faces. When the last of them had finished his cigarette, they boarded the dumbwaiter and rode it back down to the basement.

On the street, the pile of dark plastic bags glinted in the pale winter sun.

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Republic of Outer Barcoo
Janette Turner Hospital

Jodie’s desk in the Capitol building in Wirranbandi is a scratched and gouged door resting across two wooden saw-horses in a room that was once the lobby and teller area of a bank. The room is rather grand, with high ceilings and ornate mouldings and the blistered remnants of gilt around tall windows that date from the glory days of banking and gold-rush rumours. Apart from the makeshift desk and a view of the wide veranda, the room contains four termite-pocked wooden pews and a linoleum floor, the colour of which could best be described as violently mottled dried blood. These items date from the brief period when the former bank served as the Holiness Church of the Word of God Triumphant. Following its fleeting liturgical reincarnation, the building was derelict for a decade, though often put to use for drinking bouts, morning-afters and sexual trysts when jackaroos flocked into town from the cattle stations, every last cowhand hell-bent on squandering his pay with the local barmaids.

There are no screens on the windows, so flies are a problem. Jodie keeps a fan in her hand to fend them off. Naturally there is no air conditioning, but propeller blades in the ceiling turn sluggishly, run off a generator on the back veranda. Periodically, and without warning, the generator, choked with red dust, takes smoko breaks that can vary from ten minutes to several hours in duration. Since nine in the morning, when the office opened for official business (currency transfers, passport applications, enlistment in the militia), the dust has been settling like a terracotta mist on Jodie’s desk and on Jodie. Her arms feel gritty when she strokes them, and this pleases her, because she figures that if she belongs anywhere, she belongs to the earth itself.

Jodie is reading, or trying to read, but she is aware of the horse on the veranda and of the feral pig snuffling at the door and also of the bloke with the semi-automatic who has just dismounted and knotted his reins around the railing. He is unkempt and unshaven. Even from this distance, she can smell the stink of sweat and of long-unwashed body. She can also see that the bloke is good-looking, the Hugh Jackman type, a real hunk.

‘You Ruth?’ he asks, as though he owns the place.
Jodie raises her eyes over her book and lowers them again. She affects boredom. ‘That’s what my pa calls me.’

He is now leaning over her desk. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means that’s what my pa calls me. It’s not what I call myself or what folks who know me call me.’

‘Folks?’ The Hugh Jackman bloke ponders this word. ‘What’s folks? The local codgers, you mean?’

‘Right. That’s who I mean.’

‘What do they call you?’

‘They don’t call me Ruth. Since you do, I know you’re here because my pa sent you.’

The man props his semi-automatic, pointed to the ceiling, against Jodie’s desk, removes his Akubra and scratches his head.

‘That supposed to be a white flag?’ Jodie asks.

‘What?’

‘The fact that your semi-automatic is not pointed at me.’

‘You’re one very strange sheila,’ he says.

‘So they tell me.’

‘Sexy little she-dingo, though, aren’t ya?’

‘You better watch out. I bite, and I’m rabid.’

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Your dad didn’t warn me. Didn’t give me a clue. To tell you the truth, I was expecting someone with unshaved legs, reading the Bible.’

Jodie maintains eye contact, expressionless. Her customer fidgets with his Akubra and looks at the floor. ‘Didn’t mean to offend you,’ he says.

‘You’ve offended me.’

‘I’m sorry. I beg your pardon.’

‘My pardon costs,’ Jodie says.

The man doesn’t know whether to treat this is a joke or a dare. He is increasingly nervous. ‘Well…ah…what will it cost?’

‘That depends.’ There is a long silence, during which the man looks at the floor and Jodie looks at the man. ‘You got any questions?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, ‘I got one. How old are you?’
‘Two months shy of eighteen,’ Jodie says. ‘Keep that in mind. You lay a hand on a minor, you’re in trouble. Not to mention the fact that my pa would cut off your balls.’

The man laughs nervously. ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you are a firecracker. Just the same, hats off to your dad. Got the right idea, I reckon, and all us cattlemen and squatters are behind him. Name’s Danny.’ He extends a hand. ‘Danny O’Sullivan.’

‘Not all that pleased to meet you, Danny,’ Jodie says, ignoring the hand.

‘You not gonna give me your name?’

‘I thought you knew it.’

‘Well, I thought I did too. But now I don’t know, do I, Ruth? Or whoever you are. What do you call yourself?’

‘Jodie.’


‘Because that’s the name my mother gave me, and it’s the one on my birth certificate.’

‘Then why does your dad call you Ruth?’

‘Biblical reasons.’

‘You’re gonna have to explain.’

‘Book of Ruth. Wither thou goest, I will go. Et cetera, et cetera. Don’t know what you’re doing here or why you’ve been talking to my pa if you don’t know your Bible.’

‘Well,’ Danny says, embarrassed. ‘Been on a cattle station in Channel Country all my life, and never had time for those toy-boys in Brisbane or Canberra. Or Sydney either, when those silly buggers try to push in. So I’m with your dad there, he can count on me, I’m all for secession. I’ve signed up for the militia – I got the flag flying. I’m a paid-up member of the Republic of Outer Barcoo. But that don’t necessarily mean I go along with…well, you know…the religious stuff, it’s just not my billy of tea. So you’re gonna have to explain the Bible bit.’

‘Book of Ruth. Old Testament. Ruth says to Naomi, her mother-in-law, that no matter where Naomi goes – and they’re both widows, see? – she’ll go with her. She’ll never leave. Wither thou goest, I will go. My pa wanted a Ruth for a daughter.’

Danny turns the rim of his Akubra in his hands, round and round, like a clock gone haywire. He flicks his eyes up at Jodie then looks at the floor again. ‘I don’t get it,’ he says.

‘He took it for granted that I’d always tag along. To wherever. To western Queensland, to Outer Barcoo. To nowhere.’
‘This ain’t nowhere.’

‘Yeah? You think?’

‘Outer Barcoo ain’t nowhere. But what about your Mum? What does she…’

‘None of your business.’

‘Where are you from, Jodie-Ruth?’

‘Before here? Texas. Before that? South Carolina. We got secession in our DNA.’

‘Dunno what you’re talking about, but I knew your dad was a Yank, so I knew you were too. I knew that before you even opened your mouth. You sure do talk like a Yank.’

Jodie throws her ballpoint pen at Danny. It hits him like a feather and bounces on to the floor. ‘That’s an insult,’ she says. ‘Don’t you know better than to call a Southerner a Yankee? I don’t talk anything like a Yankee because I’m not one and nor is my pa.’

Danny rolls his eyes and scratches his head. ‘Yanks are Yanks,’ he says.

‘Neither of us has ever even been north of the Mason-Dixon Line.’

‘Dunno what you’re talking about, but a Yank is a Yank.’

Jodie says sourly, ‘That’s like calling an Aussie a Pom. How would you like it if I said you talked like a Pommie?’

‘But I don’t.’

‘Exactly my point. Please get it into your thick head that I’m not a Yankee and I don’t sound like one. So. If you’re here to apply for a passport, here’s the form. If you’re here to sign up for the militia, there’s a different…’

‘I already signed up for that with your dad.’

‘If you are here for currency exchange, I got Aussie dollars in a locked strong-box.’

‘You are really something, ain’t you, Miss Not-a-Yankee Jodie-Ruth?’

‘You got a problem, I can put you down for an appointment with the President of the Republic.’

‘You mean your dad?’

Jodie meets Danny’s gaze until he drops his eyes.

‘Your dad’s got a bit of a reputation,’ he says, ‘when it comes to his kid.’

‘Trigger-happy, is that what you heard? You got that right. With a temper that’s always on the boil.’
'But we understand that. It’s natural.’ Danny’s tone is subdued, respectful, peace-making. The rim of his Akubra turns faster and faster in his fingers. ‘A man’s gotta protect his girls. Women, you know, we gotta take them under our wing because they can’t look after themselves.’

‘The Premier of Queensland,’ Jodie says tartly, ‘is a woman.’

Danny spits on the floor of the Capitol building. ‘Right,’ he says. ‘There you go. Fucking Blighty. Goes down on the toy-boys, we reckon. Doesn’t it just make you sick?’

‘Certain things,’ Jodie says, ‘do indeed make me sick. They make me very sick indeed.’

Danny raises his eyes to hers, then nervously drops them again. ‘I done something to offend you?’ he asks.

‘Are you here to change currency? Or for a passport?’

‘Both. I got to have Aussie dosh and I got to get a passport.’

‘What’s the passport for?’

‘What d’ya think? For the usual reason.’

‘The usual reason is foreign travel. Outside the Republic. Where’re you going?’

‘Brisbane. Don’t want to, but I got to. Family funeral.’

Jodie nods toward the horse hitched to the veranda rail. ‘You planning to ride all the way?’

‘Very funny. I got a truck.’

‘But you don’t have a licence?’

‘Used to have one. State of Queensland, et cetera. Expired about ten years ago, I think, and who bothers out here? Anyway, your dad says, and I’m with him, that our passports are legal ID and legal driving licences. We got rights and we got guns to back ’em up.’

Jodie stamps Danny’s passport application with the seal of the Republic of Outer Barcoo. She empties his little drawstring bag of silver guineas, each coin embossed with the Southern Cross, legal currency of the republic. She unlocks her strong-box and changes his Barcoo guineas for Australian dollars.

‘Thanks,’ Danny says. He hefts up his semi-automatic. ‘Is it a killin’ offence with your dad or you if I ask you out for a date?’

‘You’ve got an appealing taste for risk.’

‘Is that a yes?’
'I got certain conditions.'
'Such as?'
'You got to take a shower before you come get me.'
'Deal.'
'You got to shave and wear clean clothes.'
'Cross my heart.'
'You got to come in your truck, not on a horse, and you got to take me somewhere with tablecloths and knives and forks and flowers in a vase on the table.'

Danny licks his index finger and crosses his heart.
'So what?' Jodie says scathingly, not for one second believing. 'Are we gonna drive all the way to Cunnamulla?'
'Better than that.'
'Okay, then. Where?'
'My shack,' he says. 'I got export-quality steak in the freezer. I got a lace tablecloth that used to be my mum's. I'm good as the devil's chef with the barbie.'

Jodie eyes him balefully. 'Oh, right. Your shack. You think I'm gonna fall for that?'
'Swear to God, you'll be safe as a nun.'

It's a staring match and Jodie is the first to lower her eyes. 'When?' she says.
'Tonight?'
'Just remember, I'm gonna let my dad know, I'm underage and I got my own gun.'

IN FACT, THOUGH she knows how the Wirranbandi chapter will almost certainly end, Jodie does not inform her dad about Danny or about her date. She showers, applies a curling iron to her hair, sprays herself with perfume. She puts on bikini panties, tight jeans and a soft cotton T-shirt, no bra. Since her father is still out recruiting, she goes back to the Capitol building. She mists the office of the Republic of Outer Barcoo with air-freshener. It's a eucalyptus scent, all she's got, but it will have to do. She takes her diary from a desk drawer and settles into one of the pews. She thinks about whether to write another letter to her mother, but writes nothing. Instead she simply stares across the veranda at the red earth and the sky. It still shocks her, just how much sky there is, and how suddenly it goes dark. Pouf! It's like a hurricane lantern blown out, like a blind pulled down.
She turns on the lamp at her desk.

Then she writes: Where are you? Are you still alive, mama? Will you ever find me? Will I ever find you? Is it always the end of the world? Does it have to be? Can there be some other kind of ending?

From one of the desk drawers, she lifts copies of her father’s sermons and political tracts and his Constitution of the Republic, and from underneath those she extracts her secret folder of clippings. These come from assorted newspapers, all illicit, all read furtively, all filched from airports or railway stations or newsagents or from recycling bins in various towns.

Her folder has separator title pages, each title clipped from headlines and stuck on with cheap white glue.

- Republic of Texas
- Republic of Canaan: a history of the secession of a Bible-based Confederate County in upstate South Carolina.

She has made a new title page: Republic of Outer Barcoo, Queensland, Australia. She cut that headline from the Sydney Morning Herald and so far the only article in the folder came from that same issue of the Sydney paper. There is photographic documentation (fuzzy and inconclusive), and the investigative reporter claims that large caches of weapons exist on a number of cattle stations and that there are widespread rumours of sedition, of revolution, of covert intention for sabotage and for violent secession from both the State of Queensland and the Commonwealth of Australia. A spokesperson from the Premier’s office says that the situation is being monitored but that no one takes too seriously the ravings of a small lunatic fringe. Yes, they are heavily armed and dangerous, but they are few. In the event of siege, they would be wiped out in a matter of hours.

Behind the Republic of Texas title page in Jodie’s scrapbook, item one is a New York Times piece dated 13 February 2005, filed from Overton, Texas.

The road to the Capitol, Jodie reads (though she knows this piece almost by heart), winds through a landscape of pine trees, rusting pump jacks and a few tidy churches in this East Texas town. Literature in the lobby describes how citizens can apply for passports or enlist in the interim defense forces. The building is the headquarters of the Republic of Texas, a sometimes militant organization whose members repudiate the authority of Austin and Washington and believe Texas should be a sovereign nation. The group gained notoriety eight years ago when some members took a couple hostage in the Davis Mountains of West Texas, and endured a weeklong siege by more than 100 police officers, after which a follower who fled into the mountains was killed. The leader of the faction involved in the standoff is still in prison.
Jodie has only vague memories of the shootout, as she was four at the time. This is how she remembers it: like cowboys on TV but sticky. The sticky was blood. From before that, she remembers the beat-up truck and the road that went on forever and the pillows on each side that her pa put there to stop her from sliding across the front seat of the cabin. She remembers sirens behind them and the trees rushing by very fast and the seatbelt she chewed and the way her pa kept promising, promising, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household,’ he kept saying, ‘and go to the land I will show you. Thus saith the Lord.’

Is it possible she can remember the words so exactly?

Of course not.

She knows the words from sermon after sermon preached in Texas and in Outer Barcoo. She knows from his telling and retelling.

She knows, all these years later, that the truck-and-pillow-and-siren memories are about the frantic flight from South Carolina, the state troopers flummoxed at the Georgia border. Somewhere between Georgia and Texas, or perhaps before Georgia, they seem to have lost her mother, but Jodie has no information on that score. Many times she has rehearsed asking what happened, but each time the words turn into vapour on her lips. They rise, she sees them float toward her father’s ears, but they have no sound. Her father is very good at staying out of prison and out of trouble. He charms people. He makes friends easily and quickly. He has (she has now figured out) friends in all the right places, oil men, cattle men, military men, born-again politicians. Everyone says her pa is a charismatic preacher. Friends become followers and then they become afraid.

Everything seems to end in flight and a lot of bodies.

New York Times, February 2005, quoting the chief of police of Overton, Texas: ‘I normally wouldn’t be alarmed by a few boys getting into a fisticuffs thing. But this is a group with a violent past…However ludicrous their beliefs might sound to you and me, we can’t forget that Jim Jones got a bunch of folks to drink Kool-Aid with him down in Guyana. You could shave one side of your head and have a loyal following around here by nightfall.’

Chief Williams said that his officers have fined or issued arrest warrants for group members. Violations included carrying Republic of Texas passports instead of a driver’s licence, driving unregistered vehicles, and redesigning licence plates to show a Texas that includes significant chunks of New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming. Group members say those areas are part of Texas, wrongly wrested away by Washington.

Group members believe that the Texas referendum in 1845 in favor of joining the United States was illegal…They also advocate the creation of an alternative monetary system using minted silver and gold coins. One coin made of one gram of silver has a large Texas star in its center and the word ‘Overton’ emblazoned around it.
After the conviction and imprisonment of the original leader, the new president has promised a more conciliatory future. He said his administration, unlike some splinter cells, did not base its political philosophy on Old Testament beliefs, did not oppose women’s suffrage and did not support a return to a legal system permitting slavery.

‘What are you reading?’ Danny asks, stepping in from the dark veranda. He is showered and shaven and smells good. ‘Hey, didn’t mean to give you a heart attack.’

Jodie stuffs the folder back into a cardboard banker’s box and covers it. Her hands quiver, so she keeps them inside the box.

‘Jeez,’ Danny laughs. ‘What is it? Pornography?’

‘What do you take me for?’

‘Normal. Probably. Except for the church stuff, but that don’t count. I know a heap of Holiness blokes keep Hustler under their pillows, praying like crazy for the Lord to forgive while they jerk off, so I ain’t gonna be shocked…’

‘You disgust me. It’s nothing like that.’

‘So I disgust you. And what are you hiding in the box? What disgusts you?’

‘Nothing. And none of your business.’

‘Tell that to the crows. Who tries to hide nothing – tell me that.’

‘It’s the History of the Republic, if you must know. I keep a scrapbook.’

‘Oh that. You mean Texas and the Call? Your dad told me. Personally speaking, only kind of voodoo I believe in comes out of the last bottle of a twelve-pack. But I got a lot of time for your dad and he said for him the Call came loud and clear.’

‘Loud and clear,’ Jodie says, fitting the lid over the box with some force. ‘Delivered by state troopers, announced by sirens. The Lord God spake and said, Go west, Mr President, as fast as you can, and here we are.’

Danny raises his eyebrows. ‘You are good and pissed off, that’s for sure.’

‘I know how this ends.’

‘Know how what ends? You and me?’

‘The Republic. All this. I know how it ends. One day my pa will be freckled with bullets and that’s what he wants.’

‘Bullshit,’ Danny says. ‘There’s not a man living wants to die, and certainly not your dad.’

‘Don’t you get it? He doesn’t believe he’ll stay dead. He wants martyrdom. Believe me, I know how this ends, over and over, every time.’

Jodie covers her face with her hands.
‘You’re serious, aren’t ya?’ Danny is amazed and uneasy. He almost puts a hand on her shoulder. ‘What d’ya want to do then?’

‘I don’t want to be here when it ends.’

‘Well then, let’s get cracking. Truck’s waiting, and I got my passport, my tent, sleeping bags…’

‘Forget it,’ Jodie says, furious. ‘Is that all you can think about?’

‘Hey, swear to God, that’s not what I meant. I won’t lay a hand on you. We’ll just keep driving if you want. Sleep under the stars.’

‘I’ve never slept under the stars. Have you?’

‘Often. Closest to religion I get.’

‘And we can just keep driving?’

‘Drive forever, if you want. Drive to Darwin.’

‘What about the funeral in Brisbane?’

‘Changed my mind. Something else came up. Where’d you want to go?’

‘Just away,’ Jodie says. ‘That’s all.’

‘That’s where we’re going,’ Danny says.
Who put the overalls in Mrs Murphy’s chowder?
Puzzling the reader
Carmel Bird

EVENY working work of fiction, regardless of length or genre, is to some extent a kind of mystery offered to the reader; every work of fiction has its plot. Every work of fiction in some way troubles its reader, and tries to bring some form of solace, whether bitter or sweet. It is its own kind of question and its own kind of answer, taking the reader into itself as part of the fabric, part of the business that fiction has with the world.

This year is the sixty-fifth anniversary of Tove Jansson’s first Moomin book. One of the great treasures in my bookcase is a 1953 copy of a picture book called The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My. Moomintroll, in the course of carrying home a can of milk, helps Mymble to discover her lost sister, Little My. There is one episode per page, and the question is, will they find Little My and get the milk home to Mother? You are dealing with a page-turner, since each page ends with the question ‘What do you think happened then?’

Here is plot reduced to its simplest elements. Situation, character, danger, resolution. Not quite the regulation sometimes put forward: situation, complication, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement (which don’t have to happen in that order). But near enough. You get the question and the tension as the answer comes in steps, as new dangers are put in the way. In case you are wondering, they do get home safely, but unfortunately the milk has curdled. As a cute coda, Mother says they will have strawberry juice instead. Always, as it happens.

It is the repetition of the question ‘What do you think happened then?’ that often comes back to me when I am thinking about plot in fiction. Because I love the way the reader is involved in the business of it all. And in this particular story, the reader is constantly taken by surprise and thrown off balance by the trademark Jansson mixture of mild terrors and delicious, whimsical beauty.
I often find it difficult, analysing fiction in hindsight, to separate plot from other elements, such as character and situation. It is even more difficult when I am the creator of the story, on the other side of the business, to separate them during the process of writing the work. I sometimes talk to groups who are studying the art of writing fiction, and I find that frequently there is a deep-seated notion that fiction writers begin by writing an outline of the plot of their short story or novel. Perhaps some writers do this, and do it successfully, but I am inclined to agree with Stephen King who, in *On Writing* (2000), expresses a strong opposition to this view. And I think there is much for a student to lose by trying to begin with a plot outline. When the work is finished, it will be possible to look back on it and analyse the plot, if that is something required by teachers and supervisors. But not before.

Stephen King speaks of writing fiction as the act of digging out fossils, discovering part of an ‘undiscovered, pre-existing world’. He is vehement, saying that to make plot outlines is ‘clumsy, mechanical, anti-creative’. He points out that writing fiction is not a fully conscious and mechanical process, that much of what goes on is located in the writer’s unconscious.

But it is also useful and instructive for a reader (and a prospective writer) to analyse the plots of fiction when the fiction is complete. Hold up the fossil to the light. I mean, you can analyse the things you read, and I also think that in doing so you can gain insight and inspiration for your own Kingian excavations of the fossils from that pre-existing world.

An analysis of the psychological horror novel *Misery*, for example, is instructive in the light of what its author says about plotting. ‘Plotting and the spontaneity of real creation are not compatible.’ But of course there is a plot. He just didn’t put it there – he dug it up from the matrix of his own fertile imagination and let it loose.

EM Forster talks about plot in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). He is, though, discussing the thing after the event, not what happens in the early stages of the writing process. He explains that there is a difference between ‘story’ and ‘plot’. He says that plot tells what happened and why, and gives meaning to it. But when speaking of ‘story’ his language grows ugly, and he says that story is ‘the chopped-off length of the tapeworm of time’, it is ‘mindless time-killing curiosity’. Ouch. Story, he says: ‘The king died and then the queen died.’ Plot, he says: ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief.’ All he has really done there is show how to make two facts interesting by making the second one consequential, something people do regularly when telling tales anyway.

I think Forster was splitting hairs by dividing up story and plot like that; however, his assertion that plot is a ‘writer’s arrangement of events’ that will express that writer’s ‘attitude to the human condition’ is fair enough, I suppose, if a bit grand.
Plot can often be boiled down to a very simple question like: Who killed Cock Robin? Who stole the tarts? Will Elizabeth Bennet marry Mr Darcy? This is not plot summary, but rather quick-fix plot essence. Some questions are more complicated than others, some answers more interesting than others. The how and why of the things that happened are what readers (and writers) love to know. Readers love the shocks and surprises, the twists and turns, the magical mystery tour of a well-managed plot as the writer’s ‘attitude to the human condition’ is gradually revealed. Main plots and sub-plots often have fun with each other too.

Just as the Moomin line ‘What do you think happened then?’ pleasantly rings in my mind when I think about plot, so does the title of an old song I used to love playing on the pianola when I was a child, ‘Who Put the Overalls in Mrs Murphy’s Chowder?’ See how the situation and the character are beautifully bound up in the question. You want to know, don’t you? You want the terrible mystery solved. The matter arose from the rather horrible fact that Mrs Murphy did her washing and her cooking in the same vessel. She left the overalls in the pot by mistake, and then made the soup, and when she dished it up the overalls were discovered. She had the decency to faint.

I speak here of mystery. Plot always, I think, involves mystery, however slightly, and therefore will invite suspense. Satisfaction comes with some form of resolution.

NOW THAT I have boiled plot down (influenced perhaps by Mrs Murphy) to a question and an answer, I must speak of the importance of structure in the delivery of the goods. For the simple chronological accounting of the adventures of creatures such as the Moomins will not always do the trick. There will often be more than one question posed, and not all puzzles will necessarily be solved. Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938) is notorious for leaving several key questions dangling. For some readers these gaps are part of the beauty of the whole; for others they are maddening flaws in the story. If you read du Maurier’s The Rebecca Notebook you will see that she did a lot of planning, but the notes really outline her writing process; they are not strictly a plot summary.

The structure of a story will provide the real strength. And structure is in any case intricately bound up with the characters and the events, as well as the language and the tone. How does a writer put the elements of the plot before the reader’s mind? Thinking about the structure of The Great Gatsby (1925) is a favourite pastime of mine. Where does the writer begin, at what moment in the sequence of events? And how does the writer organise those events to deliver not only the plot, but also the key ideas which inform the work? Think of how the death of Rebecca, the mystery that drives Rebecca, is woven into the fabric of the narrative, and seeps and spills into the story all along the way. Maybe it doesn’t really matter about the unsolved bits that will forever dangle and tantalise.
Because the structure of The Great Gatsby places the death of Gatsby at the beginning, the question is, who was he and why did he die? The hit-run accident that marks the turning point in the plot does not feel accidental, but inevitable. It feels like part of the dreadful heart of the tragic fossil Fitzgerald brought to the surface and held up to the light. By the way, you can dig back into Fitzgerald’s short fiction and find the Gatsby fossil in various stages of revelation: in ‘Winter Dreams’ and ‘Absolution’.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND Anton Chekhov have been noted for the ‘slightness’ of their plots, although I wouldn’t characterise them in this way. The stories work on the level of metaphor, subtly moving their people into view, revealing their hearts and predicaments with a particular melody that is captured by the reader’s own heart. They don’t appear necessarily to follow the rigid progress from situation to denouement, although often these elements are delicately present within the fabric.

Here is the plot of Chekhov’s short story ‘The House with the Mezzanine’, sometimes called ‘An Artist’s Story’. The boiled-down version of the plot is, will the foreign artist marry the younger sister? (From the beginning the reader hopes not.)

The narrator is a snobbish romantic French artist who is renting a grand house in a Russian provincial town. He is depressed and uninspired until he meets a family – a mother and two daughters. He falls in love with them and their house. One daughter is fiercely determined to work for the betterment of the peasants, and constantly argues with the artist, while the other, Missy, is clearly falling in love with him. Finally he kisses Missy, and watches the green light in her mezzanine room until it goes out. The next day Missy disappears with her mother. She has told her older sister what has happened, and has been sent away to protect her from the decadent fool of an artist. His response is to leave in a huff. He returns after seven years to learn that the older sister is having a certain success in local politics, and that nobody seems to know what has become of the younger. He admits that he is gradually forgetting the house, but imagines that Missy is waiting for him somewhere. He is just as big a prejudiced fool as he always was. Missy has had a lucky escape. The dramatic success of Missy’s original banishment to her aunt’s house, resulting in her seven-year disappearance from view, is quite brilliant. The power of that older sister.

When I had finished reading this story for the first time I kept thinking about it, mentally going back over the details, relishing the success of the tone of voice which delivers the narrator, in his own words, up to the reader as the tedious creature he is. The question is, will he end up with Missy, and the hope is that he won’t. He doesn’t, and he hasn’t learnt anything about anything. Missy is safe somewhere – even, it seems to me, safe in the reader’s heart. (Perhaps incidentally passing on her green light to Jay Gatsby. I like to think so.) It may be a simple question this plot is
asking, but it is set within a vivid, highly textured and complex fabric of Russian life in the 1890s. It is a beautiful story of Missy’s lucky escape. The story is finely tuned to itself, working within its own metaphor to trouble and untrouble the reader’s mind and heart.

Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Miss Brill’ is another little masterpiece whose plot is often described as slight. The question hovers and quivers – a ‘chill from a glass of iced water before you sip’. Working always within her complex and subtle metaphoric fabric, Mansfield has this story quietly pose the question, is Miss Brill dying? Is this afternoon in the park her last? To say that the answer is yes is too crass, really, but the answer is yes. All the story asks you to do is to walk with it, and look deep into Miss Brill’s heart.

After reading a story by Mansfield or Chekhov you have a deep sense that something has happened. When I read my first Mansfield story, ‘The Fly’, at fifteen I knew with a jolt that something had happened in the story, almost when I wasn’t looking, and something also happened to me – I was in love with the short-story form. In The Common Reader (1925) Virginia Woolf explained that when you read Mansfield ‘the horizon widens, the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom’. That seems right.

ONE OF THE dearest novels on my shelves is Austerlitz (2001), by WG Sebald. You could perhaps think that this book did not have a plot. Oh, but it does. The question is a simple one: who is Austerlitz and what does his life mean? The answer is the whole glittering melancholy hypnotic transcendent cello music of the grand and flowing narrative which enunciates the dispersal of the Jews from Prague and their ultimate destruction. In this novel the writer’s style and the plot are so entwined as to create their own form, but truly the plot is deep and strong and essentially simple.

I find it is a nice exercise – boiling stories and novels down to the simple plot questions, and then considering how the questions and their answers are inextricably woven into the other elements of the narrative. The simple questions remain throughout, underneath everything, tapping away at the reader, keeping the reader going, turning the pages to find the answers, taking pleasure in the twist and turns and highs and lows. In a sense every work of working fiction is a puzzle the story poses to the reader. Will the son inherit after all? Will the young man write the great man’s biography? Will Little Dorrit marry Arthur Clennam? Will Jane Eyre find happiness? Who killed Cock Robin?

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AUSTRALIA is often seen from abroad, and at home, as a land with no clear cultural core – apart from that of Indigenous Australia, which is not sufficient or appropriate to define the wider contemporary nation. This begs the question whether there is need for clearer definition.

I have worked in cultural exchange between Australia and Asian countries for twenty years, and established the Asialink arts program in 1991. I know a bit about cultural stereotypes and the urge for clarity. I see that clarity, which comes more easily for other societies, as both a gift and burden. The burden is to typecast their creative people, with a definition that they must deal with first. Australia’s seeming lack of a clear inner cultural core means that artists can be judged on their individual merits – there are fewer barriers to explain and overcome.

But labelled we are: culturally western, physically in the Asia-Pacific region, young (though we bring older cultures with us) and, depending on your position, confused – or diverse. A strange bird in the Asia-Pacific nest, but in that nest nevertheless.

THIS RAISES QUESTIONS about the position for our arts, and especially the visual arts. The Venice Biennale in 2009 seemed bigger and more desirable than ever. As I work with Asian countries I was keen to see their representation in this most splendid cultural fair. The title of the Biennale was Making Worlds. Like their countries’ political and economic development, the desire of Asian nations to be represented in Venice grows in both number and sophistication. Japan and Korea have pavilions in Giardini (the gardens on the north tip of the main islands) – Japan quite central, but Korea, like Australia, a bit on the edge.

There is no room for new pavilions in Giardini, so others, like China, have spaces tacked onto the other major site, the Arsenale. Taiwan has been there for years, well
placed just next to San Marco, and last year, as ever, doing a professional job. (China’s effort, in contrast, was less than polished.) Hong Kong was there; Thailand put on a very amusing show near the railway station.

The best by far was Singapore: a sustained series of videos, movie banners and accoutrements by Ming Wong, paying homage to Singapore and Malaysian cinema after independence, but also analysing cultural mores in a multicultural society – through the interaction between style, culture, art and commerce. This work was also wonderfully sited, taking up the whole of the first floor of a palazzo midway up the Grand Canal, so the audience could move through rooms that looked like movie sets; sit, muse and look out at the canal, and wonder about a piece based on fifty-year-old cinema in an island state on the other side of the world.

Venice is great because it evokes other societies. The Venetians always looked east and were comfortable with their links to Constantinople but also, bearing in mind Marco Polo, far beyond. The city flows and seeps; it never had a wall, and the disintegrating light on the water seems to make a nonsense of barriers.

So it has been open to these Asian art incursions, but it hasn’t celebrated or especially acknowledged them (with the exception of China, but China is always the exception). To my knowledge, no artist from a national selection from the Asia-Pacific has ever won one of the major prizes. There isn’t a buzz around the Asian sites.

BEFORE WORKING WITH Asian art, I lived in Europe; I feel quite at home there, so what I am about to say is not for reasons of alienation or ignorance. More and more, Europe is a region unto itself. It tolerates others and at times expresses warm involvement, but isn’t deeply interested. And to think it might be interested is blowing in the wind. The European Union is a successful entity – the lack of passport checks and money changing has smoothed the bureaucratic paraphernalia of internal difference and in turn enhanced the sense of the European-ness in Europe.

Interest seems primarily to be in those closest to hand – the Eastern European states and the countries of the old Soviet empire – all with closer links to Europe than, say, Singapore, or Australia. It was clear at the Biennale: the Eastern European states, including notably Slovenia and Macedonia, flexed their muscle; there was real interest in the ‘Stans’. There were shows of work from the Middle East and the ‘terrorist’ states of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan – all responding to issues of Islamic involvement within and outside Europe.

The major non-European work in the curated part of the Biennale was that of the Japanese group Gutai from the 1960s. However, their work looks like European conceptualism and fits within the European aesthetic. It is in fact very different, coming from a Shinto focus on the importance of the action of making and a belief in the spirit within. This wasn’t explained.
The American Bruce Naumann got a lot of attention because he is a big name in twentieth-century art and it was a sort of homage, but he was a lonely figure. Australia and New Zealand seemed very far away.

The borders within Europe have collapsed for cultural exchange, but they have grown stronger around it. The EU has recognised that it needs to promote a greater engagement with Asia, partly in the face of the success of APEC, which excludes Europe. They created ASEM, the ‘Asia–Europe Meeting’, which now has forty-five countries signed up, with Australia and Russia joining late in 2010. It has an associated arm, the Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore, with forty staff. If you are getting confused by the acronyms, you are not alone. A meeting in Vietnam of ASEF in early 2010 debated the name, and expressed concern about its visibility. Professor Andras Balogh, the Hungarian Governor of ASEF, gave a keynote talk that mentioned a list of ‘obstacles’ for cultural diplomacy. He included the ‘weak interest and lack of enthusiasm of many, mainly European governments in the ASEM concept and activity’ and ‘the diminishing role of Europe in the eyes of Asians’.

IN A BACKHAND way these comments confirm the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to Australia. On the same visit to Hanoi, in April 2010, watching ‘Asian’ TV one night, I was conscious of the Australian voices throughout the networks: an Australian chef teaching Korean cooking on the Korean international TV service; the BBC interviewing the Australian creator of the Shanghai Expo opening ceremony; and another channel advertising an Australian accountancy firm, fronted by an Australian of Chinese background, all in ten minutes of channel surfing.

It makes such a contrast to the Australian presence in Europe. Many are keen to fly our cultural flag higher in Europe. I am not against this, but we can’t expect too much, nor spend too much of our few resources there.

A group of thirty senior Japanese and Australian visual art museum curators, academics and practitioners met in Tokyo and Sydney recently, talking about what ‘could be done’. There were a number of recommendations.

One is the implementation of an Asia-Pacific-only ten-year program, The Utopia Project (copying a European program, Manifesta). Cities in the region would bid to host a visual arts program including exhibitions, residencies, workshops, education and community programs every two years. A city hosts it once, with the other members agreeing to support their people’s involvement, and it moves on: an Olympic games system, but without the competition.

The beauty is that the effort is once only, without the burden of an ongoing biennale; it is just for one region, so it keeps its focus and relevance; and the bureaucracy is tiny and cheap (after seventeen years Manifesta works well with just four staff). The first meeting of the core group of countries met in June in Singapore, and a second meeting is planned for Melbourne in November 2010.
A JOURNALIST FRIEND of mine once explained why ten people dying in England got more newspaper coverage than four hundred in Bangladesh. It wasn’t that their lives were less worthy, it was they were less ‘connected’ – we in Australia were more likely to understand the lives of the dead English people, to have been to their towns and even to know them, because of our history and circumstance.

The Venice Biennale is connected to Europe; Utopia could be an event that further connects the countries and peoples of the Asia-Pacific. We need, I believe, to think this way more and more, despite the desire to the contrary.

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Alison Carroll established, and from 1990-2010 directed, the Arts Program at Asialink, now the leading program for arts exchange between Asia and Australia for visual arts, performing arts, literature and arts management practice.
What makes us tick?
Polling and international understanding
Fergus Hanson

There have been valiant attempts over centuries and across continents to try to understand the prevailing mood of the times. From Herder and Hegel’s Zeitgeist to Le Bon’s collective behaviour and Durkheim’s collective consciousness, the notion has evolved that as a group, society or nation we have views or sentiments that can be reduced to an average. Until very recently, these attempts to discover the nature of this collective view were the domain of philosophers and sociologists, poets and politicians.

In the latter camp was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who attempted to gauge the prevailing mood by encouraging the American people to write to him with their concerns. His urgings resulted in a mail count averaging a whopping five to eight thousand items per day – ten times the average of Herbert Hoover, his predecessor.

FDR kept close tabs on these communications. He ordered the mail room do daily tallies on the topics they covered, and if he were making an important address or a controversial issue arose the count would be refined into those for and against the proposal.

In addition to these quasi-scientific approaches the President would also try to sample the mail by dipping his arm into a mass of letters and choosing one at random.

It was around this time that attempts to determine the collective consciousness underwent something of a revolution, with the development of the first scientific opinion polls.

The idea of polling had been around for some time. The Roman Empire developed something of a fetish for counting its citizens. The censors responsible for this task were most focused on the extent of each citizen’s property for taxation purposes, never hitting upon the idea of surveying their respondents about their preferred emperor or views on the invasion of Caledonia, let alone identifying the collective mind.
Then again, perhaps they didn’t need to. The other main function of the censors was the regulation of public morals. By virtue of their mandate to register citizens of the Empire and decide their rank, the censors developed considerable powers to reward or punish good and bad moral behaviour, in effect regulating the prevailing public mood.

After the disintegration of the Empire there was little innovation in the world of opinion polling until the development of the straw poll. The first such poll is dated to 1824 and was taken in the United States. The practice was repeated in succeeding elections but there was no real effort to ensure the polls were representative of the voting population. Unsurprisingly, the predictions derived from the results were often of sub-optimal quality.

Beginning in 1916, The Literary Digest tried to take straw polling to a new level by sampling huge volumes of voters. It developed a good reputation for its work, until 1936, when it made a hugely inaccurate prediction about the presidential race. The Digest had analysed more than two million ballots in an attempt to predict the election result, but it had relied on ballots sent to telephone subscribers and car owners who, in an America still recovering from the Great Depression, did not represent the American electorate as a whole. The Digest predicted Republican Alf Landon would win in a landslide, which brings us back to FDR – the man who actually won.

IT WAS DURING FDR’s term in office that the first scientific opinion polls were conducted, and he was the first world leader to hit upon the idea of using opinion polling to inform foreign policy.

In 1939, FDR sent a request to the publisher of the Washington Post, asking him to see if George Gallup would conduct a poll to ascertain the American public’s view towards the United States’ involvement in the war in Europe – and report the findings to the White House.

Gallup polls in 1939 revealed signs that parts of the American public were moving away from isolationism. Fifty-seven per cent agreed, for example, with changing the neutrality law to allow the United States to sell war materials to England and France, and a large majority (69 per cent) were in favour of doing everything possible to help England and France to win the war – except going to war themselves.

IT WAS NOT long before the new concept of scientific polling spread to the Asia-Pacific, opening up the possibility of better understanding the collective thinking of the region’s diverse peoples.
The first scientific opinion poll in Australia (finding 59 per cent in favour of equal pay for women) appeared in 1941. However, not everyone was happy about this new science that professed to tell politicians, writers and poets what the collective nation thought. Robert Menzies was particularly irked by the audacity of the new Zeitgeist readers.

He described a poll published by Keith Murdoch as ‘a wanton and calculated blow’, even going so far as to suggest that Sir Keith should have suppressed the results and writing to him: ‘Do you regard Gallup Poll questions as divinely inspired, or are they chosen by human beings? …Can you really believe that you can strike down the leader of a Party (when you do not suggest any alternative leader in the Parliamentary rank) and do no injury to the Party?’

Sir Keith was unmoved.

POLLS HAVE ALSO been used by governments across the region to try and improve their understanding of foreign peoples.

From 1973, the Japanese Embassy in Canberra began to conduct regular opinion polling in Australia to measure and track Australian attitudes towards Japan and to test the effectiveness of its foreign policy initiatives.

These polls tracked shifts in Australian attitudes away from seeing Japan in terms of enemies, militarism and POW camps – among the most commonly held associations with Japan in the 1976 survey, a legacy of World War II.

By the 1980s these polls picked up a new focus of concern. Two-thirds of Australians had consistently said Australia should be friendly towards Japan. That proportion fell away in 1988, following the debate on Japanese investment, with 75 per cent saying they wanted no more Japanese investment in Australia.

The Japanese did not use this polling to forestall the backlash against their investment, but it must have provided a strong guide to where they needed to prioritise their diplomatic efforts.

Lowy Institute polling shows Australians now have very warm feelings towards Japan and high levels of trust in it to act responsibly in the world. Despite this positive sentiment, the Japanese Foreign Ministry continues to conduct polling in Australia, and its 2009–10 poll still included questions about Japan and its role in World War II.

Japan does not just focus its polling on Australia. In 2008, it conducted opinion polling in six ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam).
LIKE JAPAN, THE United States takes opinion polling seriously as a tool in enhancing understanding of the region’s diverse cultures. The US State Department makes regular use of publicly available opinion polls but also commissions its own opinion polling through the Office of Opinion Research, which has a staff of forty-one and a budget of US$11.6 million (although not all of these resources are dedicated to polling).

These polls conducted in places like Indonesia are not made publicly available but are a useful tool for tracking changes in Indonesian opinion, for example in response to major US initiatives such as its tsunami relief.

Even countries well beyond the region are conducting polling in the Asia-Pacific. The Scottish Executive, for example, polled in China to support its strategy of closer engagement. Most governments are coy about their survey activities in foreign countries, so it is hard to know exactly which ones are conducting polling and where.

The Australian Government has not integrated opinion polling into its foreign policy to the same extent as other countries, although it does use it. The Australian aid agency, AusAID, conducts domestic polling on its aid program, and Tourism Australia and AusTrade conduct market research to inform campaigns like ‘Brand Australia’. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has also conducted limited polling in the region.

Of course, governments are not the only ones polling in the Asia-Pacific. A wide range of companies, think tanks and not-for-profit research organisations are polling people from Tokyo to Townsville.

THERE ARE AT least two ways that these opinion polls might be subtly serving the stability of the international system.

First, public opinion polls provide a level of surety to the international system that did not previously exist. Before the pioneering polling work in the 1930s, it was very hard to determine what was the prevailing mood in countries around the world. Imagine, for example, if world leaders had accurate polls of German public opinion when they were making early efforts at appeasement. Might the British Government have changed policy towards Germany earlier if they had been able to measure the depth of resentment among Germans?

Today polls provide this service in the background. They let other countries know that things are more or less on track – and when they are not, provide early warning that a change is underway.

Consider what happens when a poll suggests everything is not quite alright. On 29 March 2005, the International Herald Tribune carried the front-page headline
‘Australians view U.S. as a threat to peace’ after a Lowy Institute Poll found 57 per cent of Australians were very or fairly worried about US foreign policies.

Rupert Murdoch was reportedly so surprised by the findings that he raised the issue with the American Australian Association in New York. The issue was then taken up with Prime Minister John Howard who, a year later, announced the creation of a $25 million endowment to establish a United States Studies Centre to increase understanding of the United States in Australia.

Polls also provide a level of surety by informing policymakers how countries are likely to behave. They show them the domestic incentives and restraints that foreign leaders will have to take into account when making foreign policy. By knowing a bit about prevailing Japanese sentiment towards the deployment of Japanese armed forces abroad, for example, policymakers could get a pretty good idea of how far the Japanese leadership is likely to be moved when pushed on this issue.

SECOND, OPINION POLLS might well function as a mirror in the international system. We often hear tourists asked, ‘So what do you think of Australia?’ Which is a funny question, when you consider there is only one right answer. It does, however, suggest the rather human inclination to want to be liked.

Polling provides a similar type of service in the international system. We like to see that New Zealanders, Canadians and Japanese have favourable feelings about Australia. We accept that some countries – Iraq or North Korea – might not like us that much, but what if polls showed New Zealanders or Americans liked North Koreans more than us or, worse, they showed no one in the world liked us? Surely the collective consciousness would be quite troubled?

This type of effect might have been at play during the Presidency of George W Bush. Public opinion towards America plummeted around the world during his first term in office – even among close allies like Australia. It is debatable what impact this had on US domestic opinion – after all, Bush was re-elected – but it was conceivably a factor in the election of Barack Obama.

Of course, being liked is not everything. Polling shows US popularity around the world has soared since the election of President Obama. However, that has not necessarily translated into getting others to help the United States – witness Chinese obstructionism at Copenhagen and strained US–Japan relations.

POLLS ARE NO panacea, nor are they perfect tools for understanding foreign cultures. As Walter Lippmann wrote in one of the seminal early books on collective opinion, ‘public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts and there is nothing obvious about them.’ All of which suggests modern-day poets and pundits
still have plenty of years of fruitful employment ahead of them interpreting the collective consciousness.

However, if polls do provide policymakers with a degree of surety about how other countries will behave, and act as something of a mirror for the international system, then they will remain important tools in guiding the world through the dramatic power shifts of the Asia-Pacific century.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Fergus Hanson is a Research Fellow at the Lowy Institute and the director of the Lowy Institute Poll Project, responsible for the annual Lowy Poll as well as ad hoc Lowy polling in other countries.
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