WHAT IS AUSTRALIA FOR?

ESSAYS & MEMOIR, FICTION & REPORTAGE

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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.

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A question with many answers

From the mine of creative solutions

Julianne Schultz

At the end of last century I was charged, for a short time, with helping a major media organisation realise the possibilities of the looming digital world. Looking back from the always-on world of today it seems an odd, self-evident transition: one that could not be ignored, and could, if embraced early and with imaginative flair, generate countless opportunities.

That was not how it felt a little over a decade ago. It was clear that the dominant emotion was shaped by fear and threat, rather than by possibility. Those with the internal megaphone saw only the negative: an unfunded proliferation of new mediums; professionally challenging ways of aggregating, slicing and dicing content; audiences who expected to be treated like equals and who talked back; and costly new equipment. They whispered and grizzled, sending their views like a virus through the organisation.

It was a tricky situation. These naysayers could well have been right. The history of technological transformations has not been especially kind – invariably costly, uncertain and disruptive.

At the time, the Powerhouse Museum had a display examining the transformation of the home in the twentieth century. Among the appliances, it featured an advertisement by the ice industry when it was trying to stall the adoption of electric refrigerators – the argument was that ice is nice, ice is safe, ice is clean, the friendly iceman comes to your home. Fridges were costly, their reliability unknown.

With this ad campaign buzzing in my head, I convened a major meeting and asked the digital media critics to list all the threats they could conceive – I urged them to be as expansive as possible, to imagine the worst. It was a task they undertook with alacrity, real skill and practised dedication, and by the end of the meeting their list read like a doomsday book.
The rest of the group, unfettered by the negative yackety-yak, considered the positive, the possibilities and opportunities that might arise. In clear air, they excelled, seeing in this technological transformation a way forward, a fascinating professional journey, the chance to undertake projects that would once have been impossible and to craft an entirely different relationship with ‘the people who were once considered audiences’.

It should be not be surprising that the positive group, rather like electric refrigerators, has prevailed. In that meeting, free of the spiral of negativity, these people were able to consider the concerns of the critics but find ingenious ways to adapt, to take steps on a path from good to great.

In public life in Australia in 2012 it often feels as though the naysayers are pushing the country into a spiral of negativity that is largely without foundation. Unfortunately it is not as easy to quarantine them, as it was at my digital media meeting – but it is significantly more important.

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, with the war in the Pacific raging, most Australians felt under threat. There was no way of knowing Japan’s intentions, or its capacity: it was conceivable that Australia could go the way of Shanghai, Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and others, and be subject to Japanese occupation. It is hard to imagine what that must have felt like – subsequent events removed the possibility and the historical record shows that the Japanese Admiralty wiped Australia off its target list after it lost the Battle of Midway, in the middle of the year – but in early 1942 that all lay in the future.

Before this turning point, Vance Palmer penned a cri de coeur in Meanjin. He worried that should Australia fall to the Japanese, there would be little to show for a century and a half of European settlement. ‘We have no monuments to speak of, no dreams in stone, no Guernicas, no sacred places,’ he wrote. ‘We could vanish and leave singularly few signs that for some generations there had lived a people who made a homeland in this Australia… If Australia had no more character than could be seen on its surface, it would be annihilated…but there is an Australia of the spirit, submerged and not very articulate…born of lean loins of the country itself, of the dreams of men who came here to form a new society…it has developed toughness of its own. Sardonic, idealist, tongue-tied perhaps…but it has something to contribute to the world in action and in ideas for the creation of egalitarian democracy that will have to be the basis of all civilised societies.’ Palmer concluded by asking what Australia was for – a hypothetical question that shaped decades of introspection about the national identity in what soon became a postcolonial world.

The rich, cosmopolitan, competitive and globally engaged Australia of today is profoundly different to the one Palmer knew. The sardonic, idealist, perhaps tongue-tied character he described is recognisable in the DNA of twenty-first-
century Australia, but it is no longer dominant – it is kept alive through memory and cultural celebration, by writers, artists, filmmakers and musicians who draw on the past to reinterpret the present, and imagine the future with works that are celebrated at home and abroad. Palmer did not anticipate how we would come to recognise and celebrate Indigenous cultures, nor the way the population would swell with millions of people drawn from scores of countries – both enriching cultural life and the sense of national identity.

Despite his political bent, Palmer could not have imagined that the egalitarianism he so valued would morph, as the country experienced unimagined wealth, into a more passive redistributive system. Instead, the big little country perched above the Southern Ocean has become, according to the International Monetary Fund, the world’s fifth richest (eleventh in terms of purchasing power), bristling with self-regard but still oddly lacking in confidence.

THERE IS A tendency to ascribe this good fortune to luck, but that is wrong. Australia has been well served by thinkers who developed and articulated new (often initially controversial) approaches, and leaders who have sought and taken opportunities. Australia has often been in the forward pack – not the leader – of many of the most productive global trends. There are plenty of countries that took the opposite trajectory over the same period: countries where patronage, corruption, passivity and detachment from the world prevailed, with devastating consequences.

The emerging Asian century provides a moment that may make it possible to extend this good fortune for decades. Just as the gold rushes of the nineteenth century created the basis of national infrastructure, cultural identity and character, the current boom provides an opportunity for renewal and reinvigoration.

Since European settlement there has been a school of thought, as Alison Broinowski graphically detailed in The Yellow Lady (Oxford, 1992), which argued that the southern continent should be a bridge to the diverse Asian countries to its north, rather than an outpost of old Europe. This was a two-way process. People from throughout the region were drawn to the new land during the nineteenth century, and progressive Australasian idealists advocated a regional identity.

This found expression in art and entertainment. Japanese entertainers travelled south even before their government lifted travel bans in 1874; within a decade, following the International Exhibitions in Sydney and Melbourne, ‘japanalia’ was essential in every fashionable home and local artists – notably Charles Conder – incorporated japoniste into their paintings as a sign of modernity and elegance. Similar patterns were repeated with art and culture from other countries in the region.
This is now digitally turbocharged – spurred by the lucrative trade in mineral resources. It is the wealth, education and cosmopolitanism of the twenty-first century, given tangible urgency by our openness and the movement of people, products and culture, that is Australia’s unique contribution. This depth and tradition of cultural expression and innovation is a mine of creativity from which solutions can be extracted, if we can find the right tone of confidence, without smugness. Australia has much to learn and much to contribute: much more than the minerals that are dug from the ground.

Similar boldness is now required – a reworking of the Australian spirit Palmer described, shaped by opportunity, not by threat. It is, as George Megalogenis has written, an Australian moment, if only we can quieten the noisy naysayers long enough to grasp it and progress more confidently on the journey from good to great.

The essays and stories in this edition of Griffith REVIEW provide the humus from which a new vision of Australia might emerge – and the accompanying ebook, What is Australia For? Some Provocations, explores a series of specific ideas. As ever, responses and debate are welcome.

12 March 2012
I WAS in Bourke, New South Wales – the outback, that most powerful of Australian words – the edge of the world, where the unknown begins. I was having a break from writing Cold Light and I had my backpack and gear with me, intending to do a trek in that hard country, maybe to look at a geological oddity called Mount Gunderbooka, about sixty kilometres south-west of the dwindling township of Bourke. The mountain name carried within it the word ‘book’.

Gunderbooka had only recently been opened to the public. Formerly it had been part of the Gunderbooka sheep and cattle station, established 1857, and closed in by some other great stations, but these had ceased to be economic and have been gazetted as national parks. No more would those private-boarding-school boys and girls from romantic sheep stations invite their city friends home in the holidays to ride horses, shear a sheep, catch yabbies in the dam, picnic on Gunderbooka. No more ‘sturdy station children pulling the bush flowers on my grave’ (if we have Lawson in we may as well have in Adam Lindsay Gordon).

Mount Gunderbooka is not huge – about five hundred metres at its highest, about the same as Gallipoli (we might as well have Gallipoli in the narrative too),
and about thirty-five kilometres in circumference. From the sky the mountain looks
like the horseshoe-shaped rim of a volcano crater but it isn’t a volcano; it’s an
upthrust formation formed 385 million years ago, if that figure can mean much to
the imagination. It was first recorded by European eyes in 1829 by Charles Sturt.

Bourke’s long drought had broken that summer so I expected there would be
surface water. The topographical map indicated myriad small streams running off
the mountain and suggested springs on the mountain itself, and I learned that
Aborigines and settlers found water there during droughts.

I have been off-trail trekking in the bush since I was a kid – backpack, tent, sleeping
bag, carrying my food, compass and map, cooking on the campfire – and in recent
years I usually go alone for a week or more. I sometimes say that I go trekking in the
wilderness to have non-verbal time – no conversation, no writing, no reading, no
media – a tertiary-educated person speaks about sixteen thousand words a day. By
wilderness I mean wild country where it is very unlikely I will see anyone or any trace
of civilisation and where there is a good chance no one has ever bothered to go before.

In the bar I have been heard to say that I go trekking to experience a raw interface
with the natural world, with myself, with the universe. And at times in my life I’ve
done it to escape from the maddening trivia of shared, intimate domesticity. I have
also been known to quote Henry David Thoreau: ‘I went to the woods because I
wished to live deliberately…’ I don’t rate Thoreau highly as a thinker but Thoreau
always asks to be included. I take it he meant that in the wilderness you are very
aware, you need to be alert, you need your wits about you. When trekking in the
bush nothing is habitual, trivial, thoughtless, unconsidered, routine, or repetitious.
Maybe he had more transcendental meanings at work. I doubt it.

I estimate that, all up, I’ve spent about three years of my life so far sleeping out
under the stars without serious accident or getting lost (‘I don’t know where I am
but I’m not lost,’ as the old bushwalker Paddy Pallin would say). Over the years I’ve
had minor injuries – I have fallen into a creek and cracked a rib or two, I have
stubbed my toe seriously and have had to drug up and limp out – but together with
minor burns, scratches, cuts, bites, that’s about it.

My bush training came from scouting – four years – followed by two years in the
army cadets, then army national service basic training and then part-time service in
the reserve army – five years. My older brothers were canoeists and bushwalkers.
They once tied me to a tree in our back garden and told me to figure my way out. I
wasn’t discovered missing until the family sat down to dinner. If it’d rained and the
ropes had tightened I would probably have lost my feet and hands. I liked to think I
was close to freeing myself when I was found. In recollection, I was forever trying to
learn things like how to hide a razor blade in my mouth the way Houdini did – he
could also undo knots with his toes. My brothers said they were training me to be a
commando. It was called toughening up, especially for boys with a tendency to
effeminacy, ‘softness’. My mother was a Commissioner of Girl Guides and my father a Commissioner of Boy Scouts.

SO, THERE IN the motel room in Bourke, sipping a bourbon, watched by the ghosts of my Commissioner parents and the critical purview of my inner tough-as-old-boots brothers, I studied the map and did online research on temperatures, winds and rainfall. I have trekked with temperatures in the mid-thirties but when I do I usually stay out of the sun between 11 am and 4 pm. As I did my planning it seemed that a five-day trek to the mountain at the end of February was no more risky than any other trek I’d taken. It was not a trek of heroic scale. Almost a walk in the park. The take-off point was a place called Dry Tank, the poetry of its historical name now rather diminished by a new marked-out car park, water tank, washbasin, toilet, and the new brown-grouted National Park signage.

As an experienced trekker I have a checklist of seventy-eight items which has been refined over the years from my experience and my changing tastes. I try to trek in some comfort. My list includes bourbon and I also like to carry olives, paté, nuts, pickles, smoked oysters, anchovies and so on for the cocktail hour. I do a good campfire canapé. All my gear is state of the art. It includes an EPIRB (emergency position-indicating radio beacon) and an ultraviolet device to sterilise water. For a five-day trek I carry about eighteen kilograms (for reference, the check-in luggage limit on most airlines is in the low twenties).

Mount Gunderbooka is six kilometres south from Dry Tank. When trekking in rugged east coast bush I estimate I walk about a kilometre an hour off-trail – but here with light forest cover and flat, sandy terrain with little or no scrub I thought it would be a slow, ‘deliberate’ two-hour walk. Maybe a little longer. I soon found that some of the ground was gravel (a technical term for loose rocks larger than sand and up to about sixty millimetres – smaller than cobblestones. It can be hard to walk on but no great problem. In other places, especially New Zealand, scree is another problem, small round, loose stones on mountain slopes).

In Australia all trekking is water-directed – you always work towards water or, ideally, follow watercourses. When you pass by a marsh or a spring or soak you always mark it down in the log (I use 3x5 cards) in case you have an emergency – break a leg, say – and have to drag yourself back in great agony to the muddy water and soak it up with a Chux, squeeze it in a cup and drink it until the helicopter arrives with the martinis (Chux are non-toxic and degradable viscose rayon fibres – I could go on about the value of Chux cloth in the bush).

I set off from Dry Tank having left my trip plan with three designated friends. I began the day with a sortie to see if there was surface water in one of the closer creeks (slightly off the direct course to Gunderbooka, but on the way) – there wasn’t, but that was no problem. I was carrying 2.5 litres of water. I spent my first night there.
NEXT DAY I headed directly to Gunderbooka, where I expected to find water, and if there wasn’t I would have a look about for a while and then return directly to the car – two hours or so. All manageable. Home before dark.

I easily reached the base of Gunderbooka and found a waterhole about the size of a kitchen sink under a tree – probably a bloodwood – with some shade, not a lot. I should warn you that I’m not so good on botanical or bird naming in the bush, although I did get my tree badge in the scouts. I have a resistance to naming which is probably also philosophical, but there isn’t space for that here: suffice to say that I go into the wilderness to be enveloped by it. It is a confrontation with Gothic nature and a surrendering to its prickly, existential embrace – I am not there to catalogue it – it is not a nature study lesson. I made camp at the waterhole. Looking around I found that the waterhole was one of a chain of ponds which were dotted up the mountain as indicated by the map – the others were about bathtub size. No problem with water. I don’t do much bathing in the bush. Sometimes it’s good to just get, well, dirty, and to have smells, not quite in the sense of down and dirty. Part of the raw interface.

I had a good campfire and a few bourbons.

Early next morning I put some essentials in my pockets – water, compass, first-aid kit – and so on and made a recce up the mountain – the gradients were gentle enough and I reached the top in about an hour (faster than the Anzacs). As I was climbing I thought I heard didgeridoo sounds coming out as I breathed – this could be a sign of good harmony with nature or it could be a sign of delirium. I didn’t feel delirious but neither did I feel any great harmony.

On the summit I poked about for around for an hour – the flat plateau was rather treeless, some mulga – and looked out across the shimmering plains which stretched to the horizon. ‘And across the distant timber you can see the flowing heat, and the shadeless plain is wide…’ The day was warming up.

I felt a despairing empathy with those early settlers who’d made it all the way from moist, verdant Britain, spent months at sea on a tossing wooden ship, then weeks in bullock-drawn carts over barely made roads leading to dusty tracks, to this place of dry, hellish countryside of marginal agricultural value, eight hundred kilometres from Sydney. There is the fickle Darling River nearby, upon which they were probably depending. Then, deciding to settle here, cutting down the trees and building bark shacks trying to get their sheep and cattle to graze on the sparse grass. Why did they do it? From what demons were they fleeing? Crazy. We should now be evacuating what remains of these places, these hundred-year experiments with marginal country.

I then made my descent. The day was really warming up.
By about midday the sun was scorching. I hunkered down to avoid the heat and to read – too hot to do any more reconnaissance. I was reading *Civilisation* by Kenneth Clark while lying there inside the tent, in the sand and gravel of a dry watercourse. Although I carry a book I rarely read on a trek – I carry it in case I get pinned down in my tent by the weather. Here the heat had me pinned down.

As I write this essay I take down the Clark book and I open it again and I see that I would’ve read Clark’s first sentence, ‘I am standing on the Pont des Arts in Paris. On one side of the Seine is the harmonious façade of the Institute of France… Just visible upstream is the Cathedral of Notre Dame… And on the bridge…many pilgrims from America, from Henry James, downwards, have paused and breathed in the aroma of a long-established culture…’ Here I was, in a gravel watercourse, breathing in the hot dust which was now affecting my throat – no aroma of a long-established culture. This is the raw interface I dashingly talk about in the bar. Nothing comfortable: nothing convenient.

As I read, I needed to be zipped up in the tent to keep off the swarms of flies and other primeval flying beasts that were hanging around. Perhaps the end of the drought had sent the insect world into frantic competitive activity – bite while the biting’s good. I saw insects I had never seen before and have not seen since and for which I have no names. They had crawled out from cracks in the prehistoric bowels of the earth, perhaps something they did once in a millennium. Who knows? Every country has an infuriating anti-human insect that is rarely mentioned in tourist brochures – it seemed here at Mount Gunderbooka they had all gathered, from every corner of the earth. While I was out of the tent having a piss, an ant – or maybe a spider, not sure what – bit my big toe (around the camp I wear sandals), a bite so powerful it numbed the toe for half an hour or so.

During the afternoon I moved my tent a few times, chasing the skimpy shade. It is a whiz-bang modular two-person tent with a netting roof which allows you to see the stars at night and which keeps the insects out. It has a second skin (the fly) which can be put on in wet weather or, in this case, to give a sort of minimal shade. Once up, it is easily moved around.

During the day some wild goats, about six, came down from the mountain to the upper waterholes. I thought, shit, they could easily drink the waterholes dry. I let them have a drink and then shooed them away. I filled all my water containers and kept an eye on them during the day, throwing a stone now and then when a goat dared to return.

In the heat of the afternoon, I saw vivid human shapes in the white limbs of the trees. It was probably brought on by the heat, or as with the didgeridoo noises it could be some sort of Aboriginal spirit show to keep me amused. I had no appetite, but in the afternoon I ate some stewed fruit and drank some black tea. I threw it up – a symptom of heat stress, but it didn’t register with me as that.
It did not cool down much as the sun set. I moved back to my original campsite and its small waterhole. I opened my food bag in my pack to get the evening meal and found it was teeming with maggots. The sausages had gone off. I buried them. I took the remaining food and gear out and washed it and scrubbed out the pack.

I nibbled some Vita-Weat biscuits and drank water flavoured with orange vitamin C powder.

Then I was attacked by two wild bees. I slapped the bees off my face, knocking them to the ground, but they shook themselves off and came at my face again. This time I really knocked them down and crushed them with my sandal. They’d managed to bite me on the cheek and the ear. The bee stings had the wallop of a slap. I saw the nest a few metres up the tree. Perhaps they were its praetorian guard. As with the ant sting, the bee stings numbed my face, this time for about an hour. No other bees attacked. The wild bees were a first for me in all my bush experience. I could smoke them out of their nest and take their honey to make, what – mead? Honey on toast?

Stands the Church clock at ten to three? And is there honey still for tea?

As night fell the mosquitoes came out and I had to get inside the tent to escape them – jungle-strength Rid didn’t deter them. The sink-sized waterhole at my campsite was now empty but I checked that water remained in the higher waterholes – what the goats had left for me. I poured myself bourbon but did not feel like drinking – the air and ground were still very hot. In my log notes I recorded that I was somewhat breathless, maybe from boxing with the bees. I decided enough was enough. I would have an early night and get up while it was dark and cool and walk back to the car, two hours away.

So, early in the morning I rose while the stars were out – made some coffee, ate some stewed fruit, filled my water bottles with sterilised water (2.5 litres) – and broke camp.

AS IT WAS cool and I was only two hours from the car I decided to do a short recce around the base of Gunderbooka. After an hour of walking my curiosity was not altogether satisfied – there was a well-noted well on the map but I did not find it.

The sun was beginning to rise so I changed my direction to begin my move towards Dry Tank and the car.

Working by compass means that you lay out the map on the ground so that the lie of the map is the same as the lie of the land (called orienting the map) – that is, so that both the top of the map and compass are pointing north. (I won’t go into magnetic north and true north and the fact that the north pole moves about – on walks such as these that is not of great matter.) You then put the compass on the map with the line of the compass case pointing to your destination and you read off the direction bearing
from the compass, the bearing, which is now the direction of the compass arrow. You follow that bearing to your destination. That’s your number.

To keep on the correct direction you take constant readings every five or ten minutes – holding the compass in front of you and following the arrow which is pointed to your number or, to be more disciplined, lining up the arrow with a landmark, which can be just a misshapen tree, for example, and then following landmarks that lie in the direction of your number, taking a reading every hundred metres or so.

Magnetic bearings can be likened to invisible velvet ropes lying across the landscape on to which you hold as your guide through the unknown. To be honest, the velvet rope image doesn’t quite capture the intangibility of it or the variability of it (iron in the surrounding rock formation can interfere with the readings, for instance), but it is a rather weird part of the structure of the world. When it works (which is nearly all the time), and after days of making your way through the wilderness you arrive back at your car, it is exhilarating.

As I walked I found a fence and followed it even though it was a little off my bearing. It was a physical guide from the civilised world. I noted its bearing so that I could adjust my bearing back to the original reading which went more directly to the car. Following a physical route like this – say, a watercourse, a fence line (if it’s show on a map) – is a double-safe method, additional to the compass, shown moving through unknown country. In this case it was an error.

The sun was up. Hotter than yesterday.

By 11 am the day was very hot. I swung away from the fence line and headed directly towards the car. I encountered other abandoned fences, mostly fallen. I came to the realisation that this land had over the past 154 years been fenced and re-fenced, some of it mapped and some not. Some of the land was given to soldiers returning from World War I as small allotments – a very cruel gift from a grateful nation. Over the years the unneeded fences from old boundaries fell over or the unneeded wires were cut. Too many fences. I realised that out here fences are useless as guides and I returned to relying on the compass alone and my original bearing. But I knew there in the sweating heat that I had drifted from that bearing – still, it was not too late to somehow return to it in a rough sort of way.

I had drunk one litre of water but had about one and a half litres left, and had begun to use water to wet my hat and a neck bandana which I had fashioned from a Chux cloth.

I was now conscious of the risk of hyperthermia – also called heatstroke – which is not simply dehydration but is a serious overheating of the body and its organs which can only be avoided by cooling as much of the body as you can, and not just by drinking water.
The heat was hitting down through the thin canopy of trees, perhaps cypress pine, and beating back up from the red clay sand. Radiant heat.

Weirdly, I remembered something from the 1910 British Active Service Pocket Book for Army Officers, which says something like: ‘there is far less thirst when men march along with their mouths closed… This is one of the great objections to singing on a march.’

I was not singing.

I was shocked to realise that I had been walking nearly five hours – not good. I had been walking far too long. I should be at the car by now, even given the time taken by my earlier recce and the somewhat lazy deviation of following an old fence line.

I tried to recalculate the route. The heat was becoming agonising. I assumed, regardless of my compass work, that I had drifted off my bearing in a slightly dazed way. I had wandered. Very bad bushcraft.

I had an option. I could rest until the cool of the late afternoon – if it were, in fact, to cool down – I could set up something of a shade cover with my tent fly, very inadequate shade from overhead sun, and then resume walking when it was cool, but by that time I would certainly have used up all my water. What if I found that by nightfall I was truly lost and had to wait through a hot, torturing, waterless night and then seek help by triggering my EPIRB the next morning, maybe waiting ten, twelve hours for rescue (no point in calling for help in the night)? Not a good plan. Dangerous.

In outdoor emergencies there are Rules of Three (approximate rules, with room for variation). With hyperthermia and hypothermia, the situation becomes critical three hours after the onset of serious symptoms – such as my legs giving way and confusion; with continued exposure to extreme heat the kidneys, heart and so on begin to suffer damage and ‘brains will fry’, coma will set in (three hours also for some snake bites – if it is a serious bite the symptoms will begin to show). To sterilise water you should boil it for three minutes. The other Rules of Three are that it is a serious emergency if you have gone without water for three days, without food for three weeks. Without sex for three years.

As I began to stumble and felt like just sliding down where I was – giving up – a voice said, ‘Australians don’t quit,’ very much like the voice in the Lawson poem. ‘Take the air in through your nostrils, set your lips and see it through…’

AS I WRITE this I am embarrassed – I have absorbed this don’t-quit attitude from my family, especially my brothers, and from the masculine country town culture of toughness in which I grew up, and all the leadership training I went through in scouting and the army. Why should I be embarrassed? ‘Toughness’, or toughing it out, is a functional mantra which can get you through daunting situations by
driving the mind and body to extra effort. As in the army, so in bushcraft – there are
drills that are learned. A drill is a set way of behaviour for a range of situations, for
emergencies, so that you react quickly in an effective way without having to figure
out too much or consult a field manual, so that you don’t have to reinvent the wheel.
But nor is a drill performed without some oversight by the mind.

And then there is masculinity. I have had a lifelong quarrel with the negative
parts of my masculinity, maybe with all crude masculinity. My personality, as I
discovered it, at a deep level, was strongly inclined to androgyny, to the femme side
of androgyny. I no longer go trekking to perform the primitive ‘ordeal rituals’ of
masculinity, to prove myself as a man. My personality is under the command of a
more placid androgyny these days. (As a friend once said to me, masculinity is not
the only strength – androgyny has its own strengths. This is too big a subject for
this essay.)

So I did not just slide down into a slump. I pushed on, sometimes stumbling, and
with increasing physical weakness. I came across yet another bloody fence line.

I tried to take a bearing on the fence line but I found that my mind had trouble
deciding whether I was seeing it as east–west or north–south – this is such an
elementary compass reading, and as I stood there looking at the fence and looking
back at my compass I realised that I could no longer read the compass. I was drifting
into confusion. Yet in the midst of this rising mist of confusion another part of my
mind still registered this confusion and set off a blinking red light in my head. It was
a very serious warning sign. As I analyse this from my notes written (with more and
more illegibility) at the time I can see that there is a limited, firewalled part of the
mind which continues to function in emergency mode – at least for a short time –
while the rest of the body begins to close down, and which issues warnings and
triggers the survival drills.

The sun now felt as if it was beating me down.

And there was, in me, also a driving, self-punishing part of the mind that was
also still active – which was perhaps a component of the confused mind. This self-
punishing mind was a form of wackiness. It asked mockingly whether perhaps I
was exaggerating the situation, was it really that bad? Was it really that hot? Muscle
up. In accounts of explorers and others who’ve become lost or suffer hyperthermia
or hypothermia there are descriptions of this urge to stagger on. Usually it also
involves dumping gear, another error. Even trained soldiers have to be watched or
they will begin to throw away their equipment. Trekking once in Canada in the
Algonquin forest I came across a remarkable example of this. On the trail, I first
came across some books in Japanese, and a few hundred metres further on I came
across clothing, then further on a sleeping bag, then further on tinned food, and so
on, and eventually the backpack itself. The trekker had just begun dumping gear;
the stressed body was unable to bear the weight.
My mental command centre clearly registered that I could no longer decide which way to go and that I was staring at the compass without comprehension and said: stop. The punishing mind called it giving up. I struggled out of my pack and slid down under a tree with its meagre shade. *I'm done.* I wet the bandana. I poured water over my head. Although I know about hyperthermia – I have done my homework on this over the years, along with other first-aid training – I got out the first-aid book to check again if there was anything further I could do. My mind drifted in and out of lucidity. Obviously, I couldn’t cool down my body by, say, plunging into water – actually, that would not be the right thing to do, according to accepted first-aid practice. If water is available the body should be cooled gradually before immersion by washing the body with cool water, sprinkling water on the body. There was no such water: there was nothing left for me to do except to trigger the EPIRB.

I tried to stand up without my pack and my legs gave way – enzymes were being released by my stressed body, weakening my muscles – you see this happening sometimes with marathon runners. My emergency mind was repeating a message with increasing urgency: *I am in serious trouble.*

I took out the beacon and crawled to some open ground and for the first time in my life triggered it – it needs open ground to send an unimpeded signal. The emergency mind was still functioning about things like this.

Even though I knew I was out of network coverage for my mobile phone, I tried calling 000 on my mobile – again, for the first time in my life. I knew that sometimes even if the phone indicates that there is no network coverage the networks are set up to try to relay 000 calls. I got through. I had trouble telling the emergency service much information because the link kept dropping out.

I crawled back to my pack and decided to add some salt to a mug of water. This was borderline rationality – my emergency mind was still operating enough to be aware that this too was a tricky manoeuvre – while loss of salt was part of my problem, too much salt creates other problems. In recent manuals, lightly salted or sugared drinks are recommended. I added what would be considered a safe amount to my mug of water but it wouldn’t do me much good at this point.

Meanwhile, the beacon signal was beaming my location to a satellite and then bouncing it down to Canberra and the Emergency Rescue Agency, which then contacted the three people who have my trek plan – the agency in turn relayed this information to the nearest rescue authority, in this case the Broken Hill police.

I was now unable to walk, my legs were beginning to cramp, and the heat was insufferable. I carry a good medical kit but there is no drug which would have helped me deal with the heat.
MY LOG NOTES from this time show that my emergency brain was still running a constant scan of my physiology. I noted that I felt ‘death impending’ – I actually wrote these words down. It was a feeling similar to that felt during a vicious flu – it was as if the emergency mind was saying this is what happens next, beginning a preview. It didn’t say prepare yourself to die – what is there to prepare? There were no further actions to prepare for survival or for death that I could take. I was stymied. In a philosophical sense I am not particularly worried about dying and after a certain age one’s death doesn’t matter all that much to others. But nor do I shrug it off with any of the folk sayings: ‘when your time is up, your time is up’, ‘we all have to die sometime and there is nothing we can do about it’, ‘death doesn’t have a calendar’. During most of my adult life – maybe in fact, from childhood – I have had an on-again-off-again relationship with life at the best of times and I sometimes idly fantasise that I would be happy to die out in the bush – say, from that snake bite – but, without question, my body was now telling me that I did not want to die this way; I did not want to die from the agony of the heat; this would not be a peaceful death. Coma would be the only relief. My overriding impulse was not to live but to relieve myself from the heat agony. I carry no way of committing suicide on my treks. Perhaps I should.

A childish joke drifted into my consciousness: why can’t you starve in the desert? Because of the sand which is there.

I still had about half a litre of water.

After an hour or so of semi-wakefulness I heard a police siren and the sound of vehicles, and adrenaline pulled me back to low alertness. I heard a car moving slowly along a road. It stopped. I realised I was, in fact, not far from the road.

I began blowing my emergency whistle – another of the seventy-eight items I carry, and another which I have never used in my life – as best I could: an example of drilled behaviour. I noticed there was foam around my mouth.

In fifteen minutes or so two young police officers – one male and one female, following the fence line, the one about which I had been confused – burst out of the trees and reached me. The female constable was leading, using her baton to break down the many spider webs which are found in this country. (I haven’t mentioned the thousands of spider webs spun among the trees – no big deal.)

Then a National Park quad found its way in behind them and my gear and I were loaded on to it, and we found our way to the road, which was about fifty metres from where I collapsed. I had nearly made it back to my car. A new ambulance was waiting with the police and National Parks people who were there to join the search. In the ambulance the paramedics took my vital signs and tried to take my personal information – I was unable to remember my address. I had almost lost my voice.
Bourke Hospital is also new and I spent a week there in the acute care ward – what I call the acute embarrassment ward. I was embarrassed about having failed my trained bush self and having involved so many people in the rescue. I heard rebukes from my childhood – could I have tried harder, the fear of causing trouble, of being in trouble with authorities. Some sad, infantile court of behavioural judgement. I found I was tempted to exaggerate my condition to justify being rescued, to justify being cared for; however, as I listened to hospital staff chatter, I realised that for the emergency workers – the police, the ambulance, the National Parks people – this was an adrenaline rush, this was what they train for, and this was for them a great success. They had rescued a person and saved a life.

Lying in the hospital bed I saw red tartan wallpaper when I closed my eyes, I had slight delirium, and I was beset by imaginary swarms of flies. I slept deeply and long.

I learned that the temperature went to 38° on the Thursday when I was reading Civilisation and threw up. I was certainly already showing symptoms of hyperthermia. On the Friday, as I tried to walk out, the temperature went to 42.7° (according to a nurse, but certainly over 41). Sadly, I observe that as I write this I am still tempted to fudge the figures, push them up to excuse my collapse, to justify the calling of emergency services. On the Saturday when I was safely in hospital the temperature fell back to 24°. It had been a freak peak in the temperature.

I FLEW BACK to Sydney and found that I was not well and could not leave the house or tolerate the sun. I stayed with a friend for a month, for most of the time unwilling to go outside. Blood tests were done weekly and continued to show that no organ damage had occurred, but my GP diagnosed some post-traumatic stress. It was suggested that I keep a diary of my daily condition, noting changes on a scale of one to ten (one being in bed, unable to move), noting improvement or otherwise in concentration – reading, television, degree of reluctance to go out in the sun, appetite, headaches, sleeping pattern, tolerance of company, mood. For a week or so I was able to eat only fruit, yogurt, rice, chicken, eggs.

The diary began to show that I was recovering and after a month my normal physical sense of myself returned and my life resumed.

Three months later, in winter, with my young artist friend Alli Woolf as my back-up, I went out again to Dry Tank and redid the trek with further exploration of Gunderbooka. The insects were not angry; the weather was benign. It went like a textbook exercise in Australian bush trekking.

I am not finished with Mount Gunderbooka and I intend to go there again.

Frank Moorhouse’s most recent book is Cold Light (Random House, 2011), which completes the Edith Campbell Berry trilogy.
Kartiya are like Toyotas
White workers on Australia’s cultural frontier
Kim Mahood

‘Kartiya are like Toyotas. When they break down we get another one.’
– remark by a Western Desert woman about whitefellas
who work in Indigenous communities

UNLIKE the broken Toyotas, which are abandoned where they fall, cannibalised, overturned, gutted and torched, the broken kartiya go away – albeit often feeling they have been cannibalised, overturned, gutted and torched. They leave behind them dying gardens and unfinished projects, misunderstandings and misplaced good intentions. The best leave foundations on which their replacements can build provisional shelters while they scout the terrain, while the worst leave funds unaccounted for, relationships in ruins and communities in chaos.

There are many reasons why kartiya break down. Some break themselves, bringing with them baggage lugged from other lives, investing in the people they’ve come to help qualities that are projections of their own anxieties and ideals. Eager and needy, they are prime material for white slavery, rushing to meet demands that increase in direct proportion to their willingness to respond to them. They create a legacy of expectation and dependency, coupled with one of failure and disappointment.

A more common cause of breakdown is the impossibility of carrying out the work you are expected to do. Two factors in particular are not included in any job description. The first is that if the work involves interaction with Aboriginal people, which is usually the case, this interaction will be so constant and demanding that there will be no time left to carry out the required tasks. The second is that by default the kartiya’s function is to be blamed for everything that goes wrong. Blaming the kartiya is the lubricant that smooths the volatile frictions of community life. For someone of robust temperament and sound self-esteem this is irritating but
manageable. If you have an overheated sense of responsibility or a tendency towards self-blame it’s an opportunity to experience the high point of personal failure.

SINCE THE REVELATIONS about child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities scorched the national consciousness a few years ago, conditions in remote communities and towns have been back in the public eye. The flaws and failures of self-determination have been exposed, and it has become possible to speak aloud truths that until recently would have seen the speaker branded a racist, and his or her voice neutralised. That some of the most articulate and influential voices are Aboriginal has made it possible for the private conversations many people have been having for years to enter the public domain.

There is, however, one story that doesn’t get much mileage: remote Indigenous Australia has a significant white population that is disproportionately influential while being unequipped, unprepared or unsuitable for the work it does. There are the good people, who are overworked and undervalued; and there are the sociopaths, the borderline criminals, the self-righteous bullies and the mentally unhinged, who gravitate to the positions no one else wants, entrench themselves and contribute in no small degree to the malaise that haunts Indigenous communities.

It is mandatory for anyone wishing to work in Antarctica to undergo a physical and psychological assessment to establish whether they will stand up to the stresses of isolation, the extreme environment and the intense proximity to other people. All the same factors exist in remote Aboriginal communities, along with confronting cross-cultural conditions. Yet there don’t appear to be any recognised training programs for people who aspire to work in a community, or screening criteria to weed out the mad, bad and incompetent who prowl the grey zone of Indigenous service delivery. The remote community is a kind of parallel universe, where career paths, if they exist at all, travel laterally or downwards. The famous quip about mercenaries, missionaries and misfits has a lot of truth in it, and each type covers a spectrum, from highly functional through incompetent to downright destructive. Under pressure, both strengths and weaknesses become exaggerated, and what, in normal circumstances would be merely a character trait (stubborn, orderly, conscientious, volatile, flexible, timid) can become the quality that makes or breaks you.

This desert culture, where the power of family and country encompasses and transcends all other preoccupations, is where the crossed purposes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations are at their most extreme. It’s probably the zone of greatest discomfort in Australia, a place where the white noise of the kartiya world and the Babel of Aboriginal voices create a static through which we blunder, grinning and waving like mad people, signalling that we mean each other no harm, though harm frequently occurs.
The contradiction at the heart of the story is that for the quality of desert Aboriginal lives to improve in the terms demanded by humanitarian standards – in health, education, housing and the like – the people themselves must become more like us, and to become more like us requires them to relinquish the identity from which their resilience and sense of self is drawn. Without their Aboriginal identity they are reduced to society’s dross: the poorest, the least employable, the shortest lived, the least literate, the substance abusers and losers and wife bashers. And one of the most powerful ways in which they keep hold of that identity is by defining it against white people.

Among the older people, holding onto traditional culture is the force in which they believe, but the young are like the young in every culture. They don’t listen to us, the old people complain, while the young people move in flocks, plugged into iPods and clutching mobile phones, trying whatever drug is available, dreaming of becoming rock stars and film stars and sports stars, using sex as an antidote to boredom. The cultural structures are still there, in skin names, family relationships, identification with country. But they are loosening all the time, as the fine tough threads of high knowledge are wearing out, leaving behind a shadow knowledge that carries the fear of punishment without the protocols and understanding with which to manage it.

Against all this uncertainty, this great loose mutating cosmology, the kartiya are conspicuous and ubiquitous, busy, bossy, cranky, frequently behaving badly. They are running the schools and the offices, the clinics, the stores, the art centres, the police stations. They are the service providers and project co-ordinators. They control the money and make the rules. They live in fenced compounds with their pay cheques and cars and the choice to stay or go. They exacerbate, simply by being there, the antithesis of themselves.

There is, for the time being, no alternative. Kinship pressures make it almost impossible for an Aboriginal person to sustain a management position, and the few who take on such a role are subject to constant demands, and abuse if they refuse to comply. The mobility of people means that skills training is intermittent and commitment to work is provisional. Take the kartiya out of the picture and the Big Men, the powerbrokers, will fill the gap. This is not unique to desert Aboriginal society. It has happened in every place where a colonial power has abdicated without leaving a self-sustaining system in place.

FOR THE NEWLY arrived kartiya, bright-eyed and full of enthusiasm, the initial welcome is gratifying. She is thrilled to be taken in hand by one or more Aboriginal people who are friendly and knowledgeable, and is moved almost to tears when she is awarded a skin name.
‘You Nampitjin, sister for us,’ the new kartiya is informed. She feels privileged to be invited into an ancient and arcane sisterhood, and listens eagerly to the complex explanation of how she is now related to everyone.

‘Sister for me and Gracie and Sabina, mother for those young girls. This old lady your mother, and same for that one over there. This little boy here, he’s your jaja, grandson.’

Everyone is delighted, and there is much laughter and good feeling.

It takes a little time for New Kartiya to notice that while her sisters and mothers and daughters and aunts are very much in evidence, there are many others who stay away. She doesn’t understand that she is colonised territory. Invisible to her, power struggles of ancient lineage and epic proportions are being played out. This is our kartiya – hands off.

She becomes aware of mutterings and silences, and makes an attempt to find out what they mean, but the workload has escalated to such an extent that there is no time to pay attention. The previous kartiya has not acquitted several important grants, the deadlines for which are now long overdue. Ongoing funding for the organisation is dependent on the satisfactory acquittal of these grants, but much of the necessary information doesn’t seem to exist. The filing system is idiosyncratic, consisting of cardboard boxes with obscure acronyms scrawled on them in felt tip. The felt tips themselves, along with all biros, pencils and other writing implements, have disappeared. Attempts to contact the previous kartiya are met with silence: emails bounce back, mobile numbers no longer function.

New Kartiya curses Previous Kartiya as incompetent, lazy and irresponsible. According to her Aboriginal directors and helpers, Previous K also failed to pay them money they are owed. No records of these financial transactions exist.

‘She took that money with her,’ they announce. ‘That was our money. She stole it from us.’

New K is horrified that someone would take advantage of people who live in such dire poverty. She adds ‘criminal’ and ‘sociopath’ to the list of adjectives pertaining to Previous K.

In the first days of wanting to appear willing, available and caring, New K has allowed people to use the office phone for essential calls.

‘Nampitjin, I need to ring up to find out about my uncle’s funeral.’

‘Nampitjin, I got no money from Centrelink this week, I got to ring up and find out what happened.’

‘Nampitjin, I got to go to court next week, can you ring up and charter a plane for me.’
This last request raises a flicker of alarm – surely it’s outside the jurisdiction of her job.

Her refusal is taken philosophically. *It was worth a try – you never know with kartiya what they are prepared to do.*

In her search for the missing information New K discovers caches of energy bars and Minties stashed in drawers and cupboards and filing cabinets. Further evidence of the peculiar, pathological nature of Previous K, who it turns out was also called Nampitjin.

News of the phone access has spread. People are queuing to use it for increasingly long conversations, some of which appear to be social rather than urgent. Important calls, for which New K has been waiting in order to deal with the acquittals, fail to get through because the line is constantly engaged. People waiting to use the phone enlist New K’s help to decipher letters they have received from government agencies, relating to welfare payments, court cases, child custody.

‘Don’t you have someone whose job it is to deal with this stuff?’ she asks.

‘They always too busy,’ she is informed. ‘That kartiya in the office, he always growling, won’t do nothing to help us.’

During the two-hour lunch break New K locks the office and replies to all the calls she has missed. Since she has also missed lunch she eats several of Previous K’s energy bars.

With the job comes a troop carrier, a powerful LandCruiser designed to carry a dozen people and negotiate the rough desert roads. She has never driven such a vehicle, and the first time she manoeuvres it successfully through the sandy creek crossings and deep gutters of the back road she is filled with an immense sense of achievement. Encouraged by a constant refrain of ‘Keep going, keep going’ from her passengers, she overcomes her reluctance to tackle some of the nastier patches of track, and is rewarded with their approval.

‘You good driver, Nampitjin. Now you can take us hunting.’

Part of the job brief is ‘to facilitate cultural activities’, which according to her Indigenous cultural advisors (so far consisting entirely of members of the Sambo clan, whose name skids across her consciousness like a dark blip, impossible to register) means taking them hunting, all day, every day. At first this is a thrilling novelty – this is what she is here for, to experience the desert and its people, to learn to identify bush tucker and recognise animal tracks, to have pointed out to her the evidence of ancestral travellers who left their traces in the hills and creeks and waterholes. It is here, away from the tensions of the community, that things begin to make some kind of sense: patterns begin to emerge of kinship, stories and country.
As a prelude to going hunting there is a ritual that involves an hour or two of driving around, waiting, embarking and disembarking of passengers, loading and unloading of gear, shouting, waiting, retracing tracks, shopping, waiting, arguments, sulking, more embarking and disembarking, until New K is in a state of exhausted frustration. She’s learned, however, that to drive off before everyone is ready is not worth the days of growling and recriminations that follow.

The office work mounts up. By working late and inventing figures she’s managed to acquit the grants, but there is a backlog of projects, cataloguing, sorting and filing, and the new grants have to be written and submitted. She discovers that the funding process functions within a self-cancelling system in which each grant is dependent on funding being guaranteed by its state or federal counterpart. So far she has been unable to find the centre of the logjam, the submission that will start the process rolling. She rings the umbrella organisations that have been set up to facilitate the process, and encounters instead several new layers of bureaucracy that must be negotiated. Helpful voices refer her backwards and forwards between agencies called FATSIC and KRAPP and WACKO. The voices all sound alike, and she begins to imagine a single office buried deep in some labyrinthine Gulag, monitored by a shabby creature of indeterminate gender shackled to a bank of telephones each labelled with the appropriate acronym.

On the days when she manages to avoid taking people hunting she starts work an hour early in order to get some essential chores done before the mob arrives, taking a circuitous route so that no one guesses she is on her way to her workplace. She walks, leaving the troop carrier locked in the compound where she lives, to avoid being flagged down and used as a taxi service. Experience has taught her that once she picks up passengers she can spend the entire morning ferrying them between the shop, the clinic, the school, the art centre and the various camps. She has learned not to turn on lights or fans, as this alerts people that there is someone in the building. It’s too early to respond to the messages on the answering machine, which will have to wait until the lunch break. The supply of energy bars is running low. She will need to order some more.

She has begun to develop friendships among the other kartiya in the community. Vinnie, who runs the art centre, is eccentric but warm and sympathetic. Her assistant, Simon, is a little intimidating, with an ironic sense of humour, but is also amiable and friendly. But it is to Ben, who works on men’s health, that New K is especially drawn. She tells him about her difficulties with the phone, and he suggests a solution. ‘Unplug it at the wall, and tell them it’s broken. Most of the community phones are broken anyway, so they won’t check.’

She takes his advice, and although it means she can’t use the phone herself during working hours, it makes a dramatic difference to the number of visitors to her office.
Ben has worked intermittently in the community for several years, and is well-liked by the locals for his good nature and relaxed attitude to time, work, vehicles and money – all the things that most kartiya are stitched-up and anxious about. That Ben’s life resembles the lives of his Indigenous friends escapes New K’s notice. What she does notice is his helpfulness, his craggy good looks, his charm and humour. She doesn’t yet know that he has been implicated in liaisons with most of the eligible kartiya women in the community.

On Ben’s advice she has declared a two-week moratorium on hunting expeditions, while she catches up on the paperwork.

‘You have to set some boundaries,’ he tells her. This is rich, coming from Ben, but New K doesn’t know that. There are a lot of things she doesn’t know about Ben.

ON DAY FIVE of the hunting ban, Nelly Sambo Nampitjin and her sisters descend on the office. ‘You never take us hunting any more, Nampitjin.’ They cluster around her, managing to appear downtrodden and intimidating at the same time. ‘Those old ladies, they might die soon. Never get back to their country before they pass away.’

The old ladies in question look convincingly frail, sitting on the veranda like a pair of ancient stick insects. A passing camp dog lifts a leg, mistaking them for some kind of spindly vegetation, and is walloped ferociously with a walking stick by the less blind of the two. They are sisters born in the bush, their old minds reaching back to a time before kartiya, before missionaries and soup-soup and stock camps, before schools and clinics and art centres, when the world was a seamless fabric woven by the Law.

New K explains to the Sambo sisters that if she doesn’t get the grants in there will be no money to run the office or keep the troop carrier going, which will mean no more hunting, no more film projects and recording of stories. Everything will fall down. Her job is really hard because Previous K left a big mess and she is trying to fix it up.

The mention of money and Previous K reminds everyone of the money they have been done out of, and Nelly suggests that New K might be able to make reparation. She agrees to do her best to sort something out, once she can find some record of the payments. She also agrees to take everyone hunting on the weekend instead of spending the two precious solitary days catching up with her displaced self.

Despite starting an hour early and working through the lunch break she does not seem able to make any inroads on the workload. The one person she had tracked down who had been helpful with the grant submissions has resigned, or been promoted, or committed suicide. She has noted that Vinnie and Simon are often still
at work in the art centre at ten o’clock at night. Ben has warned her that Vinnie and Simon set a benchmark of superhuman standards, which makes her feel more inadequate, since she is unable to produce even moderate results. How Ben manages to do his job and remain relaxed and sanguine is a mystery to her.

New K begins to stay late at the office, munching her way through the remaining Minties and energy bars, having ordered a new supply with the weekly bush order Vinnie gets on the mail plane. By the time she gets home she’s too exhausted to cook anything, so she has a tin of smoked mussels and a double gin and tonic, and falls asleep in front of the television. Her skin has broken out in sore red pimples, and she has become alarmingly thin. Small cuts fester and go septic, and when she visits the clinic she is informed that she has a staph infection and put on a course of antibiotics. The nurse advises her to use an antiseptic soap, wash her hands frequently, eat properly and take better care of herself.

Vinnie, who is aware that things aren’t going well with New K, tells her it’s time she took some time out, that the only way any of them manage to function effectively is to take regular breaks away from the community to rest and recuperate.

‘I can’t go away,’ New K wails. ‘I’m so far behind with the grants – I haven’t even started the planning for the next round of projects. I don’t know how anyone gets anything done.’

‘You have to eat properly, and take regular breaks, and make time for yourself,’ Vinnie tells her, although New K can’t for the life of her see when Vinnie makes any time for herself.

‘I go walking,’ Vinnie says. ‘Nobody’s interested in walking unless they’re hunting.’ She doesn’t mention that she takes her walks at five o’clock in the morning.

‘Make time for yourself,’ Simon says. ‘Set boundaries. Remember you’re only human. Don’t work too much overtime.’

‘But you and Vinnie do,’ New K points out.

‘Vinnie and I are not good role models,’ Simon says. ‘I only do it because of Vinnie. We’re setting up a structure that no one will be able to maintain. It’s ridiculous.’

‘Relax,’ Ben says. ‘Drop over to my place and have a joint. We can watch a movie – I’ve got Foxtel.’

She takes up Ben’s suggestion. They get stoned and have sex. For a couple of weeks New K is happy. Ben is charming and funny and good-looking and a thoughtful lover. The workload seems manageable and the Sambo sisters make jokes that New K now has a nyupa. She wonders how they know, as she and Ben
have been very discreet. In week three she meets the new nurse from the clinic leaving Ben’s house at seven in the morning, and learns that Ben has no idea that she takes their sexual activity as anything more than mutual entertainment. He is baffled and discomfited by her furious tears.

She feels assaulted by the landscape. Everything scratches, prickles, burns, abrades. It is all so appallingly physical. She feels the need to protect herself from it, and by implication from the people. When the Sambo sisters make jokes about her love life she shouts at them and locks the office.

Because Ben is part of Simon and Vinnie’s circle, New K no longer socialises with them. Anyway, she doesn’t need to, because she has a new friend. Susie Nakamarra comes into the office one afternoon when New K is struggling to draft a management plan for the next year’s projects, and makes suggestions that are insightful and helpful. She fills New K in on some of the local politics, both black and white, and invites herself for a cup of tea at New K’s house.

The friendship blossoms. Susie regales New K with stories of her adventures growing up in and out of the community. The stories are violent and hilarious, and open up a world both exotic and dangerous. New K fails to notice that most of them centre on the stupidity and bad behaviour of other people, and how Susie’s wit and intelligence proves superior. In return, New K confides her disappointment with Ben, and Susie tells her things about Ben, that are shocking and possibly untrue.

The first time Susie asks to borrow the troop carrier New K says she’s not really allowed to loan it, but she doesn’t refuse outright. It’s obvious that Susie is a responsible person, and it seems ridiculous that kartiya rules should apply to her. She is, after all, half white, fathered by an itinerant stockman back in the cattle station days, and has been to boarding school and trained in a variety of skills.

Susie doesn’t press the request, and accepts the gin and tonic New K offers with guilty relief. It’s supposed to be a dry community, but as long as people drink quietly inside their own homes they are left alone. The two women get sentimental and maudlin, and tell each other the secrets they only tell their best friends. Susie’s are dark and terrible, and New K is shocked at the horrors her friend has undergone. Her own troubles pale in comparison.

On the second occasion that Susie requests the use of the troopie New K agrees. Nothing bad happens. The vehicle is returned on time, undamaged, although it is almost empty of fuel and the interior contains an astonishing amount of rubbish.

‘It’s the kids,’ Susie says by way of explanation. ‘I told them to clean it up but they forgot.’

The third time Susie borrows the vehicle two days pass, during which time New K becomes frantic. On the third day she receives a visit from the local police, who tell her that the troop carrier has been impounded in the town of Garnet, three
hundred kilometres away; its driver (not Susie, who seems to have dropped from sight) has been charged with drunk driving, driving without a licence, supplying minors with alcohol and assaulting a policeman; and New K will be required to give a statement about how the vehicle came to be in his possession.

For the next month, during which time Susie remains invisible, New K is embroiled in a mess of legal paperwork and bureaucratic reprimands, although the expected dismissal from the job doesn’t arrive. She is unaware that she was the only applicant for the position, and that the previous kartiya is suing the organisation for psychological damage incurred while at work.

One morning New K encounters Susie outside the community store, and timidly suggests that Susie owes her an explanation. In retaliation Susie calls New K a racist bitch and hits her with the bottle of tomato sauce she has just bought. The nurse who patches New K up at the clinic says that Susie is bad news, and that this is the third time she has assaulted a white woman she has befriended. At this point all parties agree it is in New K’s best interests that her appointment be terminated, and she flies out on the weekly mail plane.

The Sambo sisters and their extended family are disappointed to see her go.

‘That Nampitjin said she was going to get our money back for us.’

‘Yuwayi, she said that, but she never gave it to us.’

‘Must be she kept it for himself.’

‘That Nampitjin did a bad thing, keeping our money.’

The program is shut down for several months while the position is advertised and a replacement found. There is only one applicant, who is seduced by the prospect of working on the cutting edge of Indigenous culture, in a remote location imbued with the spiritual glamour of the desert. On her arrival she is delighted to be awarded the skin name of Nampitjin, and a little baffled at the filing cabinets filled with Minties and energy bars…

SOMETIMES THE PROTAGONIST has better instincts than New K when faced with Susie or her equivalent – a natural skill at recognising which boundaries must be held and which can be more elastic. He or she may have a sense of humour that thrives on the absurdities and contradictions of daily life, and a sneaking admiration for the consistency with which Aboriginal people insist on being Aboriginal. Such a person has a chance of finding some sort of equilibrium, establishing sustaining relationships and focusing on small, achievable goals. What he or she doesn’t anticipate is that the insurmountable difficulties will be generated by other white people.
In a small, isolated community in an extreme environment, perspectives tilt, passions flare, petty irritations assume the proportions of murderous hatreds. The Aboriginal inhabitants, who observe whitefella behaviour with close attention, witness feuds and coups, fisticuffs and power struggles, and a constant turnover of personnel.

A certain percentage of kartiya who work in communities don’t like Aboriginal people. Some of these people are paid very large sums of money to do things that can’t be achieved. As it’s apparent sooner or later that the projected outcomes are not achievable, it’s necessary to conceal this for as long as possible. It’s not the unachievable outcomes that are the issue – after all, there’s a long and glorious tradition of non-achievement in the field – it’s the pretence that all is well, the ticking-off of irrelevant performance indicators, the recycling of minor successes as major outcomes, the snowstorm of paperwork couched in incomprehensible language.

Into this situation comes the enthusiastic assistant, handicapped by a sharp intelligence and a tendency towards independent thought.

For the incumbent manager, who has often established some functioning structures under difficult circumstances, the suggestions and implied criticisms are irritating. It is even more irritating if the assistant shows a natural affinity with Aboriginal people, and within a few weeks forms better relationships than the manager has done in a couple of years. A standoff quickly results. The assistant is stonewalled, overridden, ignored, obstructed and undermined. In retaliation the assistant begins to alert his Aboriginal friends that things are not going as they should. This is a bad move. Regardless of the justice of his position he can’t expect support from the Aboriginal people. To them it’s whitefella business, best left to the kartiya to sort out, although it provides plenty of gossip and entertainment. The Aboriginal friends begin to fall away, foreseeing a power struggle in which they don’t want to be implicated. After all, the manager has implemented a structure of payments and privileges, and better the devil you know…

Neither the manager nor the assistant has an intimate friend to whom they can offload their anxieties and frustrations. The manager is reclusive by temperament – it’s not Aboriginal people in particular he dislikes but people in general. The assistant is outgoing and makes friends easily, but the skewed environment and the persistent yet unacknowledged persecution has thrown him off balance. His damaged confidence becomes assertive and unreliable. Forced onto the defensive, he becomes obsessed with his situation, and is exhausting company to the people who sympathise with him. No one has the energy to listen to the repetitious, circular, self-defeating diatribes. They’ve seen it all before, and know how it will end.

The manager is a wily bird. He hasn’t reached this level on the food chain by accident. He has an instinct for the power of injustice, its capacity to send crazy those who believe that justice is an entitlement. Unimpeded by empathy or compassion,
he knows he can sit this one out while the assistant works himself into an untenable position and quits.

THE MANIPULATION OF injustice as a means of maintaining power is not only employed by the unscrupulous, who know what they are doing, but by the self-righteous, who believe that they are acting for the greater good. Among the kartiya who end up on Aboriginal communities the self-righteous flourish, feeding their sense of superiority on the conviction that they alone understand the needs of Aboriginal people, that among the opportunism and incompetence of the resident whites they alone are driven by motives free of self-interest. A particular sort of blinkered stupidity often accompanies self-righteousness, and in the smaller communities it can be toxic in the extreme.

The couple who came to be known as Super Kartiya and his Super Nyupa belonged in this category. He was a self-righteous bully and she was a self-righteous protector of the helpless Aborigines. For two years they managed a community in which I work on a regular basis, and they made it plain from the outset that part of their agenda was to drive out as many of the other kartiya as it was in their power to do.

‘I will protect these people as if they were my own children,’ the Super Nyupa announced, glaring down at me from her considerable height, the inference being that it was from the likes of me that they needed protection. I was in the community at the invitation of the traditional owners, my funding came from an independent source and most of what I did involved the traditional lands beyond the community boundaries. So long as I kept out of the new management’s way the worst I had to endure was hostile glares, limited access to the office (and my only access to a telephone) and the ambient tension that prevails in such circumstances.

Not so fortunate was my friend the architect-builder, who had been coming to the community for years, during which time he had developed a team of local builders and embarked on a project to build a community centre. He spent several months each year overseeing and completing stages of the project, applying for and getting ongoing funding, building long-standing relationships based on mutual trust and respect. It was a model of sustainable processes and achievable goals, and it was intolerable to the Super duo, who set about sabotaging it with the commitment of their high moral fervour. The money for the project had to be administered through the corporation, which allowed them to obstruct his access to the funds, refuse to sanction already-agreed projects and send him slowly mad with helpless frustration. The lacklustre response of the local mob, among whom he tried to enlist support, left him nowhere to go but away, feeling done over and betrayed.

We both belonged to a group who had longstanding connections to the place, and had formed a network of people with a range of professional skills that could be brought into play to assist the local people with their aspirations. Through a process of
consultation we had identified those aspirations, and were discussing what might be achievable in the short term when we were halted by the hostile new management. Against their determined authoritarianism our carefully moderated consultative processes didn’t stand a chance. And the reality was that the community could continue to function without the long-term strategies and plans we had identified, but it couldn’t operate without a bookkeeper (her role) and a works manager (his role). We were routed, and several years of work came to a standstill.

Having driven out the architect-builder and kneecapped the support network, they set their sights on the shopkeepers and the co-ordinator of the Indigenous Protected Area. The shopkeepers were easy picking, since the shop was also under the jurisdiction of the community corporation. A campaign of micromanagement saw the incumbent store managers pack their bags and go, and over the next couple of years the numerous replacements were systematically bullied as soon as they showed signs of wanting to run things their own way.

The assault on the Indigenous Protected Area required more complex strategies, as it was embedded in the aspirations of the Indigenous founders of the community, and was the only organisation that offered long-term possibilities of meaningful employment, tourism development, land management and cultural rehabilitation. The weak point, which the Super duo were quick to exploit, was that it represented the affiliations between people and country, and was therefore subject to the jealousy and suspicion that simmers around matters to do with country. Among the local people were those who felt their own power base threatened by the Indigenous Protected Area, and were readily manipulated into the plan to push it out. The story of how this was achieved is too complicated to tell here, but suffice it to say that the damage was considerable and the repercussions are ongoing.

At some point during their reign, which overlapped for a year with that of an unstable school headmistress who also belonged to the self-righteous category, I caught myself out in an interior rant about the destructive self-interested jealousies of the Aboriginal mob I was working with. It went something like this:

Why can’t they see how damaging it is to spend all their energy being suspicious and resentful of one another?

Why can’t they put their personal and family vendettas aside and work together towards an outcome that would benefit everyone?

Why doesn’t Jakamarra understand that his morose, manipulative sulking is the obstacle that stops him from achieving what he wants to do?

Why does Nungarrayi waste her considerable intelligence thinking up new ways to persecute and undermine the sister of whom she’s insanely jealous?

In the midst of all this a small voice said: hang on there, wait a minute – let’s do a stocktake of the kartiya politics right now. A headcount arrived at a resident white population of twelve. The configuration of hostilities among them was as follows:
Super Kartiya and the storekeeper recently threatened each other publicly during a community meeting.

The storekeeper’s wife just assaulted the Super Nyupa, who is laying charges.

The Super Nyupa and the headmistress only communicate by fax.

Super Kartiya threatened to spear the builder who replaced the architect-builder.

The nurse, who is married to the builder, is not speaking to the Super duo.

Super Kartiya has appropriated the IPA water trailer and refuses to give it back.

The headmistress has banned the IPA co-ordinator from the school, on the grounds that his relationship with one of the teachers, aged thirty, is immoral.

The teacher in question is being subjected to merciless bullying by the headmistress.

Three of the four remaining teachers have aligned themselves with the headmistress to protect themselves, and are therefore not speaking to anyone in the IPA.

Because of my support for the IPA co-ordinator and his teacher girlfriend I have recently been subjected to a drive-by-shouting from the headmistress, who specialises in this method of attack.

The Super duo have installed a screen door on the office building, and control the only key, so the rest of us can only gain access to our own offices when it suits them.

IT ISN’T ALWAYS like this. There have been times when the white population has consisted of mature, sensible, capable people who co-operate with and support each other, and the difference in the mood and function of the community is dramatic. And occasionally, when the planets are perfectly aligned and whatever unpredictable entity that rules the universe is in a benevolent mood, a group of exceptional people gathers, works together with skill and generosity, and achieves remarkable outcomes. Several times now I have had the good fortune to be part of such a team, and it’s the one thing, apart from the resilience and humour of the Aboriginal people, that allows me some optimism for the future.

The high-handed behaviour and interventions of Super Kartiya and Super Nyupa finally provoked the local mob out of their passivity. It’s a mistake kartiya often make, assuming that because Aboriginal people seem disengaged and uninterested, they are incapable of acting decisively in their own interests. Action, when it occurs, can be sudden and cataclysmic, and so it was in the routing of the Super duo, beheaded in a coup that drove them out of the community in a matter of days.
That they were able to reign unchecked for a couple of years shows how poorly the systems and structures imposed by government on remote communities function, and how easily they are abused. No matter how good the strategies and programs developed at the policy level, the delivery on the ground is where it counts, and where it consistently fails.

There are some exceptional people working in remote Indigenous communities. If this wasn’t the case things would be much worse than they are. But too often they work in isolation, expected to meet criteria that have no bearing on the reality of the work they do, in circumstances of which their superiors have no grasp. For the petty powerbrokers this is very satisfactory, allowing them to build their personal fiefdoms and fulfil their potential as unmitigated arseholes. For the committed, hard-working, responsible individual it is demoralising and heart-breaking.

Why is it like this? Is it because Aboriginal Australia is still felt to be a retrograde country not fit for white people, a wounded, contaminated place to be avoided for fear of being contaminated oneself? Does it still occupy the dark corners of the collective white imagination?

In his introduction to the magnificent book on the Papunya art movement, Papunya: A Place Made After the Story (MUP, 2005), Geoffrey Bardon describes his arrival in Papunya in 1971: ‘I introduced myself to a group of drunken, foul-mouthed and violent men who, as I was to learn, were the settlement’s administrators.’

During the 1960s and early ’70s, when my family lived in the Tanami, we would bypass the settlement of Yuendumu as if avoiding a dirty secret, a festering rubbish tip into which the worst white trash had been thrown. I have no doubt that there were some good people working there even then, but the reputation of the place was self-fulfilling. Although things have improved since those days, the legacy lingers, not only in the lack of status associated with working in a remote community, but in the lack of interest among qualified and competent people to take on the jobs.

For some years I taught drawing at a tertiary art college. Among the exercises I set was one that consisted of drawing a self-portrait, then with a few subtle modifications pushing the drawing across race and gender, so that the students ended up with a portrait that still resembled them, but was the opposite gender and of a different race. The next stage of the exercise was to make a body of art by this alter ego, which required the student to research the cultural and social influences that underscored the life and influenced the art.

My students chose to be Inuit and African and Japanese and Chinese and Indian and Native American. They did not choose to be Aboriginal. Curious, I questioned my classes on this omission. The answers I got added up to: we don’t feel that we are allowed to go there; it’s too dangerous; it’s appropriation; it’s too hard.
It seems that the young, who might be expected to carry fewer prejudices than previous generations, feel warned off, forbidden to enter the complex territory of the country’s first people. How this has come about is beyond the scope of this essay, but it’s another example of the unintended consequences of good intentions.

Contaminated ground, too hard, no career path, a bureaucratic nightmare, a cultural minefield; a recalcitrant and ungrateful Indigenous population who want what whitefellas have but don’t want to do what whitefellas do, who define their Aboriginality against the whitefella presence in their midst. In an environment that calls for the best and brightest too often it’s the sociopaths, the self-righteous, the bleeding hearts and the morally ambiguous that apply for and get the jobs, and provide the example of white society against which the local people formulate their resistance.

During the era when Australia was responsible for the administration of New Guinea, the Kiaps who worked as patrol officers were trained at the Australian School of Pacific Administration. They studied law, anthropology, language, administration, health, research methodology, reporting and people management. Anyone who works for an aid agency undergoes a thorough induction in the cultural and social environment they are about to enter, and is alerted to the challenges they can expect to encounter. I’ve heard it said on a number of occasions by people who have worked in extreme environments overseas – Afghanistan, East Timor and the like – that none of it compares to the difficulties they encounter in Indigenous Australia. And yet successive Australian governments don’t see the necessity to train and prepare the people who work on our own cultural frontier.

This may be motivated in part by the assumption that Aboriginal people should be trained to fulfil these roles. Empowering Aboriginal people to run their own communities is one of those rhetorical platitudes that has been bandied around since the emergence of self-determination as a political ideology, and in theory it is the obvious goal towards which all energy should be directed. In practice it often results in the most competent and functional people being set up for failure.

The mentoring and support necessary to help them through the process of taking responsibility is rarely available, and when available is never sustained for long enough. In all likelihood the mentor will be one of those overworked and undervalued kartiya with their own manifold problems, and the competent Aboriginal person will already be in constant demand by every agency operating within the community, will be juggling complicated family politics and subjected to hostility and jealousy for aspiring to be like the kartiya. Being fast-tracked to their level of incompetence achieves two negative results, neutralising their effectiveness in the roles they were already fulfilling, and setting them up to fail in the jobs to which they have been promoted.
RETURNING TO THE community shortly after the demise of the Super duo, I find it becalmed. It has gone into voluntary administration and is waiting for the arrival of a temporary administrator. The shop is being managed by interim emergency storekeepers, and the most competent Aboriginal woman in the place is juggling roles as office manager, Indigenous Protected Area co-ordinator and, in the absence of white people to blame, the all-purpose community villain. It is apparent that the most useful thing I can do in the circumstances is to take over the position of temporary IPA co-ordinator, as the work I usually do is contingent on that position being filled. This frees up my friend to do some of the things she is better equipped to do, and promotes me to my own level of incompetence.

A dramatic change for the better has taken place in the school. It has a new headmaster, who is keen to enlist whoever in the community has something of value to offer the kids, and a mature and experienced staff has replaced the batch of cowed first-year teachers. The regional council has initiated a program to mentor young adults, and has put in place a skilled German woman with a natural sensitivity in dealing with cultural and social complexities. The new resident nurse is a warm-hearted, intelligent man. In spite of the difficulties at the administrative level the resident population of kartiya are decent, emotionally mature people whose first concern is to do as good a job as possible. With luck the present situation will move beyond damage mitigation to some positive achievements. But it’s a fragile balance. A single individual could tilt it back into the dysfunction and unpleasantness of recent times.

Meanwhile the local people carry on with their own preoccupations, assessing how best to utilise and exploit the current situation, taking the measure of this new batch of kartiya who for brief or extended periods will control the resources of their world. Kartiya are unpredictable and unreliable. Even the best of them make promises they don’t keep. It is necessary to extract the maximum value from them while you can, because tomorrow or next week or next year they will be gone, and there will be a whole lot of new ones to break in.

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AUSTRALIA, any city, Saturday night: red unsteady men in pastel shirts and designer sneakers have groping sweaty fists and angry eyes; bored tall thin men in black jeans, pointed leather shoes and structured mullets stand in copes holding conspicuously cheap beer. Lone middle-aged men in tight shirts with tattooed biceps stretch jewelled fingers and survey the crowd. Eighteen-year-old men travel in excited, sexed-up packs.

Crowds breathe in and out, and the air is flammable with alcohol and fucking and angry, tense excitement as people reel and jolt through the night. Around three in the morning they begin to fall into taxis. The drivers are patient and change the radio if requested. They are the feeder fish in this alcoholic mire. They decipher garbled addresses and shrug off drunken slurs. They take the long route if they can.

In between a Commonwealth Bank ATM and a Night Owl convenience store sits a tattoo parlour with floor-to-ceiling glass frontage. It’s open late, and people wait on pleather benches for their turn, listening to the dentist drill ring of the tattoo gun. Across from the shop is a brick rotunda where an old Indigenous couple sit, ask for money, drink and watch the world stagger by.

On a corner outside a car park a solemn white man in a hotdog hat stands in front of his cart fielding insults from passers-by. There are kebab shops and hot food stands and an all-night café that serves a four-dollar breakfast. Here is the shop with huge pizza slices where once I got into a fight with four men over an imagined slight and had to be ushered outside by the friend whose honour I was defending. We stepped onto the footpath where an unconscious man lay with a bloody gash on his forehead, gaping mouth askew. He hadn’t been there when we’d gone into the pizza shop five minutes earlier. ‘Someone hit him for no reason,’ the girl who was sitting with him said. ‘They just hit him and walked off.’

‘You’re lucky that isn’t you,’ my friend said.
AUSTRALIA, ANY CITY, Saturday night: women stuffed into sausage-skin dresses squeeze bare breasts and buttocks into the air no matter the temperature. They sway on seven-centimetre heels, turning hazy searchlight eyes that don’t connect but skid instead. In bathrooms they cackle and cry and shriek if you take too long on the toilet because everyone saves their pee until they may or may not make it to the front of the queue with their smarting, overblown bladders and made-up faces melting.

Once, standing in an endless toilet line, bloated with beer, nineteen-year-old me managed to make it past the cubicle door but not to the toilet. I pissed my pants, grey woollen pants. Wiping them damp with toilet paper, I lurched out the door of the bar, down the street, towards home.

I started drinking when I was fifteen. By ‘drinking’, I mean getting drunk. I was young compared to some people and old compared to others, although generally, my peers started at that age. We had no limitations, except price. Price meant severe quality limitations, and my early drinking life was a series of sickly, sticky-sweet nights fuelled by warm Fruity Lexia, Passion Pop, peach schnapps and half bottles of Bundaberg rum.

I grew up in Brisbane, where the air is warm and smells like tamarind paste. In summer everything is overripe and drunk with fermentation, including people. When we weren’t drunk we were, being underage, scheming about how to get drunk. If you or your friend had an amenable older brother, sister or parents, or you had a working fake ID, life blossomed.

I was odd and shy and desperate to fit in at my private Catholic girls’ school, so alcohol was important to me. It was an equaliser. If you drank you were deemed okay. At least peripherally okay – within were many other social qualifiers, which were more difficult to live up to, let alone comprehend. You must be pretty, you must be outspoken, you must wear brand names, you must know boys, you must be straight. But if you didn’t measure up to some of these criteria, all it took was a functioning pharynx and oesophagus, and the opportunity.

I drank when possible, and when possible to excess, although I wasn’t notably wild. I didn’t drink at school, I didn’t drink every weekend, I didn’t even steal my parent’s liquor and make rocket fuel. I was fairly lame compared to the other girls.

Despite that, my first empty memory is from when I was fifteen, when I drank half a bottle of rum at a friend’s brother’s eighteenth birthday party. All I know is that I was hauled out from under their house by a man covered in my vomit. My friends told me the next day. I called it contraceptive vomit and tried to make them laugh.

At seventeen, hanging out at some house with my friend and five or six men who my friend had met at schoolies, I drank three-quarters of a bottle of tequila and woke up naked on a bare mattress. A fat man was lying naked on a bed in the
opposite corner. He saw that I had woken up and said, ‘You wouldn’t let me sleep next to you. You kicked me out. After.’ Then he rolled over and went back to sleep.

Twenty minutes later he sat back up. He said, ‘Do you remember last night?’

I shook my head.

He blinked. ‘You said you didn’t want to, but then you said it was okay that we… You didn’t let me sleep next to you. You know – afterwards… You kicked me out. We used a condom.’

I was at a house somewhere in the suburbs that sprawl behind the Gold Coast beaches. I couldn’t remember getting there. I couldn’t remember meeting the fat guy, or anything about the night.

He drove me back to the house where my friend still was, via the beach so he could check the surf. We drove the long way. ‘We’re on the Gold Coast Indy track,’ he told me.

WHEN I WAS twenty-one I moved to Melbourne. It was the first time I’d lived away from home. I moved in with my best friend. She was living in a crummy old mansion that had been subdivided into flats.

For the next four years I reeled from night to night, sharing cask after cask of red wine on the stained, worn-out carpet of whatever crumbling share house I was living in at the time with whomever I was living with.

It was how we punctuated our week; it was how everyone I knew punctuated their week. Tedious sentences of work, study, school, divided by glorious, gluttonous nights of foaming beer, tart wine, alcopops, cocktails in tall glasses, dancing, smoking, fucking, talking shit and laughing.

I passed out in toilets and in Chinese restaurants. I picked fights. I talked to myself in bars and woke up between dirty sheets in strange beds. I vomited. I vomited a lot: at home, at work, in a bowl, in the toilet, while falling down stairs, on the side of the road, in Brunswick, North Melbourne, South Yarra, Malvern, Parkville, Fitzroy, the CBD, Mount Waverley, St Kilda, Carlton.

But it was funny and we were fearless. One night we broke into an old cinema that was being demolished. The bare earth was shaped like an amphitheatre, yet the toilets were still functioning. I flushed one and heard a security guard yell, so I climbed into the shovel of an earthmover to hide, watching the flash of his torch. There were three of us and we made a break for the gate. It was chained, but there was a small opening to squeeze through. The guard came close, and we only just made it through. We ran to a nearby club, hid inside for a while and then, still smiling, we exited via the staff-only rear staircase onto the street. The cops were waiting for us.
Another night I stole a fluffy pink g-string from a sex shop. I made it thirty metres down the street before I was wrestled to the ground by the enormous man from behind the cash register. He said nothing, just took the g-string out of my hands and left me on the ground.

Over time I became, if possible, a worse drunk. I said incredibly cruel things to my friends, and promptly apologised the next day. ‘You know I didn’t mean it – I was drunk.’ I cultivated what I call a Violet Crumble memory – pocked with holes. I began to anticipate nights out with excited dread, resigning myself to the fact that I would drink too much and do something regrettable.

There was no subterfuge to my drunkenness. I didn’t have to know someone who knew someone who knew someone else to get pissed. We simply walked into any Dan Murphy’s warehouse or local 24-hour bottle-o. It seemed to me that everyone was intoxicated. I remember reading in the paper during that time headlines like ‘260 a week arrested for public drunkenness’ and ‘Public drunkenness, while ugly, should not be a crime’.

ONE WEEKDAY MORNING in November 2009, before I had left for work, someone knocked on my front door. It was my aunt Helen. I was surprised to see her, seeing as she lived in South Australia.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘What a nice surprise. It’s good to see you.’

‘Not good,’ she said, and started to cry. ‘You have to go home.’

At this time I was the eldest of three children. I had two younger brothers who, like siblings in fairy tales, were tall and handsome and funny and brave. One still is. The other one went out one night and never came back. When Helen knocked on my door that morning, he’d been missing for a day and a night.

Helen bought me a ticket at the Qantas counter and we drank coffee in the lounge. We made polite conversation. On the plane we did the crossword. It took us the whole trip.

I was told that at around 2 am the night Alexander disappeared, the police had found his thongs and his wallet in a pile on the Story Bridge, a cantilevered bridge spanning the Brisbane River, connecting Fortitude Valley and Kangaroo Point.

When we arrived at my parents’ house there were people everywhere. My brother’s friends sat around the pool, not speaking. Elsewhere people were fussing, crying, falsely cheery, shaking their heads. Everyone kept trying to touch us, hug us.

My brother Patrick and I printed out missing person posters. We gave some to his friends to stick up. We went out in the car and stuck them up anywhere we thought he might have gone.

No one called, except a young guy who thought he’d seen him the night before, swaying along the walkway down the side of the bridge. He thought it was one of
his friends and had slowed down. The person he saw was pretty drunk, the young guy said.

In the afternoon we sat on the back veranda. Talk turned to the type of birds each of us liked. One of my aunties tried to name a bird, but couldn’t remember it, so described it instead. My dad took What Bird Is That? down from the bookshelf and searched through each page until he found one that fitted the description. ‘I think that’s it,’ the aunty said.

The cops found Alexander the next morning. A family friend who was out jogging saw one of the posters we’d stuck up, and called. He was looking at a police boat in the river. They were pulling something in, he said. It was a body.

They turned up at our house an hour or so later and confirmed that it was him. Alexander had been arrested for a minor offence a year earlier, so his fingerprints were on file. The police had checked the fingerprints of the body against the ones they had on record.

Patrick made a noise I’ve never heard another human being make. It sounded like a kettle boiling. Someone told me later that he was keening.

At its highest point, the clearance below the Story Bridge is 30.4 metres, almost a hundred feet. There’s a YouTube clip of someone jumping off it. This person only breaks his legs in the process. To survive a jump of that height you have to hold your body a certain way. You have to think about which limb enters first, and how to arrange your body so that the bones don’t snap and crumple from the impact.

Once you’re falling from above a certain height, I’ve learned, water is like concrete. The molecules may part and leap deceivingly, but your flesh hits a solid surface. Only then does the water that broke you go soft. It licks your fingers and plays with your hair. It buckles your scarecrow limbs in the wash. It sucks at your feet and torso with its long lips. If you are still somehow breathing, it fills your mouth, runs into your lungs and switches you off.

The young man who’d called the day before phoned again to see if we’d found my brother. My mum told him what happened.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t stop,’ he said.

‘How were you supposed to know?’ she answered.

The people at the mortuary said it would be better if we didn’t see his body. He had been in the river too long. When we went to the funeral home to view the coffin, my dad lifted one end to make sure he was in there.

A couple of days after Alexander’s death we found an exercise book in his room. He had filled in a couple of pages, and I still remember two things that he wrote. The first was that he wanted to be a stand-up comedian. He’d never told any of us that before; he was studying to be an engineer. The second was that drinking made him feel down, but that he did it anyway.
The coroner’s report, when we finally received it, stated Alexander’s blood alcohol level was very high when he died. I don’t know if he would have died if he hadn’t been drunk. Maybe he just didn’t want to be here anymore. But nothing about his behaviour suggested he was depressed. He had finished his final exams that day; it was only two weeks after his twenty-first birthday, and he was planning a trip to America. There was no letter, no note, no goodbye. Later, his best friend told us that a group of guys, including my brother, had been jumping off bridges for kicks for a while. Still, he’d never done it by himself. Whether he jumped because the alcohol made him feel gloomy, or because it made him feel indomitable – it no longer matters. All I can figure is that he wouldn’t have died that night if he hadn’t had so much to drink.

DRINKING IS INHERENT to Australian culture. In the late 1800s Marcus Clarke wrote of the new population of Australia, ‘They are not a nation of snobs like the English or of extravagant boasters like the Americans or of reckless profligates like the French, they are simply a nation of drunkards.’

In 1955 the soon-to-be-Prime Minister Bob Hawke famously drank a yard glass – two and a half pints – of beer in eleven seconds, thus entering the Guinness Book of Records as the fastest beer drinker on the globe. ‘This feat was to endear me to some of my fellow Australians more than anything else I ever achieved,’ he once said.

Being drunk, and drinking, is fun. It’s glorious to be without care or fear. Alcohol is an important and ubiquitous element in almost every human culture. It facilitates ease at social events, it complements meals, it’s used to denote special occasions, it’s a way to relax, it’s a treat, it’s something to share. But the way Australians drink to excess, the way we let young people drink – the question is no longer ‘Why do we do that?’ but ‘How do we allow it?’

A few weeks ago now a new billboard appeared near my house. It’s an ad for a well-known Australian beer. A line of attractive partygoers is pictured. A boy in the foreground holds up a beer; a beautiful girl clutches his other arm. The block writing is cartoonish. The tagline reads, ‘Destiny is calling but beer is on the other line’, and in the bottom right-hand corner are two words: ‘Hello BEER’. Like that – italicised ‘Hello’ and regular ‘BEER’ – so when you say it out loud the o in ‘Hello’ is low and long.

I assume comprehensive research went into its intended audience, its placement, its copy. It uses the term ‘destiny’, a word that means, among other things, ‘the inner purpose of a life that can be discovered and realised’. In twelve words it sums up the Australian experience of alcohol: that we forsake a lot for the sake of a feeling.

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The lost option
An Australian monarchy
Jim Davidson

MONARCHY in Australia is an idea whose time is past. For some time now the question has been how to convincingly Australianise the British monarchy. Conservatives argue that a monarch is essential to our system of government. Despite overseas precedents – and the shining role model of Quentin Bryce here – a Governor-General reconfigured as president won’t do, apparently. Yet conservatives rarely propose a king just of Australia.

Until the present sovereign, royal tours were special not least because of their rarity. Queen Elizabeth II has been here sixteen times, more than twice the number of previous royal visits, none of them by reigning monarchs. Even so, they were usually timed to mark milestones in the nation’s development, the royal visitors being the instrument connecting them to the wider imperial project. In 1901 the new king, Edward VII, questioned the need for his son to embark on a year-long royal tour. A future British Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, explained the necessity:

A great commonwealth is to be brought into existence… Its citizens know little and care little for British ministers and British party politics. But they know, and care for, the Empire of which they are members and for the Sovereign who rules it. Surely it is in the highest interests of the State that he should visually, at the opening of the first Federal parliament in Melbourne, associate his family with the final act which brings this new community into being, so that in the eyes of all who see it the chief actor in the ceremony, its central figure, should be the King’s heir, and that in the history of this great event the Monarchy of Britain and the Commonwealth of Australia should be inseparably united.

This lucid statement came a generation before the public declarations of the Imperial Conference of 1926 and the Statute of Westminster, five years later. It was not simply a matter of royal puppets being manipulated by politicians: the royal family had their own perspective. Their understanding, as they considered the Empire, with its panoply of self-governing colonies, crown colonies, protectorates and a whole subordinate empire in India, was partly dynastic. Occasionally a more
substantial royal presence was projected by governor-generalships in the dominions. Australia had one royal Governor-General; Canada could be said to have had three, if you include the husband of Princess Louise, who went with him. South Africa had two; New Zealand none.

THIS MIGHT HAVE gone further: there was the precedent of Brazil. In 1807, when Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula, the Portuguese royal family fled – breathtakingly removing the court to Rio de Janeiro, a mere colonial capital. From there the king reigned, and soon promulgated Brazil as a realm equal to Portugal and the Algarve. When the Napoleonic Wars ended, the court eventually returned to Lisbon. But King João VI left his son, Pedro, to act as viceroy. Wars of independence raging in Spanish America, and a continuing crisis in Portugal, worked for a confused situation in Brazil. Suddenly, in 1822, the prince declared the country fully independent from Portugal, with himself as Emperor Dom Pedro I.

Pedro reigned until 1831, when he was succeeded by his son, the infant Dom Pedro II, who grew to be a modest man with the temperament of a scholar. He attended the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876 disguised as a Portuguese nobleman – staying at a grand hotel, he signed the register as Pedro, and when asked to add his occupation, put down ‘emperor’.

The monarchy in Brazil lasted from 1822 until a military coup in 1889: its memory has endured as a kind of Golden Age. In 1993, when Brazil was casting around for a more effective form of governance after a long period of dictatorship, there was a referendum to test whether people wanted the monarchy restored. It failed dismally, being seen as no solution to Brazil’s problems.

The Braganza devolution was unplanned, but came to work well. It seems to have had no direct effect on thinking about the British Empire, although there were a number of parallel expressions of the need for some kind of British royal devolution. One of the most interesting occurred in 1867, as Queen Victoria’s second son, Prince Alfred, was due to visit Australia. His earlier highly successful tour of the Cape was well-known here, so before he arrived a pamphlet appeared entitled _A Proposal for the Confederation of the Australian Colonies with Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, As King of Australia_. Written anonymously by ‘A Colonist’, it is less eccentric than might be thought. Even the argument that a court would improve patronage for the arts and sciences, and benefit the carriage trade generally, was not as silly as it sounds: within a few years of the Braganzas’ installation in Rio, its population increased by one-sixth.

The pamphlet grapples with the central issues of the day. There was apprehension – which would become acute as Britain began withdrawing its troops from a New Zealand still fighting a Maori war – that the mother country intended to push the colonies towards independence. A statement in the Commons, that if
Canada wanted separation it only had to ask for it, appears in the pamphlet with the comment: ‘sooner or later our severance from Imperial rule is inevitable.’ It was the common assumption of the day. ‘A Colonist’ feared this might occur before the Australian colonies attained unity. The idea of separate colonial nationalities was abhorrent, since serious difficulties could advance to the point where ‘they can only be solved by the sword’. The pamphlet was written two years after the American Civil War, which explains why half the document is a diatribe against the very idea of a republic. Given the need for some form of federation, the seeming inevitability of separation from Britain and the raw, negative example of the United States, the proposal to make Prince Alfred King of Australia became an elegant solution. An editorial in The Advertiser welcoming Prince Alfred to Adelaide endorsed the idea, but had little influence – the attempted assassination of the prince in Sydney smothered it in conventional loyalism.

A similar idea emerged in Canada, centred on Prince Arthur, who had served with the military there. But the most curious case arose in South Africa in 1924, when the Earl of Athlone was appointed Governor-General. He was Queen Mary’s brother, and although brought up in England had been a German princeling. In preparation for his duties in South Africa he learned Afrikaans, then on the verge of being recognised as equal official language with English. Not long after the earl’s arrival the Afrikaner Nationalists came to power. Athlone attended the unveiling of a statue of Paul Kruger, the Boer War leader, and spoke in Afrikaans. Steering South Africa through a bitter flag controversy, he became increasingly popular. There was even talk in Nationalist circles that perhaps he could become king of South Africa. This was a clever idea: his wife was a royal princess, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, so the double royal connection might help to wean English-speaking South Africans from their excessive attachment to Britain. And, while the ultimate goal of the Nationalists remained a republic, the severance inherent in the idea would ultimately advance that ambition. But it was a political romance, and the proposal never achieved concrete form.

AUSTRALIAN LABOR, BEFORE the trauma of 1975, was determined, in Gough Whitlam’s words, to ‘reinforce the Australian identity of the monarchy’. As Prime Minister, Whitlam gave new prominence to the title Queen of Australia, by which Elizabeth II is officially designated alone in this country; everything else is covered by the honorific ‘Head of the Commonwealth’, without reference to Britain. He also increased the frequency of royal visits, which became shorter and more focused.

Australia’s only royal Governor-General, Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, was appointed by Labor. This was partly by accident: a conservative government had planned to install his brother the Duke of Kent, but these plans were cut short by World War II. The duke was killed in an air crash, and so after the war Prime Minister Curtin substituted his brother. When Prince Henry’s term expired, Prime
Minister Chifley tried to secure Lord Mountbatten as his successor. Mountbatten, a member of the royal family who had recently taken India and Pakistan to independence, was not interested. So the names of three royals in succession were associated with the governor-generalship.

The Duke of Gloucester's postwar incumbency merits a closer look. Historians have claimed that the appointment was made to strengthen links with Britain, perhaps to counter-balance American influence. It pleased conservatives – Gloucester was the king's brother – and aimed at creating a consensus when the government was consolidating and extending Commonwealth powers. Gloucester's appointment seemed to give this program the highest seal of approval. The prince threw himself into the task, travelling more widely than any previous Governor-General; his two young children helped engender popularity. All this coalesced to produce something like a home-grown monarchy, as stamps issued in 1945 clearly show. Although stamps today are little more than suburban stickers, at the time they were official, engraved along with the banknotes, and issued sparingly. They were minor acts of policy. There the couple are, medallions side by side as if royal rulers, summoning Empire in their military uniforms. It was the only time a Governor-General appeared on a stamp anywhere.

In 1954 Queen Elizabeth II finally undertook the royal tour that had been mooted before the war, the first reigning sovereign to visit Australia. The country was delirious. Opposition to the tour was negligible; even the communists were quiet. The former cultural nationalist Rex Ingamells fawningly referred to 'our colourful and partially rogish history [convicts]' and how our devotion to freedom 'qualified' us for royal attention. There were republicans, but their position was largely grounded in the wrongs of Erin rather than a vision for Australia.9

If there was a vision, it was of an inclusive, decentered Commonwealth. The Secretary of State for the Commonwealth, Patrick Gordon Walker, predicted that the Queen would spend more time in the dominions. 'I think we shall find that she not only visits the other countries, but resides in them for considerable parts of the year – playing in them the same role that she plays in the United Kingdom.'

It was an idea popularised by Nevil Shute, whose novel In the Wet appeared in 1953: Coronation year. Shute, an aeronautical engineer, became one of the most popular novelists of the day. He was an Englishman who settled in Australia but remained distinctly British. The novel suggests Shute had abandoned Britain because it was socialist in government, yet slow and conservative by instinct; Australia, on the other hand, was new and raw and agreeably right-wing. In an afterword he explained that In the Wet was a cautionary tale. He was trying to picture the relations between various parts of the Commonwealth in thirty years' time, and the strains that might imperil the sovereign as the link holding it together. His purpose was serious, and in his view fiction the best means of expounding it.
In Shute’s vision Patrick Gordon Walker’s prophecy has become fact. By the 1980s the Queen spends two months in Canada and two in Australia, with slices of time elsewhere beyond Britain. But the existence of the Queen’s Flight, a Commonwealth air force squadron run independently of the British government, causes tension with the British socialist cabinet. Meanwhile there is a proposal (emanating from Australia) for multiple voting, with up to seven votes being awarded to one person on the basis of different concurrent qualifications. In the novel the defeat of the referendum precipitates a crisis, compounded by a threat to the peripatetic monarchy. Shy of the strain, none of the Queen’s children wants to succeed to the throne; her death would be followed by a string of abdications that could bring the monarchy to an end. So at the very time when the idea of rewarding merit comes to reformulate the franchise in England, it is also announced that the Governor-General of Canada (an Englishman) is to take office as Governor-General of Britain. This would free up the Queen to act as Head of the Commonwealth; surprisingly, nobody seems to have thought of it before.

WHILE THE QUEEN’S tours increased in frequency, Prince Charles was being primed to take a greater part in Australian life. The decision to place him at Timbertop school for seven months in 1966 was greeted with general approval. The idea had been well thought out. While the prince would attend one of the most elite schools in Australia, Geelong Grammar, he would participate in the school’s bush campus program, becoming familiar with Australian ways and also the natural environment.

By the time of the Fraser government there was a strong push to appoint Charles Governor-General. But the action of Sir John Kerr on 11 November 1975 made this impossible: Kerr had drawn attention to the reserve powers of the office. As Gareth Evans put it at the time: ‘If the literal language of the Constitution were to be believed, the Governor-General had all the status and power of an Ottoman sultan.’ What would happen should there be a fresh crisis, requiring the adjudication of the Governor-General and thus direct royal intervention? Even if this prospect was unlikely, in the post-Dismissal context a royal appointment to the office did look very much like turning the clock back.¹¹

In fact the monarchy had had no greater champion than Edward Gough Whitlam. ‘My government was not republican,’ he declared in retrospect, saying that it was only the ‘manipulation of the monarchy’ in the events surrounding his dismissal that led him to support a republic. We may believe him. The elaboration of an Australian monarchy has the authentic, too-clever-by-half characteristic of Whitlamism. He was concerned to establish Australia as an entirely separate realm, and proceeded to Australianise the honours system and the national anthem. He probably genuinely felt that that was as far as things should be taken.
The conservatising nature of Whitlam’s legalism should not be overlooked: he saw himself working within the tradition of HV Evatt, author of *The King and His Dominion Governors*. Balanced by a local person as her representative, the new emphasis on the title Queen of Australia could be taken as an invitation to bring the monarch closer to her people. Thus, a paradox: the greatest concentration of royal visits to Australia occurred during the Whitlam period. In 1973 Prince Philip came twice on his own, and again with the Queen to open the Opera House. That year Whitlam referred to Australia as a ‘kingdom’, but then he was given to exuberant legalisms. When the Shah of Iran visited, Whitlam addressed him at a banquet as ‘sire’. Perhaps he thought he was a racehorse; certainly his race was nearly run.

Whitlam’s attempt to Australianise the British monarchy was unrealistic. No country imagines itself more republican or democratic in manners; probably only the French consciously value egalitarianism more. Occasional royal swoops could achieve only so much, as Australia stumbled – and stumbles yet – towards its separate destiny. It has been said that no one damaged the monarchist cause in Australia so much as Sir John Kerr: his action reduced the Queen to a royal cipher, not even able to deal with any petition submitted to her. One of the two major political parties now instinctively adopted a position of hostility to the monarchy.\(^\text{12}\)

While populist moves in England might bring monarch and people closer, here they come across as passing gestures from a visiting celebrity. The elevated position of the monarch has, in consequence, taken a greater tumble. In 1954, when the Queen made her first royal tour, a ball was being held in Melbourne by Dame Mabel Brookes. It was asked of Government House whether the Queen might be able to attend. No, she would not; Her Majesty did not attend balls given by commoners. Fast forward to 1977, when Prince Charles appeared on the ABC TV music program *Countdown*. The prince spoke of the Queen’s Jubilee Appeal, cutting the air with half-square hand movements and that chill in the royal voice; viewers could see the scarcely concealed scepticism of Molly Meldrum, with his yeahs and ums. At any moment, it seemed, he might burst the bubble with some wildly inappropriate remark.

Royal tours have lost much of their efficacy, and royal Governors-General are now politically impossible: John Howard recognised that in 2007.\(^\text{13}\) A Braganza-style solution is beginning to look more and more like it would have been a good idea, for royalists. But events moved too quickly for this to be considered. Until the past twenty years or so, the British would have regarded such an idea as impertinent. The concept of the indivisibility of the crown lingered for a long time, even after its formal ending in a series of enactments across the Commonwealth in the 1950s.

Australians, too, were loath to weaken the link. Before World War II, Australia proudly boasted that it was ‘98 per cent British’. Even as late as 1965, the money
raised here for the Churchill Memorial Trust compared quite favourably with the amount raised in England. When Charles came to Timbertop, in 1966, there was satisfaction all round – just the right degree of royal acknowledgement of new realities. But then things moved quickly: in came a reforming Labor government, the country became multicultural on the ground and in official policy, and the moment passed.

Alan Atkinson, at the conclusion of his book *The Muddle-Headed Republic* (Oxford University Press, 1993), outlined the four options Australia faced in the mid-1990s: continuation of the status quo, a republic, Shute-style recurrent residency or a Braganza-style monarchy. The former New South Wales Premier Nick Greiner said, ‘If there were an Australian monarchy, I’d be as happy as Larry.’ Even Donald Horne was prepared to acknowledge such a solution, although he thought it bizarre. But the candidate Atkinson mentions – Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester – is even less well-known today than he was then.

Apart from anything else – and the obstacles are many – the Braganza option has never been a contender in Australia for want of a suitable royal candidate.14

I SHALL PASS over the Keating period, and the 1999 referendum on the republic. The focus of this essay is the monarchy, and the attempts to revitalise the monarchical idea by making it more Australian. The idea of kingship has always had a primitive appeal: the elevated aspects of nobility, grandeur and continuity are yoked to an archetypal version of the family. It is humanity writ large. The trappings of power, if not the substance, means the Windsors have admirers in the United States and even contemporary Russia. You don’t have to live in a monarchy to be a monarchist.

Australia seems to have gone one better. It has been claimed that of the two hundred imaginary ‘countries’ in the world, twenty are in Australia. First was the Hutt River Province, a wheat farm in Western Australia that ‘seceded’ in 1970. ‘You should remember,’ says its ruler, Prince Leonard (Casley), ‘it’s the second-largest country in this continent.’ But Prince Leonard was careful, even when designing stamps and banknotes, not to challenge the sovereignty of the Queen. None of his imitators has, although some have cheerfully declared war on Australia – which, since they were ignored, they claim to have won. Most are nutters who had a quarrel with local authorities. An exception might be made for the Gay Kingdom based on an (uninhabited) archipelago in the Coral Sea, founded by a group of gay businessmen protesting Australia’s refusal to recognise same-sex marriage. Why Australia has engendered so many of these pretenders is a mystery. Perhaps it’s the persistence of thinking of the place as having been an empty continent, and the pioneering mentality. But the rash of do-it-yourself principalities does indicate an etiolation or decadence of the monarchical ideal in Australia.15
Eclipse, rather than etiolation, was certainly evident in the rapturous response to Mary Donaldson’s fairytale marriage to Frederik, Crown Prince of Denmark, and to the visit to Australia which followed. One women’s magazine published a sixteen-page supplement called Royal Tour 2005. It was suggested that Mary could be a role model for Australian girls, as if crown princes were a dime a dozen and just waiting to be carried off by ardent Aussie valkyries. Mary was commended for ‘eagerly ditching palace protocol’. The tour took the royal couple to a reception at Parliament House, Canberra, while ticket sales for Mary’s charity functions in Sydney approached two million dollars. On television her ratings beat those of the Oscars.

Unfortunately for the Windsors, Prince Charles was touring Australia at the same time. The Age journalist Michael Shmith (whose mother married into the British royal family) found the comparison dismal. Going to Melbourne’s Federation Square for each visitor, he likened the welcome the couple received to a carnival. Charles’s felt like a garden fete. A week earlier, Shmith had already concluded:

If there could be a precise moment Australia’s move to a republic seemed assured rather than tentative, then let it be last Tuesday evening at 8.10 at the Government House Ballroom, Perth... [At] this curious caravanserai of Prince, security men, aides-de-camp, women in purple frocks that once fitted, men with florid faces in thick-weave suits that were once fashionable... I began to realise how poignant all this was... There was all the opulence and aristocracy, but also the same unmistakable sense of fading empire conveyed in The Leopard’s Sicilian setting: a world poised between its aristocratic past and independent future.

The popularity of Mary and Frederik owed much to giving royalty a fresh face – a touch of glamour, compared with the dysfunctional Windsors. And as another journalist, Christopher Scanlon, pointed out, Mary’s marriage ‘played well to a culture fascinated by the idea of the nobody plucked from obscurity and elevated, Australian Idol-style, to celebrity overnight.’ An Australian bride ‘gave implicit validation to the rest of us’. Bob Brown set up a poll on the Greens’ website, asking people whom they would prefer, should Australia not yet be a republic when the Queen dies: Camilla and Charles, the Japanese crown prince and princess, or Mary and Frederik? Within a few hours Mary and Frederik shot ahead, with more than two-thirds of the vote. The acclamation seems to have been prompted by a desire for an Australian head of state, or a royal of our own. In England The Guardian made the playful suggestion that perhaps Australia could join a Danish Commonwealth, along with Greenland. But Australia’s taking the Danish royal couple to its heart did have a downside. A family portrait, by James Brennan, won the Bald Archy portrait prize a few years later. All hands are busy in this repulsive group portrait, with the prince, in Brennan’s words, adjusting his ‘wedding tackle’ as Mary attends to her ‘popped-out boobs’. The artist aimed to ‘bring them down to our level a bit’.16

Their visit has further symbolic significance. ‘Scandinavianisation’ of the British monarchy is perhaps the only option. As it transforms itself, from an imperial past –
the decommissioning of the royal yacht Britannia was the moment of truth – it will become akin to the ‘bicycle monarchies’ on the Continent. Consider how far already the Queen has adapted: from forbidding her sister Margaret marrying a divorced man, in 1955, to giving her blessing to the wedding of Wills and Kate – who had been ‘practising as a couple’, as Prince Charles put it, for eight years.\textsuperscript{17} Kate Middleton is the first commoner to marry someone directly in line to the throne, or a king, since the time of Henry VIII.

While this instance owes little to Australia, their experience here probably helped the British royal family to perceive the monarchy in a different way. The relatively casual ‘walkabouts’, first ventured during the royal tour of 1970, are still called that in Britain. Australia may have given William more confidence to adopt a populist style as his default position.

\textbf{THAT STYLE MAY help save the monarchy in Britain, where there are considerable arguments for its retention.} In the context of Americanisation trading as globalisation, and pressure from Brussels, the monarchy becomes the ultimate statement of British difference. Should Scotland become independent there just might be agreement, given the Stuart inheritance, to the Queen remaining a joint head of state. There’s not the faintest chance a president of England would be so regarded. In Ireland, too, the monarchy has its uses, as we saw in May 2011. At a state banquet the Queen appeared like \textit{a deus ex machina}, and with a classic display of tact was able to convincingly express regret for past wrongs. As the embodiment of the continuity of British history, she implicitly apologised on behalf of her ancestors, which gave the occasion resonance. Imagine, by way of contrast, how shallow it would have been had the Queen delivered the 2008 apology to Australia’s Aborigines.

But to return to England itself: the old argument that the monarchy stood at the pinnacle of the English class system, endorsing its snobberies, is less persuasive now, given the access of new money and the creation of new social contours. Finally, the weekly conversation between the Queen and the Prime Minister is an admirable institution; Mrs Thatcher must have felt that she was going to confession. Unfortunately, we can’t really replicate that here, since the Governor-General has no independent standing – and, increasingly, not even a decent pair of capital letters to her name.

\textbf{MONARCHIST SPOKESPEOPLE IN Australia are inclined to trot out traditional arguments as though the contexts in Britain and Australia are identical.} Tony Abbott, whose political career took off with his directorship of Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, is a notable exception. Always a monarchist, Abbott shied away from approaching the Queen at an Oxford reception, in case he was disappointed. What he wanted, he explained in a book teasingly called \textit{The Minimal}
Monarchy (Wakefield, 1995), was a new intellectual basis for supporting the crown, ‘to replace the accident of Britishness which gave it to us’. Abbott conscripts an old term often applied to the more advanced eighteenth-century American colonies, describing Australia as a ‘crowned republic’. He builds unwittingly on Whitlam’s work, characterising the Australian monarchy as consisting not only of the Queen but of governors and the Governor-General. Abbott’s argument is that the Governor-General is our head of state already. The Queen becomes merely the instrument of appointment of these Australians. ‘If Australians were starting from scratch,’ Abbott concedes, ‘we would be unlikely to choose the monarch of another country represented here by a Governor-General appointed by the Prime Minister.’

Rather like Braganza Brazil, the argument rests on the happy circumstances that brought us to this position, rather than devolution or deliberate policy. A republic would change the existing system, which has served us well, in unpredictable ways that many would reject. And Abbott points to the legal difficulties, in particular those arising from the co-existing separate sovereignties of the states. So wedded is he to the status quo that he has come to describe the monarchy as ‘almost but not quite an indigenous crown’. Certainly some conservatives seemed to feel that The King’s Speech was heaven: a stuttering monarch in a fustian court taught how to manage things better by applying a little Aussie know-how.

A NUMBER OF scenarios now present themselves. The monarchy will continue until the Queen dies, at least. Amanda Vanstone’s observation that the Queen is woman enough to have the issue discussed before she goes is probably correct, but popular opinion, even were it more in favour of a republic, would seem to oppose such a move.

There is always the possibility that Britain – or England, as it might become – changes to a republic first. Anti-monarchist sentiment could accelerate quickly under Charles – already the object, with Camilla, of a violent anti-royal demonstration in London. The ground is shifting under the royals. At the beginning of the Queen’s reign, everyone would have understood why, at the news of Diana’s death, the flagpole at Buckingham Palace remained empty – the Royal Standard is the Queen’s personal flag, flown only when she is in residence. But newspaper editors, who might be expected to know better, led the charge, demanding that a flag be flown at half-mast. So, in a concession to public opinion, up went the Union Jack. Then the persistent idea, supported in a number of influential quarters, that the succession should leapfrog Charles to William, would be a serious variation of the hereditary principle. The monarchy would be weakened further. It could eventually compromise itself out of existence.

Under such circumstances the monarchy might decide to transfer its location – not just having a residence in Tharwa, as Nevil Shute conjectured, but moving into Yarralumla.
Even many monarchists, for whom distance lends enchantment, would not be pleased by this development. As Nick Minchin said on Q&A in April 2011, the personality of the monarch was irrelevant: it was the system that mattered. John Howard found it easy enough to elbow out his Governor-General from some public occasions, but it would be much more difficult to displace a King. In short, it is too late for a Braganza rerun; while such a move might solve problems for the Windsors, it would create more for us. Canberra will never be the new Rio.19

It is ludicrous that monarchists, flushed with Prince William’s popularity, should speak as though the monarchy is safe in Australia for another century. True, support for the republic dropped to its lowest level for seventeen years after William’s post-flood tour and wedding in April 2011. But his appeal is essentially that of a celebrity: a pleasant personality and (fading) good looks. It does not generally spring from a commitment to the monarchy as a political concept, at least not among the young. The Constitution Education Fund Australia found half of young Australians do not know they live in a democracy, or what a democracy is. Enthusiasm, such as it is, is shallow. The Australian Monarchist League last year claimed fifteen thousand members. Social networking could lock them in, for a time. But dwindling membership is a characteristic of both major political parties.

The star quality of the monarchy seems to be expediting its trivialisation. A Sydney Daily Telegraph editorial said of the new royal couple: ‘both come across as extremely well-mannered, a little shy, and up for a laugh. In other words, they both seem very Australian. A little work on the accents and they’d be perfect.’ To be created in our own image is one thing; to be refracted from a cartoon quite another. Images posted on the net suggested their costumes were modelled on Cinderella’s. Preposterous, and quite wrong: in Cinderella, the colours differed substantially.20

The royal surprise of 2011 was the success of the Queen’s CHOGM visit, widely anticipated as her last. Crowds flocked to see her; in Melbourne’s Federation Square she drew a bigger crowd than Oprah Winfrey. The Occupy Melbourne protesters postponed a conflicting demonstration, an apparent mark of respect that underlined the retro flavour of the Queen’s day in the city. She opened the Royal Children’s Hospital, as in 1963 (a different building). But there was no soundtrack, not a single speech – she simply drew aside the curtain on a plaque. The Melbourne excursion was a trip down memory lane, bathed in sunshine. ‘I don’t know what all the fuss is about with her outfit,’ one girl was heard to remark. ‘She’s not Lady Gaga or anything.’ Not long afterwards the Danish royal couple made a return visit, no less successful than their first. People again responded to ‘Australia’s own royal, Crown Princess Mary’.21

The monarchy appears to be safe for now. Even Malcolm Turnbull says, ‘A lot of republicans are Elizabethans as well.’ A Newspoll in April 2011 found support for the republic was 10 per cent lower than it had been at the time of the failed referendum in 1999. Moreover, only 40 per cent of those between eighteen and thirty-four backed a republic, and only half of them unequivocally.22 Such a
dramatic shift might reflect the popularity of the royal family or a growing conservatism, but also deep disenchantment with Australia’s political leadership, quite apart from distrust of the ‘politicians’ republic’. Often the referendum is cited as though the republic’s defeat is carved in stone, but sooner or later the figures will swing back. People scoffed at Winifred Ewing, a solitary Scottish Nationalist, being elected to the House of Commons in 1967. Now there is a Scottish Nationalist government in Edinburgh, with independence a distinct possibility.

While there are more pressing issues than the republic, nothing shows more clearly the lack of vision that seems to have crept across our whole political system. Often the republicans seem to have been just waiting for the Windsors to fall into a hole. None will be big enough – not even for King Charles.

Questions such as changing the flag and the republic have become more complex, since they are affected by a new factor evident since the mid-1990s – when Pauline Hanson draped herself in the flag. They have come to serve as symbols, expressing hostility and resistance towards multicultural Australia, and what the country has become. Since there is little vision in our public discourse, it is not surprising that the concern about identity should take regressive forms. It is telling, given the tendency of peripheries to remain symbolically conservative, that the further away you moved from the centre of each state capital, the higher the vote in 1999 against the republic became.

The dramatic changes in Australia’s population in recent years will inexorably work against the monarchy. One of the striking things about the conservative case for its retention, even when argued most articulately, is the static view it seems to hold of Australian society, extending to its population groups. The day will come – a bit unexpectedly, perhaps – for the enactment of Donald Horne’s adage about the monarchy giving way to pressure like a lightly locked door. Growing consciousness of Australia’s changing context, arising from the dramatic rise of China and India to major powers, might also give it a jolt.

THIS ESSAY HAS not considered the republican position, nor the way Australia gradually moved to full independence from Britain under the monarchy. It has sought to show that, while the monarchy hangs on, it has done so after a long period of attenuation. At the moment it is treating us to a full-throated swansong – by loyal ventriloquists.

Increasingly there are tensions arising from different perspectives. Two years ago the recent convention that the Governor-General was head of state, but the Queen our sovereign, was upset by an announcement from the Palace that casually assumed the Queen to be both. English understanding of colonial niceties is not great. This was evident in Clarence House’s banning The Chaser from commenting on the royal wedding. The Brits don’t get it: humour in Australia is serious,
perhaps the main way of exciting public interest in politics. (Don Watson began writing lines for Max Gillies and ended up writing speeches for Paul Keating.)

Then there was the Order of Merit awarded to John Howard. The order is the gift of the sovereign, and Howard’s elevation falls within the expected range – the former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien became a member in 2009. But, since the monarchy is supposed to be above politics, it is not a good look. John Howard still engages in political debate whenever he has the opportunity. Moreover, the honour looked like a reward for services to the monarchy. A generation ago the order rewarded achievement in the arts and science, and most of its twenty-four members are still drawn from those worlds. At a pinch, the award might have gone to Barry Humphries; not to Sandy Stone on speed.

THE MONARCHY WAS brilliantly used by the British as the cornerstone of the Empire in its late phase of devolution. Its existence, with the projection of a larger-than-life royal family at a time when the ties of kinship were still very real, enabled the dominions to be, as Keith Hancock put it, ‘British with a small b’. But once the dominions began to function fully as nation-states, and the blood ties of kinship became diluted, the assumptions on which a shared monarchy was predicated became less and less operative. Voltaire, in the eighteenth century, said of the Holy Roman Empire – the welter of states in Germany – that it was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor Empire. Today it is obvious that the onetime British Commonwealth is neither British, nor common, nor wealthy.

It is Australia we have to consider now, not the Empire or Commonwealth. The old-style monarchical solution no longer serves us so well. More and more its continuation seems to postpone the problem of recalibrating forms of government for this successor state of the British Empire.

Debate on an Australian republic has come fitfully, partly because the monarchist and republican cases stand almost independently of each other. They rarely engage. One is essentially traditionalist, while the other likes to align itself with what it perceives to be the future – if fairly minimally at the moment. Each is powerfully rooted in sentiment. The monarchists are primarily concerned, now, with the system of government; the republicans, beyond their democratic arguments, with having our own head of state. So desperate is Bob Carr to have a republic that his minimalist model retains the title Governor-General. Blink and you’d scarcely notice the change.

The best way to reconcile the two positions might have been a separate Australian monarchy. A similar idea has been floated in Canada: Prince Harry for king. But its realisation here would be absurd. Australians have no taste for Pomp-posity. A local Australian monarchy would soon founder, a mere staging post on the road to a republic. It is a lost option.
No Australian monarchy, then, and no royal Governor-General – just royalty as visiting celebrities. The problem is essentially post-imperial. The monarchy grew out of the English society, and polity. When will the Australian society, and polity, grow out of the monarchy?

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1 Balfour to King Edward VII, 6 Feb 1901, quoted Kenneth Rose, King George V, (London: Phoenix, 2000) p. 44.
3 Rio growth figures, Wilcken, Empire Adrift, p. 96.
4 ‘Colonist’, A Proposal for the Confederation of the Australian Colonies with Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, as King of Australia, (Sydney: JJ Moore, 1867); quotes from pp. 4, 22-23.
17 Prince Charles on royal couple: Age, 18 Nov 2010.
19 Liberals for and against: Amanda Vanstone, ‘No need to whisper, the Queen isn’t offended by the R-word’, Age, 28 Mar 2011; Q&A, ABC-1, 28 April 2011.
21 The Queen’s visit: Australian and Michael Shmith in the Age, both 27 Oct 2011; Lady Gaga, Melbourne Times Weekly, 2 Nov 2011, p. 6; Princess Mary, Australian, 21 Nov 2011, Herald-Sun, 10 Jan 2012.
26 Carr, Q&A, ABC-1, 28 April 2011.
27 ‘Give me King Harry, say Canada’s Royals’, Age, 24 June 2011.
WHEN we reached the woodchop we looked at the line-up and knew it was the old boys – the vets. There they all were, quietly lined up before their stumps. None impatient, most carrying guts. One or two looked well over sixty, the age to qualify as a veteran. Most were in sleeved shirts. They milled around, waiting the ten minutes in quietness that didn’t look anything like preparation for a world championship.

The guy on the far end, right in front of the overhead footbridge, had come from New Zealand, so everyone in the small stadium knew he would be good. The guy down the other end, a tall man with a reserved, inwardly focused attention was the defending champion. We bet on who would win.

My girlfriend was all for the Champ. He carried less of a gut than most, and when he took off his shirt his arms looked full – not cut, but capable. The rangy guy next to him would have been my choice, except there was a Queenslander in the line-up in give-away maroon. I had to barrack for him. But number two, next to Champ, was very appealing. A long-limbed, easily muscled man with simple lines and a loose way of standing, he looked a lot older. His muscles had turned a corner and were just lean lines – nothing stringy – just simple, long, no-frills forms that aligned with all the simple planes of his rangy frame. Like the others, he looked quiet and considerate. He honed his axe and concentrated on his block, but not with particular focus. Rather, with an obliqueness that took the task in as one among many – another thing to be dealt with in its own good time, with the concentration needed when its time came. Not before. Not after. He was a farmer, the announcer said. The Champ was an axeman from northern New South Wales – one of the few places on earth where forests still stand. Another guy hailed from up near Taree, a place called Possums Brush. Even the announcer had fun with that – imagine, a place called Possums Brush. Sounded like a fairytale. But as the announcer joked the small man just stood there, and peeled off his shirt. He’d heard it all before. He was built like a cane toad: lean limbs; full, slab-like body; no neck.
There was a Tasmanian too. He might have been a thylacine − I wondered how long his species might last. The best in the world, the announcer said. It was printed on the walls of the little amphitheatre too: ‘Australian and New Zealand axe men, the best in the world.’ I thought about where there might be other forests, where other axe men might be able to chop them. Canada – but then my imagination ran dry. I didn’t care: here I was, watching the best in the world, a line-up of older men, quietly preparing for their short burst of energy. Silently amassing their thoughts about the first cut, the next, the wedges flying, the turn of the wrists, the pivot of the waist and the impact running up that metal axe head, up the long hardwood handle and into the sinews of the hands, the forearms; right up to the shoulders and across the back. All while the nimble feet stayed still, pivoted, just a little, gripped the earth enough to put the weight of the body into each decisive stroke and then, razor-fast, back again with the full weight of the axe and the grip of the wounded wood to balance for the next stroke.

The men wore long white pants and sandshoes − they looked light and dainty beneath the mass of their bodies. There was no glamour: just draping garments to get them into the ring. And as the announcer prepared the amphitheatre for the final five minutes, they pulled off their shirts to reveal the singlets underneath. The real stuff. Not Jackie Howe, but close enough. White hair covered their shoulders, and most had a full head of hair as well. It was like looking at how the species used to be − many of the younger men in the stadium were bald.

Except the Tasmanian. He wore his singlet over his sleeved shirt.

The late-afternoon sun was in our eyes, the announcer called for the start, and they were off. It was so quick − a hurl of bodies thrown behind wedges of steel sent accurately into the bite. Once, twice down − deep enough − turn up and gone! The wedge flew out, the block took shape. And turn again − throw the axe, balance − whack whack whack. Everyone throwing their weight into that biting and thrust, that lift and force back into the wood, and the crowd cheering, cheering to see who would win. Full concentration down the arms and into the axe handle. Pure will and full body energy, and into the steel and gone − each wedge gone − until bingo, the first block stood like a pentagon, a winning pointer to heaven.

And what a shock! It was the guy who looked like a cane toad − the little guy with no neck and a big gut just caned it, romped through the chop. No one could believe it. And then the Champ came in − a good two strokes after the little guy − and then the gentlemanly farmer. ‘The Champ aimed too high on his first stroke,’ my girlfriend said, leaning into me as we left the grandstand. ‘I reckon he would have taken it out – it’s just that he aimed that bit too high on the first.’ The crowd was howling and the afternoon sun streamed down on us all. I didn’t care: I’d just watched the best in the world.
THE SIGN OUTSIDE the pavilion read ‘Domestic Animals’. The crowd in the entrance queued – parents laden with bags and provisions, prams, throngs of kids with smeared faces and rabbit-ear headbands and loopy, lack-of-attention head spins. Little ones surveying their vast kingdom from the layered interiors of their pushed thrones, rugged-up and fat, charioted around by pale parents. We joined the queue.

I was hoping for a range of specimens – maybe rabbits, some long-haired guinea pigs, cats and dogs – but there were only cats. All along the side walls, way back from the barrier, was a wall-to-ceiling line-up of boxes. They were lined with white satin and reminded me of old-fashioned sewing boxes – padded, genteel and snug. The crowd inched forward and peered over the metal barriers. Most of the boxes were empty. But one or two had a label naming a winner. Inside were the cat champions. Most posed facing the back wall, so they looked like furry loaves of bread.

All the action was on the other side – around the bend from where cat-product salespeople were peddling a special exhibition backpack with flea treatments, diamante collars and novelty-shaped chewy treats for decaying cat teeth.

Beyond that, on the line leading to the exit, three women in white starched coats were performing to the crowd. The one with the microphone was detailing the points that had led to her selection, while the others dragged a winner from its box and held it aloft while the main judge described its strong points. There was a Cornish Rex, a British Blue and a Scottish Fold. None of them looked happy. Why should they? It was almost clammy; the crowd was unkempt and disruptive. The Cornish Rex’s big batwing ears were swivelling like radars. Elongate and elegant, the animal’s huge gold pupil-free eyes swung across the crowds to place a slippery curse on all. When the British Blue was held aloft, its chubby qualities detailed and celebrated, it looked as cross as Churchill. The indignity of having its vast pillowed bottom supported by a palm was just too much – it seemed to curse the judge and the assembled human race for the indignity of it all. The Scottish Fold seemed slightly more phlegmatic – the densely packed crowd cooed at its little flat ears, but it showed no gratitude, just feline tolerance and a feigned indifference mastered by squinting the fat fur around its eyes until they were little more than slits. We clicked away on our iPhones – the cats were pretty special. They seemed to have come from somewhere else, and we, the people, herded through turnstiles and the queues as if we had gone to see the body of Mao or Lenin or Ho Chi Minh. There was reverence to it, as reverent as ‘the people’ ever get nowadays, and we moved on out of the claustrophobic space in the early winter sunshine, as if we had made a pilgrimage.

THE BARNS OF the new auditorium were cleanly plotted and pieced and filled with straw. Each of the little booths had a display of alpacas. Most were in twos or
threes, but some alone. Two had been painted green. I wondered why – maybe a kind of camouflage. Except that in the middle of the gold straw they stood out even more.

But it was impossible to stare too long, wondering – your eyes were always drawn back to the charm of their gentle faces. Soft and forgiving, long downcast eyes framed by model-length eyelashes and sooty-black eyeliner, they may have looked apologetic if not for the way they held their perfectly formed heads so beautifully aloft. Poised to the last gasp. Some were stressed: the rapid movement of panting gave it away. But otherwise, their expression was pure grace – they surveyed the panic and movement of the exhibition venue and the crowds like genteel widows, aristocracy in the face of chaos.

Two were being clipped. Turned out in a tiny, delicate diamante bridle, a small brown one captured the attention of a group of Asian students. One by one they leaned in towards its little head, smiling, their fingers in a V for the cameras of their friends. I loomed in, eager to touch the wonderful wool, but the gentleman with the double-diamond earrings and clippers turned on me. ‘Not that one – don’t touch that one – these are ready for the ring,’ he snapped. ‘You can touch any of the others’ – gesturing to the green ones. The ones he was working on were models of perfection, sensitively sculpted soft forms with the softest wisps of ear hair. Real little Kate Mosses, both of them. Reluctantly I turned away. ‘Let’s watch what’s happening in the ring,’ suggested my friend.

The ring was a rectangle surrounded by tiered seating. We squeezed in at the front to watch the judging of the females between eighteen months and three years. There were six, each led by a person dressed in a stiff, white, cotton coat. The little black one at the end kept rearing. She’d jump up on her back legs, and then swivel and complete her pirouette, tucking her little woolly head back into her keeper’s side. The animal was not very strong or heavy – the keeper had little trouble pulling her back in – a tiny gazelle dancing on air.

Each was completely different – some fuller and fatter, the one second from the end much younger, grey with sooty extremities. Their tails arched like commas; their tummies were tucked in neatly into alignment with their chubby upper back legs. The distance from their knees to their little feet was much less than horses, and their little feet were exactly that – little feet with two long toes – they walk flat on their soles as if wearing slippers, not on the tips of their toes, like sheep or goats. The two judges would study and then lean in to separate the wool. The animals didn’t seem to like that – they would pull towards their keepers and try to bury their perfect little heads, like children in a vaccination line-up. Then one of the judges would spread a piece of the wool across the arm of her black jacket and peer at it, officially. It was all very official: clipboards, brisk pace, close survey. Only at the end, when the chief judge spoke about the reasons for her choice, did it become transparently an act of passion and subjectivity. She used adjectives of love.
Nevertheless, the two older women who we’d squeezed in next to us on the pews knew which would win well before the announcement – a tall blond curvaceous animal with a swelling middle and a wonderful way of placing her feet. Her keeper was a big beefy-faced man, and he beamed quietly. The crowd was appreciative – no one seemed to object. The older lady next to us leaned in conspiratorially. ‘They’re addictive, you know,’ she confided quietly, directing her silver head towards the female alpacas on their final circumambulation of the judging ring. I understood. Glamour, softness, and the possibility of competition as well – a heady brew.

THE DOG STANDS at the exhibition grounds are famous for those who want to test the myths about canine-owner relationships. Much has been written about owners or breeders looking like the dog. But I’ve never really found it. Sometimes quite the opposite.

There are plenty of obese, earthbound shapes lovingly tending the Salukis, for example. And the Afghans. Those wonderful hounds bred to pound over the barren high deserts of the Hindu Kush, hair streaming from the ears and tail as they lunge in unison after gazelle across the surface of ancient Mughal and Ottoman paintings. Long nose and limbs, high-cut waist, belly arching into an inverse curve before meeting the flanks. Every bit as beautiful as in legend and painted miniature – and yet here lolling in blanketed square boxes deep in the heart of Ozzieland. Patiently dreaming of an exotic past as their squat owners brush and part, smooth and fuss, bending over their wonderful living sculptures to dedicate their tiny lives to an infinite perfection mastered well before Australia was dreamed into being.

These dogs were Persian aristocrats and their owners know it, prepared to devote money, time, relationships and attention to these creatures from another culture. Reminders of other places, other cultures, other times: cultural data inscribed in every line of their wonderful bodies. These dogs were from the stuff of legend – amid the paraphernalia of the everyday they appear as strange as might a man in lightweight Ottoman hunting armour. And yet here they were as pets.

Questions about how much the owners knew about the cultures that had originally refined the breeds drifted in and out of my head. I passed the wonderful, compact, panda-like contours of the Akita Inus and thought how well they seemed to fit with the place and purpose from which they had originated. Aloof as the sighthounds, but stockier, focused, unrelentingly strong-willed, these were thick-coated aggressors bred to bring down the really solid prey – boars, elk, even Asian black bears. They looked so wonderfully Japanese, regal in a nonplussed Japanese kind of way. I couldn’t work out whether I imposed this on the animals, or whether it came through the forms themselves. I wondered again how the owners felt about cultural diversity.
Lots of booths were empty, but on the third turn of the labyrinth of the pavilion, just before the exit, I watched a large smudgy woman grooming the fur of an outstandingly sure-footed little dog into bows and carefully arranged moustaches. I made a horrible mistake. People who compete at such events must get sick of the ignorant though adoring public, and I can’t blame the breeder for almost reducing me to dust with the brevity and simmer of her response. Admiringly, I asked her if the little animal was a Skye Terrier. ‘She’s a Lhasa Apso [you retard],’ she hissed. In her skilfully aimed, truncated response it was obvious that the woman could not believe that a little animal which had been engineered in the magnificent high deserts of Tibet by generations of Buddhist monks could be confused with anything else.

And she was right. I’d lost my eye, forgotten my history, and had behaved like the enthusiastic amateur I was. I was glad to leave. Outside, in the full glare of an early winter afternoon, the judges were concentrating. The white-coated breeders and handlers were attempting to bring a bevy of Basenjis into order. The Basenjis, true to their breed, gazed in a faraway mode, at things and ideas beyond the incidentals of the competition at Homebush. Their little brows were furrowed in concentration, their little tails curled against their short, strong backs. I had no doubt inner visions took them back to Africa, to the view of the savannah from atop a tree, from a place where wider horizons and longer histories might be dreamed about anew.
In October 2011 Australia hosted fifty global leaders when the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Perth. The significance of the largest gathering of government leaders ever held in the country was overshadowed by the visit of the Queen, who opened the conference and whose every move swamped the coverage. The oddity of thousands of Australians turning out to watch a non-resident sovereign reminding us she is still head of state – a boat trip in Brisbane, a tram ride in Melbourne, a barbecue in Perth – underlined the strange duality that afflicts Australia’s nationhood. In a sporting event with Britain – cricket, say, or the Rugby World Cup – the Queen and her family support our opponents. Yet most Australians, many of whom have no ancestral ties to Britain, welcome her as their head of state.

There is a pragmatic argument for what might seem a parody worthy of Gilbert and Sullivan: a distant monarch, whose family represents the ultimate triumph of celebrity culture, is the most apolitical head of state imaginable. Support for the monarchy may simply reflect the growing contempt for politicians. It does not necessarily suggest, as republicans sometimes claim, a lack of national identity. Paul Keating has consistently argued that Australia needs to become a republic to better interact with the region, and while his is an exaggerated claim, resistance to change may be symbolic of a deeper reluctance to abandon the belief that we can continue to rely on great and powerful Atlantic friends.

Australia is transforming into a successful multiracial, multi-ethnic and multilingual society, whose greatest failure is in equality for its Indigenous peoples. In a world of increasing fundamentalisms, this – Aboriginal inequality aside – is no
small achievement. Yet as the global architecture shifts more rapidly than at any
time since the end of World War II, domestic politics seems to have become small-
minded and parochial.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the election of the Whitlam
government, a moment, at least in nostalgic retrospect, of important nationalist
assertion. The 1972 victory followed several years of social change, which Donald
Horne termed ‘the time of hope’, and it remains a dividing line in the evolution of
contemporary Australia. It may be a reflection of my age, but I detect surprisingly
little change in the debates around Australian identity over this time. There is a
deeper recognition of the realities of a multi-ethnic society, but this has not
fundamentally altered the sense of who we are. After the passion of Keating and the
shift to a more Anglicised version under John Howard – when a citizenship test was
introduced, reinforcing conventional views of ourselves – we seem to have returned
to a slightly soporific sense of national identity. The American journalist Jeff
Weinstein once said: ‘No, there is no such thing as a gay sensibility. And yes, it has
an immense impact on the arts.’ Perhaps national identity is similar.

AS SOMEONE WHO was shaped politically by the social, political and cultural
upheavals of the late 1960s I now find myself somewhat bemused by the new
conservatism. One British observer claimed that ‘the story of the past generation has
been that the right has won politically and the left has won culturally’, and in some
ways that seems true. Neoliberal economic assumptions dominate, even after the
global financial crisis, and despite some marginal tinkering in the interests of greater
equity. Important changes have occurred in the position of women and
homosexuals; and some real achievements, above all the setting of a price on carbon,
result from issues not perceived in the 1970s. Yet there are signs of a growing
conservative mood, symbolised by the relentless promotion of anti-progressive
views in the pages of The Australian, the rise of religious schools and the decline of
republicanism. The Occupy protests of late 2011 faded quickly, and unlike their
American counterparts failed to connect to the grievances of many people beyond
the assembled protesters.

Above all, the protesters in Australia’s population have yet to bring about
fundamental alterations in our view of the world. Certainly the rhetoric about ‘the
Asian century’ is reflected in much greater awareness of the economic possibilities
of engagement with our region, and the movement of people between Australia and
Asia is dramatic. Over the past few decades every European airline, except British
Airways, has ceased flying to Australia, replaced by services from Asian, Gulf and
Chinese airlines. But emotional ties with the North Atlantic world appear
unchallenged, even as Australia’s traditional ‘great and powerful friends’ lose the
power to determine global events. For a brief period the Whitlam government
seemed to question the idea that the American alliance was the bedrock of
Australian foreign policy, and flirted with closing the American satellite tracking station at Pine Gap. The current Labor government has established even closer military ties and is as unlikely to emulate Whitlam in this area as it is to follow him in abolishing university fees.

Perhaps the timidity of Australia’s views of the larger world is bound up with a failure to imagine any real alternatives. As in much of the rich world there is a low satisfaction with the political system, and an increasing disillusionment with political leadership. The belief that we could create a better society, that there could be a moment when politics was creative rather than managerial, seems to have largely vanished.

Unfortunately the suspicion that somehow we are second-rate followers, a theme that runs through much Australian self-criticism, seems to remain. The doubts about her country that plagued Frank Moorhouse’s Edith Campbell Berry through her long exile and return to Canberra still surfaces. They are echoed without irony in Errol Bray’s 2011 novel Berzoo (Port Campbell Press): ‘My cynicism about the awful side of Australia, and of being Australian, is always magnified by the flight. Going back.’ Maybe cynicism is preferable to the American conviction that theirs is the greatest country on earth. But there was a period in the early 1970s when some of us felt that we could write and agitate as both Australians and as citizens of a larger world, and Australians had a major impact on the development of women’s and gay liberation, of animal rights and environmental movements across the western world. Terms such as ‘green bans’ and ‘femocrats’, born in Australia in this era, suggested a new innovation in both analysis and activism that would have considerable impact internationally.

IN MAY 2011 The Economist ran a cover story on Australia as ‘the next golden state’: ‘Australians must now decide what sort of country they want their children to live in. They can enjoy their prosperity, squander what they do not consume and wait to see what the future brings; or they can actively set about creating the sort of society that other nations envy and want to emulate.’ There is an element of truth to this, even though many of us might be uneasy about it; the prescriptions seem to echo the Prime Minister’s schoolmistress tone when she speaks of the need for hard work and better education. What both miss is the imagination to conceive a future dependent less on economic growth, and more on reduced consumption and greater altruism. We could do worse than go back to some of the utopian writings of the 1960s and ’70s, which saw in affluence an opportunity not just to own bigger houses and cars but to restructure society in ways that were more equitable and internationalist. Geography requires we do this; our current economic good fortune provides the means.

Australia has changed since the halcyon days of the Whitlam period. The population has almost doubled; it lives longer and in more diverse arrangements.
Walk down any shopping street and the people look different: they are fatter, more racially diverse and informally dressed. Younger people resemble Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborgs’, displaying tattoos and piercings, and wearing electronic earpieces. Politicians still talk about ‘working families’, but single-person households have since 1971 doubled to 13 per cent of all homes. New houses are bigger, and cars have either shrunk or expanded into monstrous four-wheel drives, designed to demonstrate over-consumption.

The cities particularly have changed. Sydney and Melbourne are pioneering new forms of inner-city living, and large numbers of overseas students have made them world-leading university centres. Communities that did not exist forty years ago – African, Vietnamese, Indian – flourish in our cities and some country towns. At the same time the stress on the land is becoming unmanageable, and parts of rural Australia are depopulating. The biggest change is in the position of women, with huge effects on work, home and family. And if women’s sense of their self has changed, so too has that of men: the ‘bloke’ of old has largely disappeared with the collapse of factory and blue-collar jobs, and the declining role for unskilled men in the economy. Many of these men have become private contractors, so that more Australians now run small businesses than belong to unions. The decline of manual labour and the successes of the women’s movement have combined to create new preoccupations with masculinity, with conflicting images of machismo and SNAGs among young men.

Work and leisure have been transformed by the advancement of computers and the internet. The permanence promised by long service leave has been replaced by portable super schemes, and retirement is both postponed and proclaimed as a new lifestyle. Australia has created a café culture while its intellectuals still bemoan its absence, as ambitious chefs establish new restaurants in outer suburbs and country towns. Same-sex couples are increasingly accorded legal recognition, twenty years after the last state decriminalised homosexuality. Australia has experienced a rapid decline of Puritanism: until the mid-1960s cinemas were closed on Sundays; six o’clock closing lasted until mid-1967; censorship remained tight until the 1970s. Competitive sports have been professionalised, and large amounts of money are spent on sport as both entertainment and a marker of national achievement.

IT IS LESS clear how far political debate has changed. The rise of the Greens, and the apparently inexorable decline of Labor’s support, suggests a new period no longer characterised by a clear division along class lines. Questions of national identity rarely emerge in mainstream politics, except in the unfortunately bipartisan insistence on demonising asylum seekers. Apart from the Greens, politicians seem united in their view of the world, as the media fosters ignorance of all but celebrity culture. We are drip fed the intrigues of American electoral politics, and British Royal family dramas, but are remarkably unaware of significant events in countries
much closer. The recent visits by the Queen and American President encouraged adulation eerily reminiscent of visits thirty years before. Even as conservative a commentator as Paul Kelly commented: ‘Gillard’s recasting of the alliance, contentious in substance, falls upon a sludge of pro-Obama love that seems to paralyse discussion.’

We continue to agonise about national identity. Since federation there has been a quest for foundation myths; there is a vast literature on how Anzac Day became the de facto symbol of Australian nationhood, despite Australia Day. Young Australians flock to Gallipoli and the Kokoda Track, reinforcing the assumption that nationhood is established through war. Under John Howard there was a discernible rise in military imagery, a trend continued since; prime ministerial visits to overseas troops and attendance at military funerals have become commonplace. Afghanistan is our longest overseas military commitment, yet there is little debate about what our politicians mean when they proclaim, united for once, we must ‘finish the job’.

Stranded between history and geography we debate our significance, driven by the great fear of irrelevance. As the narrator in Christos Tsiolkas’s first novel, Loaded (Random House, 1995), muses: ‘Along the coastline of the city, the beaches open up to the chasm which is the end of the world. Below us there is ice. Nothing else. No human life, no villages, no towns, no cities.’ Perhaps the frenetic energy of most Australian foreign ministers is an attempt to compensate for this fear of the void.

Every Australian political leader is required to define what Australia means. In crude terms Whitlam’s nationalist pride replaced Menzies’ deep attachment to Britain; Howard’s view of Australia as a successful child of Britain replaced Keating’s republicanism. Howard skilfully combined left and right views of national identity, seeking to recuperate ‘mateship’ for the Liberal Party. Rudd seemed to be cautiously returning to Keating’s view, while Gillard seems to be searching for a new synthesis, meshing an emotional commitment to the United States with economic interest in expanding ties to Asia.

Romantics on both the left (Raewyn Connell, Germaine Greer) and right (Les Murray) have sought ‘Australianess’ in an appeal to Aboriginality, which they rightly identify as the only original culture in Australia. All empathise strongly with Aboriginal identification with the land. While Indigenous symbols have been incorporated into the face Australia presents to the world, this has little more than a superficial impact on how we view ourselves. We may decorate our public buildings with dot paintings, but that barely touches the way most Australians understand themselves.

Part of the Australian story is that we have managed the incorporation of large numbers of migrants from diverse backgrounds better than most, but residual anxieties remain, most obviously in hysteria about the threats of ‘boat people’.
Official rhetoric insists that there is no racial discrimination in Australia, but the reality lags behind: as one middle-aged Chinese Australian recounts, ‘When I would go out with my white girlfriend to the movies I couldn’t sit down without someone saying, “F…ing Asian… What’s she doing with him?”’ Today the comment is more likely to be directed at an African or Arab-Australian – and as always against Indigenous Australians.

In a country of immigrants national identity has proven to be elastic, and can easily contain very different perceptions of self and community. For many, group identity is more important, especially for Indigenous Australians. There is a significant difference between small groups who choose to remain apart from mainstream society and those whose desire to join the mainstream is met by hostility and rejection – the experience of some young Muslim and African-Australians. In the name of accepting diversity, there has been a growth in the number of religious schools, which threaten to perpetuate social divisions along ethnic and class lines. Whether these divisions prove as easy to overcome as older tensions between Catholics and Protestants is a question we are far too timid in addressing.

To paraphrase Shakespeare’s Malvolio, some identities are born, some achieved and some are thrust upon us. A social scientist might use the terms ‘primordial’, ‘instrumental’ and ‘constructivist’. The general point remains: identities are slippery, and it is easy to confuse what is inherited with what is acquired. Andrew Bolt’s attack on ‘fair-skinned Aborigines’ suggested that a fact of birth was distorted to gain political or social advantage; in the same way, there remains heated debate about whether or not homosexuality results from genetic, environmental or lifestyle factors. Religious affiliation is usually treated as if it were part of cultural heritage, not open to rational examination.

The paradox is that identities matter both more and less, as we experience the irony of multiple and shifting identities in an era of growing nationalist and religious fundamentalism. The very idea of ‘national identity’ presupposes a fixed sense of purpose around certain unchanging, shared national symbols, based on ethnic and religious identity or through a common ideology. Yet more people live between and across national borders, as dual citizenship and long periods abroad change notions of a single national identity. Many Australians now vote for overseas legislatures; several residents of Melbourne have been members of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Australian Sudanese took part in the referendum that created the new state of South Sudan.

In August 2011 I spent a week at the regional AIDS Conference in Busan, South Korea. I was particularly struck by the role of a small group of remarkable Asian-Australians, who are playing leading roles in regional community organisations, brokering their identities between their backgrounds and their growing up in
Australia. ‘I’m Asian,’ one insisted, when I asked where he was from. ‘No,’ I said, ‘You’re Australian. I heard your accent before I saw your face.’ We were both right. Today we argue about national identity when race and ethnicity are collapsing. National, racial, ethnic and tribal identities are blurring between pressures for greater cosmopolitanism and greater assertions of group solidarity, and millions of people find themselves moving across national and ethnic identities during a lifetime.

ONE CLEAR DIFFERENCE between the Whitlam era and today is the extent to which Asian-Australians are a force, with increasing numbers of artists, writers and performers coming from Asian backgrounds: Alice Pung, Brian Castro, Tony Ayres, William Yang, Abdul Abdullah, Nam Le, Anh Do. Yet popular culture, especially commercial television, remains a stronghold of the old Anglo-Celtic image of Australia; shows like Home and Away, Packed to the Rafters and All Saints no longer reflect reality. ‘How can a show that is based entirely around a hospital have no brown or Asian doctors?’ asked the Melbourne comedian Nazeem Hussain. Contrasting an evening of popular television with a walk through any major shopping mall indicates how far mass culture has to go to become contemporary.

The whiteness of commercial television is paralleled in the way Australia engages with the world. There is a strong desire to see Australia at the centre of everything, summed up in a story introduction, on SBS news no less, during the floods in Thailand: ‘Australians were being warned not to travel to Bangkok.’ What is lacking is curiosity about and openness to a changing world, in which countries we barely know anything about – Brazil, Korea, Turkey – are building global relations and helping shape ideas and events.

‘Cosmopolitan’ is a contested term, and I use it to convey a sense of celebrating diversity and focusing on the world. It means a positive interest in Australia’s geographic situation. A cosmopolitan would see in the almost unique features of Australian history and geography a remarkable opportunity to develop a vision of the world, rather akin to the political scientist Robyn Eckersley’s argument for a ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’: ‘If the shape of foreign policy includes a concern with responsibility to others and not just co-nationals, with alleviating injustices beyond the nation, then such a nation may be characterised as cosmopolitan.’

Australia can claim to exhibit some of these characteristics, through its commitment to international development assistance and peace-keeping. The lack of cosmopolitanism is exhibited through a combination of emotional loyalty to the old powers of the North Atlantic and a dogged lack of interest in much of the world, often expressed through a lazy form of Australian chauvinism.

While national identities are becoming more fluid, there has been a simultaneous development of an aggressive nationalism, best articulated in the use of the term ‘un-Australian’. The conservative Prime Ministers Bruce and Lyons employed the...
phrase in the early twentieth century to describe ‘troublemakers’, but it has never
had the political resonance of its American counterpart. It is ever more present, as in
the ‘It’s Un-Australian’ website opposing poker laws. Zoo Weekly, a glossy magazine
of heterosexual adolescent male fantasies, rated Julian Assange the un-Australian of
2010, followed by Julia Gillard – who has herself implied the same criticism of her
political opponents (on the left).

THE DOMINANT VIEW sees Australia as an unproblematic part of ‘the West’ or
‘the free world’, and there is little attempt by either the media or political leaders to
suggest other ways of imagining our position. The centrality of the American
alliance is regarded as far more than an ingredient in foreign policy – rather an
expression of a deep attachment to a world in which the values and institutions of
the Anglosphere are taken for granted as superior and beyond question. That term,
used to describe Britain and its settler offshoots, is relatively recent: it seems to have
originated this century from the British historian Robert Conquest, and to have been
popularised by the writings of the conservative American businessman James
Bennett and the equally conservative British historian Andrew Roberts. Not
surprisingly, Tony Abbott has explicitly linked his foreign policy to our membership
of ‘the Anglosphere’ and ‘western values’.

Nothing reveals our unease with our own geography more than the hysteria that
greets every arrest of an Australian for drug use in Indonesia, and the automatic
assumptions that the Indonesian authorities are incapable of justice. The average
Australian tourist in Kuta – or for that matter Phuket or Fiji – seems to regard
Indonesia with the same mix of condescension and appreciation that imperial
tourists would have displayed sailing down the Nile in an Agatha Christie novel.

Australia remains almost unique because of the interplay between its geography
and history; New Zealand is the only regional neighbour that shares a common
political culture. While foreign policy is rarely an issue of major partisan debate, it is
where national identity is established, and where global interconnections
established. Maybe Australians don’t take the soul searching too seriously, which
explains why republicanism has little purchase. When I wrote of a soporific
nationalism, it was not necessarily a criticism. But as the global order is reshaping
remarkably quickly, Australians will need to come to terms with a world in which
‘western’ powers and values are no longer hegemonic.

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Looking for utopia
A Yiddish poet in the outback
Leah Kaminsky

‘Nowhere have I felt as safe as in this wilderness.’
– Melech Ravitch

THE world has become a blur, borders losing their definition. Countries chase each other clockwise around the axis of a plastic globe I hold on my lap. With one finger I stop them abruptly, then on a whim send them hurtling off in the other direction. Instead of Australia following Europe, I change the rules of the game and set Paris, Rome and Berlin off in search of Melbourne.

It is 1975, and I am sitting in my room, slumped into a yellow vinyl beanbag, listening to Carole King’s Tapestry on my cassette player, my toes buried in a cream flokati rug. Barbie lies naked on top of Ken, both of them discarded along with all the other toys of my childhood, piled into a large cardboard box, ready to be dumped at Josie’s op shop on Carlisle Street. I am busy writing letters to pen pals around the world – Kuala Lumpur, London, Penang, Boston – whose addresses I found on the backs of various stamp-collecting magazines. I am telling them about my life in Orrong Road, Elsternwick, Melbourne, Australia, the World, the Universe, 3185.

I am fifteen. My father comes in, without knocking, and announces he is taking me on a trip to Israel soon.

‘But Dad!’ I protest. ‘I don’t want to go.’

He leaves the room. End of discussion.

During the weeks leading up to our departure, I spend hours on the phone whining to my friends about being torn away from having fun with them at summer camp. Despite all my dreams of travel, following my dad around Israel, where I will most likely have to sit and listen to the endless stories of all his ancient friends from back home in Poland, is uninspiring to my young heart, to say the least. Drinking countless cups of tea and eating greasy herring with capers in the homes
of a bunch of grey-haired oy-and-vey people whose dreamy longing for a small village from the past called Zhetl clouds their eyes, like it does my father’s, sounds like a dead bore. More importantly, my slim hope of becoming Henry Schmulewicz’s girlfriend is now dashed. I’ve had a crush on him for months already; him and Danny Solomon, Simon Ostroburski, Nathan Goldfeder, Sammy Piekarski, as well as Peter the Greek, the local greengrocer’s son. Not being around definitely doesn’t help a teenage girl’s chances of being asked to ‘go around’ with a boy. Henry will probably push on with Cynthia Blutshtein, while I am away. She was my best friend, until I found out that she was rapt with Henry too.

ON OUR FIRST morning in Tel Aviv, I wait impatiently in the hotel room for my father to finish his phone conversation before we go out to explore the city. I tape miniature salt and pepper packets from the plane into my travel journal. It was my first flight.

‘Menachim Kaminsky!’ Father shouts into the mouthpiece, as if his voice has to cross thousands of miles.

‘Who?’ an even louder voice replies, blaring from the earpiece, leaping to my side of the room.

‘Kaminsky, Kaminsky,’ he says. ‘From the army. Remember? Tocumwal. Yossele Birshtein, Franky Klepner, Shmuel Factor. And the Greek and Italian boys.’

The silence from the other end tells me this old mate from the Sixth Australian Employment Corps, who my father has been so keen to reconnect with, doesn’t remember him.

‘It’s Menachim. Menachim mit der croome foos,’ my father says in Yiddish, referring to his right foot, deformed by childhood polio, which has left him with a permanent limp.

‘Nisht azoi croom. It’s not so crooked,’ Yosl Bergner says, even though he hasn’t got a clue who he is speaking to. And he invites my father over to his studio on Bilu Street, so they can schmooze about the old days. It will be many years before I come to understand this side of Yosl, a man who is empathic and kind, sometimes to the point of letting others smother him with their requests and demands. He will always say yes.

Later that morning, walking in off the narrow street, through the half-opened frosted glass doors, Father and I enter an anteroom, an atrium surrounded by stained smocks hung on hooks and brushes soaking in jars of turpentine. It has a dizzying, heady smell. A man with piercing blue eyes, wearing a navy artist’s smock covered in flecks of paint, greets us warmly.
'Ah, Kaminsky! Now I remember you,’ he says, hugging him and slapping him on the shoulder. ‘And who is this maydeleh?’ he says, turning to me. I want to answer ‘I am not a little girl,’ but my father has already introduced me as Leahleh, a diminutive form of myself.

Inside the studio, rusty graters lie stacked up on the top shelf of an old dresser. Cream-coloured paint is peeling off the wood and an antique Kodak camera catches my eye. The walls are covered in photos and tchatchkes, and half-finished paintings rest on easels around the room, depicting tattered metal utensils, filled with holes that look like faces. I don’t realise it then, but I have stepped into another world. Yosl catches me looking back at the old camera and walks over to take it off its hook.

‘It was my father’s,’ he says. ‘He took it with him on a trip across Australia in 1933.’

What follows is the first story I heard Yosl tell. Many more were to follow over the years. But it is the one about his father, Melech Ravitch, an eccentric Yiddish poet travelling across the Australian outback wearing new trousers, a checked shirt, a bow tie and kangaroo hide shoes, carrying this Box Brownie camera, that touched me most. Looking back on it now, I think it gave me the spark to break out of the dull, comfortable life of a spoilt teenager growing up in suburban Melbourne. And I like to believe it was that moment too, that led me to become a writer. I ask myself what it was about the lives of Yosl and his father, Melech Ravitch, that inspired me so much. Maybe it was the lure of a world of the imagination that they both inhabited; how wild and wonderful stories always became an integral and inseparable part of their daily lives. How even graters, door handles and fire hydrants had faces and souls.

I also think of how different my life was from Yosl’s, and yet what a close bond we subsequently formed. The world I inhabited as a teenager in 1975 was so far removed from what had happened in Yosl’s world when he was fifteen years old. In 1935 anti-Semitism was on the rise in Europe. It was the year that the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonisation formed, its mission to search for a potential Jewish homeland. But two years before, Yosl’s father, Ravitch, bade farewell to his family and journeyed to Australia, as part of his job as a fundraiser for Bundist Yiddish schools in Poland. His more pressing motive was to look for land that ‘nobody wanted’ in order to resettle German Jews, who were under threat from the rise of Nazism. After brief visits to Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, he set out for the Northern Territory, armed with a letter of introduction from Albert Einstein, journals in which he would record his incredible journey and, slung around his neck, the Box Brownie that I had held in my hands on that first day I met his son, Yosl, in 1975.

ZACHARIA CHANA BERGNER – whose pen name, Melech Ravitch, was derived from his favourite Yiddish poet, Melech Chmelnitzky, and Yanko Ravitch, the protagonist in a story written by Shapira – was a Yiddish poet, essayist, playwright
and cultural activist. He was born in Radymno, eastern Galicia in 1893 and died in Montreal in 1976, having lived in several countries. In 1920, the year Yosl Bergner was born, Melech Ravitch translated the works of his acquaintance Franz Kafka. At the time, Ravitch wanted to give his first-born son seven names, so that the child might choose his favourite when he grew up. Yosl became so enamoured with Kafka’s works that I’m surprised he didn’t change his name to Franz.

I could tell you a lengthy tale about Ravitch’s adventures Down Under. I have spent years reading and translating his journals and letters, poring over the archives that Yosl entrusted to me, imagining through the black-and-white photos he took, his journeys and adventures. The man left behind an enormous legacy of a life meticulously recorded, often in minute detail. His thoughts, his dreams, his impressions of places and people, his musings on why Melbourne of 1933 had forty-eight Albert Streets; his surprise upon his first encounter with an Indigenous man, in the domed Reading Room of the State Library of Victoria. The ‘wild man’ of his imaginings took the form of an Aboriginal gentleman, seated at a wooden table next to him, who wore a suit and bowler hat, and was reading the Argus newspaper.

I could describe how he travelled across the outback on a mail truck with a fifteen-year-old Aboriginal boy named Angus as his guide. He writes that the boy begged to be bought from his father for forty shillings, so that Ravitch would take him along with him wherever he travelled. Instead, the Yiddish poet gave him a bag of lollies and the teenager gave up his dreams of adventure. The driver, an Italian immigrant, spoke no English. (Recently, I have been able to trace this man’s story, too.)

I could tell you how, along their journey, these three unlikely companions would sit by a bonfire at night, one dreaming of his home town back in Poland, writing in his journal in Yiddish about a new moon, strange constellations high in the desert sky, and his impressions of Australia, with its cartography taking on the ‘appearance of a human head, with a sharp nose. It reclines back, with its nose pointed up to the Heavens’. Ravitch was a dreamer, travelling across a land that rose from the Dreamtime. But the black people’s Dreaming and the white people’s dreams for the land were as diametrically opposed as the colours themselves.

WHEN YOSL FIRST gave me his father’s diaries to translate from the Yiddish, many years ago, I was reluctant to publish them. I had worked for a brief period in Aboriginal health with the Gagaju Tribe in Arnhem Land in the late 1980s, and developed a strong affinity with the tribal elders and their mesmerising stories about the spirit of the land. I was taken aback by Ravitch’s attitude to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. He was astonished to learn that at the time, in an area of half a million square miles, there lived only twenty-five thousand people, of
which only a fifth were white. His answer to how the Aboriginal problem would be resolved, if in fact a Jewish settlement were to be established: ‘The blacks cannot be regarded as the owners of the land. A crazy idea! They are on the lowest rung of civilisation. They could be allotted a few thousand square miles of land and be taught to work the land.’

As uncomfortable as this attitude made me feel, his words were in keeping with colonial attitudes of the time. In contrast to this statement, I kept looking at the photos Yosl had given me of his father’s trip, and the poignant captions Ravitch had written beside them. The look of dispossession in his Aboriginal subjects’ eyes reminded Ravitch of the plight of the Jews. Yosl, his son, who arrived in Melbourne in 1937, would go on to be one of the first of a group of social realist painters that included Albert Tucker, Noel Counihan and Sidney Nolan, who would paint Aborigines as a neglected and disenfranchised people, refugees in their own land. Yosl writes in What I Meant to Say, a book of his stories put together by his dear friend Ruth Bondy: ‘The first Aborigine I ever saw was standing outside the Melbourne Town Hall playing a tune from an American musical on a eucalyptus leaf. Totally uprooted. The Aborigines reminded me of the Jews. I saw their plight… I was the first painter in Australia who painted urban Aborigines.’

Others were to follow in Ravitch’s outback footsteps, including Steinberg from the Freeland League. A pastoral firm even offered vast tracts of land for settlement in the Kimberleys, stretching from the north of Western Australia into the Northern Territory. The plans, although they seemed promising at one stage, ended up, like other visionaries’ proposed Jewish utopias in places as far-flung as Ecuador, Uganda and Madagascar, going nowhere. But for a time, Melech Ravitch became involved in a serious investigation of the Kimberleys. He brought his wife and his children, Yosl and Ruth, to live in Melbourne. Ruth, now in her nineties, still lives here. She had a long and successful career as a beautiful and innovative dancer, and a lifelong relationship with the painter Jim Wigley. Yosl eventually studied in the National Gallery School, until the outbreak of War World II. He served for four and a half years in the Australian Army, where he met my father, and the story of my own journey towards Yosl Bergner and Melech Ravitch began.

THERE IS SO much to say about Ravitch, so many stories to tell. As Yosl puts it: ‘I’m still pregnant to father. Once I start talking about him there’s no end to it. One day I came to terms with it – that I would know father but that he would never know me.’

And maybe that is where our stories intersect. We spend our youth running away from our childhood, and the rest of our lives trying to recapture it. In writing about Yosl Bergner and Melech Ravitch, a father and his child, perhaps I am trying to find my own father again – a simple tailor, who did not leave behind manuscripts
or photos, diaries or archives. His stories were stitched into the fabric that made up my life, and maybe it is through a Yiddish poet and his son, a painter, that I am trying to find the pattern of my own life, unravelling my father’s story, and chasing after loose threads.

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IT’S September 2010, one of those gloriously bright, almost clichéd Perth afternoons. My husband and I haven’t yet separated, but we will soon. At the moment, though, we have a house to sell, one that’s been on the market for six weeks without an offer. The agent tells us it’s slow out there, and we shouldn’t worry, but I’m convinced this house is overflowing with accumulated stress, and that people walking through the front door are repelled by the weight of our tension. My solution is to redecorate, to fill our space with shades of yellow – potted marigold on the front doorstep, a pastel sketch of a haloed naked girl, tulips in a vase. Yellow, I tell myself, will bring joy. Yellow will change everything. In any case, the act of redecorating comforts me. I’ve read about this before – it’s the process rather than the result, the act of moving things around, a feeling of newness. Rupture: that’s the word the essayist Pauline Garvey uses for it. I’m trying to rupture my routine, my circumstances.

‘Mummy, what’s that?’ my son asks.

My children, aged three and two, are supposed to be having quiet time, but my son can’t sleep, or doesn’t want to, so he’s downstairs playing by the window. The sun lights up the couch and his hair too; it looks like fairytale gold spun out of straw. He is fixated on something outside.

‘What have you found, hon?’

‘It’s yellow. It’s yellow and funny and it’s stuck on the ground.’ He pauses. ‘Mummy, I think it’s a bird.’

I move to the window. He’s right. It is a bird: a canary. And it’s in shock.

WHEN I WAS little my dad would bring home all manner of ailing birds. He’d house them in an emptied-out laundry hamper, and for a week or two my sisters and I would peep through the criss-crosses of plastic, and fight over who was
going to give out the feed. Mostly these birds would be magpies or pigeons with limp wings. But every now and then we’d hear the garage door open, and Dad’s footsteps bounding up the stairs. ‘Quick, quick!’ he’d yell, and we’d see he had a dazed budgie or a canary in his hands. My parents worked well together: Mum making a human nest with the curve of her palms; Dad producing an old shoebox with biro-sized holes in the lid, cutting up an apple, waiting, hoping, for a small chirp that would say this bird was going to be okay. My sisters and I would be waiting, too, because, if the bird happened to make it, we’d be able to name a new pet.

It always fascinated me, this ease with which we could change the way something existed in the world just by naming it. On those long waiting-for-the-budgie/canary-to-chirp days, I’d speculate what the bird’s name might have been in the home it came from, and how long it would take for it to start responding to the name we’d choose, and whether it would miss its old one, or just be happy with our inevitably better Lucky or Cotton or Sky.

Even as a child I equated naming with power. I would think about this constantly, saying my many names over and over again. Papas. Maria Papas. Maria Andoni (which distinguished me from the other Maria-cousins by identifying me as belonging to my dad). And then there was my legal surname – the one printed on my birth certificate – which was sixteen letters long and broke down into ‘The People of Father Michael’, and which I vowed never to officially change, because it held a hidden, if patriarchal, history of who I was.

Who had power? Father Michael had power. Men had power. I knew this because my mother, and her mother, and the mother before her, all routinely buried their names beneath the gold of their wedding bands.

Captain James Cook and Matthew Flinders clearly had power. And so did the Australian Customs Service. In 1950 Customs had enough power to tell my paternal grandfather that the name Argiris was too obscure for the Australian tongue, and that from now on the name Jack would be an appropriate substitute.

It was a funny little power, this naming power, unquestioned and non-controversial. I knew that much. Why else would women simply take on their husbands’ names? And why did all the Greeks of my parents’ generation automatically christen us one thing and enrol us at school as another?

On one of those bird-waiting days I watched my mother give whispery kisses to a barely moving canary, and I realised that in the space of about three years she had lost both her Christian name and her surname. The first was changed for her by the government and the second by my dad. I blurted out my discovery: ‘What was it like? To change every sound and all the syllables?’

My mother shrugged. ‘It’s just what was done.’
I’M FORTUNATE TODAY because my parents happen to be in Perth for the weekend. One phone call and they’re over: Mum making that palm-cave again, Dad sorting out an old shoebox.

‘You got the Yellow Pages?’ he asks.

‘What for?’

‘So I can find you seed and a cage.’

‘I don’t want to keep the bird,’ I say. ‘You don’t need to buy stuff.’

The canary is firmly tucked away in my mother’s grasp. I can see his beak deep in the hole her hands have created, but he hardly moves. My mother draws him to her chest. ‘What are you going to do, then? You can’t leave him like this. He’ll die.’

‘We’ll find its home,’ I reply, in part to my son, too, so as not to get his hopes up.

‘You do that,’ Mum says. There’s a certain tone to her voice.

‘Mum,’ I say.

‘The very idea of you finding his home is impossible.’

‘I’m too busy for a pet.’

‘You know it’s good luck,’ Dad adds.

‘Where’d you get that from?’

‘Your yiayia,’ he replies, just as he’s leaving for the pet store. ‘She used to love birds, remember?’

MY DAD WAS five when he came to Australia. My mother was twenty. The year she turned forty was a milestone: I was seventeen, her eldest child, and soon to be leaving home for uni and the city. Back then I thought, in that very self-absorbed teenage way, that all her crying was due to me moving. But later, as an adult, and especially as a mother, I came to understand that she wasn’t just letting me go – she was reliving her own desire to leave and the impact it had on her life. At forty, she recently told me, she became acutely aware she had been Australian as long as she had been Greek, a Sylvia as long as she had been an Argiri. Having just completed a trip to her homeland, she felt as if she belonged nowhere, neither Greek nor Australian, xeni, a stranger in both her countries.

In Greek the term xenos encompasses ‘foreigner’ and ‘migrant’ in the same breath, as ‘stranger’ and ‘strange’. It is not a one-directional term. A person new to a town might be seen as a foreigner, but in the eyes of this foreigner the xenoi are the locals. Like many things, it’s a matter of perspective. The outside, according to Madan Sarup, who wrote extensively on the migrant experience, ‘is what the inside is not…enemies are the wilderness that violates friends’ homeliness…but a stranger is
neither friend nor enemy’. Much like Derrida’s *pharmakon*, which can be a remedy or a poison, a stranger, Sarup suggests, stands between inside and outside, both physically close and culturally distant.

Don’t I know this well. ‘They are xenoi to us, foreign, unknown.’ That’s what my family often said about anybody who wasn’t Greek. I used to hate this. To imply that any non-Greek person I had affection for, romantic or otherwise, was a *xenos* and therefore ‘not for us’ was to keep that person at a distance and to deny him or her (and me) the emotional and physical intimacies I felt others took for granted. So I pulled away from the Greek community. I developed contempt, especially against the Greeks from the city, whom I saw as too tight-knit and too unwilling to associate with anyone except each other. Subconsciously or consciously, I detached myself. I was living in a country town, going to a school where the most common physical feature was blond hair and the next most common was an Indigeneous skin colour. Had I limited myself to those who were ‘for us’, my adolescence would’ve been rather lonely.

So I did what any good teenager would do. I rebelled. I sneaked out through windows, and found myself at the kind of bonfire parties where girls lost their virginity beneath trees or got raped or suffered a fuzzier yet more damaging in-between. Most of my friends’ parents, regardless of nationality, were hesitant to let us go.

But I didn’t see any of that. I wanted what I wasn’t allowed to have. ‘I’m never marrying a Greek boy.’ That’s what I used to say. ‘They expect women to wait on them … They live with their mothers until forever … They love their cars, love their soccer, sit around in cafés and boast about the real estate they’ll one day purchase…’

I developed my own stereotypes. What’s more, I sought these stereotypes out, to confirm them.

Perhaps this is why I always found it difficult to own the migrant story. It was something I knew: my heritage, but not my past. I could appreciate what had happened in history – my great-grandfather’s journey, my grandparents’, my parents’ – but again, only from a distance. My story was different. In fact, I didn’t think I even had a story. I was born here. I slotted in. Greek sometimes and Australian at others.

Consequently, the word ‘migrant’ took on a different set of connotations for me. It wasn’t simply about geographical movements or countries far away. Rather, when I thought of ‘migrant’ I thought of the feast days: St Nicholas Day, sweating in large numbers outside the Greek Hall; St John the Baptist Day, dipping an ornate crucifix into the fishing harbour; and midnight Easter Saturday, singing the Resurrection outdoors and by candlelight. What linked these events was a familiar sense of duality. I liked sharing these experiences with my family. But I was conscious that these events not only made us different, but also – since they were
outside and in spaces shared by fishermen, people driving by and residential partygoers – exposed our differences. On most occasions I did the necessary slotting – demarcating my Australian and Greek selves as appropriate – but on these days, feast days, I saw myself as a spectacle, a migrant. I saw myself as strange.

MY SON AND I knock on doors up and down the street. My son holds my hand. No one is able to help us, and after ten or eleven houses my son asks, ‘Can we name him Jigalee?’

‘We’ll see,’ I reply, not wanting to say yes, but also not wanting the tears that might come with a no. ‘Let’s try this next street, too.’

We walk on: wandering, knocking, wandering, watching. Ironically, the suburb we live in was once a market garden, populated by Mediterranean and south-eastern European migrants. Over time the growing of fruit and vegetables moved further north to another wave of newcomers – this time from Asia. Now, the (mostly) Italians and Croatians in this area are well into their old age, and while some of them are stubbornly holding on to their 1960s bungalows, many have sliced and subdivided and made way for townhouses like mine. Regardless, this is still a suburb full of olive trees, the loquat of my childhood, figs, lemons and grapevines which will soon be blooming into a hard, unripe, matte fruit: the same fruit my cousins and I used to pelt each other with at the back of my grandmother’s house.

I remember my grandmother both vaguely and vibrantly. She would deep-fry sticky doughy treats on a cooker she had set up in her outdoor laundry. She had two aviaries: one you could walk through and another, smaller one for her canaries. She was fat and robust. In love with Paul Newman. Different to the stereotypical Greek grandmother because she never wore black, and because, despite her fears about xenoi, she had befriended women with surnames like Warren, Pickersgill and McKeig. I remember Easter lunch at her house: lamb on a spit, and a stuffing made of rice and chopped liver bits, which I ate and enjoyed until the year I discovered what they actually were. I remember playing in the branches of her fig tree. And I remember standing by her floral skirt, looking at tiny eggs nestled like a secret, listening to her whistle and sing an old Greek tune about a bird that was driving her crazy. What’s gone is the name for those treats. And the words to her song.

I MOVED TO the city when I was seventeen, met the man I’d marry at nineteen, and somewhere between then and the age of thirty-six I began to forget. I think my parents did, too.

My grandmother died, before I finished university. Her last words – ‘Remember St Nicholas’ – resonated for a while, and I faithfully made a yearly trip to my regional hometown for this early December feast day. Always, during that service, I would think how appropriate it was that such a community would choose the
patron saint of travellers for their church’s namesake. I was now swinging between the city and the country, more comfortable in moving spaces – on a train, in a shifting crowd, or on the edge of the ocean – than in any fixed location. Because I wasn’t sure what to call home I felt some connection, some empathy, for those who had built the church.

But a few years on, the nostalgia of my grandmother’s ghostly presence on the wooden pew three rows down from the front would diminish, and I would once again situate myself as an outsider looking in, this time my Australian self, finding it difficult to identify with what was largely an ageing city crowd coming to a tiny town parish for the day, being ultra-nationalistic, refusing to speak English, holding on to a version of the past: a version they brought with them, and which seemed to me to be almost non-existent, except in the performance of it.

‘ANY LUCK?’ MY mother asks when we get home.

I shake my head.

My daughter is awake now. ‘We have a yellow bird,’ she says, smiling and nodding, wide-eyed and animated.

‘He’s going to be a Jigalee,’ her brother informs her.

Dad’s car is in the driveway. He comes through the door with a cage and a shopping bag full of bird-things. The canary is covered up in a little shoebox. There are holes in the lid, just as I remember. I shift this lid a little, peek in through a corner. He’s still crouched, still not moving. I can see a sliced apple in there, untouched. ‘Will he be all right?’

‘He’ll be fine,’ my mother replies.

Dad sets up everything, puts the perches in place, the cuttlefish on the wire. He fills a tray with seed and another with water.

Mum takes the bird out once more. She shows him the cage, puts him in. He dives for the seed.

‘Poor thing. Must have been hungry.’

‘Anyway,’ Dad says. ‘We’re making dinner at your sister’s if you’re interested.’

‘Sure. Thanks.’

And then, just like that, the two of them are gone.

IT’S GETTING LATE now. The pattern of light has moved away from the couch. Outside, the sun is low to the west. I don’t know where my husband is, but he should be home by now. I fix the tulips, rearranging them so there is greater symmetry. We have a cold marriage, I think. One where there is little common
ground. I don’t look back and wish I had married a Greek boy. And I don’t have the impression my relationship is what it is because of our cultural differences. But I do wish I had tried less to slot in, tried less to be the chameleon I learned to be.

‘Who wants to say goodnight to Jigalee?’ I ask, trailing an old cot sheet behind me.

I hear two voices in unison. ‘Me! Me!’

I cover him. ‘You know, my yiayia used to sing a song about canaries.’

‘What was it?’

It hurts that I can’t remember. The tune is pretty much there. I can even hear it: a bouncy, bouzouki-sounding thing, much the same as many of the other songs my grandmother used to sing. I know the dance that goes along with it too, a celebratory kalamatinos – performed in a half-circle with all of us holding hands, several steps forward, a couple back – but the only words that come to mind are kanarini mou glyko. I sing these words for the children, and fill the blanks with ‘something-something-something’.

The kids stare at me. All I can think of is that they don’t know this part of me, and that my husband hardly knows it either, and that the last time I danced to this song was at our wedding, and – now that I think about it – he did not join in.

‘DO YOU FEEL very Greek anymore?’ I ask my mother just before dinner.

My dad has often given me a stereotyped version of his schoolboy ethnicity – fancy lunches, hand-me-down clothes and chooks in the yard – but he has also told me that his earliest off-the-boat memory was the sound of a cheering crowd coming from a taxi radio. Aussie Rules has been a big part of his life; soccer hasn’t. He was raised here. Perhaps given slightly different circumstances he might’ve even been born here. My Greekness, then, feels as though it comes from the women in my family. But my grandmother is gone, and my mother has long stopped reading Romanzo in favour of Victorian classics.

‘No, not really,’ she says.

Then she tells me there is little point in squeezing a heritage that is lost in time as well as space.

When I ask what she means, she says, ‘You come to a new country and you hold so tight to what you had before, and then you go back and see things have changed, just as they’ve changed in the country you’re now in, and you realise some of the traditions and values you were keeping weren’t part of the place you came from, but of that time. It’s better really, to release your fist a little.’

Then she says there are traditions she does keep. Not for show, but for herself.
Fasting, for example, which she does for a fraction of the forty days she used to as a child. Feasts too. And in particular, the past-midnight Easter soup with her sister, who serves a mild *avgolemono*, rather than the innards in broth my uncle used to like. Things change. They are transformed. Goat’s milk is pungent now, too strong a smell for her southern-hemisphere nose. Homemade grape or quince jam is served on toast and not in a little glass bowl.

‘And no one wants liver bits in their rice anymore,’ I interrupt.

‘Liver bits are from your father’s side, not mine.’

‘Do you remember Yiayia’s canary song?’

‘I do,’ she says. She sings me a bit, but I want more. I have a thirst for every word, not just the ones that come easiest to mind.

My mother stops. There is a small absence, a hollow in the conversation, which she soon fills: ‘I’m making *tiropitakia*, if you want.’

For the first time in years I sit across from her as she butters strips of filo for the cheese triangles I always considered to be authentically Greek, and I am shocked to see her open a packet of Kraft cheddar.

‘You mix cheddar in there now?’

Mum looks at me. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Ever since you were little.’

‘But cheddar’s not Greek.’

‘You complaining?’

I shake my head.

‘You sure?’

‘What’s it supposed to be?’

My mother shrugs. She is nonchalant and dismissive. ‘I can’t remember.’

Marc Augé, in his book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Verso, 1995), sums it up nicely. He speaks of patron saints and annual feast days, and he writes that in many cases these observations don’t just disappear: they are transformed. What I see now, Augé would argue, is something projected at a distance: the place I used to believe I lived in from day to day (or at least the conditions of my living), but which now I’m being invited to see as fragments of history.

I pick at the scraps of filo. This is exactly like the time I learned that my mother’s Greek lamb recipe was not from the village at all, but rather from *Woman’s Day*.

TWO DAYS PASS before I realise I can search for the song on YouTube. I type in the words *kanarini mou glyko*. I’m not sure of my spelling, and because I’m using English language, letters, not Greek, I half expect to get no results.
There are more than sixty. I scroll down, click on an icon of a woman wearing a red dress. A circle revolves, footage loads.

My heartbeat is so loud it threatens to overpower the music. This whole thing seems so sordid and exciting. That I can access what’s lost from my brain on something so public. That my grandmother can survive past her flesh and be given a different kind of life. And yet it doesn’t escape my attention that I’m memorialising her in the same way as a museum might. What I’m creating is another site of memory: the internet, rendered a sacred portal to what is no longer accessible, no longer ‘a part of everyday experience’.

The music begins. It is so familiar, so comforting. Madan Sarup asks us, ‘How can the singing of a particular song…have such an emotional charge?’ I don’t know the answer. All I can say is that it does. It really does.

The woman in the red dress sings with a Turkish lady, the two of them swapping languages and verses, changing the song yet again, making me like it even more, shifting my memory of it, so that it’s no longer only about experience, but also about the melding of politics, and cultures, and countries.

There she is. Not my grandmother. But her voice. Or at least the voice of the stories she once told. And it’s not just the song; it’s the dance as well, and the look on all those faces. I’ve seen that look before. This is a panagyri, a festival. The tables haven’t been cleared, and the music’s begun, and the crowd is dancing, and smiling, and everything’s looking gluttonous and indulgent. I am seduced. I succumb to the disease of nostalgia. I can’t tell what’s worrying anyone. I can’t tell what’s worrying anyone. I can’t tell what their problems are. What’s written on their faces is pure euphoria, a rupture to (and maybe rapture for) the pain of everyday life.

_Ela konda mou_
_stin aggalia mou_
_na se hortaso_
_me ta filia mou._

My Greek isn’t the best. I can’t read and I struggle to speak it, but I understand fairly well. This may be a song about a woman who is driven to distraction by her canary, but it goes much deeper. It’s also about her longing, her want.

Come close to me
into my arms
so I can satisfy you
with my kisses.
Time is spherical. I learned this from the nature poet Annamaria Weldon. Time is not just behind us or in front, a linear trajectory from past to present to future. Time is beneath our feet. It is above us, around us. We carry it in our flesh.

My house does sell. We don’t need to move because for the moment we’re able to rent it, but in a way I wish we could move, if only for the opportunity to start out fresh.

The compulsion to reorder grows in me. I change the colour of the bathroom towels; buy a new floor rug, a duvet. I watch myself as if there are two of me, one doing, one reflecting. Redecoration, Pauline Garvey confirms, is an attempt to reinvigorate a perception of staleness, or a way to impose a missing dynamism, a lack you feel about yourself. It is, she says, closely linked with identity. I can see that now.

We do keep the canary. He comes to me: this stranger with both the remedy I need and the poison. He ruptures my routine, my thinking. And at the same time as my marriage is pulling apart, something else is piecing together: me. We name the canary, change the way he exists in the world. Change the way we exist too.

In December, after my husband has gone, I put my hand in Jigalee’s cage. He climbs all over my fingers, my knuckles. I can feel the tickle of his claws and the brush of his feathers. But when I go to grab him, he jumps away. He sings: beautiful, haunting, loving melodies. I am ambivalent about keeping a bird in a cage. I understand captivity is all he’s ever known, but that doesn’t make it right.

Now and again I watch kanarini mou glyko on YouTube. It speaks to me, the closeness yearned for in this song: how much I crave that same closeness; how unfamiliar it is to me. There is certainly a power to naming, and especially to renaming. Some might say there is also dissidence in keeping a hidden name, swinging between multiple identities, never quite allowing those from one segment of our lives access to our other. But I also know the long-term effects of slotting in, and the difficulties of pretending.

In Greece a festival is what tightens a social bond, what removes all barriers, if only for a night. And yet it also works on a more insidious level. You can tell an insider, by whether he or she knows the intricacies of that community’s dance. The steps are seemingly easy to pick up, the newcomer is invited in but, inevitably clumsy, he or she is relegated to the end where rhythm and beat no longer matter. In the meantime those with experience remain at the front, in step, in time, leading the group. In many cultures, if you learn the music, the song, the stories, you survive. You bring one another close. But how do you do this without burying your past? How do you locate your self? How do you ask, ‘Who am I? Where have I come from?’ How do you say, ‘Acknowledge me, please, without erasing my heritage, my identity’?
If the migrant story is to survive past me and past the next generation, then my children need to know a few things. They will never be insiders – at least not to a collective Greek identity and not to an outdated colonial notion of Australia. I don’t expect them to just slot in or divide themselves into their many aspects of community. But I do expect them to enter another type of knowledge, a mixed heritage, a tasting plate, transformed to their own liking, received from and given to as many others as possible.

I take their hands, one each on either side of me, and show them a few dance steps. Right now I am the string on the bouzouki, the carpet under my toes, the warmth of soft child-skin.

Time hovers. It haunts and teases. It is the ball we move in. It is the history we walk on. This comforts me on many levels, because it means what I had forgotten needn’t be so far away.

Maria Papas’s stories and essays have appeared in *Page Seventeen*, *Lines in the Sand* and *The Reader*. In 2011 her play *Arbour Day* was performed at His Majesty’s Theatre in Perth, where it won the Maj Monologues Competition. Maria has completed a Master of Creative Arts, producing a manuscript titled *Familiar Places*, which was longlisted for the Australian/Vogel Literary Award and shortlisted for the TAG Hungerford Award. She recently began a PhD.

**Works Cited**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjiB3COuJ_o


Cultural creep
Australian arts on the march
Nick Bryant

TODAY it would be called a reality show, but in the early 1950s the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Incognito was billed as light entertainment. Alas, no recording of the radio program survives in the corporation’s vast audio archive. Nor does it earn a mention in Ken Inglis’s two-volume authorised history of the ABC. Yet Incognito is one of the most influential programs the national broadcaster has ever put to air, if only because it caught the ear of the Melbourne-based critic AA Phillips. The idea, thought Phillips, was quaint enough: to pit a local artist against a foreign guest, with the audience asked to adjudicate. Occasionally, listeners would favour the home-grown performer, thus producing ‘a nice glow of patriotic satisfaction’. The program, however, was founded on the belittling premise that ‘the domestic product will be worse than the imported article.’ Phillips coined a neat description for this ‘disease of the Australian mind’ and immediately his aphorism, described in a 1950 Meanjin essay of the same name, took hold: ‘the cultural cringe’.

Four years later, Manning Clark issued something of a rebuttal, arguing that Europe was ‘no longer the creative centre’ and rejecting the notion that Australians were philistines who had pitched their tents in the ‘Australian Cultural Desert’. In his 1954 essay ‘Rewriting Australian History’, he exhorted his compatriots to ‘drop the idea that our past has irrevocably condemned us to the role of cultural barbarians’. Clark was swimming against a rip. By the end of the 1950s, Patrick White’s more durable polemic The Prodigal Son described his miserable return from England to a country where in ‘all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness’. Robin Boyd weighed in soon after with The Australian Ugliness, which bemoaned the craven Americanisation of local culture; then Donald Horne published The Lucky Country, an even more excoriating attack. It was as if a team of scientists had unlocked the country’s DNA and found cultural inferiority imprinted in the molecular code. ‘Lucky country thinking’ came to have a similar emasculating effect as ‘cringe thinking’. Horne and Phillips framed the national debate so rigidly that it was hard for dissenting intellectuals to escape its confines. More depressing
still, few seemed to want to – bagging Australia became a badge of sophistication: European sophistication. To be cultured in Australia was to deny Australian culture.

Neither was the completion of the Sydney Opera House, Australia’s most glorious cultural cathedral, an unambiguously positive development. It was not merely that its opening celebrations featured Rolf Harris singing ‘Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport’, a populist counterpoint to Sir Charles Mackerras conducting the prelude to Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Nor that the ribbon-cutting duties were performed by the gloved hand of the monarch. No, the more lasting reminder was that the building’s staggeringly beautiful exterior was the product of a Danish imagination, while its humdrum interior was the work of a local journeyman architect appointed after Jørn Utzon’s enforced resignation. A building of multiple entendres, the Opera House became a landmark both to Australia’s rising self-confidence and its lazy embrace of the ‘middling standard’.

Fifty years on, ‘lucky country thinking’ is still potent. Australians are still cashing in on resources, and Horne’s thesis about second-rate politicians seems as resonant at the start of this decade as it was half a century ago. But the thesis is no longer uncontested. The realisation is dawning that after successfully avoiding the last three global recessions this country has made much of its own luck, through bold economic reform and judicious regulation. The country has found its ‘sweet spot’, according to the political commentator Peter Hartcher. Fellow journalist George Megalogenis has crowned it ‘The Australian Moment’.

What of cringe-thinking? Gough Whitlam’s nationalism, and the artistic advancement it nourished, dealt it a severe blow, as did celebrations for the Bicentennial and Sydney Olympics. An ever more interconnected world has made foreign books and films immediately available; the cultural lag is not so limiting, nor is there the nagging feeling that the country’s location means trailing the zeitgeist. Yet vestiges of the creep still linger, like a once-virulent virus that has been controlled but not cured. Happily, a remedy lies beyond these shores, where something more communicable and infectious has taken hold: Australia’s cultural creep.

HOLLYWOOD’S ANNUAL ACADEMY Awards have become a sort of cinematic Olympics, one of the rare occasions each year when Australia’s cultural success internationally is given mainstream domestic coverage. Channel Nine’s show-business correspondent, Richard Wilkins, patrols the red carpet and after-parties much like a sports reporter hugs the boundary line and gate-crashes the post-match celebrations in the sheds. His brief is to bag a few A-list celebrities, and also to pass on the good wishes of the nation to Australian nominees about to enter the Kodak Theatre. Given the patriotic flavour of the coverage, and the yearning for green and gold statuettes, it is surprising that the noun Oscar has not yet been turned into a fully-fledged verb, as in ‘to podium’ or ‘to medal’.

NICK BRYANT: Cultural creep
In a nation keen to quantify its per capita success, the Academy Awards also provide statistical proof of advancement. Prior to the mid-1990s, Peter Finch was the only Australian to be nominated for lead actor, winning, posthumously, in 1976 for *Network*. Since then three men, Geoffrey Rush, Russell Crowe and Heath Ledger, have been nominated six times between them, and taken home two gongs: Rush for *Shine* and Crowe for *Gladiator*. Ledger, like Finch, won after his death, for best supporting actor in *The Dark Knight*. Likewise, during the first sixty-nine years of the Oscars only four Australian actresses were recognised in lead and supporting categories. In the sixteen years since, six have shared twelve nominations, among them two winners, Nicole Kidman for *The Hours* and Cate Blanchett for *The Aviator*.

With the exception of Mel Gibson, for *Braveheart*, the Academy has not been kind to Australian directors. Yet Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi, George Miller, Scott Hicks, Chris Noonan and Baz Luhrmann have all won acclaim in Hollywood. There has also been considerable behind-the-scenes success, with Australians winning for cinematography, art direction and costume design, and in the scientific and technical categories. Twice in the past decade Australian films have won for animation: *Harvie Krumpet* in 2003 and *The Lost Thing* in 2010.

Some Oscar successes have been metaphoric. Geoffrey Rush won for playing David Helfgott, a schizophrenic Melbourne-born pianist who took by storm London’s Royal College of Music. The first of Cate Blanchett’s five nominations came from her rendering of a British monarch in *Elizabeth*, while her Best Supporting Actress Oscar was awarded for her portrayal of the first lady of American film, Katharine Hepburn.

Perhaps it would help, in terms of public awareness, if Australia had a *Chariots of Fire* moment: in 1982 the Liverpudlian screenwriter Colin Welland shouted ‘The Brits are coming!’ as he held aloft his Oscar like a musket. But, then, it would seem a little after the fact, as the Aussies have arrived already. In the academy’s first seven decades, Australia won just fourteen statuettes, with almost a third of them awarded for costume design. In the past sixteen years alone, there have been twenty-four. Gold, gold, gold.

The cultural creep has gone well beyond the red carpet in Tinseltown. The judges at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival awarded the Camera d’Or first film award to Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah*. The following year, the jury at Sundance presented David Michod’s *Animal Kingdom* with the World Cinema prize. What made their success even more emblematic was that Michod and Thornton had told stories from the underworld of Melbourne and the otherworld of the red centre that were emphatically Australian.

On Broadway the Australian crawl is nearing a strut. In recent years Geoffrey Rush has taken two local productions to New York, Eugene Ionesco’s absurdist drama *Exit the King* and *The Diary of a Madman*, where theatregoers paid as much as
$700 for a seat. His performance as the 400-year-old King Berenger earned him his first Tony, thus completing the coveted triple crown of acting: Oscar, Tony and Emmy. ‘Put simply,’ wrote John Heilpern, the theatre critic of the New York Observer, ‘Mr Rush is giving one of the greatest virtuoso performances I’ve ever seen.’ Yet Australians did not require a New Yorker to tell them that, for they had already recognised his brilliance themselves.

Cate Blanchett’s theatrical success in America has, if anything, been even more stunning, for the simple reason that the Sydney Theatre Company’s A Streetcar Named Desire turned the cultural cringe completely on its head. What chutzpah to take a ‘made in Australia’ production of one of America’s most celebrated plays to New York and Washington. Again, the reviewers gushed. Blanchett had scaled ‘the Everest of modern American drama’, wrote John Lahr in the New Yorker. ‘I don’t expect to see a better performance of this role in my lifetime.’ He also praised Joel Edgerton’s Stanley as ‘superb’ for his ‘low-key roughness’. Again, there was no need for outside validation. Blanchett and her troupe had crossed the Pacific with standing ovations from Sydney audiences ringing in their ears.

In promoting Australia’s cultural success abroad, actors and actresses have doubtless been some of the most prominent ambassadors: Rush, Blanchett, Crowe, Kidman, Guy Pearce, Toni Collette, Eric Bana, Rachel Griffiths, Ryan Kwanten, Rose Byrne, Abbie Cornish, Sam Worthington, Hugo Weaving, David Wenham, Naomi Watts, Judy Davis, the up-and-coming Mia Wasikowska and the Tony-award-winning Hugh Jackman, who won for playing Peter Allen in The Boy from Oz. The list is by no means exhaustive.

But what of the writers, poets, musicians, architects, dancers and artists? They, too, are just as much a part of the creep, even if the conversation about Australia’s cultural exports so often begins and ends with its actors. Had Channel Nine despatched a reporter to cover, say, the Man Booker Prize down the years, they would have toasted the success of Thomas Keneally and Peter Carey (twice), DBC Pierre and Aravind Adiga, and also have rooted for short-listed authors, like Tim Winton (twice), David Malouf, Kate Grenville, MJ Hyland and Steve Toltz. What makes these writers so culturally relevant is not that they were recognised by international juries but that they speak with a uniquely Australian voice. Peter Carey may reside in New York but The True History of the Kelly Gang and Oscar and Lucinda, not to mention many of his other works, are insistently antipodean novels. Thomas Keneally may have won the Booker for Schindler’s List, but he was also nominated for The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, another exceptionally Australian work. Tim Winton is Australia’s great laureate of the ocean. Kate Grenville has become the literary custodian of its colonial past. Cloudstreet and The Secret River could not have come from any other country.
The Slap and A Fraction of the Whole, two of the more recent books to catch the eye of the Booker judges, have also brought contemporary Australian voices into the international realm. The Wall Street Journal, in a generous review, described Toltz’s debut novel as ‘Voltaire-meets-Vonnegut’, but its rollicking eclecticism is more a product of his multi-ethnic background: his Polish, Lithuanian, New Zealand and Palestinian grandparents. Toltz explained himself more simply, however, when asked on the ABC to characterise his ethnicity: ‘I am Australian.’ In The Slap – the book is stacked high in British bookshops – international readers have been introduced to the voice of a Greek-Australian, Christos Tsiolkas, although again the ‘Greek’ seems superfluous.

Perhaps it will take the Nobel Prize for Literature to bring Les Murray even greater local acclaim, but already he is venerated abroad. In 2007, the New Yorker adjudged him to be one of the three or four leading writers of poetry in English. Again, the voice is singularly, even obstreperously Australian, combining what The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature describes as ‘respect, even reverence, for the pioneers, the importance of the land and its shaping influence in the Australian character…such Bush-bred qualities as egalitarianism, practicality, straightforwardness and independence’. Fabulously uncomplicated, Murray has happily embraced his moniker, ‘the bush bard’ – one he shares with no less a figure than Henry Lawson – and also has described himself as the last of the Jindyworobaks, the literary movement in which white writers promoted Indigenous idioms.

In terms of Australia’s artistic self-worth, Murray would be an especially useful Nobel laureate, for his prize would be much less ambiguous than the one presented in 1973 to Patrick White. It would be interpreted as a home-grown victory. By contrast, the Cheltenham- and Cambridge-educated White was a writer of conflicted allegiances, who modelled his technique on the great Russian and French stylists, and who spoke with flinty contempt for his homeland. Here again we encounter the essential difference between Australia’s cultural ambassadors today and those from the recent past. Murray is unashamedly Australian. Local artists are no longer inhibited by the crippling self-consciousness once the norm, nor do they exhibit national loathing.

THE INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS of the comedian Chris Lilley, and the ways in which it differs from the experience of his forebear Barry Humphries, offers another case in point. Summer Heights High, his bullseye parody of suburban adolescence, proved such a hit on HBO that the American network co-produced the follow-up, Angry Boys. Yet Lilley continued to insert gags and references – like naming one of Gran’s guinea pigs Kerri-Anne – that only Australians would appreciate. Rather than eschew his home audience, he took it along for the ride, and his humour, though damning, remained affectionate. Humphries, by contrast, was merciless, and his comedy work betrayed the sourness and superiority of an exile.
There are other telling differences. Dame Edna and Sir Les Patterson were creatures of a monocultural country beset by a stultifying conservatism and conformism. Lilley’s ensemble of characters reveals Australia’s modern, multicultural face, the source of so much of its cultural vibrancy. Nor did Lilley have to become an expatriate to succeed. There is no longer the same rush to the international departure lounge – what Phillips called the ‘centrifugal pull of the great cultural metropolises’ – for promising young artists seeking to advance their careers.

In the meantime, the international honour roll grows. In music, we could speak of any number of groups in any number of genres. From Nick Cave to Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, the inaugural number one in the newly created world music chart; from the young composer James Ledger to the great Peter Sculthorpe, Australia’s Aaron Copland; from the world-renowned jazz trumpeter James Morrison to the Australian Chamber Orchestra, which The Guardian’s critic recently described as without peer in the world. Its leader, Richard Tognetti, who was taught to play the violin by the virtuoso William Primrose in their home town, Wollongong, tells a revealing story from the 1970s: a Japanese agent tried to book the ACO but suggested it would help if they discarded a few letters from their name. After all, the Australian Chamber Orchestra would draw bigger crowds. Needless to say, nobody makes that request any more.

In the visual arts, we could celebrate the work of the Aboriginal photographer Tracey Moffatt, the Egyptian-born sculptor Hany Armanious (Australia’s representative at the 2011 Venice Biennale), the video artist Shaun Gladwell or the Western Australian painter Brian Blanchflower – to name a few. As for Indigenous art, it may well be haunted still by ‘a shining dream’ of ‘international acceptance and global prestige’ as the writer Nicolas Rothwell recently argued, but it is on permanent display at the celebrated Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, with paintings, sculptures, boomerangs and barks from eight artists, including Yannima Tommy Watson, John Mawumdjul and Ningura Napurrula. The 1988 Dreamings exhibition on Park Avenue in New York was also more of a breakthrough than Rothwell concedes. Featuring more than a hundred works from Central Australia, Arnhem Land and the Cape York Peninsula, it had half a million visitors by the time it had travelled to Chicago and Los Angeles. Dreamings also provided the inspiration for the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia, which opened in 1997, the only permanent collection of Indigenous Australian art in America. The Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art in the Dutch city of Utrecht, another institution devoted solely to Australian work, has just celebrated its tenth anniversary. Indigenous art is also finding an appreciative audience in China, as Rothwell has pointed out. The Tu Di – Shen Ti (Land and Body) exhibition, showcasing works collected by the Ngaanyatjarra community from the Warburton Ranges in the Western Desert, opened at the Australian Embassy in Beijing in mid-2011 and has been touring the Chinese provinces. More than eighty-five thousand people have seen it.
In dance, there’s the Melbourne-based troupe Chunky Move, which in recent years has toured America, France, Germany, Lebanon, Hungary, Columbia, Japan, Belgium, Canada and Russia. In cabaret, the extraordinary Meow Meow. In architecture, Glenn Murcutt, winner of the Pritzker Prize and the Thomas Jefferson and Alvar Aalto medals. Admired for his use of simple materials like corrugated iron, and also his homespun inspiration, the Australian wool shed, Murcutt’s is a local aesthetic: an Australian pastoral. Home-grown architects were also much in evidence at the Beijing Olympics, where they were responsible for seven of the major legacy projects – including the celebrated ‘Water Cube’ by the Sydney practice PTW Architects.

In gaming, LA Noire, an homage to film noir produced by Team Bondi, became the first computer game ever to be shown at the Tribeca Film Festival. In movie animation, Animal Logic, the Sydney-based firm visual effects company behind Babe and Happy Feet, is a global centre of excellence. In another modish art form, the staging of extravagant spectacles and galas, the world leader is Ric Birch, the creative force behind the opening of the Beijing and Sydney games. In arts management, there is Michael Lynch, the former CEO of the Sydney Opera House who ran the South Bank in London and who is now in charge of Hong Kong’s arts precinct in Kowloon. In art criticism, Sebastian Smee of the Boston Globe won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. The story is repeated in every creative field.

THE POINT IS amply made. To use an unlovely phrase heard more commonly in diplomatic and sporting circles, Australia is punching above its weight in the arts and culture. The problem is not a lack of creativity or talent but rather a failure of self-realisation. Little wonder then that the conductor Alexander Briger brought together the Australian World Orchestra in August 2011, a band made up of ninety or so musicians from forty-five foreign ensembles. His intention was to highlight their international success at home. There ‘are so many Australian musicians holding these major positions with so many orchestras across the world,’ he told reporters, ‘and I doubt very much that the general public here knows who half these people are. So it’s time for them to finally receive their deserved recognition in Australia.’ Knowing his audience, Briger, the nephew of Sir Charles Mackerras, drew a sporting analogy: ‘You look at Cadel Evans and how he was celebrated recently. These musicians are the same. They really are the top of the top in their field, they have achieved amazing things.’

What makes this cultural impact all the more impressive is that Australia cannot boast a major governmental organisation devoted to touting its wares. There is no equivalent of the British Council, the Alliance Française or China’s Confucius Institutes. In the late 1990s the Australia International Cultural Council was created at the prompting of the then foreign affairs minister, Alexander Downer, to promote Australia as a ‘stable, sophisticated, innovative and creative nation with a rich and
diverse culture’. But it was only a consultative group, with the narrow remit of facilitating exhibitions within Australian embassies, and providing small travel grants for artists. That so few people even know of its existence speaks of its peripheral role. The Australia Council does not engage much in what it calls ‘The international projection’. Its budget to promote the arts abroad is just $2.5 million, less than 2% of its annual spending.

Instead, the main organisation entrusted with the national brand is Tourism Australia, which has tended to sabotage efforts at portraying this country as sophisticated, innovative and creative. Unconcerned about stereotyping the Land Down Under, the marketeers concluded long ago that clichés sell, regardless of the collateral cultural damage. Unfortunately, the arts do not have the financial means to produce a counter-narrative to the ‘dumb blonde’ image of Australia. The ‘Where the Bloody Hell Are You?’ campaign, widely regarded a failure, cost $180 million. The annual funding for the Australia Council is $175 million. Recent governments also have been poor in trumpeting artistic achievements. When the Gillard government released its discussion paper on National Cultural Policy, the first review since the landmark Creative Nation report of the Keating years, its authors noted that Australian artists ‘need to compete on the world stage’. It neglected the victories achieved already.

Fortunately, Australia can now call on some of its leading cultural castaways to make its case. Clive James, who left Sydney for Britain in the early 1960s, has often been portrayed in the Australian press as a disloyal knocker. Indeed, when he wrote in The Observer, after seeing the Opera House for the first time, that it resembled a ‘typewriter full of oyster shells’, it provoked a barrage of negative headlines. Yet James has long been a cheerleader, rejecting the ludicrous notion that Australia has never progressed much beyond adolescence and cannot be viewed as an artistically mature nation. ‘Australian actors and filmmakers and writers and arts people have been colonising the planet for years,’ he wrote in a review of Baz Luhrmann’s Australia, ‘and the jokes about Australia’s deficiency of culture are old hat, like all the jokes about Australians knowing nothing about wine. Australia killed the wine jokes by producing supertankers full of wine that the whole world wanted to drink and it killed the culture jokes by flooding the world with an outburst of quality remarkable for a country that looks big on the map but has fewer people in it than Mexico City.’ The world knows this, wrote James, but Australia’s intellectuals have not yet reached this self-realisation. Instead, ‘they persist in cherishing an inferiority complex so at odds with the facts that it amounts to a psychosis.’

THE PARADOX IS that the superiority complex cherished by British intellectuals and cultural brokers towards their cousins below the equator is largely a thing of the past. In consigning it to history, the permanent presence in Britain of expatriates like Clive James, Germaine Greer and the late Peter Porter has been
instrumental. Indeed, the very figures judged to have depleted Australia’s cultural stock in the 1960s and ‘70s through their exit to the UK have helped nourish a new sense of cultural parity between the two countries. Whether through the writing of James, the poetry of Porter, the acting of Blanchett or even the Aussie cookbooks and interior décor guides that weigh down the shelves at Waterstones, Britons in the know came to the realisation long ago that Australia is a creative hub.

Australia’s success abroad has also been founded on a much firmer base at home. Never before has the country’s cultural infrastructure been so strong. Canberra has a popular new National Portrait Gallery; Brisbane has the Gallery of Modern Art; Melbourne has an eye-catching new recital hall and is in the process of renovating its South Bank arts complex; Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art will soon have a bold new extension, and Cockatoo Island, one of the world’s most well-appointed venues, is finally being tapped (although imagine Cockatoo Island in the hands of Frank Gehry, or, better still, the team that came up with the Water Cube); Tasmania has the Museum of Old and New Art, which a correspondent for the New York Times called ‘the best museum you’ve never heard of’ – though in Australia you could hardly avoid mention of it. The arts are flourishing in unexpected corners of the country. GOMA has helped turn Brisbane’s South Bank into one of the hottest stretches of cultural real estate in the country. By 2010, not five years after it opened, GOMA had become Australia’s most popular gallery, with attendances outstripping those of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne and Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales – indeed, it is one of the ten most visited galleries in the world. MONA in Hobart is likewise having a mini-Bilbao effect.

The arts are also being democratised. When the Australia Council brought out its More than Bums on Seats report in 2010, one of its most interesting findings concerned the popularisation of culture, its surfacing as a mainstream activity. In a previous study conducted in 1999, over half of respondents said that the arts attracted ‘the somewhat pretentious and elitist’. A decade later, that view was shared by only a third. Nearly three-quarters of the population attended at least one artistic event. On a per capita basis, Australians art galleries are the most well-attended in the world. Many of the blockbuster exhibitions, admittedly, have been imports: Picasso, Masterpieces from Paris, the recent Renaissance exhibition. But there have been home successes, too, like the landmark Sidney Nolan exhibition in 2008, and the long overdue Rosalie Gascoigne retrospective that opened in Melbourne the same year. The Archibald Prize for portraiture breaks new records ever year, as does Sculpture by the Sea. It started in 1997 as a one-day event at Bondi that attracted twenty-five thousand people and now lures more than half a million visitors, and has travelled to Western Australian and been transplanted to Denmark. Of late, the deaths of celebrated artists such as Dame Joan Sutherland and Margaret Olley have become more emotionally charged events.
There are problems aplenty. The political class is hardly awash with cultural connoisseurs. Julia Gillard is not known to have ever attended a cultural event at the Sydney Opera House. Tony Abbott has described the more challenging works of the federal parliamentary art collection as ‘avant-garde crap’. Kevin Rudd won tabloid approbation by stirring up moral panic about Bill Henson’s photographs. Simon Crean, the arts minister, was prevented from attending Margaret Olley’s funeral because of the Opposition’s refusal to grant him a pair. Rare now are art-loving politicians like Malcolm Turnbull, who defended Henson, and the former New South Wales premier Bob Carr, who delivered a fabulous blow to the cultural cringe by walking out of Kevin Spacey’s Richard III in Sydney at the interval and opting instead for a kebab.

Australian movies still find it hard to get screen time at home. Samson and Delilah was seen by just 1 per cent of the population at the cinema, although the ratings when ABC TV broadcast it suggest the film reached many more. Australian movies capture just 3.9 per cent of the domestic market. Relish is still evident in the media coverage of cultural blips, like Baz Luhrmann’s Australia, when the cringers go to work. The ABC, the country’s most important cultural institution, has also scaled back its arts coverage, with the closure of its specialised arts unit. This at a time, The Australian noted, ‘when more Australians are more culturally attuned than at any time in history’. Curiously, the ABC is about to broadcast a new reality show that turns the notion of Incognito on its head. Next Stop Hollywood will follow a group of young Australian actors as they attempt to make a start in the movie industry, a mission that the producers of the show are confident will end in success.

More problematic is the extent to which Australian culture continues to reflect a strongly Anglo-centric bent. Back in 1994 Creative Nation described ‘an exotic hybrid’, a characterisation that did not ring true then, and does not ring true now. Asian influences especially have taken time to be absorbed. Lyndon Terracini, the artistic director of Opera Australia, recently lamented the ‘meat and three veg’ culture, and complained that ‘the extraordinary tastes of Asia’ routinely were ignored. Gatecrashers, like the Chinese-Australian artist Guan Wei, are rare but welcome – some of his work is an amalgam, showing Nolanesque Ned Kelly motifs against Chinese landscapes. Yet as the government hammers out a new national cultural policy, one of the central challenges will be to ensure that Australian culture keeps pace with demographic changes.

In his seminal essay Arthur Phillips argued that the cultural cringe was a greater enemy to Australia’s cultural development than the country’s isolation, and warned about a boastful strut from ‘I’m-a-better-man-than-you-are’ Australian bores. He wanted his compatriots to walk with ‘a relaxed erectness of carriage’. Home-grown performers assumed that posture years ago, at the Belvoir, on Broadway, at the Booker prize ceremony and at Bennelong Point. This gait was also in evidence on a
temporary stage in Canberra when Geoffrey Rush stepped forward to receive the 2012 Australian of the Year award. Much of his acceptance speech read like a rejoinder to a previous recipient, Sir Robert Helpmann, and his famous mid-1960s putdown: ‘I don’t despair about the cultural scene in Australia because there isn’t one here to despair about.’ In two generations, Rush said, Australia had grown from a relative wasteland into a unique species of native tree that only Australian soil could cultivate. Then he likened his fellow Australian artists to spiders, almost invisible and prone to being whacked occasionally with a newspaper. Well, those arachnids are on the march, and, as so often is the case with novel antipodean animal stories, the world is taking note.

Nick Bryant, the BBC’s former Australia correspondent, is the author of Adventures in Correspondentland (HarperCollins, 2011).
**As I walked through the school gate, its posts stencilled with turtles and goannas, towards the classroom where I take Drama Group, I heard someone call out, ‘Hey, Hairy Hayley!’**

I turned in the direction of the voice. Katia, a Year 6 Aboriginal girl with fair hair and watery blue eyes, stood beside a wooden lunch table under the wispy silky oak trees, hands on her hips, chin tilted up. She was staring at me, as were nine other Aboriginal kids, all different ages, boys and girls.

At Drama Group we play a memory game where you introduce your name with an action and an adjective beginning with the same sound as the beginning of your name. Now all the kids at this small rural school, not just those who come to Drama Group, call me ‘Hairy Hayley’.

‘Hi, Cool Katia,’ I said, smiling.

‘Come over ‘ere,’ Katia said, gesturing to me.

I walked over to her table.

‘How you doing?’ I asked, sitting on the bench beside her.

‘Have you got a boyfriend?’ Katia said.

I wasn’t prepared for this question. It’s a left-field question when you’re a volunteer running a lunchtime drama group at the local public school in a rural area. It’s a loaded question when you’re a lesbian.

The options flashed before me. I could say: ‘No, I’ve got a girlfriend.’ But that didn’t seem appropriate for the primary school playground. I could say: ‘It’s none of your business.’ But my reason for volunteering is to connect with these kids, and to do it truthfully.

‘No,’ I said. It wasn’t really a lie. I was just answering the question I’d been asked.

Katia said, ‘Tallie says you’ve got a girlfriend.’
Tallie is a twelve-year-old girl who lives in the same rural area as I do. My partner, Jen, and I see her most Friday nights at the local community hall. She’s hung out with us at the annual cricket match, helped us draw witches and spiders to decorate the hall for the fire brigade fundraiser, and last year we gave her brother a job helping us pull out fireweed and stuffing it into old feed bags.

I was rattled. Katia and the nine other kids were staring at me. I wouldn’t lie – I couldn’t lie.

‘That’s right,’ I said to Katia. ‘I do.’

‘So does that mean you’re a les-be-n?’ Katia asked, letting her lips and tongue linger over each syllable.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’m a lesbian.’

My heart was hammering. What’s school policy on discussing this kind of thing? Would the teacher on playground duty march over and order me off the school grounds for saying the L-word? Would the headmistress summon me to her office and say, ‘Thank you for your time but we’ll no longer be requiring your assistance with Drama Group’?

Being a lesbian’s not illegal. Even the federal government now recognises lesbian relationships for the purposes of social security and tax. And I’ve never had second thoughts about coming out – not on the stage at Darling Harbour when I encouraged Australian and international judges to appreciate the injustice of laws that deny our relationships, not on the stage at New South Wales Parliament House when I spoke as an out lesbian about the options for law reform, not in law classrooms, not at legal conferences.

But as the branches of the silky oak swayed above me, and a blond-haired child with caramel skin and a posse of friends stared at me, I realised I didn’t know what was appropriate at a primary school. My fingers reddened as I clutched my bottle of water; my palms sweated. I didn’t know how to handle this situation. Around me the sounds of chatter faded, everything telescoping onto my interaction with Katia. How long was it since someone had spoken? Should I have said something else? The children were all watching me, waiting.

‘True?’ Katia said. Her mouth widened into a sideshow-alley laugh, and suddenly I was one of the kids in the playground and she was pointing her finger, shaming me.

At last Katia looked away. I considered getting up and running to the safety of the classroom. But Katia wasn’t finished. She turned to the crowd of kids.

‘Ask ’er,’ she said. ‘Come on, ask ’er.’

From the other side of the table, a boy of about ten years said, ‘Are you a les-be-n?’
'Yes,' I said. 'I am.'

And then another young girl asked me, and another young boy; every single child at that table asked me if I was a ‘les-be-n’; each one let their lips and tongue linger over each syllable.

None of the non-Aboriginal kids came over to join in the questioning. It was just these ten kids. And they all had to hear it from my mouth. I wondered how long they’d been planning this inquisition. I imagined their conversations on the school bus, in the playground, at the morning line-up, as rumour of my sexuality had spread. Like smug hunters with traps set, they’d been waiting for me to turn up for Thursday’s Drama Group.

**BULLYING.** To hurt, intimidate, or persecute. To use strength or influence to harm or intimidate others who are weaker.

Element one satisfied: Katia had strength and influence in her milieu. Every Aboriginal child did her bidding; they watched me; they asked if I was a ‘les-be-n’.

Element two: did she harm and intimidate me? The Australian National Centre Against Bullying defines five kinds of bullying: physical, verbal, psychological, cyber-bullying and social bullying. Perhaps Katia’s treatment of me was social bullying – ‘Lying, spreading rumours, playing a nasty joke. Repeatedly mimicking someone and deliberately excluding someone.’ Word had swept through the school about my sexuality. By outing me, Katia was playing a nasty joke on me. By making fun of me and showing her disapproval of my sexual orientation she was deliberately trying to isolate me. Element two proven.

But what of the final element: was I, the white, educated, middle-class adult, weaker than twelve-year-old, Aboriginal Katia?

AS I ANSWERED ‘Yes,’ and then ‘Yes’ again to each of those children’s questions, I started to wonder if this would seal the fate of Drama Group. Each week I’d been delighted that the kids came back – after all, it was their lunch hour; there were no marks or gold stars for attendance. Maybe now none of them would want to come: they wouldn’t want to play with the ‘les-be-n’. As I looked into the laughing faces I was certain they’d want nothing more to do with me. And if the school rumour mill worked swiftly, then it wouldn’t be long before the whole school knew I was a lesbian.

Drama Group was finished. Kaput. I could see myself putting the CD in the player, readying the track, pushing the tables and chairs to the side to clear a space, then waiting, reading and rereading the nouns, adjectives, adverbs printed on orange cardboard. Maybe the kids would ask the teacher if ‘les-be-n’ was a noun or an adjective.
I imagined spending the forty minutes waiting for participants, alone, with kids’ laughter and voices outside and then, as the bell rang, I’d reclaim my CD, push the tables back in place and scurry, shamed, to my car.

As ridiculous as this seems, perhaps element three was proven: I was weaker than Katia in this situation. She had the power to affect something I wanted: I really wanted the Drama Group to work. And maybe because I, the South African-raised girl, am ever conscious of racism, I was reluctant to exclude or reprimand an Aboriginal girl. My do-gooder, politically correct self gave Katia yet more power.

Then it occurred to me that if Drama Group had just been canned by Katia outing me, there wasn’t much to lose. The disaster had already happened. And as I sat on the wooden bench, mentally staging future events, Katia and company were gazing at me with real interest. It struck me that these kids wanted to know who I was. This might be the first time they’d met a real, live, out lesbian.

So I said to Katia, ‘You know, I’m not ashamed to be a lesbian.’

She laughed, her spittle spraying my cheeks. Then she turned to the others and they too laughed on command. They were almost sneering at me.

I had to stay on this bench; I had to turn this inquisition into a conversation.

‘How old are you, Katia?’ I asked.

‘Twelve.’

I said, ‘I’ve been with my partner for twelve years. That means we’ve been together almost as long as you’ve been on this earth.’

She looked at me and then, wide-eyed, she said to the crowd, ‘She’s been a les-be-n for twelve years.’

‘Oh, no,’ I said. ‘Longer than that. I’ve been with Jen for that long. I’ve been a lesbian for more than twenty years.’

Katia stared at me; she was silent. She looked stricken. Was she shocked that I was that old? Or because I’d admitted to the affliction of long-term lesbianism? Perhaps such lasting deviance showed I was beyond redemption.

But Katia was smart; she’d claimed the name ‘Cool Katia’ for good reason. She recovered herself and asked, ‘So her name’s Jen?’

‘Yes,’ I paused. ‘You know everyone round here knows we’re together. We’re similar to the other adult couples you know, like your mum and dad and aunties and uncles. We’re just another couple who’re in love and in a relationship.’

Oops – I’d used another L-word.

‘You in love?’ Cool Katia was giggling now. So was the rest of the audience.

‘Yes,’ I said.
‘Next week, you bring in a photograph of her. I want to see what she looks like.’

‘Haven’t you met a lesbian before?’ I said to the assembled group. I was going to have to own my freak-show status.

Katia and a few others shook their heads.

‘No way,’ Katia said. And then, taking the upper hand again, she said, ‘So do you have s-e-x?’

I couldn’t answer that question. That would surely be considered a breach by the headmistress. And the next question would probably be ‘how do you do it’ and as a rule I never answer that question. I felt my back straighten and I shook my head. I might want to relate truthfully to these kids but this was rude, not just cheeky.

I looked at my watch and said, ‘Drama Group starts in five minutes.’

As I slipped Angelique Kidjo into the CD player I chewed the side of my mouth. What had just happened? I’d been bullied and mocked by a bunch of children. I swallowed. I scanned my class plan. Just focus on the activities, think about what just happened later. Would anyone come play this week? I consoled myself with the thought that it had been an interesting experiment. Twenty-five students came the first week. Chaos. After that it settled down to twelve to fifteen students from Kindergarten to Year 6, mainly girls, but both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids. And although there was a different group each week, there were always the same five regulars who looked at me with wide eyes and did the exercises even when others refused.

Before I started this group I’d told a performer friend about my plan. He’d leaned back in his chair, arms laced behind his head, and said, ‘You’re nuts. It’s a drama teacher’s nightmare. You’ll just wind up running a glorified form of childcare.’

I’d decided it was worth a go. Improvisation and creative play are fun; they build confidence and insight and ignite creativity. Over years, when I’ve played with my friends’ kids, they’ve all delighted in theatre games and play-acting. I imagined the students at our local school would too.

They did. Some Thursdays, we’d walk across hot coals or sink knee-deep in soft sand; sometimes we were frogs; sometimes we’d build the Harbour Bridge or a sailing ship with our bodies, or watch a soccer match or a horror film. Sometimes they’d role-play scenarios. Mostly we laughed. And week after week the students came back.

As I stood in that empty classroom I thought of how I’d tell my friend Drama Group died when I was outed by a twelve-year-old girl. I remembered how Katia had come to Drama Group for the first three weeks. When I’d played Christine Anu at peak volume and we’d danced in a circle, moving first our eyes, then
adding ears, then tongues until our whole bodies were dancing with the drums, Katia had elbowed a smaller girl out of her way. I remembered how when the sound system wouldn’t read my CD, Katia had taken over and played her CD, how she’d answered for the younger Aboriginal students before they’d had a chance. I’d watched others step aside, wilt under her glare, get out of her way. I hadn’t been sorry when she stopped coming. That’s when I realised: Katia was the school bully.

Nothing unusual about this story, really. There are bullies in most Australian schools. More than a quarter of Australian Year 4 students said they had suffered bullying, according to a 2008 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study produced by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which surveyed schools in nearly forty countries. The study found that, despite strict anti-bullying programs in schools, Australian primary school students suffer bullying at a rate of almost 50 per cent above the international average. Only Kuwait, Qatar, Taiwan and New Zealand fared worse. Michael Carr-Gregg, a child psychologist and adviser on school bullying to the Queensland Government, believes the problem is getting worse: in 1998 one in six young people were bullied in schools, in 2006 it was one in five, and in June 2009 it was one in four.

Just as I was ready to pack up my books and CD, Katia strode into the classroom, six other Aboriginal students in tow, and then five regulars slunk in, wide-eyed at the new batch of participants.

As we played piano, then guitar, then flute, then saxophone with our fingers and mouths to the sound of Angelique, I felt Katia’s eyes on me, everyone’s eyes on me. Were they thinking, *Is this how a lesbian moves?*

I swallowed hard and told everyone, ‘Play drums now,’ and kept my gaze away from Katia.

When we played the name game and it came round to Louise, who was still in Kindergarten, I held my breath. Would Katia intervene and say, ‘Call ‘er Lesbian Louise’?

She didn’t. Someone suggested ‘Lovely Louise’ and my shoulders slumped with relief.

When we sat in the circle to play the birthday present game I read the rules from my book. Under Katia’s gaze I couldn’t trust my memory. While the game moved around the circle I worked on my light and cool persona; I made sure I treated everyone the same. Even if Katia was testing me, even if she was here to play ‘let’s watch the freak more closely’, she wouldn’t be able to fault me.

That day, I gave my greatest performance – and then I bolted for my car.
I'M AN ADULT. I had a get-away car. Supposedly I was running the class. And I felt ruffled, sick, uneasy, disturbed. No surprise, then, that in Lismore bullying by fellow students played a ‘significant’ role in fourteen-year-old Alex Wildman’s decision to take his own life in 2008. No surprise, either, that a thirty-year-old victim of schoolyard bullying was recently awarded almost half a million dollars in damages because the bullying had led to behavioural problems such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and symptoms of depression. No wonder the former Family Court chief justice Alastair Nicholson, the chair of the National Centre Against Bullying, has called for a law making bullying a crime.

Bullying is allegedly not tolerated in New South Wales public schools. Every public school has its own School Discipline Policy, which includes codes of conduct to ensure students are free from bullying and intimidation, and an Anti-Bullying Plan. But despite anti-bullying programs, bullying is still a major public health problem. Recently a regional New South Wales school advised a Year 4 boy who suffered bullying to take out an AVO against his tormenter, a ten-year-old.

WHEN I GOT home I bush-bashed across the paddock after the tractor. I had to tell Jen what had happened, immediately.

I was baffled. Not by Katia’s questions. I admired her guts, admired her for asking. I was baffled by my fear that by telling the kids I was a lesbian I was doing something wrong, that I’d get into trouble, that there was something naughty, bad, corrupting about telling them. Why? Something about their being young? It didn’t worry me when I taught at university. When students walked out of my classes on gay relationships I’d laughed it off as part of my job as an educator. But at the primary school I was waiting to be called up to the head and reprimanded. Was it because, regardless of my own views, sexuality is usually regarded as a subject inappropriate for discussion with children under twelve? Was it because of the suspicion that hovers over gay men because of paedophilia? But that’s not usually pinned on lesbians, is it?

Mostly I was baffled by how the interaction rattled me. When I’ve copped homophobia before I’ve confronted it, challenged it. But that’s always been in situations with adults. There’s been equality. This time, with twelve-year-old Katia, I felt mocked, I felt vulnerable and caged. Was it just because I’d never read the Department of Education’s rule book on appropriate behaviour with children on the topic of sexuality?

Or was it because those kids were seeing deep inside me? Was it because I still have some deep-rooted sense that the way I live is ‘wrong’, that it damages those around me? Was I still carrying my mother’s disappointed response to my announcement that I was a lesbian, my aunt’s frown, my sister’s rage about how it would destroy our mother?
Jen halted when she saw the car bumping across the paddock. My appearance in this way was unprecedented; I’m not the good farmer’s wife who brings sandwiches and a flask of tea out to the paddock. She jumped down from the tractor and took off her earmuffs.

‘What’s happened?’ she asked. ‘Are you okay?’

Over the tractor’s hum she shook her head as I told her the story and said, ‘Bloody kids. They’re all the same. Now do you understand what I mean?’

Jen had thought my Drama Group ill-advised. ‘Why would you choose to go into a school and teach kids and not even get paid for it?’ she’d said.

For two years in the 1970s she’d taught Home Science at a large public school in western Sydney. She was part of a lesbian teachers’ group formed when a lesbian maths teacher was advised to resign from a private school after the media printed a photograph of her, complete with ’70s afro and feminist slogan T-shirt, being dragged into a police wagon at the first Mardi Gras march.

As I’d driven the half hour home from school, I’d wondered if Jen was right. Maybe Drama Group was a bad idea, maybe kids at a rural primary school are as difficult as tough urban high school students, maybe nothing’s changed since the ’70s.

As I leaned against the tractor in the strained winter sun, I said, ‘It wasn’t a total disaster. I mean, Katia and her henchmen came to class. That says something.’

‘What does it say? That they want to check out the lezzo?’ Jen said.

‘Yeah maybe, but maybe they’ll see me as cool now – isn’t lesbianism the latest thing?’

‘For kids out here?’ Jen said. ‘Doubt it.’

‘Maybe there’s some subconscious minority-group identification going on. Maybe Katia thinks I’m more acceptable now ’cause I’m from a minority group too? I don’t know. All I know is, Katia came to class.’

‘Just wait for next week,’ Jen said, winking. ‘You’ll see, they’ll chant “Lezzo, lezzo” when you walk in, not “Hairy Hayley”.’

The obsolete meaning of ‘bully’ is sweetheart, darling or good friend. The word (probably from the Middle Dutch boele, ‘lover’) was originally a term of endearment applied to either sex, later becoming a familiar form of address to a male friend. Was there an element of Katia’s behaviour that was consistent with this obsolete meaning?

THE FOLLOWING WEEK I turned up for class. Was every single child watching me as I walked through the gates? Should I change my walk? Stride more; wiggle more. What were these children concluding from watching me?
I was relieved when I heard someone call out, ‘Hi, Hairy Hayley!’

Saskia and Tina, two of the Aboriginal girls who often came to Drama Group, were sitting apart from the others.

‘We’re on bench,’ Tina said. ‘We have to eat lunch here.’

Saskia said, ‘What’s your partner’s name again?’

‘Jen.’ No doubt the news was all round the school by now.

Tina’s jaw dropped; her hands and sandwich froze midair.

‘Tina didn’t know about you,’ Saskia said to me, conspiratorially. ‘She wouldn’t believe me.’

Tina didn’t come to class that day.

But Katia came. She was bossy. She monopolised the sound system. She directed the other kids. She answered for the little ones even when I repeatedly asked her not to. Her gaze silenced and withered a Year 2 boy.

Katia bullied me and most of the kids in Drama Group. Was this just who she was? Or was her behaviour a result of the prevalence of violence in her own community, the pressure she was under to conform? According to Julie Coffin, from the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health in Western Australia, mainstream bullying programs don’t work because they don’t address Aboriginal culture and a lifetime of oppression that has resulted in parenting and post-traumatic issues. She argues that the word ‘bullying’ is not even used in Aboriginal communities.

Could this explain Katia’s behaviour? She was doing what she knew, what she was used to witnessing. She was taking the upper hand where she could.

Perhaps my inexperience with children and my lack of disciplinary muscle normalised Katia’s bullying behaviour. Perhaps by labouring under Katia’s power and not evicting her from the class, I failed to model behaviour that refused to tolerate bullying. I don’t know.

There’s only one thing I’m sure of: during lunch in the back section of the Year 5-6 classroom of a small country school, twelve students, including Katia, the school bully, followed my directions and made their bodies into cups and saucers, into knives and forks; they performed the roles of mothers, teachers, lost dogs. They gave themselves a round of applause at the end of the class. And no one mentioned the L-word. Not even Katia.

The names of the girls in the drama group have been changed for privacy reasons.

Hayley Katzen was a legal academic and now helps run a cattle farm in northern New South Wales. Her play Pressure Point was produced at the Byron Bay Community and Cultural Centre Theatre, and her short stories have won competitions, been read on ABC radio and published in anthologies.
**ESSAY**

**Girt by a sea of anomalies**

Becoming a resilient nation

Robyn Archer

**FEDERATION** became clear to me for the first time recently – at least fifteen years after I served on the Celebration of Federation Committee chaired by Joan Kirner. That was the first time I had been able to witness this deft politician in action, and I learned a lot. But for all the tactics and intrigue, the great conversations and the miraculous process of gaining some kind of accord among so many different views, I didn’t really feel federation in the blood. Prior to my Epiphany-on-Murray, the best measure of understanding had been the matter of a national defence force. Had we not federated, we would not have been able to send troops to World War I. Had that not happened, there would have been no slaughter and sacrifice, and subsequently perhaps fewer anomalies in the evolution of our day of choice for sounding pride, nationalism and identity.

My Murray tale is not about identity (though there’s something of that to observe) or national pride, but about a glimpse of what federation meant. I was doing some research about the *Paddlesteamer Canberra*, which turns one hundred in 2013, as does her namesake. This lovely old boat is tied up at the wharf in Echuca, and I had a chat to her captain. He believes that the boat, commissioned by a professional cod fisherman and built in Goolwa, may have been named with tongue in cheek. Prior to federation, interstate taxes were enormous: if you fished in one state and sold your catch in another, there were exorbitant taxes to pay.

You only have to note the anguish in past years of farmers getting a reduced water allocation on the Victorian side of the Murray, while their neighbours in full view on the other side get a larger allocation, to understand how close yet how divided the states can remain. In some places still, to fish from the Victorian side you have to get a New South Wales licence. Prior to federation the division was much more dramatic.

Federation abolished the interstate taxes, and from 1901 the cod fishermen grew rich: with profitability up, better equipment and a consequent increase in the popularity of the business, this was the start of a period in which the Murray was
fished out. By 1913 this particular cod fisherman was rich enough to commission a new boat, hence the nod to Canberra. It was an unsustainable practice: that became clear when fish stocks were exhausted, as was the temporary realisation of the Chaffey brothers’ dream of Los Angeles in the desert when they started to introduce irrigation along the Murray. These are early examples of what appeared to be great ideas at the time, but neglected the fundamentals for building resilience.

For me, the value of the PS Canberra’s story is in understanding the extent of the divide between the colonies prior to federation. Can we imagine what the implications would be now if such interstate taxes applied? These days Murray water has a price on it. What would South Australia’s fate be with no source within its boundaries and taxes to pay for water originating in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland? Given the technological, especially engineering, advances in the past century, you can imagine squabbles of civil war proportions had the colonial system prevailed, leaving anyone downstream waterless.

ONE OF THE great stories I’ve come across, also in research pertaining to the centenary of Canberra, is that of the CSIRO. It says a lot about what Australia thought it was for in the past, and begs the question about what it is for in the twenty-first century. The original Advisory Council of Science and Industry was set up in 1916, and in 1926 morphed into the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. The organisation’s agenda consisted of research that would help develop both primary and secondary industries: in particular, farming, mining and manufacture. But the focus was on agriculture. Indeed, the story I gleaned from the CSIRO in Canberra left me with the impression that the national agenda has been in the hands of the CSIRO since its inception. Australia wanted to be a world leader in agriculture. Given the pioneering work of MacArthur around Parramatta in the wool industry at the end of the eighteenth century, and that of Farrer one hundred years later, exactly where Canberra is now, in developing resilient wheat species, this looks like a reasonable aim.

While baby boomers were still being drilled in boiling-hot classrooms about the wonders of wheat and sheep, the agenda was changing. World War II had demanded the CSIRO turn its attention to research that would assist Defence: radar was high on the list. Emerging from the war, Australia saw its future in manufacturing, and I witnessed the pride in the men of my family, my father and my uncles, as they got jobs at Kelvinator, British Tube Mills and Holden. Again, the list of projects indicates the shift, as Australia now aimed to lead the world in manufacture and industry.

The effects of globalisation and international trade deals, and the criminal slipperiness of national currencies (a national currency’s strength no longer reflecting the hard-working efforts of its people, as it had done for the majority of
the twentieth century), have seen the importance of agriculture and manufacture decline dramatically. While the recent attention to methods of slaughter and the transporting of livestock remind us of how many Australians are still affected when agricultural trade is interrupted, and how many exporters are still affected when global financial markets fiddle with the Australian dollar, it is also clear that subsidies are now essential in maintaining what used to be mainstays of the Australian economy. Interestingly, this was also one of the many passionate themes of President Obama’s most recent State of the Union address: a commitment to supporting American car manufacture and exports. Is everyone except China in the same boat?

These days the CSIRO’s agenda focuses on sustainability (or, we hope, resilience, which is the stronger concept), and ‘invention’ is now high on the list of proud achievements and priorities. Atomic absorption spectroscopy, plastic (polymer) banknotes and Wi-Fi are all products of the CSIRO, highly exportable and profitable on the global scale. If you accept that whatever the CSIRO is doing at any point is a good indicator of what Australia is for, then what we are currently for is the nurturing of clever scientists who contribute to this creative thinking and convert it into world-leading invention.

While I am an awestruck follower of new developments in all kinds of science, including environmental and medical, I have no expertise in these fields. But I can see how the development of ‘resilience thinking’ is essential for the future health of my own field of arts and culture, and I know that it must be the same for all systems, economic, ecological or cultural. Continuing to feed the top of the tree while neglecting the roots is a recipe for weakness and vulnerability. Taking a little off the top in times of challenged resources in order to nurture growth at the roots is the way to go – yet for many this is an unattractive model. There’s some unwillingness to temper the boom, to ask shareholders to take a bit of heat, to shave off just a small percentage of lifestyle luxury, in order to divert resources to shoring up the less glamorous, less obvious paths to future strength and the great claims we could make about what Australia can be for in the future.

PHYSICALLY, GEOGRAPHICALLY, FACTUALLY, what Australia is used for, as opposed to what it is for, represents a substantial list. It is used as a strategically vital defence outpost for the United States of America. The absence of protest at the latest announcement in Darwin says a lot about the voice of contemporary Australia. Has celebrity really conquered all? Is it as simple as an equally strategic decision to ensure the physical presence of a charismatic American President at a highly sensitive northern border, to quash dissident opinion? Or is it just that we are now so mature we realise that we can’t have a secure nation without the help of a much larger ally, so why argue? Young people are keen to occupy financial districts, but once upon a time in Australia young people travelled to the red centre to protest
an American presence they were prevented from knowing about. Has the century-old fear of an invasion from the north, no longer just the ‘yellow peril’ of yore but now also twenty-first-century ‘asylum seekers’ (such irony in the derision of a concept that should evoke sympathy), made it seem pointless to challenge the American military presence there?

We are also used as a convenient territory for the ongoing promotion of the British royal family’s popularity. The admirable Elizabeth II still works her undoubted charm, but the power of even greater celebrity, in the shape of William and Kate, seems destined to play a more crucial role in Australia’s immediate future. As delightful as they may be, charming pretty people are no reason to postpone a public debate about independence and national pride – yet recent polls indicate, and the media are happy to report, that republicanism is now ‘off the agenda’.

We are used as a temporary stall in the global financial markets. When major currencies dip we are seen as a handy short-term site for speculators to keep on making money until those larger markets rise. Then they desert our currency as quickly as they came to it, in the tap of a computer key. None of this would matter if it only affected the active players – let them speculate, let them rise or fall. But the whole country having been forced into what is portrayed as a life-or-death need for superannuation, every Australian’s future is a potential victim of global gambling. We are told we must have super or our old age will be miserable, yet we are obliged to sink our hard-worked earnings into playthings for speculators who don’t give a damn about the quality of our lives in old age. I have a family background in which gambling played a critical role, and I fear any form of gambling far more than most, but it is surely one of the most astonishing anomalies of all, that for all the appearances of a strongly individualist nation we are ‘patsies’ for any number of serious cons operating around the world. Are we generally viewed as likeable precisely because we don’t kick up a stink about such things?

WHAT AUSTRALIA IS for at present, as opposed to being used for or used as, is the source of raw materials for the development of the Asian Century. Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea and India form the vast majority of buyers of Australia iron ore, coal, natural gas and aluminium. There have been many questions asked recently about the export of uranium to India. What we have most to sell is not what we grow and raise on the land, or what we produce and manufacture out of those raw materials above and below, but the raw material itself, which is sold to others so they are able to value-add. And the question of sustainability is all-important: people talk about enough raw material under the earth for a hundred years, but that’s not long enough.

In this context, building resilience and exporting know-how, a priority for the CSIRO at present, seems like a good idea. As a continent we now confront many of the challenges that the rest of the world is or will be facing. Given our excellent record of
scientific achievement, an ambition to lead the world in inventive measures for resilience/sustainability seems like a beauty. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn, for all the media attention Australia’s elite sportspeople achieve and the constant boast that we ‘punch above our [population] weight’ in this area, that we do likewise in global achievement in science and the arts too. When I look at other institutions, like the Curtin Medical Research Centre at the ANU, where eighty-six PhDs are beavering away at things like revolutionising methods of medication for those with HIV/AIDS (which could have absolutely future-determining results for Africa and parts of Asia), and NICTA in Canberra, where scientists are collaborating in the Bionic Eye project through the development of the chip that interprets the data gathered by the camera and feeds it to the brain, I am in no doubt about our ability. Our record in immunology, led by the great humanitarian Gus Nossal, and now in DNA research, is at the top of the international field. Despite our popular image throughout the world for fun and sun, beaches and sexy cities, sport and laid-back ratbaggy, perhaps what we are really for is something less glamorous, such as brains and courage in pioneering fields. Do parents dream of their kid making a fortune as an elite sportsperson, or a fortune as a celebrity, or an award-winning scientist who will change the world?

Brilliance in resilience thinking harks back to MacArthur and Farrer. It seems to ‘come natural’ in a continent like this. But it takes guts, and a game population. Despite our good fortune in ‘wealth of soil’, and the contradicditories of fire and flood – which bring tragedy to some communities, and huge opportunities for observation, experiment and development of new measures for the scientific community, in similar proportion to the development of new technologies as a result of war – the majority of Australians, whipped up by the conservative media, seem resistant to the kind of national agenda that might allow us to be great in the global context. Dr Brian Walker, a CSIRO research fellow and now part of the global Resilience Alliance, has often talked about the necessary pain we have to go through to develop and sustain resilience.

The very things that many people believe we are for may in fact prove to be the barrier to us continuing to be for great things in the future. The strongest arguments against doing anything about carbon emissions come down to speculation about domestic finances. We are in a perfect position, a perfect moment of environmental threat, to show global leadership and scientific skill in dealing with the escalating challenges of air quality, water shortage, natural disaster (which could equally now be renamed man-made disaster), disease, food supply and so much more. But the prevailing feeling of the Australian people seems to be saying that leadership of this kind rates a poor second to maintaining the quality of life that would resonate with so many when asked ‘What’s Australia for?’

Recent stays at Gulf St Vincent, Yellow Waters (in Kakadu) and Durras on the south-east coast have reinforced for me the sense of an Australian paradise: anyone who can afford to spend time in the beauty of these pristine natural environments
understands why international tourists are in awe of what we take for granted. These, and so many other unique places, sit next to wealth, relaxed lifestyle, sports stars, film stars, pop stars, big TVs, cars, and the consequent freedom for pleasure, laughter and taking the piss. But for how long? And will anyone have a voice strong enough to persuade us as a nation to do the tough things required for building resilience, and thus preserving so much of what we and the world currently value in Australia? It does mean shaving off some of the privilege of the lucky country, and there’s the rub; but it is the only way we can continue to be what we are now for, and also become as soon as possible what we should be for in the twenty-first century.

Robyn Archer is a singer, writer, director and artistic director, and a public advocate of the arts, mainly in Australia, though her reach is global. She is currently the creative director of the Centenary of Canberra. Her essay 'Industry that pays, and art that doesn’t' appeared in Griffith REVIEW 23: Essentially Creative.
Marrying health and agriculture

Food, what is it good for?

Cameron Muir

IN the past three years there have been urgent calls – by organisations ranging from the United Nations to the Queensland Liberal National Party – to double food production by 2050 and feed a global population of nine billion. The corporate farm lobby, multinational food manufacturers and biotech companies the world over are using this line to support their demands for an unprecedented expansion of industrial agriculture.

There’s another figure, however, that draws out one of the contradictions of the global food system that Australia champions: a third of the world’s food is wasted. In developing countries the figure is lower; most of the losses there occur in the production stage due to poor facilities and drought. In wealthy countries, like Australia, the percentage is higher; about half the waste is food dumped in bins in shops and homes.

Why are we planning to grow more food when we throw half of it out?

IT’S EIGHT IN the morning, a week before Christmas, when I drive south until Canberra ends and the ranges loom ahead. On Westwood Farm, a property donated for the use of charities, sit the new Canberra offices of OzHarvest. I’m supposed to meet the director, Dave Burnet, before spending a day with Chris, a van driver. We will collect food from supermarkets and function centres that would otherwise go to waste, and deliver it to community organisations that distribute the food to families who need a hand.

On the walls is a patchwork of framed letters of appreciation – the Red Cross, the Big Issue, local schools – and certificates and photos announcing donations from businesses and local fundraising events that range from a few hundred dollars to ten thousand. Everything has OzHarvest’s yellow branding: even the three umbrellas in a bucket by the door are yellow.
It’s not long before Dave rushes into the room and starts greeting everyone, makes jokes about the OzHarvest Christmas party the night before (one of the volunteers spent the night on the office couch), shakes my hand, then sets about looking for his mobile phone, misplaced during the party. He finds it and counts the missed calls. He’s tall, with greying hair and a friendly grin, and everything about him says go, go, go.

‘Come into the office,’ Dave says. ‘Oh, wait – you want a coffee or a tea? You’d better have a tea.’

The building is three construction site offices cleaved open, gutted and joined together. Like the land here, the site offices were donated. The resulting structure has the layout of a house, with a large ‘family room’ complete with worn yellow couches and a TV set against the wall, and a dining table where a volunteer named Pam is doing the accounts on a laptop. There’s a large kitchen that doubles as a store, with rows of metal-framed shelves stacked with tins and other non-perishables, making it look like a library of food.

‘Actually,’ Dave says, putting down a teacup, ‘you’ll have to get going with Chris soon.’ He grabs a mug with a lid so I can carry it in the van.

We’re about to go into his office when he says, ‘Come out here first,’ and we walk onto the veranda facing the ranges. We admire the view before Dave delivers staggering figures on food waste. A quarter of the food squandered in rich countries could lift all of the world’s nearly one billion hungry people out of malnourishment. The smaller supermarket chains ‘get it’, he says, but the bigger ones don’t.

I’m wondering when I’ll get a chance to take the teabag out of my mug when we’re on the move again. Back in the main room Dave gives a mock reprimand to a volunteer, Pete, who replies, ‘Just dock my pay.’ OzHarvest doesn’t receive government funding. Everything runs on donated time, money and food. Even the white plastic containers used to carry wet food are empty ice-cream buckets from Boost Juice. The sense of goodwill is overpowering; it lifts you like the view of those mountains in the distance.

To get to the chairs in Dave’s office we navigate a pile of Christmas hampers the team has been preparing and packing for several weeks. He tells me that when they started doing this, in 2008, the office barely had space for one desk. Dave parked the van at home. Now they have three vans, new offices and five employees. They’re almost growing faster than they can manage. ‘I think it’s because people see the sense in it,’ Dave says. ‘It’s so obvious. There are people going without food while good food is being thrown out.’

He moves onto statistics again – how a tenth of wealthy countries’ greenhouse gas emissions come from growing food that is never eaten, and how in Australia we throw out food worth $5.2 billion every year. That’s the amount of extra money
needed to fund the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or pay for the Greens’ proposed dental care plan four times over.

‘Today you’re going to see…’ Dave says. ‘There are people with addictions; there are women and children escaping domestic abuse…’ He pauses again. ‘Well, you know, just use common sense.’

I try to take notes and get a sip of tea but Chris is waiting outside, getting edgy. The drivers have a tight schedule. It’s a big logistical operation co-ordinating them to collect and deliver food across the ACT and surrounding towns. They travel as far as Yass and Binalong, nearly a hundred kilometres away. Chris is looking at the blocks of time marked off on his running sheet. We should have left by now.

I grab my camera and mug, and we head out to a yellow van. We’re in Van 1, the original: 150,000 kilometres in three years. Chris has already picked up fifty-five kilograms of food from a supermarket in Manuka and delivered it to a charity in south Canberra. He is young, burly, a gridiron player, with a wild mop of hair that almost covers his eyes, and he wears thin, low-cut white sandshoes without socks that seem out of proportion.

Chris’ parents are friends of Dave’s and they arranged the summer job for him. ‘I just liked it, so I stayed,’ he says. He spent his gap year driving the yellow van.

We pull up in the back dock of a suburban shopping complex with an Aldi supermarket. The van is refrigerated, so its engine stays running while we head through a steel door. Staff lead us into the store room, to four crates holding chest high boxes of discarded eggs, watermelons, focaccias, sliced bread. There are two trolleys in which the Aldi staff have stacked the best food. Until a few years ago this wouldn’t have been possible, because of the legal risk, but the laws were changed to indemnify retailers giving food to charities. Chris and I push the trolleys through the shopping centre, out to the van.

We pull out bags of nectarines, mangoes, apricots and plums, along with punnets of raspberries and strawberries, and check and weigh them. It’s a summer harvest – rich red, orange and purple, and sweet aromas. The heavier nectarines have squashed the raspberries and crimson liquid is leaking. We have to bin them. It’s a contamination risk, and not fair to the agencies that would take the food or the people who would eat it.

Six and a half kilos of fruit, and six loaves of soft white bread marked down to sixty-nine cents.

WHEAT TAKES UP more of the world’s land than any other crop. Producing one loaf of bread, from the field to shop, requires eight hundred litres of water. The industrial production of nitrogenous fertiliser requires mining for natural gas. Nitrogen in fertilisers runs off into rivers, causing toxic algal blooms, and then into oceans where
Estuaries can become ‘dead zones’. They release massive quantities of nitrous oxide, a gas with three hundred times the heat-trapping potential of carbon dioxide, as well as nitrogen oxide, which destroys ozone. According to estimates by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, up to 2.5 million tonnes of nitrogen is applied to Australian crops each year. We turned Nauru into a doughnut for its phosphate.

The fertiliser has to be transported and distributed by trucks and tractors burning diesel. The grain is harvested and transported on trucks and ships burning more diesel. Natural gas is used to fire the ovens that bake the bread. Bread also needs oil and salt, and sugar, which is probably sourced from the cane fields of Queensland, the excess fertilisers and chemicals of which run off to the coast and threaten the Great Barrier Reef.

Humankind’s agricultural activities have been the primary cause of species loss, and – according the world’s top biological scientists working for the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment – continue to be ‘perhaps the single greatest threat to biodiversity’. Agriculture has played a significant role in plunging the earth into another mass extinction event, the sixth in its history.

This is more than a matter of unnecessary resource depletion and environmental destruction. The food system is breaking down. In wealthy countries we grow and consume so much excess food that it’s killing us. We’ve become unhealthy vessels for the disposal of unwanted surpluses. Researchers Dorothy Blair and Jeffery Sobal calculated that the population of the United States is storing more than ten trillion kilocalories of body fat: a gigantic reservoir that will be released as carbon dioxide at death. Two-thirds of Australians are overweight or obese. Access Economics estimates this has a total cost to the national economy of $58.2 billion. That’s almost two broadband networks every year.

Perhaps what is most unsettling about the global food system is that, despite it producing such large surpluses, around two billion people suffer from lack of nutrients, and of those a billion go hungry every day. The wasted food in North America and Europe alone could feed the world’s hungry three times over, according to the historian Tristram Stuart. There is a disastrous misalignment between how we grow food, what we grow it for and who we grow it for. Australian grain farmers toil for over fifty hours each week to make a $20,000 annual profit so a businessman in India can get diabetes. We dam the rivers and degrade the Murray-Darling Basin so someone in Japan can throw half her rice in the bin. We grow grain to fatten cattle for premium markets while a billion go hungry. Is this what Australian agriculture is for?

Almost seventy years ago an Australian fruit farmer, Frank McDougall, had a vision for aligning agriculture with the needs of public health and social justice. He took his vision to the world and almost succeeded. McDougall decided at
the age of twenty-five to become a farmer and move to the new irrigation settlement of Renmark, in South Australia’s Riverland. Unlike Greenwich in England, McDougall’s birthplace, Renmark wasn’t the global co-ordinator of time. In 1907 his chosen town wasn’t even connected to a train line. Tanned scrub-cutters and fruit-pickers would cool off and bathe in the Murray River’s wide meander sweeping round the edge of town, while red dust drifted silently through the townsfolk’s airy huts and settled on everything.

On the eighty acres he had cleared McDougall built a two-room shack and grew apricots. At the end of the summer harvest the discarded stones of McDougall’s dried apricots accumulated around his shack until the paths were paved with them. Each new stone marked the slow and quiet passing of time. Perhaps he yearned to be at the centre of things again. McDougall enlisted in the army, and served in Egypt and France with the 1st Anzac Cyclist Battalion. On his return he wasn’t content just to grow fruit, and he became a member of the board of the Australian Dried Fruits Association and travelled to England to represent growers’ interests. In 1923 he formed a close relationship with the conservative Australian Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, who sought McDougall’s advice on economic, agricultural and trade matters.

In 1925 McDougall published *Sheltered Markets*, a book that ‘refined and popularised’ the concept of imperial preferences, the system of reciprocal tariff reductions between British colonies and dominions designed to foster trade within the empire. The historian John B O’Brien, in one of the few essays on McDougall, described empire trade as a policy that was ‘narrowly focused, restrictive, combative and essentially pandered to xenophobic nationalistic instincts and pursuits that could best be realised within the limits of a confined section of the world and to hell with the rest’.

The liberal economic policies influential at the time were a hangover from the nineteenth century. They were founded on a belief that the producers in society were the most noble and virtuous, and contributed most to the generation of wealth. The consumers, on the other hand – the workers and the poor – were morally inferior, a drain on society. The provision of relief was thought to unnaturally weaken the gene pool. This did not mean a preference for small government: the supporters of laissez-faire economic policy ‘were more than willing to see government provide tariffs, railroad subsidies, and internal improvements, all of which benefitted producers… What they condemned was intervention on behalf of consumers,’ the historian Kathleen Donohue contends. Workers and the poor were seen to be diverting money that could be reinvested in production. Government structures, policies and legislation enhanced the rights, protection and power of producers.

By the late 1920s, however, empire trade was failing, and so too were the policies to deliver economic subsidy and advantage to the producers. Massive surpluses accumulated in the exporting countries, due to a combination of reduced world
trade and the actions of producers, merchants and governments, who refused to sell at lower prices and colluded to deliberately withhold produce from the market. The New York stock market crashed in 1929 and commodity prices went into freefall. The price Australian wheat fetched on export markets in the 1931–32 season was two-thirds lower than in 1924–25. Governments responded with a hodgepodge of panicked and parochial economic and trade strategies. Farmers were forced to try extracting more from the land to recoup their losses.

Much of the West’s confidence began to crumble. Fascism and totalitarianism spread in Europe, and military tensions between industrial powers were heightening. Instead of attempting to lift people from poverty, and stimulate demand to raise prices, food surpluses were left unsold while millions starved.

FRANK MCDougALL was dismayed by the system he had helped create. In 1933, when the World Economic Conference ‘failed to agree to anything save the desirability of the restriction of production in a poverty stricken world’, McDougall abandoned his views on imperial preference and tariffs. He thought it immoral and economically senseless to restrict production in a world of hunger. Instead of protecting and subsiding the producers, he argued for a plan to increase the capacity of consumers to purchase the surplus, stimulating demand. The purpose of agriculture would be restructured. It could no longer be treated as a set of commodities for balancing terms of trade – the global system would be redesigned to provide the world with more nutritious foods.

McDougall had become good friends with John Boyd Orr, the world’s leading nutrition scientist. Orr was about to publish a study that described a vicious circle by which Britain’s poor could not afford food, leaving them less productive and without the capacity to lift themselves from poverty. McDougall’s nutrition agenda was drawn directly from knowledge he gained through his friendship with Orr. A healthier society, combined with other efforts to increase living standards, would increase world demand, stimulate industry, end the problem of surpluses and bring the world economy out of depression.

In a briefing paper of 1934 entitled ‘The Health and the Agricultural Problems’ McDougall drew on the nutrition literature to argue that the emphasis of agricultural production should shift from high-energy grains to the most nutritious and vitamin-rich foods, such as fruit and vegetables, milk and eggs. He argued that food processing and distribution should be ‘conducted more on the lines of public utility services’, rather than profit-making businesses. McDougall was suggesting a public takeover of private industry: food production would be a public utility, like the domestic water supply. He even included ideas for how milk might be delivered by a system of pipes and distribution centres, following the model of petrol stations. The long-term aim was to restructure the global economy, redistribute wealth, and
create a more equitable and healthier society. It was extraordinary, it was radical, and it gained worldwide attention.

In 1935, Stanley Bruce, by now no longer the Australian Prime Minister, took the paper to the League of Nations, promoting it as a plan to ‘marry health and agriculture’. Members were intrigued by the reversal of conventional thinking. The historian of international development Amy Staples wrote that its originality ‘rejuvenated’ the League of Nations and caught the imagination of a Depression-weary world. Before long twenty countries had established national nutrition committees, India reduced its tariffs on milk, and Estonia did the same for fruit and vegetables. It became the league’s best-selling pamphlet.13

As war with Germany loomed, attention diverted from the nutrition revolution. McDougall tried to argue that food programs could bring peace: better health could alleviate the grievances of those in Germany causing social unrest in response to poor economic conditions. This approach was labelled appeasement, and it failed. War halted the spread of international nutrition plans.

In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt made his ‘Four Freedoms’ speech. The third was ‘Freedom From Want’: an opening to put nutrition back on the agenda. McDougall prepared a memo for the United States Department of Agriculture in 1942, and by chance Eleanor Roosevelt read it. In September that year he was invited to dinner with the President.

McDougall claimed most of the conversation was taken up by Franklin Roosevelt trying to determine a name for the United Nations after the war. At one stage, when ‘the President momentarily became absorbed in the contents of his plate’, McDougall suggested that the United Nations should have something to do, such as an international agency for food and agriculture.14 In February 1943 Roosevelt called the first conference of the United Nations at Hot Springs, Virginia. Its subject was food and agriculture. It seemed like a triumphant moment but England, followed by the United States, began to put strategic interests before international co-operation on agriculture, food and health.

BY MID-MORNING CHRIS and I have picked up forty-eight kilos of summer fruit, just about every kind of bread you could think of, frozen T-bone steaks, gourmet pies from the National Gallery, bottles of flavoured milk and ‘indulge mango sensation’ yoghurt.

I ask Chris what he wants to do after he finishes working at OzHarvest. ‘I want to get into Duntroon. I want to be a peacekeeper.’ His father is in the Air Force.

I know people with family members who have served in Afghanistan; thinking about the danger, I make a comment that comes across as flippant, saying that at least Australia might be out of there by the time he finishes training.
‘There’ll always be somewhere,’ he replies.

It’s time to make our first drop-off. We head to St John’s Care, a couple of blocks from the city, towards the red boulevard of Anzac Parade and its symbols of sacrifice. The car park is full. Chris stops the van in the middle of the lot, leaving just enough room for others to get out.

Inside a small building trestle tables are set up with supplies. People enter and select what they need, like a supermarket. Mothers carrying infants or walking with children by their side are laughing and sharing plans for Christmas. It’s communal, almost joyful. I don’t know if it’s always like this or if it’s due to the festive season. There’s a hardness about their appearance – creases around eyes, pulled-back hair, protruding elbows – that suggests the toughness that comes with living and working at the margins.

A man in his late thirties with a shaved head and a crescent-shaped scar from his temple to the back of his head asks if I’ve brought food. He wants to help. His speech is slow. I point to the van, and he sets about loading the food on trolleys in such a determined and efficient manner that I realise that even if we didn’t need his help he was going to give it.

The two directors help unload food too. While everyone around here seems fairly relaxed, Sue and Robyn look weary, and a little anxious. Their doors only just opened but they’ve already had twenty-seven families this morning. I ask Robyn if OzHarvest’s food has helped the St John’s Care centre. She glances at me with a grim-looking half grin. ‘We no longer have to buy it…or as much, at least.’

BY LUNCHTIME WE’VE picked up eight kilos of lamb souvlaki and the odour of garlic is so powerful we could find our van in a car park by smell alone. The back of the vehicle is stacked to the roof with another twenty-five kilos of bread.

We drive north to a warehouse where Hand Up operates. They support more than nine hundred families. At the warehouse they run a shop where people can buy essential grocery items at a discount. ‘Hand Up are good for mono-drops,’ says Chris. ‘The smaller agencies need variety, so it’s hard to drop off, say, a hundred kilos of oranges, but they serve so many here it’s not a problem clearing it.’

I start wheeling a trolley with yellow crates full of bread from the dock into the warehouse. There are five women working for Hand Up and each one says, ‘Bread! You’ve got bread. We’re out of bread!’ So close to Christmas their supplier couldn’t get extra loaves. With well-practised swiftness they begin unpacking and sorting on a ten-metre-long stainless steel bench. Just before I leave I notice towards the back of the room, among the shelves of grocery items, a tall woman with long hair telling her three-year-old daughter to choose something special for Christmas Day.
For the rest of the afternoon we collect food donated at Canberra’s public libraries. They’ve been running a ‘food for fines’ program over the summer: borrowers can clear their fines by offering tinned and packaged food in lieu of cash. We pick up twenty-seven kilos of tinned soup, tomato paste, baked beans and pasta at Belconnen Library, and the same amount at Kippax.

At twenty to two we’re driving to the next library when Chris gets a call from Pete at the OzHarvest office. Sue from St John’s Care needs more food. Forty more families arrived after we left and have cleaned her out. ‘Sue never calls,’ Chris says. ‘She is desperate.’

All we have in the van are the non-perishables from the libraries. Chris pulls over and rings Van 2 but there’s no answer. He wonders whether he could go out to the big food donor near the airport. A few months ago he collected four hundred kilos of ‘ready to go’ ravioli in one pick-up. Chris decides there isn’t time, and he’s not scheduled to go there until tomorrow anyway. He sounds worried. ‘Hopefully Van 2 can get something to them,’ he says. ‘Tomorrow I’ll do the pick-up near the airport and I’ll be able to smash them with food.’

AS WE DRIVE through the suburbs of north Canberra I notice advertising on bus shelters. On the left-hand side of the road an ad announces: ‘War declared on liquor prices’. On the right, there’s a giant yellow M, with ‘Open 24 hours’ written underneath. I wonder if we’re living with the unintended consequences of McDougall’s nutrition agenda. His scheme, worked out with John Boyd Orr, included plans for a rapid increase in agricultural production, an independent organisation that would arrange the financing of capital for farmers in developing countries, short-term food relief and open access to markets. It sounds like the institutions and global food regime that operates now: the FAO, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization. It sounds like the Green Revolution, which was successful in increasing yields but degraded environments and probably increased inequality.15 In Griffith REVIEW 24: Participation Society Mark Hopkinson argued that the switch to a consumer-oriented economy created ever-expanding expectations of material growth. Perhaps this has helped produce food surpluses and over-consumption.

On the surface there are similarities, but this is not the way that McDougall envisioned postwar development. Britain and the United States began to perceive the global nutrition agenda pushed by McDougall and Orr as a threat to their domestic and strategic interests. Orr’s 1936 study, Food, Health and Income, so embarrassed Britain that it excluded him from the 1943 conference on food and agriculture at Hot Springs. McDougall found a way to include the nutrition scientist. He screened a film called The World of Plenty that featured Orr asking, ‘What are we fighting for?’ Amy Staples described the reaction: ‘When Orr answered his own
question by arguing for a war against want, starting with food, the delegates rose to their feet and cheered.'\textsuperscript{16}

In October 1945 an interim commission met for what would be the first of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s regular meetings. Britain only granted Orr observer status. The British delegates conspired with the United States’ Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and Assistant Secretary of State Will Clayton to diminish the organisation’s responsibilities. Its role would be to gather statistics and offer advice. One year later, to the extreme disappointment of the British and North Americans, Orr was the last candidate standing for the position of first director-general of the FAO. While director-general he proposed a more activist World Food Board. He wanted it to create vast food banks, stabilise prices, oversee trade agreements concerning agricultural commodities, advise on the most nutritious foods to grow, redistribute food and provide generous assistance to farmers in developing countries. This was McDougall and Bruce’s marriage of health and agriculture.

Britain opposed Orr’s proposal because it was dependent on food imports and any plan that might lead to higher food prices would be detrimental to its weakening economy. Raising farmers’ incomes in developing nations was not its priority. The United States was opposed because it saw its future as dependent on the generation of wealth through opening markets for its exports. It wanted the new International Trade Organization that it had played a significant role in founding to determine trade agreements without any interference from the World Food Board. It wanted trade to protect its prosperity, not to lift the poor from poverty. The United States also thought the proposal would obstruct its national security agenda and the pursuit of its long-term strategic interests. The World Food Board would have limited ‘its ability to use food aid to bring third-world nationalists into the US fold, and its garnering of international goodwill through its food initiatives’, Staples wrote. The State Department described the proposal as ‘disturbing’\textsuperscript{17}

Knowing the World Food Board was popular among developing nations, including India, Britain and the United States worked quietly to defeat it. McDougall, Bruce and Orr believed international co-operation and the economic and social advantages of a mutually beneficial global agricultural system would define a new era of peace. The dominant power, the United States, pursued a parochial nationalist agenda centred on economic conflict, military supremacy and the promotion of a false free trade. Food became just another instrument of its foreign policy.

In April 1948 Orr’s term as director-general ended. He left for Scotland, bitter and dejected: ‘I took out my handkerchief, wiped the dust of America from the soles of my shoes with it and threw it into the harbour.’\textsuperscript{18} Years later, Stanley Bruce expressed his disappointment that their nutrition agenda had been narrowed and
marginalised to ‘humanitarian considerations’. He said their scheme had little to do with high moral principles: they had always argued on economic grounds. The distribution of food was supposed to be integrated into the mainstream of the economy, not something special and conditional, in the form of food aid, that reinforced inequitable economic and power relations. McDougall continued to work for the FAO for the rest of his career, pursuing his nutrition agenda from the inside.

THE WORLD HEALTH Organization estimates that by 2020 chronic non-communicable disease, mostly associated with diet, will be responsible for two-thirds of the world’s disease and mortality.19 An article in the Bulletin of the WHO describes an ‘unprecedented’ change in humanity’s diet. Basic foods are being replaced with processed food products containing high amounts of added sugars, salt, fats and oils. Levels of obesity in Latin America are similar to those in the United States, and higher among women in North Africa. Large transnational food corporations penetrate new markets by purchasing majority shareholdings of local food processors, wholesalers and growers. Mexicans drink more Coke than water.20

If governments try to undertake small measures to improve diets, such as labelling food with health indicators or taxing processed foods, they risk legal action under World Trade Organization rules – much like the tobacco industry’s High Court challenge to Australia’s plain packaging laws.

The line about doubling food production by 2050 has its origins in a 2006 FAO study that estimated demand for grain would grow by seventy to a hundred per cent to feed animals as more people start eating meat.21 The food industry and lobbyists have spun it to justify the status quo. Instead of an international democratic body regulating food, we have multinational food corporations and commodity trading firms regulating the system. McDougall and Orr would be impressed by the intensity of their centralisation, co-ordination and influence.

The major element missing from the McDougall’s marriage of health and agriculture was the environment. It is difficult to work out what the alternative environmental impact would have been had the world grown more fruit and vegetables instead of high-energy foods such as grains and sugar. Perhaps the World Food Board, with its focus on nutrition, would have regulated to minimise over-consumption, avoiding wasted use of resources. In any case, the virtue of having a clearly defined purpose for agriculture, better global nutrition, is that planners could change the means and methods without jeopardising the goal. It wouldn’t have mattered to McDougall whether industrial farming, organic farming or agro-ecological biodynamic farming was the method, so long as it grew the most nutritious foods. The amorphous agenda of ‘prosperity’ and ‘increasing consumption’, on the other hand, conflates means with ends. It produces an agriculture focused on higher yield, at any cost. To suggest change to the system is to threaten vested interests and the established order.
AT TWENTY PAST two we make our last pick-up. Two hundred and fifty-five kilos, a quarter of a tonne, all up today. Chris is almost apologetic. ‘It wasn’t a good day,’ he says. ‘It’s a very light total.’

Van 2 rings to say its been to the big food donor near the airport and collected a hundred and sixty kilos, and is on the way to Sue at St John’s Care.

‘Thanks,’ Chris says, and his shoulders drop as he sighs with relief.

We’re travelling south, towards the ranges and the OzHarvest office, when Chris tells me he hopes to see the Sisters of the Good Samaritan at Queanbeyan when he does his drop-off tomorrow. The Sisters will be working food stalls. ‘It’s a Saturday; it’s not a work day for them,’ he says. ‘They just do it, out of their own time.’ He says he admires them, and that they are his role models. ‘I think about them most days. I hope some of their goodness, their inspiration, rubs off on me.’

Chris spent his gap year working in a low-paid community sector job because he enjoys it, he wants to be a peacekeeper knowing the danger he will face, and his role models are self-sacrificing Catholic Sisters. What drives him is a deep commitment to public service. He’s an extraordinary person. They all are. Dave let OzHarvest take over his home life when he parked the van in his driveway; Pete volunteers six days a week. Since his wife died a year or so ago he’s dedicated his life to helping others.

That’s when I’m confronted with the idealism of McDougall’s plan, and my idealism for believing in it. The nutrition scheme required international cooperation. It was optimistic and saw the best in humanity. Even if its economics appeared to make sense, it still depended on generosity, power sharing and empathy. I thought the staff and volunteers at OzHarvest were ordinary people who saw the statistics and were appalled, who were persuaded by reason and rational argument, and who recognised the system is broken and decided to do something about it. But if they are extraordinary, meaning limited in number, I’m left wondering what that means for a plan that requires better relationships between people across the globe. You can only accept the current system of agriculture if you believe some lives, some groups of people, are worth more than others. Is there enough good in us all for a McDougall-style alternative?

AT OZHARVEST, VOLUNTEERS are packing hampers under the whirr of pedestal fans. Chris and I unload the boxes of tinned food from the van. The last thing I hear before leaving is that a bus carrying fifty people has turned up to St John’s Care. I hope Chris ‘smashes’ them with food in the morning. And I hope there is another McDougall for the next forty years, for the nine billion by 2050. Perhaps it will be a politician, but that seems unlikely. I would like to see this person come from the ranks of farmers, like McDougall – someone who can bring the people along, who will persuade Australia to ‘marry health with agriculture’, so that our farming can be a model for rest of the world.
McDougall gave Australia an international voice in unlikely circumstances. Today Australia doesn’t have the capacity to feed the world, but we could lead it again.

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4 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008, National Health Survey 2007-08, Cat 4364.0.
8 Ibid., 165.
14 Ibid., 173-74.
17 To win the peace, p 505.
20 Ibid
JESS stood at the edge of the dam holding her daughter’s hand. She had said they were going to the beach, but it wasn’t a beach, just a flat bit of gravel that fell away to the water. The water didn’t even lap. Around them, bathers were spread out on towels. One woman’s feet and ankles swelled. Her toenails were painted sapphire green, jewels in the fat. Jess felt queasy at so much flesh.

Frankie squeezed her hand. Jess looked down at her in her bubblegum-pink one-piece. Go on then, she said and squeezed her hand back. Don’t go deep, though, only up to here. She made a line across her stomach.

Frankie nodded and walked to the edge. Then she ran in quickly, with a squeal, the only sound she’d made in hours. She stopped when the water was at waist height, arms hovering beside her, and looked back at Jess. A flock of pink galahs screeched and wheeled overhead.

Nobody was supposed to swim in it, the town water supply, but the air was forty degrees and the dam shimmered with promise. She’d read in a brochure – the rental agent had left it on the kitchen bench in the house – that after the flooding the town had been renamed Burrnburnng-nga, an Indigenous name. Every time she heard someone say it they pronounced it differently and quietly, unsure.

It’s beautiful in there, a woman said, emerging from the dam. Her bikini was lost in folds of wet skin, the tropical print only displaying grandly over her buttocks and breasts. Every bit of her wobbled.

Jess shifted in her own bikini: it felt tight. Her toes broke the water’s skin. It was much warmer than she expected, and the dam floor was soft and silty. The water wasn’t brown like the dams she remembered from down south, copper coin-shaped dams that were dug into dry earth to water cattle. This water was a luminous green, but she couldn’t see any bit of herself that was submerged. She tried to catch a little of it, some of the colour, but in the cup of her hand it was clear.

Her daughter doggy-paddled towards her. Mum, she said, grinning, looking like Max.
Hallelujah, Jess thought, she speaks. Hello, she said and scooped her up. Together they went deeper. Frankie clung on, legs rubber-band tight around her waist. The galahs screamed. She could now see the tops of drowned trees, green algae draped over the dead branches. They stretched solemnly towards the blue sky. She didn’t let Frankie put her head under.

AT THE SUPERMARKET, dam water dripped from her ponytail down the back of her shirt. Produce was piled in gorgeous pyramids. The apples gleamed. She smelt a mango and it made her mouth water. It was bigger than her hand and heavy, its skin a blushing orange. All the fruit and vegetables had signs that said ‘Grown in the Basin’ or ‘The Basin Feeding the Nation’. She laughed: every rural town she’d known subsisted on frozen white bread and canned goods. She put the mango in her basket.

The checkout woman’s arm fat jiggled as she moved each item from conveyor belt to bag.

Hello there, the woman said to Frankie. Hello, sweetie.

Frankie, swinging off the edge of the bench, didn’t reply. The checkout woman’s cheeks were shiny red as the apples.

Good fruit, Jess said.

The woman laughed. Isn’t it?

How do they do it all the way out here?

The dam, honey. I can’t even remember what it was like before. She laughed again – her eyes were the prettiest blue. She sang the price, One hundred and thirty-two fifty, and smiled. Her hair was a natural flaxen. If she weren’t obese, she’d turn heads, Jess thought as she put her credit card back in her purse. She gave Frankie a light plastic bag to carry, shifted her shoulders and lifted the rest. They walked out through the yawning electric doors.

The car park was blinding hot. She couldn’t see her old Holden for the trucks. They were new, even under the dust, the kind of trucks small towns sprout after they’ve had a good year, a bumper crop.

Mum, Frankie said and pulled her towards their car. Parked next to the Holden, as if drawn together by a shared history of rust, was a white ute. An old man was loading boxes of bottles into the tray. Jess could tell a farmer when she saw one – thin as a stalk of wheat and skin the colour of exposed dirt. Kind of how her dad looked after ten years of drought.

She opened the door and dumped the shopping in the back. An apple rolled out and under the seat. She motioned for Frankie to get in too. In you pop, she said. But Frankie was staring at the man. Frankie, she said loudly.
He looked up at them from beneath the brim of his hat. They took my land, he said, squeezing words between fly-bitten lips.

The water bottles thumping into the back of his truck made a loud gong that vibrated through her.

Don’t drink the water, he said.

What water? Jess said.

He motioned with his head to the dam at their backs.

Oh yeah? What about swimming in it? she said and pulled her ponytail to the front, squeezing water onto the dusty cement. The man forced out a brittle laugh, and hid his face back under the brim of his hat, muttering. He didn’t look at them again.

O-kaay, Jess said to herself.

She clipped Frankie into the seat, and got in to the front. Sitting there Jess felt fatter, much bigger in the seat – her legs, softer and wider, seemed squished under the steering wheel. She could see Frankie strapped into the back, seatbelt pulling tight against her front, a trussed Christmas ham.

I’LL SEE YOU tonight, Max said and kissed her forehead, as he did every morning before work. His stubble against her skin. His breath, smelling of Nescafé. She wasn’t asleep – she couldn’t sleep.

Wait, she said. But he was already out the bedroom door. She got up to follow him down the hallway. Her thighs rubbed together, hurt with each step: a heat rash bloomed rose-red there. He shut the front door behind him, without looking back.

Max, she said. Her voice, echoing in the hallway, sounded like her own but her body was distorted and blown out. Her skin hurt and broke into stretch marks, shiny pink lines that tiger-striped her. She leaned against the wall, holding herself up, huffing. She couldn’t remember why she’d run after him.

JESS DROVE TO the dam lookout. It was the highest point in town and to get there she had to drive up the guts of verdant fields. Giant wheeled sprinklers rolled in slow motion, spraying a fine mist over the green expanse. She wound her window up.

Up, up, up, she said to Frankie, who took her thumb out of her mouth to fumble with the handle. The mist blew into and over the car. Jess put the window wipers on. Bug splatters and dust smudged across the glass, making everything blur. She couldn’t tell what was growing in the fields: potatoes, tomatoes? Just rows of plants and damp black dirt.
At the lookout there was a tall chain-link fence, probably designed to discourage suicide. It was cemented into rock that shimmered in the heat, sharp grass growing from its cracks. Rubbish had blown up against the fence. She got out and hooked her fingers through the wire. Frankie mimicked her, poking her chubby fingers through too.

The flat expanse of water reflected the sky and the purple red of the hills shrugged up around it. It took her breath away. The pamphlet said it was the biggest inland body of water in Australia. They called it a lake. Beyond that she could see green fields into the distance. The town rose up out of the earth, as if it too had grown there. Squeezed in between two hills was the facility where Max worked. There was no smoke, no sign of activity.

A diagram etched into a metal plaque showed how the land lay underneath the water. It showed how the river once ran, with drawings of grass and wallabies on the river flats. She imagined the seam of the river under the water and that seam ripping open. She wondered if the wallabies were stranded on islands in the beginning, whether they tried to swim to the edges. There were also distances etched into the plaque: to Sydney, to Indonesia, to the Cape of Good Hope, as if this place was somewhere too. A sadness welled inside her. The chain link pressed into the fat on her arms.

The galahs flew up behind her so close she could hear their wings. She whipped around to face them, tearing her hands from the fence. The wings were pink as an open mouth.

Get! she yelled. She crouched down to shield Frankie and the birds flew up and away, pretty pink and white against the sky. She saw them circle, then land way down in the dam on the exposed limbs of the dead trees. Frankie was crying, tears falling silently down her ruddy cheeks.

I'm sorry, she said and pulled her in. Their fat squeezed out and over with the force of the hug.

WHAT'S WITH ALL this water? Max said. She'd been buying it for weeks now.

We're not drinking town water.

Don't be silly, baby.

He went to the tap and got himself a glass of water. It bubbled and then settled in his glass. He drank it in one long gulp.

It's totally fine.

I'm not stupid, she said. My jeans don't fit. They don't even fit over my thighs.

So buy some new jeans, then.
That’s not what I mean. I mean, this is scary. Everyone in this town is morbidly obese. I’m morbidly obese.

You’re being hysterical.

I want to leave.

Baby, don’t be crazy – he leaned over the table, knocking the salt over with his arm – we’ve never done so well.

She looked at his sausage fingers grabbing at her own.

What do you do, anyway, in that factory?

It’s not a factory – it’s a facility.

But what do you do?

Baby, I’m a carpenter.

She pulled his hands from hers and faced their palms to the ceiling. They were soft and pink as a baby’s. She scraped her chair back.

SHE WAS SITTING in the lounge, her body moulded to the chair. He looked at her from the doorway.

Come to the pub with me, he said.

Is that an apology?

Yep, he said and threw her the grin that had made her walk across the pub and say, Hey, when she was only sixteen and really too young to be hey-ing anyone.

She couldn’t help but smile. Okay, she said.

We’ll drop Frankie at the sitter’s – come on.

He walked over and placed a kiss on her forehead.

Kiss me so it counts, she said. He turned her chin up to him and kissed her lips. She closed her eyes.

They waddled down the steps, out onto the dewy grass, gone cold with the night, to the car.

Jess grabbed Max’s hand as they pushed through the pub doors. The noise reached out and engulfed her. Max pulled her in through the squeeze of people.

It wasn’t so bad at the edge of the room. Max wrapped her hand around a cold beer and grinned.

You look pretty tonight, he said.

Don’t lie.
I like it, he said and pulled on the edge of her shirt. It was his shirt, the only thing that would fit her. His teenage footy team’s mascot growled over her breasts.

You’re crazy, she said. She sipped at her beer. It was delicious. They make this in the basin too? she asked.

He laughed. They drank their beers.

Another?

Sure, she said and smiled.

He left her at the edge of the room. Her glass was empty and warm in her hand now. She felt someone stumble against her. She dropped her glass and it landed with a dull thud on the carpet.

Sorry, love.

It was the old farmer. He steadied himself on her arm. She could see the veins beneath his skin, the sinew in his arms. Men like him didn’t stop working – they just dropped dead.

Drunk, he said.

It’s okay.

He looked naked without his hat. His grey hair was stained nicotine yellow at the front. His wrinkles were like cracks in dry mud.

You look different, he said.

Have we met before?

His bony fingers dug deep into the flesh of her arm. You were skinny before, he said.

She felt the sting of tears.

The most beautiful country you ever seen, gone. Them gums, they’re drowned under there. Ever heard a gum drown? They creak. All the animals. It’s not like fire – them animals can’t sense it coming – they was drowned, sure enough. The surface of the water was just insects. Snakes curled and died. They washed up at the sides. It didn’t look like it does now. It was putrid.

His face looked hollow, eyes too big in their sockets.

Stop it, she said.

All that water – this is dry country.

You got your payout?

With what little saliva he could muster, he spat on the carpet beside him. I ain’t spent it, he said.
Hey, said Max. He had two beers, one in each hand.

The old man let go of her arm. Even in the dull light she could see the red marks of his fingers and thumb. He stood up straight. She saw the fighter in his stance, muscles wound tight and dry as jerky.

He was just telling me about the flood, about the animals, she said. How they drowned.

She patted the old man on the back, and he took one more look at Max before collapsing into his bones. He shuffled off into the crowd.

Are you okay? Max said.

Yeah. Let’s go.

Max put her beer on the counter and downed the other in one long gulp. Sure, he said. Whatever you want, baby.

IN THE PINK dark of early morning the road was a long slow line of headlights as workers arrived at the facility. Frankie was asleep in the backseat, her head lolling like a limp balloon with the movement of the car. When they got close to the gate, lit bright as a border crossing, Jess pulled the car off the road. She watched the trucks stream past. By 7.30 they were all through, and the day was empty and hot.

The next time she looked her daughter’s eyes were open, shiny as Christmas baubles.

Where are we? Frankie said.

Just following Dad.

Where is he?

In there.

She looked at the gate. A man in a tan uniform was walking towards the car. She tried to turn the engine over but it coughed at her, shuddered. She tried again.

The man banged his palm on the hood. He was tall and his gut hung out over his belt like a full pouch.

Ma’am, he said. He bent down to look at her through her open window. How are you today?

Sir?

Call me Gary, he said. He put his hand through the window to shake. She took his thick fingers in her own. He stepped back and surveyed them. When’s Max going to buy you a new car? About time, I reckon, he said with a smile. What are you doing all the way out here, anyway? It’s going to be a scorcher. You should be home, in the shade, with a lemonade. He cracked a bigger grin.
You know Max?

See him twice a day, he said. At the gate, you get to know people.

I just wanted to see where he worked, you know?

You want to see it? We got visiting on the second Saturday of every second month. You can even stand atop the wall. Best view in Australia. Second Saturday of every second month, you hear? He banged the hood of her car again and walked away.

She felt sick.

I’m hungry, Frankie said.

I know, possum.

The car started first go.

JESS HELD THE little pill in her hand. Max had got them for her, so she could sleep. She felt as big as a wedding marquee in her nightie. She filled her glass from a bottle beside the basin she left there to clean her teeth. Taking a sip, she spilled water over her mouth and down her front. She moved with her old body – it was inside her, like a second skeleton. She attempted another sip, sighed and laughed at herself, poured the water down the sink, refilled the glass from the tap. She swallowed the pill and washed it down with the town water. It tasted metallic, like licking a playground monkey bar. She gulped it down, looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were deep in the puff of her face. She tapped at the glass, leaving an oily smudge on her reflected forehead.

In the morning she woke up crying, her pillow soaked. She couldn’t remember her dream, only that it was of dark and that the dark had rushed at her. She felt exhausted. Max had left for work and the sun was already pouring in sharp, hot lines through the blinds.

She got up, made Frankie toast and herself tea from bottled water. She sat at the kitchen table and began the wait for Max to come home. Frankie crunched her toast until there was a pile of neat nibbled crusts, then asked for more.

FRANKIE WAS CROUCHED over dirt. The car ticked in the heat. It was hot enough to fry an egg on the bonnet.

Look, Mum, Frankie said.

There was a line of big ants slipping into a crack in the riverbank. The dry bed was like a scar. Above, gum leaves shivered in the heat. Jess picked up a leaf, slim and long. It curled at the edges, with a bug’s scribble across it, beautiful as cursive.
A magpie warbled nearby. Jess couldn’t see the bird, but its song hung around her. She closed her eyes and felt dizzy, disoriented. She needed a drink, but she should save some water in case the engine overheated. There was dust on the road behind them, in the distance.

Quick sticks, she said to Frankie, ushering her into the back of the car and clipping the seatbelt. She checked Max was breathing, kissed him on the forehead. He was in a deep sleep. She figured he’d wake in an hour or so. She jumped in the front and accelerated away from the rest stop.

We’re just going to drive, she said to Max. It was like talking to herself.

We’re going to drive south until we hit the ocean.

The ocean would be so cold it would strip them right down to their bones.

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The invasion of Australia just didn’t make any sense. A huge, dry, bulbous tile, sitting at the end of a chain of shards that dribbled out from Asia. Unlike the smaller islands in the chain, it had no exotic spices to entice and numb the European palate. It played no role in the highways of trade and culture sketched across the oceans between Africa and Siberia. The most advantageous position of this great sullen landmass – its top-left shoulder, which looked west to the Indian Ocean – was ignored. The colonisers instead chose the opposite corner: a stubbled coast that looked east and south to the almost empty vastness of the Pacific and the Antarctic.

The strangers who came here embodied the restless madness that had infected the other side of the globe. They, who had leaked rivers of blood and tears fighting over the most crowded corners of the second-smallest continent, had discovered that the world was bigger than they thought, but not limitless. They fanned out across the world’s oceans in the greatest real estate race in history, unable to countenance greedy neighbours snapping up islands, deltas, rivers and straits first. The people who already lived in these pieces of new-release real estate didn’t count. They weren’t part of the great race. Their land was fair game.

The people sent to seize this land at the end of the world were used to life under low grey skies; low and grey were their prospects too. A life on teeming cobbled streets, followed by an eternity in crowded fetid ships, to reach a place of dazzling emptiness – the agoraphobic shock of the first colonials became a thread that ran through the generations of immigrants who followed. Those they pushed ever backwards have never shaken off the claustrophobia caused by these restless, avaricious newcomers.

The first encounter between the immigrants and natives echoes down the generations. This land, for its original inhabitants, was a universe of meaning, an endless chain of wisdom and being. There was nothing beyond, before or after. For its new inhabitants, this land was a nullification, banishment beyond consciousness,
a place with no past, a desert of meaning mocked by the universe of significance on the other side of the world. Only a deafening present, and a future defined by a yearning for a return to meaning and significance.

AS THE YEARS passed and the original inhabitants were pushed back, the new arrivals found what they regarded as valuable in this land at the end of the world. Soon those arrivals who had no choice were outnumbered by those looking for better lives. For them, this was no push over the edge of consciousness but a new start, a clean slate. Their sense of *terra nullius* was not so much about the legalities of possession and dispossession – it was about imagining this new land on their terms, imprinting it with their future, without having to acknowledge that this land had already been imagined by those who had always been there.

The newcomers had wrested Australia into the world, the last frontier in a new universe of bitter competition. A bigger, dangerous world. Before 1788, for eons, it had been a universe to itself – a totality, not part of something bigger.

From the start the new arrivals felt small, isolated, vulnerable. This vast silent continent constantly echoed these feelings back at them. The unimaginable distance between them and where they had come from became a splinter in the brain, a birth trauma to rage and worry over. This new invention, Australia, became a yearning for elsewhere, for transformation – and always, ultimately, for connection.

The world that Australia had become a part of was unforgiving and avaricious. Out beyond the horizon were others who wanted to take this new discovery for themselves. That no other country could be seen from anywhere in Australia only diffused and deepened the dread. Machinations and confrontations on the other side of the world were amplified by the distance. Each ripple in Europe’s balance of power assumed huge importance for who would own the land at the end of the world.

Australia’s birth was the result of the spasms that engulfed the world from the end of the fifteenth century. The first was the sudden breaking of a millennium-long siege of Christendom. The followers of the Cross had become used to defending their faith behind sullen stone walls from waves of powerful unbelievers. The depths of their despair had come in 1453, when the Ottomans finally took Byzantium, the great eastern rampart, the inheritor of the original covenant of Constantine. But within a generation the Ottomans’ fellow Muslims had been pushed out of Europe’s western rampart, with the final conquest of Granada. At just that time, Christendom’s fervour had boarded a new revolution in ocean-going vessels, taking its piety and avarice to all of the earth’s continents.

The next contraction came quickly, splitting a newly resurgent Christendom down the middle, pitching Europe into paroxysms of medieval savagery. A new type of Christian emerged – surly and sober, humourless and determined. Perhaps
not by coincidence, this new Christianity sunk stubborn roots in the frozen, unforgiving north. They defined their purity against the sensuous Babylon of a resurgent Catholicism with its heels in the warm, exotic Mediterranean. The Protestant urge was separation and escape, first to the rocky islands off Europe’s coast, the Arctic peninsula, then the pilgrimage across the Atlantic. In America, the restlessness and disgust with Europe only grew more intense, and the westward escape continued.

The third contraction took longer to arrive, but was the biggest. It called into being a world of cities and steel and smokestacks and pitiless striving. Its logic was the denial and demolition of limits, a mania with no scruples. It had a bottomless appetite for coal, ore, people, land, beliefs. The more it consumed and destroyed, the hungrier it became. The logic of limitlessness quickly outgrew the British islands and within decades had brought all the world’s continents into its voracious orbit.

Australia’s conception, gestation and birth came from expansion and schism, escape and avarice. Little wonder its new settlers built their own meaning – and that of the place they lived in – around how they fitted into the global convulsions that had spawned them. Their great sullen land was soon discovered to have in abundance what was wanted by the continent they had left and longed for. Wood, flax, wool and gold flowed to the other side of the world, and the money and knowledge to build a new nation flowed back. Australians started to become very rich – not a good look for a penal colony.

THE NEW AUSTRALIA’S journey now had a narrative that predisposed it to another convulsion in Europe. Humans were no longer sacred, but animals like those they farmed and ate and petted. They had come not from an act of God but from millennia of mutation and competition. Those who survived and prospered were the most highly evolved – a pitiless law of the universe of living things. Here was a new way to explain why all the other humans the Europeans had encountered on their global expansion looked different. To some, it also explained why on no other continent or island did they encounter furnaces and factories, telegraphs and trains. Survival, prosperity, dominance had an evolutionary explanation – superiority flowed in the blood.

Race replaced God in explaining human fate. Societies were destined to compete. With only the fittest surviving, competition became ever more pitiless. The schism of Christendom soon gained a racial narrative. The Protestants reached back to the account of Germania written by the Roman historian Tacitus – a proud, indomitable people, imbued with traditions of equality and self-government. They had carried their democratic genius in their Saxon veins as they invaded England; later they had refused to be serfs to the invading Normans. A defining moment was the Magna Carta, from which flowered the Anglo-Saxon traditions of liberty, laws and
democracy. There was no accident about the supremacy of the British race: its stability, prosperity, inventiveness. Britons never would be slaves. And it was the unfolding of the logic of evolution that this most supreme of races would take possession of swathes of the world’s temperate zones: North America, southern Africa, Australia.

Here was the meaning of Australia: it was an expression of the genius and destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. Every triumph of the English-speaking peoples was celebrated in its cities and towns. Australia’s responsibility was to maintain the purity of its society against the teeming lesser races to its north, and to play its role in the evolving global drama of the British peoples. It was a natural transplantation, playing an important role in the onward march of a great and ancient race. Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato was the motto chosen by the nation’s first university: the same mind under different stars. The wars of Britain were the wars of the entire race, and in glorious sacrifice was born the nation’s founding myth: Anglo-Saxon courage and resilience against overwhelming odds.

The Nazis gave race a bad name but Australians were still proud of their Britishness, until the British began redefining what it meant. To the horror of many Australians, Whitehall had started to define the subjects of Empire as British – irrespective of colour or religion – and many had decided to take up residence in Britain. Luckily the mantle of leadership had passed to another, surging English-speaking people, who had proclaimed its global dominance by reference to those values that Tacitus had observed in ancient Germania: liberty, democracy, laws, enterprise. Australia’s narrative stayed intact. Just as its wood and flax had provided masts and sails for the British navy, now its vast interior played a key role in testing nuclear weapons. The Anglo-Saxon preference for rules would be put to good use in designing the new global institutions of Pax Americana, and a new wave of prosperity would flow from the rebuilding of the world’s economy under the imperium.

THIS WAS A story that should have had no end. The combination of liberty, laws, democracy and enterprise was supposed to be the elixir of success. In the post-racial world, any society with the good sense to adopt the simple Anglo-Saxon formula would flourish.

The land at the end of the world saw in its first turn of the millennium with a burst of light. Its position meant it was one of the first to leave the old millennium; its fireworks preceded those in Europe and America. Its harbour city played host to the great symbol of the world the West had made: a festival of sport and commerce hailing back to the birth of the West.

But this millennium isn’t proceeding to script. Time’s arrow came to ground before the end of the first decade. Liberty turned to vulnerability as planes crashed
into the World Trade Center and diplomatic secrets became common reading. Societies began to choke on their laws. Democracy fell into bitter and trivial division. Enterprise unfettered took financial systems past the capacity of any to comprehend or regulate, and brought the world the West had built crashing down.

This is a moment of profound disorientation for the land at the end of the world. Its internal story – privilege, wealth, safety – continues to play out, but the back story – of the strength and success of the far continents that built the world – has crumbled. Australia’s wealth no longer comes from the strength and success of those that built it. Its minerals and energy now feed those that are remaking the world. Its schools and universities pass on knowledge and confidence to the architects of a different order, training different minds under the same stars. Its beaches are host to people who never saw time as an arrow, the unfolding of a single, timeless design to ever greater glory. For those who now bathe in the pristine isolation of the land at the end of the world, time is a cycle – and the cycle is turning.

This will be a time of reinvention for this place on Asia’s rim. Its role in the world has been recast from the outside in. Once it was peripheral; now it is central to the world’s changes. One day soon, it will recognise the cards it has been dealt. It is a newborn society in a neighbourhood of ancient civilisations and rivalries. It is an old set of institutions in a neighbourhood where others are desperately building new ones. It has in abundance what the overcrowded continent to its north will soon fight over.

Where once the land at the end of the world defined its purpose to fit a narrative written elsewhere, now its narrative will come from within. The lords of this millennium will have no single story. Australia’s purpose will emerge as part of a new story, one not of yearning and transformation but of confidence and purpose.

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I BLAME Yasunari Kawabata for my obsession with Japan. When I was sixteen I read his short stories ‘The House of the Sleeping Beauties’ and ‘One Arm’, and I was hooked. The first, about a lonely old man who finds a place where he can watch beautiful, naked girls sleep beside him in a comatose state, later inspired Gabriel García Márquez’s *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. More recently, the film *Sleeping Beauty*, written and directed by the Australian novelist Julia Leigh, also bears an uncanny resemblance to the story’s plot.

But at sixteen I thought that Kawabata was all mine. No one I knew in Australia had read any of his works and I coveted my copy of his stories, with its traditional Japanese brown paper cover, which I had bought for twenty cents at a second-hand bookshop in Carlton. I wondered who had originally bought it and why it had been abandoned after making the journey all the way to Melbourne. The second story in the collection is a magic-realist tale about a man who meets a girl and asks if he can take her arm home with him. She detaches it for him and off he goes with the limb—under his coat, to keep it warm! It was so wonderfully odd that I started looking at my arms and wondering how they would look under men’s coats.

But Japan isn’t my little secret anymore. In the past two decades Australia has become more and more influenced by Japanese culture. And while I love Japan finally getting the recognition it deserves, I’ve never been very good at sharing. I used to be the only girl with Little Twin Stars and Hello Kitty underwear; now they are sold at Target. *Sailor Moon*’s Serena, a Japanese schoolgirl with long blond hair and magical powers, introduced to Australian audiences in 1995, was once my quirky idol; now she has a huge following. There are Australian anime clubs and conventions, and the Japanese bookshop Kinokuniya, in Sydney. Japanese DVDs are so popular that JB Hi-Fi has an entire section dedicated to them. And documentaries on Japanese teen *hikikomori* and Japanese women who dress as geishas for photo shoots on their wedding day are more prevalent on Australian television than ever before.
More significantly, Japan isn’t mine anymore because images of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami captivated the world. Stoic children were shown in voyeuristic glossy images as they were carried through the debris. They didn’t cry. Reports of the rising radiation at Fukushima dominated the evening news. Japanese men gave up their lives to stop the nuclear flood: they were the Fukushima Fifty, the nameless samurai. My Japanese publisher wrote on his blog: ‘Keep your power usage low and donate what you can to those who need it.’ On his Facebook page he posted: ‘It is often said, “Life is short”. The Japanese people have one of the longest life expectancy rates in the world. So far over 5,000 are dead, over 8,000 are missing… [Watching the] scenes on Japanese NHK TV of the destruction, the cold snow, and thousands of people in shelters, I feel life…became even shorter.’

There was an initial mass exodus from Tokyo, so I got on the Narita Express to make another trip back there. I was returning to my second home; I needed to show my support. When I told people I was going back to Japan, my friends were enthusiastic. They asked me to bring them back Hello Kitty chopsticks and Studio Ghibli merchandise. As an afterthought, they asked if everything was okay in Tokyo.

My family asked about the radiation. They waved newspaper articles about the Fukushima plant at me, and my grandmother started crying. They told me that my hair would fall out. They told me I would get cancer. They told me I was being selfish and stupid to go. They said, ‘Why do you want to go to Japan? Do you know what they did in the war?’ It always comes back to the war.

I AM NO stranger to this cross-generational divide in Australia. As a Japanophile, a _shinnichi_, I have struggled with many often racist remarks about ‘the Japs’: ‘they all look alike’; ‘they are a savage race’; ‘I don’t trust them.’ When I discuss this with my peers they tell me I need to be mindful that the Silent Generation’s views are shaped by their having lived through the war. It always comes back to the war.

My mother told me to be patient with my grandparents. ‘I’ll talk to them,’ she said, but added: ‘although I don’t know why you keep going back to Japan either.’ She told me that I had to put myself in their shoes. For a moment I felt like she was Atticus Finch and I was Scout. ‘They saw what the Japanese did,’ she said. ‘What’s that?’ I asked – but she couldn’t answer. ‘You must know,’ was all she could muster. But she doesn’t know; she doesn’t even really understand what happened.

World War II ended thirty years before I was born, and at high school the war was initially presented as Germany’s invasion of Poland. In history classes the emphasis was on Hitler and the Nazis. Discussion of Japan was confined to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into the war. Prior to this, without independent reading, I wouldn’t even have known that Japan was in the war, nor that the war, in many ways, began with Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931.
But the secondary school curriculum is already packed and teachers can’t be expected to teach everything. And while I can’t say I learned very much about World War II at school, what I did learn was a set of relatively unbiased facts. This is worth noting, as I was part of the generation that had to complete two compulsory units of Australian Studies, in order to pass the Victorian Certificate of Education. Not that there is anything wrong with knowing the history of your own country. I find America’s patriotism and knowledge of its history heartening. But Australian history and culture should permeate the curriculum, not be scheduled once or twice a week in a compulsory class.

Australians are expected to talk constantly about Australia, promote Australia, even pay people to come to Australia to endorse our ‘wide brown land’. Lara Bingle made a motza out of it: ‘So, where the bloody hell are you?’ But I started talking about Japan when I turned sixteen. I told my parents that I understood how you could be homesick for a place you had never been. My mother told me that was ridiculous. I was home. Home for me would always be Australia. Home was where my family lived. My father told me he loved Australia’s climate, he loved Australian people, he loved Australia. Why didn’t I? Sometimes I feel like a traitor for wanting to travel to Japan.

My grandparents always tell me that when I travel, I should tell everyone I meet that I live in the greatest country in the world. This is part of Australians’ insecurity about their nation. Perhaps it stems from lacking the settled and shared history of other countries. Perhaps Australians are ultimately still searching for a firm identity. But rather than celebrating this uniqueness, Australia seems still to need validation from England or America, in particular. The British sports commentator Francesca Cumani identified the problem when she argued that Australians need a ‘mindset change’. She challenged the habit of paying American celebrities millions of dollars to attend the Melbourne Cup: ‘It continues to surprise me that locals need their great race authenticated or approved by foreigners… I think it shows an insecurity in a race, an event, a carnival which is like no other.’ The observation can be extended to Australians as a whole.

Part of this mindset manifests in the expectation that Australian writers will write about Australia. I won’t say that I’m not conflicted. I want to write about Japan. I want to set my novel in Shibuya, start it on the scramble crossing in the middle of afternoon. My protagonist would get off the Yamanote train and wait for her lover at the Hachikō statue. It would be a clever metaphor for fidelity: Hachikō, an Akita, waited for his master in that very spot for nine years. My characters would walk up Dogenzaka hill, hand in hand, past the television screens and the ichi-maru-kyu building.

But I am an Australian writer and therefore I am, apparently, compelled to write about Australia. I picture myself as Sybylla Melvyn in My Brilliant Career and My Career Goes Bung. Miles Franklin taught me that the pen is mightier than any Harry
Beecham. As a precocious teenager I was taken with reciting: ‘I am given to something which a man never pardons in a woman. You will draw away as though I were a snake when you hear.’ It wasn’t the best pick-up line, but it made me feel like I could have a brilliant career ahead of me. I pictured myself with Judy Davis’s red hair, a riding whip and a manuscript.

I was brought up on Barbara Baynton and We of the Never Never. My mother called me her little gumnut baby and read May Gibbs to me every night until I got sleepy. It took me a long time to realise that the women in my family were instilling in me a sense of what it was to be an Australian woman and an Australian writer. It’s just that I want to use my Australianness to write about other places. I want to be an Australian who writes about Japan.

AUSTRALIA IS MORE like Japan than most people would imagine. Both countries are fiercely loyal in preserving tradition; however, their sense of tradition is vastly different. Australia has an Anzac tradition, but it is sometimes difficult to see how it imposes itself on everyday life. By contrast, the Samurai tradition and related concepts of honour and duty are still woven into every facet of Japanese culture. The Samurai were disciplined and formidable opponents in war and unequivocally loyal to the lords, Shoguns and the Emperor, they served. The bushido moral code, or ‘the way of the warrior’, encompasses bravery, truth and respect; to behave dishonourably in Japan is a serious offence. I feel safe in Japan.

When I arrived in Shinjuku after the radiation scare, the sight of people rushing from one platform to the next comforted me. Shinjuku station is the busiest station, busier even than Tokyo station. The first time I arrived there it took me half an hour to find my way out. This time I headed for the East Exit and the Kabukicho sign. When finally I emerged from the station, the sight was overwhelming. Noise, television screens and skyscrapers – some beautifully lit, others garish and flashing – as far as the eye could see. Someone was singing a punk rock tune off-key. Sunglasses, manga porn and smoked fish were being sold on every corner. I could see Studio Alta opposite the station: its television screen is the largest and most vibrant. A boy band sang in harmony – from the gestures they made, in unison, I could tell it was about lost love. As I passed by, the television switched to the weather in Tokyo: it was going to rain.

I had to check in at the Shinjuku Prince Hotel and head out to Komaba-Tōdaimae on the Chūō line: I had a meeting with a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo’s Komaba campus. But not before I returned a call from my grandfather, who had already left two messages for me at the desk. He picked up the phone on the first ring and asked where I’d been. It’s the same conversation every time I go to Japan. I tell him that it takes this long to get from the airport to the hotel. He tells me that my grandmother was worried that something might have
happened to me – ‘It is Japan,’ she says, as she grabs the phone from him. I reiterate that it is one of the safest places in the world. And then I ask, ‘Why don’t you ever worry about me when I am in America?’

I met the academic on campus, at the Italian Tomato Cafe Jr. She is visiting professor from Australia and I was keen to hear her insights into Japanese education and culture. I ordered her a hot kohi and myself an iced kohi. I forgot that in Japan an iced coffee is simply percolated coffee with ice cubes in it. I smiled at my mistake. The professor took a sip of her coffee and told me that the Japanese students she teaches are largely unaware of any tensions that may exist between Japan and America – or, in her experience, Japan and Australia. This is partly because of the way Japanese history is taught in schools. Textbook screening, or ‘authorisation’, by the Ministry of Education has ensured that criticisms of Imperial Japan, especially its actions in World War II, are whitewashed. The younger generation is often unaware of Japan’s war crimes.

The professor told me that her Japanese students wouldn’t expect to find any tension if they travelled to the US or Australia, as many do, to improve their conversational English. The younger generation, in particular, is greatly influenced by Europe and America, and interested in Australia. She was overwhelmed by the number of students who signed up for her class after hearing she was visiting from Australia. She was impressed by how keen they are to read and understand the Australian poetry that she sets them.

Equally, most young Australians are fascinated by Japan. In fact, many are more at risk of exoticising it than criticising it. The advanced electronics coming out of Japan, the unique fashion, the shrines, the anime and much of the food beckons Australians who want to see it, hear it and taste it, first-hand. Tensions that exist in my grandparents’ generation concerning World War II are slowly dying out, though many would argue that Japanese whaling continues to damage Australian–Japanese relations. Articles in Australian newspapers exposing the siphoning of money from the tsunami-relief efforts into whaling funds reignited anti-Japanese feeling. This culminated last year in three Australian activists climbing aboard an armed Japanese whaling vessel in protest. The ideological difference about Japan’s whaling program will continue to cause a rift between the two countries. But it is unlikely to prevent young Australians from travelling to Japan or enjoying Japanese culture.

The internet has encouraged students to cyber-travel. Travellers upload their photos to sites like TripAdvisor, and images of Shibuya, Shinjuku and Ginza are constantly googled by people all over the world looking for the latest trends. Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku Girls ensured that Takeshita Street in Harajuku would become one of the fashion meccas, Lady Gaga’s ‘We Pray For Japan’ bracelets for tsunami relief brought the world’s attention to Japan’s struggles in March 2011, and apps such as Fruits publish photos of avant-garde Japanese fashion for a wide readership.
My colleagues and students tell me they are envious of my trips to Japan. They quiz me about Tokyo: ‘What is the food like?’ ‘Does the sushi taste different from the hand-rolls we get here?’ ‘What is the fashion like?’ ‘Have you been to Harajuku?’ ‘Have you seen a geisha?’ ‘Can you read Japanese?’ ‘Can you speak it?’ ‘Have you been to the Tokyo Park Hyatt?’ ‘What do you love most about Japan?’

I thought about this last question as I composed an out-of-office message for my university account: ‘Thanks for your email. I am currently undertaking research in Tokyo, Japan. I will be answering my emails but may be slower to respond than I normally am! I will be back on 22 December.’ What do I love about Japan? My computer dinged: incoming mail. The first email was from a lecturer in anthropology asking me about the progress of a student we co-supervise. The second email was also from her; she had received my out-of-office message and replied: ‘Tokyo? You lucky gal. Wish I could join you there.’ The third was from a student asking me if I would write him a reference; the fourth was the same student: ‘I hope you are having a great time in Tokyo. I really want to go to Japan the year after I graduate… I want to go to Tokyo and Hiroshima.’

I’D BEEN TO Tokyo about a dozen times but never to Hiroshima. From secondary school all I knew was that the Americans entered the war after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. It never occurred to me that the Japanese were any different from anyone else engaged in warfare. In fact, as the events of Pearl Harbor were always linked with America and the atomic bomb, I felt sympathy for Japan.

I took the Hikari bullet train from Shinjuku, changed trains at Shin-Ōsaka and re-read Marguerite Duras’s screenplay for Hiroshima mon amour. It’s a four-and-a-half-hour journey, so I had time to think. From the photos and documents I’d seen, Hiroshima was reduced to radioactive dust and rubble: the original Ground Zero, a wasteland. I wondered how my grandparents reconcile these images in their minds. In the photos there was nothing but rubble and a few random buildings, still standing in defiance.

I went straight to the A-bomb Dome, one of the few buildings left standing. At 8.15 on the morning of 6 August 1945 the first atomic bomb exploded, six hundred metres above the building. It is a living tomb. A mechanical skeleton. The ground I stood on was once nothing but stones and debris, a demolition site. The screams of people as they ran into the Motoyasugawa River, burning and melting, were in the air. The A-bomb building, once the Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, is hollowed and fissured. The dome is a construction of metal lacework, capping the central cylindrical structure. I felt like a voyeur peering into its rooms and spaces. The Japanese thought about levelling it, as it was a reminder of their vulnerability in war, but decided it was more important that the building stood as a reminder of the horrors of atomic warfare. It now belongs to the National Trust.
I wended my way over to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It houses a confronting series of exhibitions. While the ground floor is dedicated to anti-nuclear warfare, the history of Japan’s role in World War II is presented in remarkably unbiased fashion. The atomic bomb is the villain, not the US. Big black and white photos indicate that its victims were the innocent citizens of Hiroshima. Mannequins have been constructed to demonstrate the effects of radiation: their hands are melting. A sign tells me that some victims sucked the pus from their fingertips, trying to quench their thirst. On the top floor, keloids and deformed fingernails tell a gruesome story of suffering. I saw coils of victims’ hair, photographs of their charred bodies and deformities. But it was the scorched school uniforms and the lone lunchbox, found six hundred metres from the hypocentre, that moved me the most. So many children suffered. The thunderous noise of the atomic bomb is piped through parts of the museum. It sounds like wind echoing in the wilderness.

I checked into the Hiroshima Grand Prince hotel. There was a message for me waiting at the front desk. I called home. My grandfather told me how much trouble they had leaving a message. He complained that the girl on the desk didn’t understand what he was saying, that she didn’t seem to speak English at all. I asked: ‘If a Japanese person rang a hotel in Australia, do you think the Australian would speak Japanese?’ He didn’t respond. News that I had been to the A-bomb dome and museum was also met with silence. My grandparents were unhappy, perhaps even annoyed. They stopped me when I started to describe the remnants of nuclear war. ‘You’re not telling us anything we don’t already know,’ they said. ‘We lived through it, you know. We didn’t look at the images then; we aren’t about to hear about them now, from you.’ I told my grandmother that it was hard to understand how President Truman could have made the decision to drop the Nagasaki bomb after seeing the devastation of Hiroshima. Her response: ‘Well, they had to end the war somehow.’ And: ‘You know, if it wasn’t for America, you would be Japanese.’

I think that it wouldn’t be so bad to be Japanese. In fact, I think I would love the low crime rates, great transport system and food. And if Australia were under Japanese rule, I would love the emphasis on school and academics. I have spent my life on the wrong side of the brawn-versus-brains battle in Australia.

We promote Australia as a sporting nation, which is, in turn, discussed as anathema to an intellectual society. We are sporty rather than smart, or perhaps we are sporty at the expense of being smart. These terms, in Australia, are thought of as mutually exclusive. Australian intellectuals can be seen as social pariahs: the embodiment of brains in a society bent on valuing brawn. We teach this in schools to our children. The boys chosen for the football team will be excused from mathematics and English classes to train for ‘the big game’. The girls’ ‘A grade’ soccer team at the school in which I worked got a week off school to train for the tournament. In my experience, at most high schools the students who win chess
competitions or read-a-thons do not receive the same accolades as those on sporting teams. And brainy students who ace every test are rarely as envied or popular. This has manifested itself in Australians hero-worshipping football players and celebrating the WAG life as a legitimate career path for women.

I wonder what it would mean if Australia had been under Japanese rule since 1945. I look to Japanese occupation of Korea and Manchukuo, and think about Australia as a Japanese puppet state. This vision requires me to separate the myths surrounding the place of women in Japanese society from the reality of the modern Japanese woman, and to somehow combine it with an Australian woman’s heritage. It requires me to switch my understanding of the glass ceiling to that of the bamboo ceiling. It requires me to consider Australian apartheid and how Australians would react in the face of defeat.

But Japan surrendered. I think about the war and the atomic bomb. I think about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My grandparents are still on the other end of the phone. My grandmother is nattering about Home and Away and Packed to the Rafters.

I interrupt her. I tell her, ‘You know, in the face of floods and fires, earthquakes and bombs, the Japanese, just like Australians, have a great sense of community.’ She is silent. ‘There is a strong sense of family in Japan.’ For the first time, I know she is listening.

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IN 1990, while dark clouds still hung over Tiananmen, I packed up my life in Beijing and landed in Melbourne with my northern Chinese face and Chinese brain. Twenty years later my face is still Chinese but my Chinese brain has somehow shrunk. This new land, which greeted me with its warm blue sky, then tested me with the cold reality of survival and loneliness, has somehow crept inside me and taken over at least half my mind.

Although my passport has long shown that I am Australian, it has taken me much longer to get used to my new identity. Who am I? Why am I here? Where is home? For years these questions have haunted me, a ghostly echo in my head. It must be the curse for all adult migrants – a life torn between past and present, old homeland and new; between two lands, two cultures, two peoples. So much so that in 1999 I uprooted my life again, escaped Melbourne and returned to China, my ‘real’ home, only to find myself facing the reality of yet another cultural shock, and an even more acute identity crisis.

Mixing among my colleagues at the Australian Embassy in Beijing I stood out as unmistakably Chinese, despite my improved English and my official Australian identity. Outside the embassy’s black marble walls, among free-spirited Chinese pedestrians, humble bicycle riders and proud drivers of new cars, I blended in easily but still often felt like a stranger, a cultural mixed-blood under her Chinese skin, a woman who had turned herself into a self-exiled half-caste, a half-foreigner from both sides.

Torn by my dual identity, four years later I packed up my life in Beijing and left my first homeland a second time. Blessed with Sydney’s beautiful scenery and regular business trips to China, my life finally became more settled. Having a Chinese face and a mind both Chinese and Australian became a blessing, rather than a curse. But just when I finally began to feel comfortable with my dual identity, a work training session in the heart of my adopted city upset the fragile balance again.
FEELING THE WARMTH of the morning sun through the plate-glass of the office tower, I look out to the glittering blue harbour, gazing at the white sails of the Sydney Opera House. This is the top end of town, where office towers and hotels define the city skyline.

‘China has a 200-year strategy – first Hong Kong, Taiwan, then Africa and South America; step by step, it will take over the world!’ announces a white Australian woman to her audience.

My lips sneak a sarcastic smile. Sitting in front of me, a young man turns his blond head around to check the reaction of the only Asian face in the room.

I don’t know why I am here for Asian skills training. Perhaps I am invited for the psychological experiment – to demonstrate how aggressive Asians can be, and how they should be led? And who is this woman? Where did she get her Asian ‘insights’? Glancing at her cold face, I can’t help wondering: why does she sound so alarmed, and so…anti-China? Aren’t we, Australia, part of Asia now? And isn’t China our number-one export client?

I challenge her in my head. I wish I could stand up and speak up, but my face remains wooden, my body immobile. It must be my Chinese upbringing. I curse myself – I have been conditioned to respect those in power, to do all I can to avoid conflict.

To ease the tension, I fix my eyes on a small ferry moving past the Opera House and into open water. I suppose you can take the girl out of China but you can’t take China out of the girl, I tell myself. Like it or not, no matter how much I feel like screaming, this Chineseness deep inside me stifles the scream in my throat, keeps my face calm, turns my mind philosophical, sometimes even indifferent, in order to maintain my politeness and keep out of trouble.

I cannot see the grand ambition that this woman claims China harbours. China still faces tremendous domestic challenges and its vast rural areas still struggle with poverty. I doubt China has ambition to conquer the world; historically, it has no track record of territorial ambitions anyway. As Bob Hawke once pointed out, back in the fifteenth century Admiral Zheng He’s 300-ship fleet went as far as Mozambique, but unlike western explorers he did not conquer any of these lands. After all, China is an ancient civilisation growing out of inland rivers; as a result, we are more interested in our own land, families and Middle Kingdom than the outside world.

THE WOMAN’S MONOLOGUE drags on. So far, she has shown no intention to invite any comments from the floor and no one in the audience has dared to interrupt. What a bore! I turn my head to the blue water, annoyed with myself too. Why can’t I just say something? Why can’t the Australian half of my brain
overpower the Chinese half? And what about these young Australian faces around me? Why haven’t they uttered a word? Do they all subscribe to her message: ‘Watch out – the sleeping lion is waking’?

Finally, the monologue comes to an end. Thank heavens – this is worse than the propaganda speeches in China! I stand up, switching off her drone in my head.

‘Do you Chinese really eat dogs?’ a soft voice asks. I turn and see a young woman with long curly hair and curious brown eyes standing behind me.

‘Sorry, bad joke.’ Sensing my hesitation she quickly brushes off her own question before I have a chance to reply. As I watch her curly head disappear through the door, memories of dogs flash back.

IT WAS A chilly Melbourne winter morning, the first for me in this new land. Wrapped in my heavy Chinese jumper and overcoat, I rushed out of my flat for the tram stop. The sky had just woken up and the street was still sleeping. Worrying about my job interview at the embroidery factory, I kept my head down and charged forward – until I faltered. A dog sat firmly in the middle of the narrow footpath, blocking my way: his face half black and half white, eyes cold and fierce, body motionless and powerful.

A quick glance at the split face sent a shiver down my spine. I tried to walk around him, and he followed me; I started to run, and he ran after me; I ran and ran, as fast as I could; he followed, getting closer and closer to my feet. I could almost feel his jaws open above my ankle, ready to grab and drag me down. Reaching the tram just in time, I gathered all my strength and jumped on.

I spent the rest of the day in fear. Night had fallen by the time I jumped off the tram home, retracing the same footpath on my toes, worrying my steps might entice the split face to jump on me again. Heart thumping, I unlocked my flat.

As I ate my simple dinner, an angry crowd appeared on the television screen. Marching along the street, they and their placards shouted ‘Dog Killers Out!’ Apparently some Vietnamese had killed a dog in Australia, but before they could taste their treat the police nabbed them in their backyard. Though the offenders were fined and jailed, the local community was outraged; their collective voice was loud and clear: they wanted these savage people out, sent back to where they came from.

‘Is it really that bad?’ I wondered as I watched the angry crowd. Dog and dragon carry opposite images in Chinese and western minds. While no one wants to be a dragon woman in the West, for the Chinese the dragon represents their ancestors and traditional sprits – hence the elaborate dragons on the yellow robes of Chinese emperors, and the colourful dragon dances staged at Chinese New Year.
While a dog is almost part of a family in the West, in Chinese culture the dog often features in swearing – as in dog legs (hired thugs), dog bear (coward), a barking dog behind his master (a bully who attacks others for his master). In my memories of growing up in Mao’s China, dogs were dangerous creatures, scary animals barking fiercely behind farmers’ low fences, ready to jump over to attack the pale-skinned city kids passing by. The fear surfaced when I was chased by the split-face: only this time the dog was not barking behind a fence; instead, he was loose, itching to attack me.

But as time passed and my empty flat was gradually decorated with second-hand furniture, my view of dogs softened. I came to enjoy watching them chasing each other in the park, catching tennis balls, dropping them at the feet of their owners, tails wagging. Yet my feeling towards dogs only really changed when something unexpected happened.

It was a typical Melbourne winter’s day: cold, damp and overcast. Driving my first car, I was eager to get home after a long day in the office. Vehicles clogged the street. Just as the red light finally turned green and my impatient foot pressed the accelerator, a small dark shadow dashed across the road and my left front wheel lifted with a bump. My heart stopped; I froze.

The car was at a standstill in the middle of the road. In the rear-view mirror, a line of headlights snaked behind me. I felt awful and wanted to investigate what had happened, but my body refused to move. Through the mirror I watched an Australian woman open her car door and walk towards me.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘I…I killed it.’ I broke down, my head buried in my arms on the steering wheel.

‘No, you didn’t – it got away,’ the woman reassured me.

‘No, it didn’t,’ I replied, my teary eyes avoiding hers. I wished I could tell her about the bump under my wheel, but somehow I couldn’t – instead, I just sat there, stunned, in pieces.

A stream of cars overtook me, but no one blew their horns. Sitting still, eyes glued on the line of cars in the rear-view mirror, I was overwhelmed by the image in my head: a small dog lying in a pool of blood under my front wheel. You have taken a life, I told myself over and over again, tears flooding my cheeks.

I had no idea how long it took me to gather myself and start the car again. When I finally dragged myself home, I collapsed into bed, switching off from the painful world.

I opened my eyes, sun bursting through the plastic blinds. It was a bright morning, unusual for this time of year; outside my flat the street was wet, and the air
was scented with sweet lemon gums. Taking a deep breath, I went down to check my car; to my relief, there was no sign of blood on any tyre. The woman was right, after all – the dog did get away; the bump under my wheel was something on the road, a brick, a rock, something still, something bloodless.

‘DO YOU CHINESE eat dogs?’ the girl’s voice echoed in my head. Well, today, there is a new saying in China: if you are poor, you raise pigs; but if you are rich, you have dogs. There is certainly no shortage of dogs in Chinese cities nowadays. The little ones sit in the arms of their indulgent mummies, or sniff the ground in their cute jackets; the exotic-looking ones walk proudly beside their rich owners, or bark smugly out of the windows of their posh cars. The less fortunate ones end up in a small apartment, and each day they have to wait patiently for their owners to return from work. Only when it is dark outside can they follow their nervous owners to sneak down by the slow lifts or dusty stairs and venture into the dark for their secretive walks.

‘I call my dog Big Black, for its black fur and for being illegal,’ says Annie, my former Chinese colleague, in her gentle voice. ‘It costs thousands to register a dog, and you have to do it every year. Imagine what’ll happen if they catch my dog,’ she continues, her big eyes terrified. ‘So every time Big Black barks, I beg him not to; he just looks at me as if he understands me,’ she says fondly, as if talking about her baby. ‘You know what I want to do if I have lots of money?’

‘Buy a big house,’ I reply.

‘No, I want to build a huge dog home in a village, and give dogs like Big Black plenty of space to roam around.’

‘THE CHINESE ARE the most cunning negotiators.’ Our trainer continues her China-bashing after the break. ‘Today, they still use their ancient war stratagems like “Beat the Grass to Startle the Snake” in business negotiations.’ She pauses, then emphasises: ‘And you must never reveal your real intention.’

Soon the audience is divided into two groups: one to play the Chinese side, the other the Australian. Ten minutes later the two groups meet over a long table. I find myself mixing in the ‘Chinese’ group, holding fake Chinese business cards, bowing heads, shaking hands with the ‘Australians’. When the mock negotiation starts, we look across the table with blank faces. A long silence – worried about revealing our intentions, no one on either side dares utter a word. All heads turn to me, the only actual Chinese face around the table.

‘May I introduce our team and the purpose of our visit?’ To everyone’s surprise, I break the silence with a smile, looking straight into the shocked eyes across the table.
After a short pause the eyes across the table respond, and the discussion starts to flow. I smile, remembering how we have broken the ice with our western-style frankness in China, imagining the startled look on the face of our coach behind me. What’s the point of us playing mind games in her imagined Chinese ways?

Chinese people may appear cunning, but we are genuine people in our own way, and we value honesty, friendship and sincerity. While our indifferent faces may seem deceptive, the simple truth is that in Chinese culture this is deemed good manners, as our ancestors have long taught us that it is a virtue to restrain yourself from revealing raw emotions such as happiness or anger.

Instead of trying to imitate Chinese ‘cunning’, it would be far more effective if we could learn some positive ways of dealing with China – such as building rapport with the Chinese people; having an open mind; being willing to learn about their culture, the way they form friendships and do business; appreciating Chinese hospitality, and the strong liquor that often comes with it. However trivial such things may seem, they are often critical in getting to know the real faces behind the masks, and in building trust between people, regardless of the colour of their skin.

‘I THOUGHT YOU were going to be a real Chinese?’ a young man asks me after our training.

‘People are people – it doesn’t matter where they come from,’ I reply, finally silencing the voice bursting in my head.

‘How long have you lived here?’ he asks.

‘Nearly twenty years.’

‘Do you still miss home, families, friends, all that?’

‘I do, particularly after my visits. It often feels like my body has taken a direct flight back, but my heart has been put on a ship, floating on the sea.’

NOT LONG AFTER my China-bashing training, I receive another invitation for a seminar: ‘Overseas Chinese Serving Motherland’s Development’, the Chinese-script invitation reads. The person who passes on the invitation is not an enthusiastic promoter. ‘Feel free to go along if you happen to be free on the day, want to mingle with people, and don’t mind a free meal,’ his email says, in sharp contrast to the patriotic clichés on the invitation.

When the day comes I arrive at the hotel in central Sydney. To my surprise I find a packed Chinese audience facing a presenter and large screen. Unlike at a casual Chinese community gathering, many in this audience wear smart suits and scholarly glasses. Using PowerPoint slides the presenter explains China’s ‘One Thousand Talents Plan’, a strategic scheme to lure top overseas Chinese scientists,
academics and senior managers back to the motherland with their expertise acquired in the West.

After the presentations the audience is divided into two groups for more intimate discussions. ‘Please feel free to tell us your ideas and suggestions – we will bring them back,’ says the head of the delegation, a senior representative from a collective of Chinese democratic parties.

‘The Thousand Talent Plan is good, but one thousand is only a drop in the ocean compared to the large number of professional Chinese living overseas,’ a well-dressed Chinese man stands to say. ‘Doesn’t China want to build world-class universities? The government should have policies to attract more highly trained overseas Chinese.’

Some in the audience nod while another man stands to present more ideas.

After the seminar, I follow the crowd and step into a waiting coach; leaving the narrow city street the coach heads towards our next destination, a Chinese restaurant. Facing a small stage, we all settle around ten large round tables. As the clichéd official speeches proceed, Chinese dishes of familiar aroma begin to appear, and soon after, events move up a notch as Chinese singers and dancers step on and off the stage.

As the Chinese master of ceremonies announces the final performance, he asks everyone to stand to sing the last song. Curious, I follow the others, picking up the pink page from the table and joining in the singing: ‘We love peace, we love our homeland; whoever dares to invade us, we will make them perish.’

I lift my head, uneasiness creeping into my mind. It has been years since I last heard, let alone sang, such a song. It was a song of Mao’s era, a time when we were told that communism was heaven and we were the happiest children on earth; a time when we spoke of the ‘American imperialists’; a time when no McDonalds, KFCs and Starbuck could be found in China.

Fast forward to post-Mao China in the 1980s, when our life had become full of curiosity, enthusiasm and idealism. What consumed our minds were no longer Mao’s Little Red Book and the utopian communist ideals. Instead, our thoughts and conversations were peppered with western philosophies and literature, Chinese novels and films reflecting China’s feudal traditions and the trauma of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and our first taste of ballroom dancing, disco and Hollywood movies. For university students there was the hope of studying overseas, particularly in America. In the meantime, we hoped all the good things we suddenly learned about the West, including free press and democracy, could be realised in China…until our burgeoning dreams were crushed by the tanks at Tiananmen.

In the early 1990s, soon after the Tiananmen crackdown, and facing international condemnation, the Chinese government introduced nationalism as the glue to hold
the country together, under its own leadership. Using classrooms, film and television, nationwide patriotic campaigns were launched. And yet, despite its political convenience, even the party knows that nationalism can be a double-edged sword: it might help to legitimise the government politically, but extreme nationalism could jeopardise the agenda of peaceful development under the party’s leadership.

How ironic, I muse, that while China is a bullet train on the tracks of capitalism, here we are singing Mao’s anti-imperialism song in a western capital. I glance around: facing the stage, people stand solemnly around their large tables, singing in full voice. Among them are Chinese diplomats, overseas Chinese academics, those who may or may not qualify for the elite talent pool but still give genuine advice on how to develop their motherland, and those who set up small companies with grand names in Chinatown, receiving Chinese delegations and arranging their sightseeing for a handsome fee.

To my left is a young man who has just received his PhD, and is torn between going back to China and staying in Australia for his young family. To my right is a well-connected woman who travels frequently between the two countries, while the focus of the two garage owners next to her has been the steamed fish and stir-fried scallops.

But now everyone is standing still, holding that pink piece of paper, following the punchy lyrics: ‘The five-starred red flag waves in the wind; here we are singing, praising our dear motherland’s march towards strength and prosperity.’

I join the flow of the song, smiling at the familiar words and tune as I sing. ‘Our Great Leader Mao Ze-Dong, pointing us in the direction forward.’ I almost laugh. ‘No, he can’t now’ – the words slip off my tongue. I look around, and to my surprise, no one has lifted their eyes from the page; in fact, everyone looks deadly serious and no one is giving away any hint of their true feelings – not on their faces so wooden, not in their eyes, not even in their voices.

My cheeky grin fades, and a profound sense of loneliness hits me. Despite our similar Chinese faces, our common tongue, our shared memories of the Great Leader, and of his wife’s red Peking opera that we have just hummed together, life has clearly drawn a line in our minds. Standing among my fellow Chinese, listening to the disturbing revolutionary song, I become acutely aware of my dual identity, of becoming both Chinese and Australian, and of the ticking of the Australian half of my brain.

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SUNDAY, 3 April 2011: Crossing the Hay Plain at 30,000 feet.

Underway at last! I didn’t sleep well last night. In part it was the normal anxiety that precedes international travel, exaggerated by the fact that I haven’t been overseas for years and that this is my first trip to China – a country so big as to be almost inconceivable.

But I blame my disrupted night mostly on Joseph Furphy, AKA Tom Collins. I don’t recommend *Such is Life: Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins* (1903) as bedtime reading. For one thing, the novel is too bloody stimulating – or, as Furphy/Collins would say with his mock concern for propriety, ‘too (adj.) stimulating’. Furphy’s ‘somewhat discursive style’ makes for a narrative that is anything but direct as ‘one idear sort o’ fetches up another’. The story meanders, branches and eddies like the Murray River, around which parts of the novel are set, but it also plunges you into pools of philosophical reflection. Am I the architect of my destiny – here on ‘my present holiday’ as a result of my own independent decisions and actions – or are my present circumstances just the working-out of a complex set of chemical, physical and biological processes set in train with the Big Bang, when ‘a scrap of fire-mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet’?

Furphy set my brain swirling and the cadence of Tom Collins’ voice floated my dreams along curious currents. So reading Furphy is not conducive to a good night’s sleep. Nor is it the easiest thing to do in a cramped economy-class seat on Air China flight 178.

MONDAY, 4 APRIL: Tuanjiehu District, Beijing.

We arrived close to midnight. The taxi ride along multi-lane expressways to our apartment gave us an impression of the immensity of Beijing, a city home to almost as many people as the continent of Australia: nineteen million, depending on how you count (fewer if you don’t include the migrant workers who lack official
residency permits). Despite the long journey, sleep remained elusive, so I resorted to Furphy/Collins while my family slept. Predictably, Furphy was of little help in navigating a path to the land of Nod. Such is life.

In the opening chapter Tom Collins runs across a group of bullock drivers. He is travelling around the Riverina as a ‘Deputy-Assistant-Sub-Inspector’ for the New South Wales Civil Service, ‘a Government official, of the ninth class’ – a reference to the nine tiers of the Mandarin class in Imperial China. It’s not a job that involves much work: Collins is paid according to grade rather than merit and ‘not by any means in proportion to the loafing’ required. He camps with the bullockies for a night – the night of Sunday, September 9, 1883, to be exact. It’s a date chosen at random, if we are to believe Collins, from one of his ‘twenty-two consecutive editions of Lett’s Pocket Diary’ with a week to an opening and ‘all filled up’. At the outset of the book Collins promises to extract the diary entries of each day in the chosen week and to amplify them ‘to the minutest detail of occurrence or conversation’, in order ‘to afford to the observant reader a fair picture of Life’.

So while the action in Chapter One ostensibly involves the bullock drivers’ efforts to steal grass for their ‘carrion’, while avoiding detection by the station owner, much of the narrative is devoted to campfire conversations, recounting the yarns the men tell. The presence of the well-bred but impecunious Willoughby, who is ‘travelling loose’ with two of the bullock drivers, prompts an extended dissertation on the nature of class and education. Collins deprecates the tendency of the Australian novelist to place ‘the bookish student, or the city dandy, many degrees above the bushman or the digger or the pioneer’, for it is, without doubt, ‘easier to acquire gentlemanly deportment than axe-man’s muscle’.

Willoughby is a ‘whaler’. This is not a reference to time spent hunting giants of the deep, but to his vagabond status: like Bassanio in the Merchant of Venice, ‘all the wealth he had ran in his veins’. As the editors of the annotated edition of Such is Life helpfully explain, a whaler was ‘a tramp of particularly indolent type, who often camped for long periods where fish could be caught, especially along big rivers like the Darling, the Murrumbidgee and the Murray’. (The ‘whale’ in question is probably a Murray cod.)

‘Whaler’ is one of many expressions that have me flipping from the front of the novel to the endnotes, another reason why Furphy is not a good soporific: ‘Cornstalk’ (a young person born and bred in New South Wales), ‘the Cabbage Garden’ (Victoria), ‘beef-bag’ (shirt). I find some expired Australianisms worthy of resuscitation: ‘please the pigs’ (if circumstances allow), ‘gives me the wilds and the melancholies’ (gives me the willies) and ‘ain’t the clean spud’ (has a bad reputation). Then there are technical details from the lost art of bullock driving: what is a ‘Wagga pot’, for example, and why is ‘deference always conceded to wool’? (A Wagga pot is a type of bullock bell. Wool was more valuable than most other commodities and
also more bulky, which tended to make for unstable, top-heavy loads so drays carrying other goods would give way to it.)

Above all I turn to the notes to appreciate the range and extent of Furphy’s magnificent language. He is playful, erudite and witty, littering the text with references and allusions. The Bible and Shakespeare are favourite sources but Furphy also quotes Swift, Cervantes, Longfellow, Byron, Tennyson and many, many others. When Collins lies down to sleep he commits himself to ‘sore labour’s bath’ (*Macbeth*), grateful that insomnia is not among ‘the thousand natural ills’ that his flesh is heir to (*Hamlet*), a fact he attributes to the operation of ‘a mind at peace with all below’ (Byron’s ‘She Walks in Beauty’).

But enough, my family is stirring and Beijing awaits. Go to, then.

**MONDAY, 11 APRIL:** Tuanjiehu District, Beijing.

A week has passed. When I began this diary I intended to commit word to page each day but I can see that, like Furphy/Collins, I must amend my plans. When he opens his account Tom Collins promises to provide the record of seven consecutive days, confident that ‘a rigidly faithful analysis of that sample would disclose the approximate percentage of happiness, virtue, &c, in Life’. But at the opening of Chapter Two he sees ‘an alpine difficulty looming ahead’. His next evening was spent with a group of sheep drovers named ‘Splodger, Rabbit, Parson, Bottler, Dingo, and Hairy-toothed Ike’, and delicacy prevents him from ‘getting the dialogue of such *dramatis personae* into anything like printable form’.

Instead, Collins decides to dip into his diaries at monthly intervals and so his account jumps forward to 9 October 1883. I will follow this example and provide weekly, rather than daily, instalments of our exploits in Beijing. The narrative thread of the journey will be broken but, like Collins, I hope a wider scope of observation might provide a fairer picture of our experiences.

But I must digress. Like Furphy I commenced my record without providing essential background information. Furphy’s characters suddenly appear in the narrative as they might in Collins’ diaries, without any contextual introduction. Equally, readers of this diary might wonder what brings me to China: my wife, Julie Shiels, has an artist’s residency in Beijing and – together with our son Leo – I am helping to carry her bags. So while Julie works, Leo and I entertain ourselves as we see fit. As a journalist I am uncomfortable ‘eating the damper of idleness’, and like a busman on holiday I cannot help but engage my trade and provide some account of our time. Yet I cannot do so professionally, as my visa is restricted to tourist class. Like Collins I am compelled to take an ‘enforced furlough’, which gives me the leisure to undertake the ‘pleasant task of writing out these reminiscences’ and extend ‘a ray of information, however narrow and feeble, across the path of such fellow-pilgrims as have led lives more sedentary than my own’.

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It also gives me the time to reacquaint myself with *Such is Life*. This sprawling novel, first published in 1903, may seem an odd reading choice for a trip to the Middle Kingdom but there is method in my madness. I have decided to read the novel once every ten years, to mark the anniversary of the death of my father, Tim Mares, and his partner, Robin Eaden. Tim, and more especially Robin, were devoted Furphyists who worked with a team of fellow editors to produce *The Annotated Such is Life* (Halstead Classics, 1999). Recognising that the novel ‘is not one that yields all its pleasures at once’ the editors felt a guide would be ‘as useful for Furphy as for Joyce or Chaucer’. The first annotated edition took sixteen years to prepare and appeared in 1991. Having completed the task, the editors, like painters on the Harbour Bridge, started over, and spent another eight years revising the work. This was a labour of love, with no prospect of monetary reward, external funding or career advancement. Julie and I would visit Tim and Robin to find the dining room table littered with scraps of paper, handwritten notes, card indexes and piles of opened reference books: an ordered chaos. ‘Sorry about Furphy,’ Robin would say. ‘We’ll have to eat outside.’ I regret to say that I didn’t pay much attention to the project and had only the vaguest idea of what the novel was about. I assumed it must have had something to do with Ned Kelly.

When the 1999 edition was finally ready, Robin proudly presented us with a copy. In the flyleaf she wrote: ‘Love to Julie and Peter, who had to suffer the page proofs!’ It was a reference to another visit, during which piles of Furphy had occupied most of the furniture, and much of Robin and Tim’s attention span. It was an alarmingly thick volume. I promised myself I would read Furphy – one day – and stuck him on the bookshelf to be forgotten.

He might be there still, but not two years later, in early 2001, Tim and Robin died in a car crash. Horrible months followed, and in the fog of that year I opened up Furphy for the first time. At first I was bewildered, as many readers are, but I persevered, initially out of a sense of obligation to Tim and Robin but eventually with a slow-dawning enjoyment. I gradually began to appreciate why they had been so passionate about keeping this novel alive. I marvelled then, and marvel now, at the dedication, the huge amount of work, the scrupulous attention to detail, that Robin and her fellow editors applied to the text.

Shane Maloney reckons that *Such is Life* is a novel ‘which nobody reads and even fewer comprehend’. He is echoing the late Manning Clark, who described Furphy in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* as ‘the author of a classic which few were to read and no one was ever to establish clearly what it was all about’. I’ve been told that Chris Wallace Crabbe warns students at Melbourne University that ‘no one should have to read Furphy for the first time’. Tongue in cheek and unfair, such assessments contain an element of truth. The novel is long and complex, boldly experimental for its time, packed with (sometimes obscure) references, and told by a charming but unreliable and infuriatingly prolix narrator. It is a novel that cannot be rushed; it richly rewards
the observant and judicious reader. As The Bulletin's literary critic Alfred George Stephens wrote, after reading the first draft of the manuscript in 1897: 'Rather long-winded, yet Such is Life is good. It seems fit to me to become an Australian classic, or semi-classic, since it embalms accurate representations of our character and customs, life and scenery which in so skilled and methodical a form occur in no other book I know. I think the book ought to be published and would find a sale.'

It did find a publisher, but sales were modest and have remained so. In 2010 Halstead Press ran out of stock of The Annotated Such is Life and ordered a reprint, but the annual turnover of the novel runs to tens rather than hundreds of copies. There are occasional upward blips in the sales chart when a brave or committed lecturer includes Furphy in one of the ever rarer Australian literature subjects in our academies. (Students at the University of Melbourne were so disappointed with the lack of local writing on offer last year that they established their own informal Australian literature course without any academic involvement.) It is disappointing that Such is Life is not yet finding a new generation of Australian readers but perhaps fresh interest in the novel can be kindled by the centenary of Furphy's death, this September.

Reading Furphy the second time I discover great, slow pleasure. But I must interrupt myself – Leo is waiting for me to join him in a game of table tennis. Beijing's housing estates are dotted with free public tables – concrete, with metal nets – an admirable example of urban planning. Hitting the ball around is not only fun for young and old but leads to some enjoyable interactions with the local citizenry. I will have to record more details of our life in Beijing on another occasion.

MONDAY, 18 APRIL: Tuanjiehu District, Beijing.

Rereading my account I realise that I have said a great deal about Joseph Furphy/Tom Collins and Such is Life, and almost nothing about China. But I am finding strange, unexpected connections between the book and my location. The novel was first published in 1903, but the narrative is set in the early 1880s, a turning point for Australia's pastoral industry. After hitting a high in the early 1880s, wool prices began to decline. According to some accounts of the country's economic history this boom-bust sequence was partly self-inflicted: high prices led to over-investment and over-production, then pushed down the price paid for the wool clip in London. I cannot help wondering if we are headed for a similar fall. Today, Beijing is our London, and the record-high commodity prices that China has been paying for our resources have stimulated a massive expansion of the mining industry in Australia and around the world. Should too much mineral production come on stream, or should China's economy falter, or should both these things happen simultaneously, commodity prices will plummet. Australia will be far more exposed than it was during the global financial crisis.
As I travel around Beijing, I cannot help but wonder about the longevity of China’s boom. After admiring the architecture of the Olympic stadiums, Leo and I ventured into a new, upmarket shopping complex. It was clean and cold and almost deserted. We have now seen several such temples of marble and mirror, stocked with exclusive designer brands and well-manicured sales assistants but empty of customers. At the other end of the retail scale there are countless multi-storey covered markets, with row upon row of small, tightly packed stalls selling identical T-shirts, belts, dresses, bags, accessories. China may have 1.3 billion people but how much Rolex, Dolce & Gabbana and Lacoste (genuine or knock-off) can one country consume before reaching saturation point? It is little comfort to find that the renowned American professor Nouriel Roubini agrees with me. One of the few economists to predict the GFC, Roubini has been visiting China too and found a country ‘rife with over-investment in physical capital, infrastructure, and property’, evident in ‘sleek but empty airports and bullet trains (which will reduce the need for the 45 planned airports), highways to nowhere, thousands of colossal new central and provincial government buildings, ghost towns, and brand-new aluminium smelters kept closed to prevent global prices from plunging’. Roubini says China is headed for a hard landing. If he’s right, there is trouble down the track for Australia too.

The Australian economist Saul Eslake has a much more positive view of how long the China boom has to run. He reckons if you predict doom as often as Roubini, then you’re bound to be right every now and again, just as a stopped clock tells the correct time twice a day. Eslake’s confidence in China’s ongoing demand for Australian commodities is based on historical observations of the path from developing to developed nation. He says it will be at least another ten to fifteen years before China’s per-capita income reaches the benchmark of around US$18,000 per head, the point at which a nation’s consumers start shifting towards buying more services than goods. Until then, the economy will remain heavily geared towards energy-hungry heavy industry, manufacturing, construction and infrastructure development, with a matching appetite for coal, iron ore and gas.

There’s a long way to go before most household incomes reach $18,000. We spent the weekend in the countryside, about two hours’ drive north of Beijing, an area where the steep hills are terraced to grow chestnuts and where fish are farmed in backyard ponds (concrete tanks, really). It was dry and dusty and scrappy-looking, a flinty landscape that speaks of a hardscrabble existence – not the verdant green of rice paddies that you might find in better-watered parts of China, the type of country that inspires silk paintings of trees clinging to the edge of rocky promontories.

I marveled at the industry required to survive in such a harsh environment. Part of our journey involved a visit to a section of the Great Wall, but the real wonder of China is the latticework of dry-stone terraces that extends high up into the hills,
creating tiny patches of level land, sometimes barely big enough to cultivate two trees.

Our accommodation was a home stay – an arrangement encouraged and approved by provincial government to boost local incomes and preserve village traditions. As foreign tourists, we are not the primary target: the home-stay program is designed to entice Beijingers to get reacquainted with their rural roots and to share some urban wealth with their country cousins. The house was enclosed in a courtyard, the whitewashed walls adorned with red-painted characters for good luck and happiness – a lovely place to perch on a low stool and drink a beer, kept cool in a brick-lined underground pit, along with vegetables from the intensively cultivated courtyard garden. Everything had to be fished out of this cellar with a long metal hook.

Our hosts were a retired couple who spoke not a word of English, but who made great efforts to communicate. With rosy cheeks and rolled-up sleeves they resembled characters from a revolutionary propaganda poster – she in her apron strings, he in a boilersuit – cheerfully preparing to build the glorious socialist future as the sun rises in the East. On Saturday night they treated us to a huge feast of home-cooked dishes – including local fish, fetched from a neighbour down the street, and char-grilled with sesame seeds and Szechuan pepper; various types of fried dumplings; soup made with bean-thread noodles and dried vegetables (snow peas, mushrooms and cabbage that had been dried for storage through the cold winter months); fatty pork cooked in a clay pot with tofu; and some delicious wild greens that our host had picked from the mountain that day. At breakfast the next morning there was another spread of local specialities: congee (rice porridge) with red beans, eaten with salty pickles; and steamed buns filled with bean paste, ingeniously shaped to resemble hedgehogs.

After reading Furphy overnight, I found the hospitality almost shaming. China may not have been an emerging superpower in the nineteenth century, but it still loomed large in Furphy’s day. Front of mind was the perceived threat of Chinese labour to Australian workers. To a twenty-first-century reader, the depiction of the Chinese in Such is Life is confronting. They are ‘Manchurian lepers’, ‘yellow agony’, ‘foreign devils’, ‘pagans’, ‘heathens’, ‘Chinks’ and ‘Chows’. The Chinese gardener at Runnymede station is derided as ‘Sling Muck’. At least he gets a name. Collins has repeated encounters with a Chinese boundary rider, Paul Sam Young, who he insists on calling ‘John’, a generic moniker as all Chinese look alike. When Collins meets the boundary rider for a second time he observes: ‘though it is impossible to recognise any individual Chow, I fancied that this unit bore something more than a racial resemblance to the one from whom I had recovered Alf’s bullocks. Moreover, he was riding the same horse (horses being far more easily distinguished from one another than Chows).’
Assuming the boundary rider is too stupid to understand English, Collins addresses him in a bastardised pidgin (‘suiting my language to his comprehension’), showering him with abuse and bullying him with threats. Collins warns Paul Sam Young that he’ll ‘pull-um off you dud; tie-um you on ant-bed, allee same spread-eagle; cut-um off you eye-lid; likee do long-a China; bimeby sun jump up, roast-um you eye two-tlee day; bull-dog ant comballee, eat-um you meat, pick-um you bone; bimeby you tumble-down-die…’ (Strip off your clothes and tie you spread-eagle to an ant bed, and cut off your eyelids like they do in China; by and by the sun will come up and roast your eyes for two or three days and the bull-dog ants will eat the meat from your bones until you fall down dead…)

This is coarse stuff and at first glance it is in keeping with the attitudes of the day: Furphy’s bias is ‘offensively [white] Australian’. But such ideas sit uncomfortably with Furphy’s erudition and temper democratic; they stand in blatant contradiction to Tom Collins’ frequent philosophical musings on universal brotherhood. When the down-and-out Andy Glover approaches his camp, Collins comments that the swagman’s ‘personal value, judged by the standard which I, for one, dare not disown, was certainly as high as that of the average monarch or multi-millionaire’. Andy may be unable to spell a word of two syllables, yet he too has ‘thoughts that glow, and words that burn’. A long discourse on the nature of status follows, in which Collins (or rather, his favourite Meerschaum pipe, which he is in the business of smoking at the time) espouses an Enlightenment faith that the spread of education and egalitarian ideas can overcome the ‘petrified injustice’ of entrenched privilege, wealth and class: ‘I cannot think it is anything worse than a locally-seated and curable ignorance which makes men eager to subvert a human equality, self-evident as human variety, and impregnable as any mathematical axiom.’

I’m not looking to excuse Furphy or disown his support for white Australia, just to point to a level of complexity. Furphy is not Tom Collins, though he published under the name, and the writer assiduously alerts us to his narrator’s shortcomings. Collins’ abuse of Paul Sam Young is exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness and reflects poorly on him. In the end it is the boundary rider who proves the sharper of the two and gets the last laugh. Paul Sam Young encourages Collins to grass his horse in a paddock where he knows Collins will be caught trespassing and fined. Although the trick conforms to the stereotype of a cunning Asiatic, it is the white station boss, not Paul Sam Young, who conspires to set the trap. And there is a moment in which the typecast is broken, when Collins compliments the boundary rider by calling him a Christian, which draws a proud response from the not-so ‘heathen Chow’: “Me Clistian allee same you,” he replied, not without dignity. “Convelt plully long time. ‘Paul’ Clistian name. Splink’ wattel, all li.’” (I’m a Christian just like you. I converted a long time ago. Paul’s my Christian name. I was sprinkled with [holy] water, all right.’)
MONDAY, 25 APRIL: Tuanjiehu District, Beijing.

Something strange is happening in our neighbourhood: there are people on the street sporting red armbands with yellow lettering that reads (in Chinese and English) ‘public security volunteer’. Some are staffing intersections, waving little red flags to ensure that turning traffic gives way to pedestrians. We’ve seen public security volunteers sweeping the pavement, picking up rubbish and painting out graffiti. I saw one berating shiny-suited staff at a real-estate agency about the number of cigarette butts littering the footpath outside their office. Nothing to object to, but such vigilance is a little unsettling.

More disturbing is the sudden disappearance of Leo’s favourite snack food: a spicy, pizza-like flat bread cooked on a griddle near the local market. When we went to get some we found not only that the stall was gone, but so were all the other pavement vendors. No flat bread, no steamed buns, no old man selling temple votive money, no old lady selling shoelaces and inner soles. Traders without an official permit or sufficient connections are being swept from the street. Clearly there is a clean-up going on, but we’ve been unable to discover the motivation for this sudden beautification campaign. Perhaps a zealous local party committee has ordered a spring clean or perhaps a dignitary is about to visit.

It’s much like the lopsided contest between the bullock drivers and the station owners in Such is Life. The squatters need the bullockies to cart in their supplies and cart out their produce, but they don’t want to share the grass in their paddocks or the water in their tanks with the contractors’ hungry, thirsty beasts – particularly not in a drought year like 1883. Bullocks found illegally inside the squatters’ fence lines were impounded and the drivers were forced to pay hefty fines for the release of their teams (and the return of their livelihood). Furphy had been a bullock driver himself, until the ’83 drought ruined him, and his sympathies are clear.

The bullocky Steve Thompson sums up the dilemma well: ‘If you want a problem to work out, just consider that God constructed cattle for living on grass, and the grass for them to live on, and that, last night, and to-night, and to-morrow night, and mostly every night, we’ve a choice between two dirty transactions – one is, to let the bullocks starve, and the other is to steal grass for them. For my own part, I’m sick and tired of studying why some people should be in a position where they have to go out of their way to do wrong, and other people are cornered to that extent that they can’t live without doing wrong…’

Were he in Beijing, Furphy would sympathise with the footpath vendors, independent contractors like the bullock drivers. With little hope of establishing a formal right to trade on the street, but with the imperative to earn a living, they have no choice but to break the rules, and suffer at the whim of those with power.
MONDAY, 2 MAY: The Astor House Hotel, Shanghai.

Shanghai is a study in contrasts: on one side of the Yangtze is the elegant architecture of the colonial era; on the other, the gleaming skyscrapers of Pudong, towering follies stamped out of rice paddies and river mud in only fifteen years.

It is a reminder of how quickly the world changes. Furphy was born in 1843, just after the first opium war and just before this hotel was built. The British East India Company was smuggling opium across the border from Bengal to counter a trade imbalance with China. Alarmed by an increasing loss of revenue and growing rates of addiction, the emperor sought to crush the trade. The British retaliated with an expeditionary force and the war ended in the one-sided Treaty of Nanking, which forced the emperor to open up Shanghai and five other cities to European powers as trading ports. The colonial buildings that grace the Bund are a testament to the indifferent power of capital. They were built in the years when Furphy was trying his luck on the goldfields or at driving bullocks, before he moved to Shepparton to work in his brother’s foundry and write his masterpiece in the back shed.

A few days ago we caught the train from Beijing to Shanghai, travelling through a flat landscape as intensively cultivated and densely occupied as Tom Collins’ beloved Riverina was sparse and empty. With Furphy on my lap, I watched the Chinese fields and factories fly past the train window and contemplated what it means to be Australian.

As he traverses territory between the Lachlan and the Darling, Collins delights in the ‘monotonous variety’ of the ‘interminable scrub’. It has ‘a charm of its own; so grave, subdued, self-centred; so alien to the genial appeal of more winsome landscape, or the assertive grandeur of mountain and gorge’. Despite tacit acknowledgement of prior occupation – through the character of the half-caste Toby, who says, ‘Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country, as fur as the eye can reach’ – Collins describes Australia as a ‘virgin continent’ and sees the landscape as the crucible of a future nation: ‘It is not in our cities or townships, it is not in our agricultural or mining areas, that the Australian attains full consciousness of his own nationality; it is in places like this…’

In our highly urbanised immigrant nation, I am suspicious of romantic theories about the Australian character being moulded in the experience of the bush. Yet, as the locally born child of Irish parents who emigrated in 1841, Joseph Furphy appears to have had little trouble sinking roots deep into Australian soil. As the first-generation child of English migrants who arrived more than a century later, I am more ambivalent. Beyond a preference for milky tea in the morning, I have never felt myself to be very English, but nor do I identify easily with the Anzac legend or the outback myth. I have no convict antecedents, no pioneering forebears, no links to diggers who fought on the Kokoda Track. I do not feel that I can lay claim to these
stories any more than I could lay claim to stories of the Dreamtime. Yet I inherit some part of all these things, by virtue of my place of birth, and reading Furphy helps me to connect, to feel the history, to let it get under my skin.

TUESDAY, 3 MAY: At 30,000 feet, on the plane approaching home.

At some point in the night our flight crossed over the edge of the Australian continent. I should be asleep, but I’ve had Furphy to keep me company. At the conclusion of the novel the loose threads of Tom Collins’ disjointed diary come together and links are established between his apparently random characters. A picture emerges from the complex tapestry of the narrative, although Collins doggedly fails to see it. For all his erudition, for all his book learning, our literary guide claims not to see the links in his own story.

Tom Collins tells us that he is ‘fatally governed by an inveterate truthfulness’. We must take this statement – like his ‘fixed resolution to avoid the very appearance of digression’ – with a large pinch of salt. He vests his work with the authenticity of the eyewitness account, the ‘limpid veracity’ of individual experience – and Furphy did work with bullock teams, so he knows of what he writes. Yet memory is an elusive and unstable thing. Besides, Tom Collins is a pseudonym and not one chosen at random; in Furphy’s day the name was an idiomatic reference to an imaginary person. This is the ‘characteristic perversity’ of Such is Life, a work that constantly attests to its truthfulness while alerting the reader to its artifice. It launched a broadside against the romantic conventions of the nineteenth-century novel and revelled in realism – from references to contemporary scientific debates on evolution to accurate descriptions of the plant life of the Riverina. Collins is ‘a mere annalist’, he claims, ‘and a blunt, stolid, unimaginative one at that’ – when in fact his diary is an elaborate, intricate fiction. This is the joke that runs through Furphy’s book, and it is a reminder to readers to always pose the question: can I trust this author?

Such is life.
References:

Joseph Furphy *The Annotated Such is Life* edited by Frances Devlin Glass, Robin Eaden, G.W. Turner and Lois Hoffmann, Halstead Classics 1999


Nouriel Roubini 'China's bad growth bet' 14 April 2011 http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/roubini37/English


Saul Eslake's comments about Nouriel Roubini and China's continuing demand for Australian resources were made in October 2011 at the Adelaide Festival of Ideas in the panel discussion 'Resource rich or dirt poor: is Australia making the most of the mining boom?', subsequently broadcast on *The National Interest* on ABC Radio National. http://www.abc.net.au/rn/nationalinterest/stories/2011/3370570.htm
IN 2004 I drove to the Wave Hill area of the Northern Territory. I had been
contracted to assist its Gurindji residents to develop a plan for their neighbouring
communities of Kalkaringi and Daguragu, on the banks of Wattie Creek. A year
with the locals was enough to evoke a continuing fascination with those
communities’ inception mythology: the Wave Hill walk-off.

Subsequently associated with the national movement for Indigenous land rights,
the Gurindji people’s strike of 1966 against their pastoral masters eventually accrued
its own anthem, ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’.1 The strikers’ vision after
their protest was clear: to create their own homeland and run it with minimal
interference. Their decision to squat illegally on the British beef baron Lord Vestey’s
Wave Hill Station became a millstone around the neck of the federal government. A
political brawl erupted, in which pastoralists and politicians claimed that the
Gurindji’s communist supporters were puppet masters and had ‘stirred them up’ to
strike.2 Sympathetic unionists and activists such as the writer Frank Hardy claimed
the support they offered to the Gurindji was solicited by a group of tribal elders.

When news of the situation at Wave Hill reached the public in 1966, it came
largely via Hardy’s hand. He had been languishing in self-imposed isolation in
Darwin, waiting for a revelation. Wasting no time getting to the strikers, he arrived
at their riverbed camp next to the Wave Hill Welfare Settlement a few days after the
walk-off.3 Hardy was soon picked by the Gurindji as their chief correspondent, and
he framed the event as a protest for basic labour and human rights. When the
 strikers squatted at Wattie Creek, it became apparent that they sought to reclaim
their traditional land. The strike and occupation was what Hardy required to
restrengthen his belief in the potential of an ideal society. In turn, he bolstered the
Gurindji’s self-belief and steered them towards more sympathetic ears in the south.

Frank Hardy is one of Australia’s best-known postwar authors. His flair and
bush-yarning Billy Borker persona – schooner in one hand, pipe in the other – were
the gauche exterior of a troubled artist.4 An ale at the closest pub and a bet on the
races (‘a lottery with four-legged tickets’) provided frequent relief from his struggles to balance his extroverted public image with the authentic, sensitive man within.\textsuperscript{5} His sister Mary, the acid dominatrix of Australian commercial television and radio in the 1960s and ‘70s, was plagued by similar though more intense struggles, and eventually took her own life.\textsuperscript{6}

Unlike other Indigenous strikes, where the adversary might have been a local superintendent or aspirational cow cocky, the Gurindji had taken on Lord Vestey, the head of an international fiscal empire. Their bravado seized the public’s imagination as Hardy worked to embed the protest in the national consciousness. Ever since this encounter it has been impossible to consider the walk-off’s narrative without examining the role of its primary herald, Hardy, the most prominent – and among the earliest – of scores of karriya (non-Indigenous people) to attach themselves to the Gurindji cause.

As if he was not confronting it himself in the days after the strike, the question of Hardy’s involvement as a catalyst for the Gurindji’s course of action was raised immediately in the press.\textsuperscript{7} In the hands of conservative politicians and pastoralists it was used to discredit them and resist their demands. Hardy sought legal advice from the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Lionel Murphy.\textsuperscript{8} On the strength of Murphy’s advice, a petition for a barely heard-of concept, land rights, was addressed to the Governor-General, Sir Richard Casey.\textsuperscript{9} Appended were the stamped thumbprints of four Gurindji elders, and the signatures of Frank Hardy and Bill Jeffrey, the local welfare officer.

Hardy wrote much for the pre-literate Gurindji, beginning with a sign proclaiming ‘Gurindji Mining Lease and Cattle Station’ for their camp at Wattie Creek, and two years later producing a book on the subject of the walk-off, \textit{The Unlucky Australians}\textsuperscript{10} (Nelson Publishing, 1968). As my interest grew, I knew that to understand the events of forty years earlier I needed to read his work in its setting. A 1968 edition arrived in the mail and I read it half a mile from where much of it had been written. \textit{The Unlucky Australians} chronicles the entwinement of the Gurindji’s concerns with those of its self-doubting author. As I shuffled the book’s disintegrating pages I found that Hardy situated himself, painfully exposed at times, in the text, laying out a direct challenge to the reader: either to defend the position that an objective account of history exists or to accept that we must realise ourselves as actors in the events we apprehend – in this case, the aftermath of Australian colonialism. After justifying his principled support for the Gurindji, at the end of the book Hardy excoriated himself by linking Australia’s once-militant labour movement, with which he strongly identified, to the racist birth of ‘White Australianism’. He ended with a direct challenge repeated to the reader: ‘How do you plead?’\textsuperscript{11}

Two years after the book’s publication, the campaign Hardy had helped organise was at its zenith, and the radical writer was indisputably one of its stars. On 31 July
1970 a large protest was organised outside the offices of the Vestey company in Sydney. A flatbed truck with a large PA system mounted on the back was borrowed for the day. Hardy was handed a microphone, and managed to maintain a somewhat disjointed monologue of invective and encouragement from the tray amid the chaos on the street. Two young activists, Rod Williams and Warwick Neilly, were in the cabin, and decided that to breach the police line with the bumper bar would be politic. They let the machine lurch through the cordon of coppers attempting to hold the protestors from the foyer of Vestey’s Australian headquarters. By the time the enraged police had managed to wrest the driver from his cabin door, the passenger had long disappeared into the crowd on the other side, the key in his sock.12

IF THE GURINDJI campaign was increasing Hardy’s purpose and notoriety, he had an unknown jack-of-all-trades called Bill Jeffrey to thank. Jeffrey had been seeing out an uneasy stint as a public servant with the Welfare Branch of the Department of the Interior when the Gurindji walked off Wave Hill. By virtue of being in the right place at the right time Jeffrey had played a significant role in the walk-off’s early days. A freshly politicised and eclectic drifter, he had landed a job at the Wave Hill Welfare Settlement after working on the neighbouring Camfield cattle station. A handful of Gurindji stockmen had aired their grievances to Jeffrey on Camfield, and he had resolved to join the Welfare Branch to ‘do something about it’.13 When the long line of strikers appeared and sat down in the creek bed near his house, Jeffrey and his family did what they could to support them.14

To aid the Gurindji cause, Jeffrey hosted Hardy as a personal guest on the settlement at a time when leftists, academics and reporters were forced to battle Director HC Giese for the privilege of entering Aboriginal Reserves.15 According to some strikers’ accounts, he also surreptitiously donated tools from the Welfare Settlement to the Gurindji’s new camp at Wattie Creek through a hole in the fence.16 It is conceivable that in the early weeks of the strike, when entreaties were made by Vestey’s for the Gurindji to return to work and union-donated food was low, they could have been swayed without such practical support. He was certainly not the disciple of departmental doctrine that Director Harry Giese would have hoped for.

According to Hardy, as the Gurindji’s strike continued Jeffrey found the Welfare Branch’s expectations increasingly restrictive. During the heightened isolation of the 1966–67 wet season Jeffrey and his wife, Anne, also came to feel that the Gurindji and others at Wave Hill had turned against them.17 Their daughter Sue was sent to complete her schooling in Adelaide, and as Bill’s transgressions of Welfare Branch policy continued, pressure on the Jeffreys – both real and imagined – built to the point where Anne sought ‘respite’ in a Katherine hospital.
FOUR DECADES AFTER Jeffrey’s posting to Wave Hill, I was living a few hundred yards from his former residence. After attending the funeral of the last surviving member of the Gurindji’s walk-off leaders, in 2006, I became obsessed with the mystique of Bill Jeffrey. Why had a man so significant in the saga completely disappeared? Even the people who worked on the Gurindji cause in the years after Jeffrey had no idea where he had gone. I turned to my only source of information, The Unlucky Australians. Recounting his first trip to Wave Hill, with the union official Paddy Carroll in the days after the walk-off, Hardy introduced Jeffrey:

There is only one Bill Jeffrey and this must be he. He drew himself up to his full six feet five inches and said gruffly, ‘Have you got a permit to visit this settlement?’

‘No, we haven’t,’ Paddy Carroll said.

‘Well,’ said Jeffrey, a gleam of mischief in the shrewd, peasant eyes set in his massive head, ‘you can’t visit [the Settlement], but you can visit my house as my personal guests for as long as you like.’

Jeffrey, for his part, made it clear that he was a staunch admirer of Hardy, and delighted at having met him: ‘In my youth, this person Frank Hardy was like a guiding light to fellows such as myself. I am an ex-seaman and we all knew of Hardy on the Waterfront.’

Hardy, when writing his book, had provided Jeffrey with a tape recorder and asked him to tell his own story. Jeffrey obliged, describing a childhood on a North Queensland cattle station dominated by his father’s and uncles’ violent treatment of their Aboriginal employees. This, he explained, had given him a ‘guilt complex’ about blackfellas. This information, along with the names of his wife and daughter, was the little I had to guide my search to find Bill Jeffrey or his family.

Thinking to start with some reliable documentation, I looked for World War I records of Jeffrey’s forebears – ‘Light Horsemen from the First World War, tough, knockdown merchants’ – that would lead me to some biographical information on their son and nephew. As I pored over National Archives’ records, dates and geography failed to align. To complicate things further, in every instance that Jeffrey’s name was committed to print it was spelled differently – at times even on the same page.

Clues slowly emerged. I discovered that some articles were published in Jeffrey’s name in 1967 by a Melbourne student newspaper, which had led to a raid by the special branch. Gough Whitlam, the Leader of the Opposition, had enquired in parliament about the sacking of a ‘Mr JW Jeffrey’ of the Welfare Branch in 1968.

More research, then a small breakthrough: a telegram sent by Jeffrey from Far North Queensland to the Gurindji’s ‘Handback’ ceremony in 1975, offering his
congratulations. This led me to an old electoral roll address in Cairns for ‘Anne Jeffrey – Teacher’ and a man by the name of ‘Jackson William Jeffrey – Engineer’. Armed with what I now presumed was Jeffrey’s real name, I began sending letters to every Jackson, William, Anne and Sue Jeffrey in the country, while trawling the cemetery records and archival sources of Far North Queensland.

One night I discovered that a woman with the same name as Jeffrey’s wife had died in Adelaide five years earlier. I obtained the details of the funeral service and sent an email. Days later the director replied, providing me with the name of the daughter of the deceased. I sent a letter to an address in western Victoria, and another week went by. Then an email appeared one morning. The ‘Anne Patricia Jeffrey’ living with Bill Jeffrey in Cairns in 1975 was the woman who had died in Adelaide. Her daughter congratulated me and told me that her time at Wave Hill had been the most significant of her life.

‘Sue Jeffrey’ turned out not to be a Jeffrey at all, and she didn’t use the name Sue either, but Essie W. Her once infamous ‘father’ was not related to her but had been in a de facto relationship with her mother, ‘Anne Jeffrey’ (actually Pat W), through the 1960s and ’70s. It was only blind luck for me that Anne had not reverted to her maiden name, Avilda Grace, after her subsequent two-year marriage to Jeffrey.

With the gloss finish of the family image painted in Hardy’s book now flaking, I asked Essie about her stepfather. It turned out that Bill Jeffrey was a Jeffrey, but that was the only part of her stepfather’s identity in the book that had not been sacrificed to his love of a good yarn. I learned from Essie and Jeffrey’s surviving children (who had been deposited in Victoria with his parents and ex-wives for the duration of their childhood) that his self-portrayal for Hardy was not based on fact. This was a lifetime modus operandi for the man who liked to be called ‘Wild Bill’.

Further research confirmed that Wild Bill was born in suburban Melbourne to strict Methodist parents, both of whom had died in the two years preceding the walk-off. Far from being raised by lubras (Aboriginal women) under the racist regime of cruel cattlemen in the North Queensland frontier, the young Jeffrey’s paternal influence came from a teetotaller who worked in Victorian forestry. Jeffrey’s mother was a strong woman whose father was Christopher Mudd, a travelling lay preacher and respected botanist to King Edward VII.

Tracking events after those described in The Unlucky Australians, I also learned that Wild Bill had been transferred to the Bamyili Welfare Settlement to remove him from the politically charged environment at Wave Hill. He had been sacked, and found powerful enemies after he began making public denunciations about his former employer. In subsequent articles in the press Jeffrey cast himself as a bush radical, a larger-than-life Australian Castro clad in elastic-sided boots and chewing a cigar. He mythologised himself as a product of the dark frontier: ‘My earliest memories as a child among the Aborigines are of happy times, but I can never recall
them without one terrible act of inhuman cruelty stalking across my mind… I could hear my father and his brothers abusing them [Aboriginal workers] as only wild Irishmen can. Then the fight started… My father and uncles went into the shed behind the house, then came the crack of rifle fire… they left the shed carrying a pick, shovels and a crowbar. “They are going to mend the fence,” my mother said. But I knew – and she knew I knew. I still don’t know if they managed to reach the safety of the scrub, or had been shot down.

In creating a childhood for himself defined by his (fictional) family’s military achievement and by Aboriginal suffering, Jeffrey probably sought to impress Hardy and create a better fit with the Gurindji protest. He may also have sought to distance himself from a bitter truth: that although he had genuine political ideals he was primarily a skilful opportunist, successfully passing between jobs and even professions with the ease of a natural yarn-spinner and chameleon.

As an activist, Jeffrey’s aim was variable. On one occasion he wanted to ‘keep on upsetting the can (of Government) until I get a Royal Commission’, and on another he wanted to sue Vestey’s for the Gurindji’s allegedly withheld wages. At times, Jeffrey’s ‘wildness’ – for example, admitting to a hope of becoming a frog in his next life – possibly did little for the Gurindji.

During the fallout from Jeffrey’s well-publicised criticisms of the Northern Territory Administration and the pastoral industry, the Northern Territory Cattle Producer’s Council (NTCP) went as far as contacting his former employer at Camfield, the station neighbouring Wave Hill, for a character assessment: who were they dealing with? Camfield’s Manager Paul Vandelaur was of the opinion – although he barely knew him socially – that Jeffrey had ‘something of the gift of a good confidence trickster’, and even suggested that people may have been misled about Jeffrey’s integrity and expertise by his wife being ‘evidently so intelligent’.

Whether or not Jeffrey felt guilty about bluffing Hardy as an author or a mate is unknown, though at times the issue seems to have been close to the surface. Sitting together with a bottle of rum by Manly Beach in Sydney after the great events in which they had been embroiled at Wave Hill, Jeffrey offered Hardy a telling line: ‘I bet those bastards in Canberra are checking up on me. Hope they find out a few things; I’m not too clear on me own early history.’ After a few months as a whistle-blower he took a job managing a hostel for Indigenous boys in Sydney, never to return to the limelight.

THE SECRETS OF Wild Bill were never revealed, and he retired to the country that had seized his imagination: Far North Queensland. After two decades together, Jeffrey married his de facto, Anne, and the two were divorced within eighteen months. According to his neglected sons (with whom he never reconciled), even during his last years he was fiendishly useful with his hands and had little need for...
money, bartering his repair and engineering skills around Ravenshoe to meet his wants. He was plagued by diabetes, and his oscillations and flights of fancy became more pronounced. One day he was a great friend of the local Murris (Aboriginal people); the next he found them despicable. He developed stories about his own Indigenous roots in the Pacific Islands, and died in 1997 with little to his name: some cassettes filled with his ranting, a workshop full of tools and a half-built miniature steam engine.

With both men having gone – one in rural anonymity and the other with the trappings of a state funeral – it is Bill Jeffrey, or Walter Robert Jeffrey, or Jackson Jeffrey, who deserves the greatest ‘Billy Borker’ prize of all. The Unlucky Australian’s ‘Bearded Devil’ hoodwinked Hardy, the barroom champion of bush yarns, leading him to recount, unawares, a pile of bullshit in the middle of a great Australian tale preoccupied with the ethics of accountability.

On Jeffrey’s death, one of the few books among his possessions was a signed copy of The Unlucky Australians dedicated to him by its famous author. The sections mentioning ‘the Bearded Devil’ had been delicately highlighted with paperclips, sticky tape and arrows, as if by a reader who had dwelt upon them for the pleasure they offered many times. Hardy’s final words on his mate Wild Bill were: ‘you sit doing a black and white sketch of him, and wishing you could immortalise him, in all his outrageous, ironic, kind-hearted, rebellious humanity.’ This, Hardy almost achieved. In the end, the larrikin ways of both men and their support for the Gurindji cannot be disputed, and surpass the mistruths of Jeffrey’s serpentine, self-created lives.

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4. ‘Billy Borker’ first appeared in the ABC’s television series *The Yarns of Billy Borker and Billy Borker Yarns Again*, 1964-67. The series starred Peter Carver as Billy Borker and was directed by William Eldrige. The television series were based on the stories of Hardy that were published in two eponymous books: *The Yarns of Billy Borker*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Sydney 1965; and *Billy Borker Yarns Again*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1967.


28. *ibid*.


Andrew Bolt’s disappointment

Why didn’t you ring their mums?

Bruce Pascoe

MY friends take a breath, lean across the table and assume the tone of Richard Dawkins explaining dinosaurs to intelligently designed Christians. They believe that in my promotion of Aboriginal achievement I’m simply being loyal to family or wanting to take a belligerent stance on our country’s identity and history.

Houses, crops, agriculture, *sewing*! Their frustration is benign, their love for me is no less, but they think I’ve gone too far this time. Writers are supposed to be mad and they are to be coddled for it like a warped aunty. They are also supposed to be heretical but they are not supposed to defy everything we were taught about Aborigines. They must not be encouraged to refute the national story.

We sit there, against the backs of our chairs now, a little disappointed with each other’s company. Perhaps disappointed is too strong. Disconcerted might be the better word. We are looking at each other across a gulf of incomprehension. We are concerned that one of us is a liar and the other a denier.

I am one of Andrew Bolt’s disappointments. I didn’t know I had offended him until a friend sent me a copy of the column in which I was pilloried by Bolt for *deciding* to be black. People expect me to be outraged but my inclination is to wish I could have a yarn with Bolt over a beer. Except he doesn’t drink beer, I’m told, just good red wine. Sad, the impasse we have just because histamines play havoc with my arthritis.

I can see Bolt’s point, and the frustration of many Australians when pale people identify with an Aboriginal heritage. The people he attacked for this crime, however, had an unfortunate thing in common: their credentials were impeccable. Any good reporter could pick up the phone and talk to their mothers about their Aboriginality until the chooks go to roost.

If I had been part of the group who took Bolt to court for impugning their heritage he would have had a field day. My mother’s dead, and even if she had been alive she knew precious little about her heritage. He would have found that my
cousin had discovered the woman we thought was our Aboriginal ancestor was, in fact, born in England.

Having got that far I hope he would have delved deeper and found that both my mother’s and father’s families had an Aboriginal connection. I was amazed to find that the families knew each other in Tasmania years before my father met my mother at a Melbourne Baptist church.

But was it an accident? The two families lived close to each other in Melbourne, in the same street in Tassie, and had Aboriginal neighbours in both places. Aborigines signed as witnesses to their weddings, and various members of the families went back and forth across Bass Strait to marry back into the other family, including some first cousins.

I’m sure Bolt would find it fascinating. It mirrors the turbulence of postcolonial Australia and explains why so many Australian families have a black connection. Why should I deny them, I would plead, they fascinate me, the very nature of their survival is heroism in a cardigan. My great-grandfather died two streets from where I lived and I never heard anyone in my family mention his name. His mother had a traditional Aboriginal name. Aren’t you intrigued by that, Andrew?

I’m not saying people whispered ancient secrets in my ear or passed on sacred knowledge; what I was told amounts to a bald analysis of Australian history and society, and the injunction to watch and listen to the land, to respect the fact that we do not command the earth. I’d like to explain to Bolt that my mother told me the same thing and I’m not sure if that is Aboriginal thought or just her general modest decency.

My insight into Aboriginal Australia is as abbreviated as my heritage has allowed. It is as if I have been led at night to a hill overlooking country I have never seen. I am blindfolded but at dawn the cloth is removed and I am asked to open my eyes for one second, any longer and I will be killed, and then asked to describe that country.

An impression is what you would get in that second. Detail? Very little. You would be left with a feeling of the country’s nature and for the rest of your life you would be searching the span of a second’s memory. An impression – a shallow base from which to lecture others; a humble heritage. Humility was always valued in our family, beyond wealth or influence, and you don’t shake those legacies easily.

I had to learn my Aboriginal history and I had to learn Aboriginal etiquette by making mistakes. It has not been a painless journey filled with the excitement of acceptance and inculcation into the mysteries of a secret society.

I reckon Bolt and I would have a terrific yarn. He came from Holland as a child and learned to be an outsider too. I reckon I’d be fascinated by his childhood, how he coped as an alien. But I’d be impatient to tell him how I was perplexed by my father’s mild acceptance of my discoveries. I’m sure Bolt would want the same question answered that I do: why had no one but a rogue uncle spoken of this before?
Obviously someone, or several people, had been covering tracks, but my father’s affirming nod to me after I’d spoken about our Aboriginality on ABC Radio hit me for six. I’d left him listening to the radio in my Volkswagen as Terry Lane and I did the live-to-air. Terry had a way of getting guests to confide. That’s journalism, Andrew!

I walked down the old ABC stairs expecting to have the best blue with my father since he saw me on the news during the Vietnam moratoriums. But, no, just the mild nod and after that we were closer than we’d ever been. I treasure a photo from that era in which he’s nursing my son and my dog is asleep on his feet. He’s doing the accounts for *Australian Short Story* magazine, a venture he could never imagine would succeed. But he did lend me $10,000 to prop it up.

He only told me one story and I’ve written it word for word in my novel, *Earth* (Magabala, 2001). It’s almost the only thing we know of that past. After uncovering the lattice of our Tasmanian days I have a few more questions to ask him. Like, how much did you know, Dad? Perhaps you and me and Andrew could sit together: me with my Boag’s, Andrew with his superior red, and you with your Lan-Choo because you and Mum were still saving the labels for the full dinner set.

Dad’s gone but I could talk to Bolt easily and without the least rancour because I think it’s reasonable for Australia to know if people of pale skin identifying as Aborigines are fair dinkum. No one likes an imposter. Of course we should extend the same rigour to the Irish, Jews and Christians.

What I’d like to say to Bolty – because surely we’d be on nickname terms by then – Bolty, I’d say, why didn’t you ring their mothers? Are you crook on them because they identify as Aboriginal or because they’re successful Aborigines?

Australia could be confident in leaving the matter of identity to the Aboriginal community because it is far more rigorous in its assessment and does so simply by utilising two quaint scientific tools: genealogy and the telephone.

MANY AUSTRALIANS ARE curious about Aborigines; some, like Andrew Bolt, are alarmed, and some with solid Christo-socialist credentials get agitated at my kitchen table and lean their arms upon it and implore, at a closer, more insistent distance: houses, crops, agriculture, *sewing*? I’ve gone too far; I’ve exaggerated in my desire to defend the race. They understand defending the beleaguered, many do it on a professional basis, but they like to think that, true to their professions of law, welfare or education, they never go outside the realm of fact.

Houses, crops, agriculture, *sewing*? They’ve read their explorers, they claim: Mitchell, Sturt, Giles, Eyre, Grey. They lean in closer to urge the wayward student-defendant to reconsider. These are my friends, we know each other’s families, and they have a genuine desire that I not perjure myself.
I argue that they have not read Mitchell, Sturt, Giles, Eyre and Grey; they have read about them. They’ve read what other Australians found fascinating about their discoveries and it wasn’t anything about the Aboriginal people. If those explorers weren’t looking for inland waters and vast pastures they were looking for gold and a line for roads and telegraph lines; they were not looking for an Aboriginal civilisation.

The story that most gets up the noses of my friends is of the crops on the Warburton River, the permanent houses, the happiness, the prosperity. Surely if such existed we would know about it, they declare – we studied the birth of Australia at university. Double majors in history, two degrees!

I had been hoping they would be delighted by the story but it offends or embarrasses them that they have never heard of it. This is neither their fault nor the fault of any one Australian. It is how we’ve grown up. A certain view of history believed by our parents and buttressed by our education. This is what I believed until 1981.

Older Aboriginal people listened keenly to my family story and assisted with connections where they could, but as the years went by they became frustrated by my ignorance, my acceptance of the Australian story we are taught to believe. With controlled impatience they explained what had happened to their families; they pointed to events on my own family path where the history of Australia had shattered my family, shamed them, made them forget there was ever a black aunty.

I listened in disbelief, protective of the education of which I was so proud. My cousins, sister and I graduated from university, though we came from a family where secondary education was virtually unknown. Our grandmother revelled in our success and insisted that we treasure it. We loved her, and because we were warmed by her pride we decided to find out from where she came.

I made notes and listened as patiently as I could to the elders but was astounded that fellow Australians could have such conflicting views of the past. I slunk off to the libraries hoping no cousin would find me checking on their mother’s story. My cheeks flushed crimson as I turned page after page of the histories, police records, genealogies, settlers’ diaries, explorers’ journals. I’d been sold a pup by the best university in the land, not just in the history classes but in education, economics, geography and science.

The Australian story we accepted with such equanimity is unbelievable after rudimentary examination: just go back to what the first European explorers described. The story with which I try to inspire my friends is from Charles Sturt’s journal of his desert expedition beginning in 1844. His second-in-command is dead, the doctor is critically ill with scurvy, and Sturt is almost blind from that and other illnesses. Their horses can barely walk. Sturt climbs a tall dune and is hailed by four
hundred Aborigines. He is startled to find happy, healthy humans in a terrain that has claimed the lives of many explorers and has reduced his party to a tottering, vulnerable rabble.

The people have never seen a horse but after they have sated the thirst of the stumbling explorers they turn to the strange beasts and reach out the coolamons so their fellow living creatures may drink. Sturt comments on this courageous and generous act. The explorers, with their teeth loose and gums inflamed from scurvy, are invited to dine on roast duck and cakes baked from the grains the Aborigines have been harvesting. In the desert! Then they are offered their choice of three new houses in the village. Houses, crops, agriculture, baking?

We can accept that the world is round, that the globe is warming and smoking causes lung cancer but we cannot seem to accept as true or pertinent what the explorers witnessed of Aboriginal society and economy. European science has produced marvels and its foundation principle is curiosity. Why are we not curious that Aboriginal people could cultivate crops in the desert? Why do we pay no attention to the dams and irrigation techniques employed? When our farmers are so threatened by droughts, salinity, erosion and crop diseases, why do we not investigate the crops and farming techniques developed over thousands of years to accommodate the challenging characteristics of this continent?

Some have speculated that many colonists were so outraged by Aboriginal customs and the absence of Christian practice that they felt compelled to reject everything of Aboriginal provenance. And that unease has survived until the present day. Our understanding of quantum physics and medical science is unrecognisable to the knowledge we professed two hundred years ago and yet we continue to scoff at the prospect of an Aboriginal civilisation.

What about the unconscious? Could it be that in a Christian-democratic country the one possible justification for taking the country from the Indigenous population was that they were unworthy of its possession? Some colonists thought that positioning Aborigines in Australia was one of their God’s rare mistakes.

How many charities in Australia support indigenous populations in Africa? How benign do we feel when we buy an Oxfam goat for the benighted of other countries? How niggardly are we in the provision of aid to the race we have dispossessed? At home we don’t buy goats – we send in the army.

I DIDN’T PLAN to write history. I’m a storyteller. I thought that literature, while not much use to a practical world, was the best I could do to honour my grandmothers’ and grandfathers’ legacies. But then, in telling stories, I discovered their hidden stories, and as they were already dead I had to ask other Aboriginal people. The rest is history.
There are a dozen or so Australian scholars upon whose work I rely and I dread to think what our country might become without their courage. These people have withstood disdain and ridicule for their opinions, for their willful misrepresentation of the country’s soul. I’m a fiction writer so I’m expected to be deranged, but the others are academics and must have felt the isolation on the nation’s self-convincing campuses.

One young scholar complained to me that he had been warned not to quote the work of the heretic Bill Gammage. Gammage recently released a book, *The Biggest Estate* (Allen & Unwin, 2011), and in my dream every Australian would read it. After reading my next book, *Dark Emu: Agriculture or Accident*.

I think of Gammage sitting at a lonely university café table quietly reviewing his own work. He spends a lot of time in *Estate* anticipating the scorn of fellow academics and preparing his responses. No doubt some of his friends have leaned across tables, urging him to reconsider his heresy: houses, crops, sewing, sowing?

Another landmark scholar has become so disaffected that he has removed himself from the campus entirely and studies alone. His books are now published in plain covers in London. What a shame to let the Old Dart do our controversial publishing and thinking on our behalf.

I love my country. I am relieved to live in a place where we can go down the street to get milk and expect not to get shot at. And yet I am surprised that in a country of such gifts and intelligence we have edited our country’s history so that our children will never question our right to the soil and will learn to express surprise at the ingratitude of those we dispossessed. They will be astounded, confused and belligerent at the very mention of Aboriginal achievement. Houses, agriculture, sewing, baking!

Justice holds up the scales of judgement and wears a blindfold so that no partiality is allowed. In Australia we prefer our children to dispense with the scales of justice and make do with the blindfold. The rest of the world can see the donkey ears above our blinkers: it is only here we believe they are invisible.

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THE taxi was late, even later than usual. I was too tired to be angry. It would be a waste of precious energy, and besides, I know very well these taxi drivers are gold compared to most. Some don’t show up at all. Most can’t be bothered to get out of their vehicle to ring the doorbell of the nursing home. One compassionless bastard simply left Mum at the locked door. Luckily the staff found her before she wandered off and the police had to be called. So this father-and-son maxi-taxi team can look as potbellied and snaggle-toothed as they like. They may not be too dainty about deadlines, but they show up eventually. And despite the unprepossessing externals, they show up with a bit of heart.

I know all this, but still the waiting is hard. On the slide towards arsenic hour, Mum’s thin grip on reality loosens and my nerves fray under the saw of her anxious repetitions.

What am I supposed to do now?
What am I supposed to do now?
What am I supposed to do now?
If only I knew, Mum, if only I knew.

Usually it’s no more than an hour, an hour and a half past the arranged time and the taxi appears. And then her begging begins.

Aren’t you coming with me? Can’t I stay here?
Not possible, Mum. Not for me or you.

And every time the sickening wrench as I slide the van door shut. Just another Sunday afternoon in the suburbs.

But this Sunday something else happened. I’d cued Simon and Garfunkel on the iPod to fill the silence, music being one of the few bridges we could still cross together. Late afternoon sun filtered silver light through the trees. The man across the street mowed his verge while I stared at the empty driveway. Please come soon. Please come soon. My soundless prayer to the god of taxis.
Then something flashed across my field of vision. Something hallucinatory, strange. As with all clichés, given the exact circumstances, they are exactly true. I could not believe my eyes. A short, naked brown child darted across my driveway and up next door’s in pursuit of a large brown hound. Leaving Mum in the lounge room, I went out into the dazzling light.

Even then I couldn’t quite reconcile the evidence of my senses, until the dog reappeared and loped past me into my own backyard, the boy running behind. The man across the road kept mowing his verge. Wild children obviously didn’t faze him. I glanced around helplessly, expecting the imminent manifestation of a responsible adult. None was forthcoming, so I followed the unlikely pair up the back.

Where is your Mum? What is your name? My name is Liana.

He immediately established a personal space I knew instinctively not to broach. This stocky brown boy-god had full command of himself. I knew the label ‘vulnerable’ was not inaccurate, but somehow it wouldn’t stick. He was far from silent. The rhythms and intonations of his voice were theatrical, hypnotic. And the speech was accompanied by expansive and confident gestures more to be expected of a middle-aged actor than a five- or six-year-old child with missing front teeth. His skin was flawless, not glossy but taut and dusty brown. His gestures were unambiguous; his rapid, sure-fire speech full of energy and assurance, and absolutely incomprehensible.

I stood there helplessly fishing the occasional word – ‘No!’ ‘Mum’ – out of the babble when I heard the screen door click behind me. My mum emerged from the house and appraised the situation in a glance. Her knowing smile said it all. She recognised an apparition when she saw one.

I was outnumbered here. Neither Mum, nor the boy, nor the dog had a problem. But I sure did. With nothing to fall back on but manners, I introduced them.

This is my mum. Where is your mummy?

Yes, where the hell is your mummy or daddy? It was, given the circumstances, a rhetorical question.

The hound bounded back down towards the house and noisily hoovered up the cat’s food and water. The boy edged closer. Close enough for me to see the scar down his breastbone. And hear the catarrh through which he continued to chatter animatedly.

Look, Mum, he’s had heart surgery. Just like you.

Down syndrome was way too small a cage to capture this jungle boy of suburbia. He slipped through its bars and dealt with the world on his own terms.

I opened the back door and we all went inside. Crowded together in the small lounge room – boy, hound, Mum and me – we made quite a menagerie.
Our low glass coffee table holds several large glass bottles at a child’s height. The lowering sun lit their jewelled colours. The boy, enchanted, reached out a delicate finger to touch a rim and smiled up his delight. My hand rested lightly on the hound’s head. Nobody spoke. Twenty minutes had passed since the boy first appeared. Neither the taxi nor his guardians had appeared. I was the only one worrying.

I rang my husband’s mobile and it went straight to voicemail. I went back to the lounge room. Situation the same. What on earth does duty of care mean, exactly? What is the correct etiquette when you are visited by an archetype on a Sunday afternoon? I don’t want no god on my lawn / Just a flower I can help along.

Calling the police seemed extreme, a last resort. Better to at least try to deal with things in the community. If some distraught neighbour was out searching, calling the police might unnecessarily complicate matters. Incident reports. Trouble with Welfare. A few hours a week spent honouring family bonds was enough to wear me to exhausted despair. I was in no position to call judgement on some poor soul who had to deal with this force of nature full-time. Besides, I’d seen how fast the child could move.

For want of any better option, I herded us all out to the front veranda to await our fates. The light was fading. I sat flanked by twins of difference from each end of the life span, the cicatrix of the surgeon over each heart, a tribal bond. It was a Zen koan in four dimensions. Life is wild and mysterious and utterly beyond my control. I surrendered. That was all that was necessary.

Three vehicles appeared in swift succession.

The taxi. Sorry, love, there was a car rally and all the streets were blocked.

My husband’s ute. Who’s the storybook kid?

An old Valiant sedan. Get in the car… (then, an afterthought) …thanks.

Her perfunctory nod wasted no energy. Her face showed traces of hard living. Her voice was the antithesis of her son’s – flat, tired. It held no kindness, but neither was it harsh. The boy got in the car willingly enough.

As they drove off into the twilight the dog ran behind. I thought of the boy’s skin. Not a mark on it – bar the mark of a long-ago decision in favour of life.
AT the time of his death, in 1883, Wambeetch Puyuun was the only Liwira Gunditj still living on his country in the Western District of Victoria. In its obituary, the Camperdown Chronicle reported: ‘As the last remnant of his race in this locality has passed away in “Camperdown George”, it has been suggested to commemorate the circumstances by raising a tablet to his memory in the cemetery.’ Perhaps not surprisingly, nothing came of this suggestion, at least not until Wambeetch Puyuun’s friend James Dawson, the local Protector of Aborigines, returned to the district following two years’ absence in his native Scotland. Dawson immediately set about raising funds for just such a memorial, but without much success, and the obelisk that now stands in the Camperdown Cemetery was erected largely at Dawson’s own expense. One of those Western District squatters who Dawson approached for a donation famously responded with the words: ‘I decline to assist in erecting a monument to a race of men we have robbed of their country.’

Such cynical sentiments seem to have prevailed throughout the later-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Apart from the grave of Thomas Mitchell’s guide Yuranigh, with its combination of Aboriginal carved trees and European inscribed marble, the tombstone of Indigenous cricketer Johnny Mullagh Unaarrimin at Harrow, William Ricketts’ eccentric sculpture park at Mt Dandenong and Dawson’s tribute, I cannot think of any significant monuments to Aboriginal Australians erected prior to the 1988 Aboriginal Memorial in the National Gallery of Australia, with its Bicentennial two hundred log coffins, or the slightly later installation outside the Museum of Sydney by Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, Edge of the Trees (1995).

These last are essentially formal-emblematic sculptures, monuments to Aboriginality in the abstract, to a whole people: nations, tribes, clans, families. In more recent years, prompted by the enhanced popular awareness of and engagement with Indigenous history, by the national readiness for reconciliation, there have also been a couple of more personal, individual memorials.
In Albany, Western Australia, a life-size bronze figure of the Minang (Noongar) leader Mokare by the sculptor Terry Humble was erected in 1997, to commemorate – as it says on the plaque – ‘the role Mokare played in the peaceful co-existence between Noongar people and the first European settlers’. In Victoria, the sculptor Peter Schipperheyn has for some years been agitating for a similar memorial to the Kulin statesman Beruk, known to Europeans as William Barak, ngurungaeta (clan leader) of the Wurundjeri and spokesman for the Aboriginal community from the 1870s to the 1890s. The artist’s website contains detailed design drawings for a six-metre-high bronze and stone sculpture of Beruk in heroic pose, wearing a possum-skin cloak and holding a large fighting boomerang.

The proposal seems to have been circulated strategically. Phillip Adams gave ‘Schip’ a glowing testimonial in a November 2008 column in the Weekend Australian. Sculptors looking for substantial public commissions must necessarily also speak with the people who have control of foyers and plazas, and the Schipperheyn website acknowledges the ‘support and assistance’ provided by the property developers Bruno and Adam Grollo of Grocon.

FAST FORWARD TO 2010 and the launch of Portrait, an apartment block design-ed for Grocon by the Melbourne architectural firm Ashton Raggatt McDougall. One of a cluster of retail, office, apartment and student accommodation buildings planned for the historic Carlton & United Breweries site at the north end of Melbourne’s Central Business District, Portrait is in many ways the human face of the development, both in its direct address to Swanston Street, the city’s main north–south axis, and in its relative modesty. With only thirty-two stories and 530 apartments, Portrait is certainly small beer compared to the ninety-storey, 800-apartment Denton Corker Marshall tower to be erected on the south-east corner of the site.

And the human face is not just metaphorical. The north or ‘back’ elevation of Portrait is flat, but is decorated with a linear pattern that resembles a contour map, or the whorls of a fingerprint. The decoration seems to allude to Indigenous pattern maps and stories, though there is no historical or tribal specificity here. This is not the totemic pattern emblazoned on a Wurundjeri possum-skin cloak; it is more a super-hieroglyphic of placedness in general. But across its curved Swanston Street frontage the building presents an unequivocal marker of Aboriginality: the face of William Barak.

As with so many of its ilk, the front of this building is crossed at each level by a horizontal line of balconies. However, here the balconies are not straight, but curve and swell, so that the dark shadows behind and within are variously enlarged. This permits a dynamic modelling of the face of the building. Studio Gang architects achieved a not dissimilar effect with their recent Aqua skyscraper in Chicago. In that building the curved concrete balconies project beyond the steel and glass cubic core; and, because the extent and flow of the curves varies from storey to storey, the
whole structure has an undulating, fluid profile, presenting an ambiguous, abstract image of a waterfall or a stalagmite. ARM’s technique involves shaping the balconies on the vertical plane, which similarly animates the facade but permits a more precise control and a more photographic finish.

Certainly photography has been an important inspiration for ARM. The firm’s first design to incorporate this idea of ‘striated balconies’ was a proposal back in 2005 for the Dupain Building, a fifteen-storey development on Sydney’s Darling Harbour. This building was to feature, or rather be made into a screen for, the representation of Max Dupain’s Bondi – that classic 1939 image of a bathing couple seen from behind, with the woman tugging at the right buttock of her swimsuit – spread across the entire north side of the building.

According to ARM’s publicity: ‘To build this image the famous original photograph was scanned and processed into strips using a sophisticated computer-generated technique. Each strip became curved and rippled like ribbons or driftwood. Together these strangely evocative balustrade forms create the vivid optical illusion of the original picture, which becomes clearer as distance increases, to emerge as if from a mirage.’

AS REPORTED BY Grocon, the official launch of the Portrait building design, on 15 September, began with a welcome to country by the Wurundjeri elder and Beruk descendant Aunty Doreen Garvey-Wandin. The company’s media release explained:

Wurundjeri Tribal Land Council CEO Megan Goulding said there was full support for Grocon using William Barak’s image on the facade of the building.

‘The Elders have noted that it’s Grocon’s intention to pay respect to both Barak and the Wurundjeri people as the traditional owners of the Melbourne and greater Melbourne region over many thousands of years,’ she said. ‘The Wurundjeri community is very moved by this gesture and appreciates the respect that both Grocon and ARM have shown in developing this exciting concept.’

Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Minister Richard Wynne said the Government also welcomed Portrait and the continuing redevelopment of the Carlton Brewery site.

‘As this site has been vacant for more than 20 years, we are glad to see buildings such as Pixel and Portrait appearing,’ he said. ‘And this commemoration of the life of William Barak is one that the Victorian Government certainly applauds.

‘The Victorian Government has celebrated the life of William Barak in other ways, including by naming the footbridge leading to the MCG in his honour, and we see him as a very significant figure in our history.’
Barely six weeks later, the apartments were advertised for sale in a four-page liftout in Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper. Beruk had completely disappeared. The front page of the supplement announced ‘New City Living’ over a peculiar collage of a designer chair, a pair of headphones, a couple of flowers and a grey cornery bit that turns out on closer inspection to be *a da sotto in sù* black and white photograph of one of the remnant bluestone brewery buildings. Inside, the word Portrait appears in large letters, but of the two images of the facade one is not from an angle that shows any image in the rippling balconies and the other is a close-up view that shows only seven storeys, and thus, again, no image. On the back page, the computer-generated image is of the Swanston Street elevation, the ‘face face’, but the art direction of the shot and the pattern of lights turned on and off in the apartments make it virtually impossible to read the portrait.

To a degree, this absence is an artefact of perception. As Daniel Grollo himself said at the launch: ‘It’s not meant to be that from every angle you will get the perfect image of it; it’s that you will get the perfect image in glimpses.’ The striated balconies produce a shimmering instability, a visual frisson somewhere between a half-tone dropout poster head of Jimi Hendrix or Ché Guevara and one of Bridget Riley’s black and white op-art paintings of the mid-1960s. It’s a wee bit like the New Zealand artist Gordon Walter’s painted versions of Maori *koru* patterns, with their shifting black and white, positive and negative. Now you see it, now you don’t.

However, Beruk’s disappearance from the sales liftout seemed deliberate. Perhaps the marketing people were frightened by the Channel Ten news report of the launch, which proclaimed that ‘just like [football personality] Sam Newman’s mural of Pamela Anderson [on a townhouse designed by the young Melbourne architect Cassandra Fahey], this face on a facade is dividing opinion,’ and which included the vox-pop soundbite ‘Who is this guy anyway?’ Perhaps they calculated that superannuation fund managers and offshore property investors don’t care too much about reconciliation. Or maybe they just figured that no one would want to live inside a blackfella’s head.

Whatever the reason, the ostensible subject of Portrait was as completely removed from the liftout as any purged counter-revolutionary from a Soviet Politburo photograph. Well, perhaps not entirely; in the corner of the back page image, in tiny eight-point type, is the text ‘Artist [sic] impression / Barak image derived from / artwork by Peter Schipperheyn.’

Excuse me, but this is just weird. You can’t claim the history and deny it at the same time. You can’t make the Aborigine disappear at will.

ESPECIALLY NOT THIS Aborigine. Beruk is not only a key player in Aboriginal–settler history in Victoria, but he was also evidently a figure of considerable personal presence. When (in old age, twice widowed) he married for the third time, the *Lilydale Express* reported on the speech he made at his wedding: ‘His Majesty stood
up. Although not a tall man he is noble looking, and [manager] Mr Shaw informs me he is a nobleman in every sense of the word. After the loud applause with which he was received had subsided, perfect quiet reigned for fully half a minute. King Barak then, having looked around him, said in a most impressive manner, “I am here.” Another stillness for thirty seconds, during which a pin dropping might be heard, and then he gave a detailed account of his courtship and marriage.’

Something of this authoritative bearing can be seen in the many pictorial records of ‘King Billy’. This archive of relatively small, flat images is in itself a powerful monument. There is, for example, an extraordinary photograph in the State Library of Victoria in which the white-bearded Beruk leans back on one leg in a martial stance, fighting club in his right hand, boomerang held above his head breaking the horizon; at his feet are a couple of mongrel dogs, one gnawing at an itchy back leg, the other tremulously attentive to the sticks. Then there are the equally well-known Talma & Co. pictures of Beruk with hat on and collar up, one hand holding a brush, the other in his pocket, painting on the outside wall of his wooden shack one of his now widely exhibited and much-admired depictions of traditional ceremony.

Less familiar but equally potent is the image of Beruk as a handsome, dark-haired, scowling 33-year-old in a photograph by Charles Walter, one of the 104 ‘Portraits of Aboriginal Natives Settled at Coranderrk’ displayed at the Intercolonial Exhibition of 1866. The exhibition was held in a Great Hall constructed behind Queen’s Hall at the State Library in Swanston Street, just a block from the Grocon brewery site. WH Ferguson’s King Billy and His Mate shows Beruk and a younger though still grey-whiskered man, both in European dress and handsomely hatted, each holding a boomerang in his right hand: an image poignantly resonant with those of first-generation contact Pintupi or Warlpiri men from Papunya or Yuendumu in the 1970s.

Beruk’s appearance is recorded not only in photographs, but at least three times in that luxury artefact of European culture, the oil portrait. Two of these paintings were made towards the end of his life, in 1899 and 1900 respectively. The first is a profile by Victor de Pury, younger son of the cultured Swiss settler Guillaume de Pury, whose Yeringberg vineyard was one of the first and most successful in the Yarra Valley. The elder de Pury was a prominent figure in the Lilydale district, and evidently took a keen interest in the local Aboriginal community; Beruk is known to have been a regular visitor to Yeringberg, and de Pury was one of the members of the 1881 Board of Inquiry into conditions at Coranderrk. The second is by the Portuguese émigré Artur Loureiro, a Paris-trained painter who was closely associated with the naturalists of the Heidelberg School, and who may have been inspired in his choice of subject by Tom Roberts’ 1890s heads of Corowa and Yulgilbar blacks. Both of these turn-of-the-century portraits show Beruk as a snowy-haired and long-bearded patriarch, a sort of nineteenth-century Indigenous reprise of a Renaissance Moses or St Jerome.
More interesting is an earlier work by the young Florence Fuller, now in the State Library of Victoria – again, just along the road from the Grocon site. Eighteen-year-old Fuller was the niece and, at the time this picture was painted, the pupil of the orientalist and society portraitist Robert Dowling, best known to present-day viewers for his closely observed if somewhat awkward early paintings of Tasmanian and Victorian Aboriginal people, and Fuller’s picture has a similar deliberateness and objectivity. Beruk is here presented not as a savage, however noble, not as a romanticised or sentimentalised ‘last man of his tribe’, but as (to use the art historian Joan Kerr’s words) ‘a well-groomed visitor to town’, wearing a double-breasted coat, clean white collar and red tie.

This is the William Barak who was warmly received by Victoria’s Chief Secretaries Graham Berry and Alfred Deakin, who provided invaluable information on traditional beliefs and cultural practices to the pioneer anthropologist Alfred Howitt, and who was the probable author of numerous petitions and letters from the Coranderrk people to the colonial government, to the Aborigines Protection Board and to various newspaper editors. This is the image of a man who spent much of his life trying to negotiate a viable personal and communal space somewhere between Indigenous and settler cultures. Indeed, it is entirely appropriate that Beruk’s (Anglicised) name should have been given to a bridge. And a pedestrian bridge at that: Beruk’s long walks – from Yering to the Acheron and then to the Mohican in 1860, from the Mohican to Coranderrk in 1862, and from Coranderrk to Melbourne, once with his terminally consumptive son David, and many times to meet with politicians and public servants – are a significant part of his legend.

It is equally appropriate that the Florence Fuller painting was commissioned by one of Beruk’s greatest white allies, the wealthy philanthropist Ann Fraser Bon, at whose Kew residence Beruk would stay when on those delegations to the city. In 1901 Mrs Bon gave Fuller’s portrait ‘To the People of Victoria’, and many years afterwards she was also instrumental in the development of the first public, exterior monument to her late friend.

IN OCTOBER 1931 the Healesville branch of the Australian Natives’ Association announced its intention ‘to erect a permanent stone over the grave...of one of the most notable aborigines of the Healesville district, King Barak, of the Yarra Tribe.’ The Argus reported that the branch had been given ‘a splendid stone of Italian marble, valued at between £300 and £400’, and had opened an appeal for the £60 still needed to meet the costs of its removal and re-erection. The stone in question formerly stood in the grounds of Mrs Bon’s Wappan homestead at Bonnie Doon, bearing the names of her deceased husband and first-born child. However, the property had been compulsorily acquired by the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission in the 1920s, and was to be flooded for the new Sugarloaf Dam.
Whether out of Scots practicality or a deeper motivation it is impossible to judge now, but the remarkable fact remains that Ann Fraser Bon offered her own family monument, ground clean and re-inscribed, to stand over Beruk’s grave.

Her generous gesture prompted another. Peter Schipperheyn was not the first artist to propose a Beruk bronze; in December 1931 Paul Montford, then working on his ambitious sculptural program for the Shrine of Remembrance, wrote to *The Argus*: ‘Believing that no memorial to an individual is complete without a permanent representation of the subject, I will provide, as my contribution, a medallion of Barak, to be placed on the memorial...’ Appropriately, Montford’s imposing compass-point sculptural groups at the Shrine represent Patriotism, Sacrifice, Peace and Justice, abstract nouns made concrete in the life and work of William Barak.

In the event, neither the cemetery site nor the Montford medallion survived the lengthy planning process, but on a wet winter’s day in 1934, in the presence of many visitors and local residents (including both a number of Aborigines and the 96-year-old Mrs Bon), the monument was officially unveiled in Healesville’s main street, bearing the legend

To the glory of God,
and to the Memory of
BARAK
Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra tribe
of Aborigines and his race
Barak died at Coranderrk
A sincere Christian

This is not quite the end of the story. Some years later the William Barak memorial was vandalised, and the local council subsequently removed and stored it. However, in the early 1950s the Melbourne literary society the Bread and Cheese Club revived the Australian Natives’ Association’s original idea, and arranged for the stone to be relocated once again, to stand over Beruk’s grave at Coranderrk. Three hundred Victorian Aborigines attended its dedication ceremony.

ALL THIS INDICATES something of the complexity of the business of commemoration, particularly in relation to a life as long and tangled and troubled as that of Beruk, ‘white grub in gum tree’, of William Barak, ‘last of the Yarra Yarra tribe’.

Yet, for the architects and advocates of Portrait, biography seems to have been rather less important than geography. The designers are, as indeed they should be, particularly concerned with the cartographical potency of the site, with the critical
importance of the Swanston Street north–south axis in defining the shape and 
meaning of Melbourne’s built environment. I can remember when I was a young 
man studying at the University of Melbourne, just up the road, and how with all the 
sociological smartarsery of the undergraduate I thought it a great joke the way that 
taken together, the twin nodes of a war memorial and a brewery created a neat 
caricature of the Australian national character.

Sadly the Ashton Raggatt McDougall proposal is not that much more 
sophisticated. For the firm, the Shrine of Remembrance is apparently the key point 
of conceptual departure. This much is made clear in the ARM promotional video. 
To a soundtrack of psy-trance drumming, digital didgeridoo and haunting, 
wordless vocals, a virtual aerial eye descends in an arc from the top of the Shrine, 
down St Kilda Road, to Princes Bridge. There the image shifts into monochrome and 
drops down to street level for a few blocks of 1910 tram-cam documentary footage; 
then the camera swoops up again to regain colour and show the view from the 
Portrait penthouse. Then…fade to black.

As reported in *The Age*, ARM’s Howard Raggatt said, ‘the firm designed the 
high-rise to be paired with the Shrine of Remembrance as “bookends” for the city. “I 
guess we were searching for something that could have that kind of status, I 
suppose.”’ On Ten News, he elaborated: ‘We felt that if the Shrine represented the 
type of modern history of the country, then we should be looking at the kind of 
deep history of the country.’ Or, as the ARM website has it, ‘The image of William 
Barak…references the deep history of our land – a strong and dramatic presence, 
and a symbol of our shared identity and heritage. It is a homage to the First 
Australians, and a recognition of our complementary history.’ Admittedly he was 
speaking off the cuff, and the statement is accordingly less polished, but on that 
same Ten News report then Premier John Brumby expressed a similarly vague and 
vaguely heart-warming attitude: ‘And I think anything that linked to our 
Indigenous heritage – that’s a good thing…’

Now we can understand why it doesn’t really matter that the Beruk on the 
building is not really an actual, historical, documentary image of the man, but an 
idealised artist’s impression from a hundred years after his death. Because the Beruk 
on the building is not primarily a historical figure, but rather an icon of ARM’s ‘deep 
history’, a kind of local ‘One Pound Jimmy’ Tjungurrayi, a metonymic 
representation of the whole of the Kulin Nation.

The sad truth is that this building is not a monument to William Barak. It is not in 
fact a Portrait. And it is not, strictly speaking, a commemoration of any kind. No, 
this is Brand Reconciliation, in which a literally superficial image of Aboriginality 
serves to mask the profit motive, with corporation and government colluding in a 
chorus of unassailable political correctness, and in which the particular and painful 
thruths of Indigenous and settler history are glossed over in favour of a warm and
fuzzy notion of communal inheritance. However sincere the motivation (though the camouflage effect I have described must give cause for doubt), however sophisticated the computer-generated technique of the striated balconies, however enthusiastic the response of representatives of the dispossessed Wurunjeri, this is still kitsch. Beruk deserves better than to stand on his country as a giant concrete Aborigine for the Garden State.

IF THE MAKERS of the urban architectural environment, and of the public culture more generally, can be so cavalier in their treatment of an individual life and image, it is hardly surprising that their macroscopic projection of Aboriginality should turn out to be equally ropey. For Howard Raggatt the Shrine is simply a synecdoche, a structure that stands for the whole 200-odd years of settler-Australian history, while ‘bookend’ Beruk stands for the previous sixty thousand. However, the Shrine was not designed as – nor, until the recent rise of ‘Anzac-Aussie-oi-oi-oi-ism’ perceived as – some kind of abstract national monument. It is first and foremost a cenotaph, a publicly funded public expression of grief over the deaths of young Australian soldiers during World War I.

It is possible that Raggatt and his team are making a sly but deliberate equation of the two structures, in a similar manner to the appropriation of Daniel Lebeskind’s Holocaust Museum for their design of the National Museum of Australia. It could be that Portrait was designed as a kind of counter-Shrine, an ironic, postmodern memorial to the thousands of Aborigines killed in the undeclared wars of the Australian frontier. But whether simply insensitive or smugly more-PC-than-thou, the mirroring of Aboriginal identity and war might not be the most helpful contribution to reconciliation.

Furthermore, given the architects’ evident focus on the building’s location, it is more than a little surprising that they should so completely ignore the history of the Carlton site. Since the earliest days of European settlement, Aboriginal Australians have drowned the sorrows of death, dispossession and disadvantage in alcohol, and alcohol-related illnesses and mortality are still major challenges for many Aboriginal communities. A 2008 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare survey found that Indigenous alcohol-related hospitalisations were between one and 6.2 times greater than those in the non-Indigenous community in the case of males, and between 1.3 and thirty-three times greater in the case of females (assault injuries featured significantly). In 2009, the report of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision stated that Indigenous deaths from various alcohol-related causes are five to nineteen times greater than among non-Indigenous Australians.

In the light of such statistics, to put a black man on the site of an ex-brewery is, to say the least, in questionable taste. Moreover, remembering that as a youth I made that joke about beer and diggers on the Swanston Street axis, I can easily imagine the
eyebrow-raising, the smirks and the slurs that Portrait will generate, its reinforcement of the prejudicial stereotype of the drunken blackfella. This would be not only unfair, but also ahistorical. Defending the continued existence of the Coranderrk settlement, Beruk’s predecessor as nurungaeta, (Simon) Wonga, stated: ‘It is better to live here than to go about and drink,’ and station manager John Green told the 1881 inquiry that he ‘sometimes…fined the blacks for being drunk. They themselves made a law authorising that.’ It would appear that the devout Presbyterian William Barak and his community were solidly opposed to grog.

And then there is another problem: the head itself. Yes, the portrait bust is such a commonplace in the western artistic tradition as to be unremarkable, and the colossal head is also familiar, from those of Rameses II at the British Museum and Constantine the Great at the Capitoline to the recent sculptures of Ron Mueck and Jaume Plensa. Nevertheless, in this specific case the isolation of the Aboriginal head must inevitably recall the regrettable social-Darwinist elements of nineteenth-century anthropology – the obsession with physiognomic measurement (height of Aboriginal cranium: thirty-two storeys), the oppressive scopic regime of ethnographic photography and, even worse, the regular mutilation of Aboriginal corpses to satisfy the international museum skull trade. Finally, speaking of bones, and despite the University of Melbourne architecture professor Philip Goad’s endorsement of the fact as ‘strangely haunting’, is there not something passing strange about a memorial to a black man having an all-white finish?

No, no, no – this is all too much. What were these people thinking?

Beruk richly deserves to be remembered and honoured as an important figure in Victorian history, as a defender of his people and of their proprietary and citizenship rights. But in relation to this Portrait I find myself in sympathy with the anonymous correspondent who wrote to The Argus around the time that Ann Bon’s ‘splendid stone of Italian marble’ was installed in the main street of Healesville: ‘residents would have no objection to the erection of a suitable memorial to Barak…but they do object to the resurrection of an out-of-date, mournful-looking tombstone to serve this purpose. Better no memorial at all than one which is…an object of ridicule.’

The story of Beruk and Coranderrk has been told many times, most recently in the third episode of Rachel Perkins’ 2008 television series First Australians. This essay also owes a debt to Jane Lydon’s Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians (Duke University Press, 2004) and Chris Healy’s Forgetting Aborigines (UNSW Press, 2008). Thanks also to Penny Edmonds, Tom Griffiths, Robert Kenny and Peter Timms.

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Howqua to Jamieson.

My name is Nelson after the Pommy sailor who lost an eye to grapeshot. Or in my case a whip. My left eye is gristle. I can’t see Yella the newblood walking beside me. I can’t see the Goulburn River. I can’t see the fucking mountains. You might say I’m blind to anything sinister, giving rise to my namby-pamby folklore (Orion’s words) that helps us pass the time tramping through the backblocks.

Orion walks in the rearmost span closest to Cusack’s whip, gaining my stories piecemeal from bullock to bullock, yoke to yoke, Chinese whispers down the line.

Yella is a virgin to the open road, this trip his first beyond the outskirts of Mansfield. A willing beast, the kid is riddled with questions – Why do birds sing? How far is Jamieson? What’s a barouche? – as Nigger is with heartworm. I envy the breath Yella finds to verbalise uphill. I long for the novelty he feels on fording creeks. The nonsense code of insects. No doubt Yella is braced for a long haul, most of it without me. This road to Aberfeldy shapes as my last.

Cusack our driver has an ironclad rule when it comes to choosing yokemates. Old must accompany new, he believes, the likes of Yella by the likes of me, world-weary by world-hungry. Cusack hopes the coupling will see the new ox ‘break’ but I prefer the opposite idea. Yoking I see as the vital step on the road to completion. Twice the beast for the stories I feed him, Yella is shedding his innocence by dint of miles and campsites. As two, we merge into one. The ox, he’s learning, owns more than a walk-on role when it comes to the landscape we brave, the snaky road, the watchful bush, the kilns and mines and scratch-out farms we encounter on the road. Only this morning he mistook our species as Johnnies-come-lately to this island’s saga until my oxtale told him otherwise.

Presnell’s Comet.

Engine of an empire, the ox has blazed this colony’s way from the outset. The original migrant herd crept from the lobes of Botany Bay, beyond the leases, the outer parishes, sneaking north of the Tweed, sheltering in the lap of the Darling
Downs. There, in pioneer times, a drover named Presnell goaded a medley flock – cattle, sheep and assorted bullocks – across the loam. Early evening, a long summer twilight, when suddenly the sky turned magnesium.

A fireball creased the air! Chased by sparks! All bar the oxen bolted for shelter. Even Presnell bunched his reins, horror-struck by what he saw. Coconut, his mare, reared – and Presnell toppled off. The scene was chaos save for the oxen, content as ever to ignore the heavens, dining on native grasses and turning our rumps to the alleged omen.

Ancient Romans understood the sky, unlike Australians who view the blackness as a threat in itself, a derisive anagram of the English sky they’d known, a mystery more ancient than Old Rome itself. In light of Presnell’s Comet, as the fireball would come to be known, only *Bos taurus* ox was prepared to graze in the face of disaster, our broad rumps an endorsement of the colony’s longevity.

Presnell at length passed the tidings onto outlying graziers, allowing the news and kudos to filter slowly south. The image of the steadfast steer afforded heart to a million cowed Australians. Here was a five-star investor in the new land’s future! Faced by comets in the sky a nag will baulk, the swine run, all udder milk curdle overnight, but the stable ox is a beast heaven-made for this skittish folly of a continent.

*Jamieson to Gaffneys Creek.*

The clay is slippery. Stepping is a case of hoof by deliberate hoof, our task to keep the trace chain taut, the going fluid, the cargo poised, the headstall square. Steam floats from Sergeant’s hide. Cusack curses the rain and team in turns. For every pinch and quag our load adopts a subtle ton.

We march in a train of six, twelve steers hauling the stage that Australian life is played upon: the open dray. Yella thrives amid our company. He whiffs something epic in the going, while I confess to feeling less ennobled, servant as I am to the umpteenth leg in the colony’s odyssey, dragging Progress one inch further inland. This week Progress comprises planks and flour, oats by the hundredweight, fuses and picks, fencing wire, a barouche.

What’s a barouche? asks Yella, not for the first time. As an answer I speak on matters pedestrian.

*Oxley’s Moccasins.*

I kid you not, the explorer’s name was Oxley. (Little by little Australians are paying their bovine cohorts their overdue tithe.) A surveyor, Oxley was responsible for measuring Illawarra, the unkempt sprawl extending to Port Jackson’s south. His
bullocks hauled chains, stakes, astrolabes across the brutal seaboard. We blazed Bulli Pass, waded Kembla Rip. In short, the oxen gave Oxley’s inroad the necessary legs.

If road is the right word: the path was nonexistent, the sun malicious. Lesions bloomed on the animals’ spines. Gashes festered. Hooves fell into disrepair with nary a farrier in cooee.

Too kind a soul to qualify as bullocky, Oxley granted ample spells for the team along the way, but the foot sores worsened. The odour of pus overpowered our sweat. Creeping across the escarpment, a chorus line on tiptoes, the broken hooves steeped the outcrops in blood. Ten days into the trek, holed up at Wollondilly River, the surveyor struck an idea.

It should be said, to make matters clear, that during such an epoch the ox was Australia’s chief source of leather. (Cows were few in number and daily wrung for curd, while kangaroos were too chimerical for colonists to contemplate.) Yet so highly were oxen deemed, the lure to exploit our leather was often scorned. Most settlers were content to ply their trade unshod, or tricked up in London hobnails such as Oxley wore himself.

Hence the enigma when Oxley that night opted to hunt opossum and native bear, indeed any marsupial asleep to his designs. Five long nights in Wollondilly, the sixth a bee of makeshift needlework, Oxley hunted and skinned, he smoked and oiled, cured and stitched, all the while his bullocks watching and left to second-guess their driver’s intent. When the slippers were done, a full two dozen lace-up shoes, four for each beast, the master bowed before his team and kitted out each ox. Aye, the first fancy-shod steers in history! Explorations resumed on slippered hooves. Thus did John Joseph William Molesworth Oxley, trailblazer and makeshift cobbler, pay one part of this colony’s extravagant debt.

Two Bob Night.

Rain has eased. Darkness enters the valley. We gain the eastern bank on Two Bob Creek and Cusack calls a halt. Aberfeldy is nine miles distant going by memory’s map.

Egg-and-bacon flowers, boronia, morning glory – the feed is good around these parts. Yokes off, we are hobbled as a group and eat in silence. Come dark we congregate close to Cusack’s fire, his fresh mutton spitting in the pan, the flames licking shapes against our pelts.

Rudolf, an ox of few words, disturbs our lull with an outburst. ‘Catastrophe waits on tomorrow. I can see it.’
‘The seer bloody steer,’ brays Sergeant. ‘Shut your fucking gob and go to sleep.’

Rudolf persists. ‘Believe me brothers, this trip is short-lived. Trip is the pivotal word.’

Nigger shushes the clairvoyant. Mortgage, another tyro, sneers in tandem with his yokemate Orion. Yella is camped beside me. I sense his fear and thus speak softly of Elijah Puplick.

**St Treacle.**

Convicts are the breeding stock of Australian life, men whose flesh have tasted the lash, the cat-o'-nine-tails and every other number in between. Elijah Puplick was one such wretch, a devil in pyjamas with rape and sedition his calling. But the devil escaped, breaking shackles in a Pitt Town quarry and killing a string of lieutenants en route to freedom. The 46th Regiment combed gully and byre but the wilderness offered outlaws ideal camouflage.

The monster prospered, strangling the Madden clan of Wallerawang station and adopting their airs and chattels until a bullock team passed. The load of gunpowder kegs murmured destiny to Puplick who planted a mattock in the bullocky’s brain and so inherited the dray. He set his sights for parliament, not so much as candidate but as self-anointed destroyer. He whipped the team hard towards Port Jackson. Treacle, the senior ox in the span and a conservative by nature, was first to register the nihilism that coursed in Puplick’s veins.

Twelve miles from Sydney – in scrub on Parramatta’s margins – the oxen were obliged to pass the night in their shafts, feigning sleep as Puplick, weary with raillery, slept like a child on the flatbed. A dying fire shone like an impulse in Treacle’s eyes. Softly, using the age-old curses, the bullock roused his brothers into action, urging them to ease the juggernaut above the firebed.

As one the oxen were doomed. So too anything in a hundred-yard radius. Parramatta locals still recall the night Quaker’s Hill shook like never before, a modest Armageddon, with modest repercussion, in light of what might have been. The load’s true intention vanished with Elijah Puplick and a dozen hidebound martyrs.

**Two Bob to Woods Point.**

Orion walks before us this morning, his hind legs deliberately ajar. ‘Take a good look, Yella old mate. See that ball sack? Looted! Picked clean! That’s what fucking humans do, beffing us up to excess then fleecing the best of us.’

The team is rounding Mount Irwin on a corkscrew path known as Jacob’s Ladder. The rain is gauzy. All around us the slick bush shines like something newborn.
Orion feels the urge to go on. ‘Take no heed of Nelson’s namby-pamby folklore. I too was once a bull! Look at us now. Fucking slaves is who we are, eunuch serfs for the mealy-mouthed bullocky. Look at mine, look hard. A ransacked sack is nothing to crow about, son. Ask Nelson how a eunuch bull can be anyone’s ancestor. His talk is tripe. His stories are worse than the knife what done this.’

As decoy from the tirade I whisper to Yella another.

The Golden Ox.

Gold is the human panacea, the reason for Australia’s being. Why do you think Aberfeldy is? Or half the forlorn fleabites an ox team will pass in a calendar year? What sane farmer would sow and reap in these cruel hills? How else to explain the picks and fuses piled high on our dray?

Years ago Samson was likewise employed. A Lancashire longhorn, the ox was a regular on the goldfield run, Ballarat to Melbourne, a perilous trip as Mad Dog Morgan owned the turf.

Morgan was a cutthroat with no god for compass. He loomed from the she-oaks edging Emu Ford and ordered the men to throw down arms. Stand aside! Billy Sing, a part-Chinese dogsbody with stupendous cunning, distracted the bushranger with a fan of treasury notes while the drivers slipped the gold into several nosebags. Morgan was conned. He took the notes and other trinkets, killing Sing and co. nonetheless, leaving the bullocks to munch on a mix of rapeseed and bullion. By the time a wayfarer encountered the bloodbath the nuggets were a sound part of the animals’ constitution.

Until weeks later at Port Gellibrand, the colony’s southern gateway. There stood Samson, awaiting his cue to haul a swarm of flywheels from the dock, when the urge to defecate arose. Samson released. He shat a drayload, an undammed bonanza through his colon’s own southern gateway, dumping the compost in eyeshot of Giles O’Cullough, an Argus reporter saddled with the duty of annotating new arrivals.

O’Cullough himself was fresh from Eire, as hinted by the credence he paid to Samson’s stool, telling his readers and the world by default of a land so munificent that even its livestock dumped treasure.

Rumours rebounded over the ocean. Hip pockets itched across meridians. Gold fever had a relapse as all peoples of the atlas made sail for Australian shores. Just think, the colony harvested new blood owing to a single ox’s extraordinary evacuation.
Jacob’s Ladder.

Mortgage, the newcomer with too much time to spare for Orion, slips. The bank is steep. Cusack snarls, tugs the brake, but the end is over before the tragedy begins. Chains groan. Braces tug. Orion follows. Downward. Headlong. Yella and I are next in train, Nigger and Lofty, Ollie and Rudolf, Sergeant and Hercules. In one mad moment Jacob’s Ladder becomes Jacob’s Snake as the team plunges helter-skelter into the abyss, Cusack and the load, lock, stock, box and dice.

Despite the rain there’s dust. When it settles the reckoning begins. Sergeant is dead. Ollie is dead. Rudolf the prophet is dead. Blood as thick as axle grease drips from Yella’s open jaw. ‘I’m going,’ he says – but not before I pant the final story.

Snowgum Angels.

Feathertop, a mountain not far from here, is a heron plume of snow, so cold one day a driver named Garner Pegg froze blue and fell like a plank from the dray seat. The sky thickened – flurry turned to blizzard. The world went white as the bullocks, plus Pegg’s two useless dogs, lay stranded high on Feathertop.

And then the killing began. Ten steer, two dogs, horns and fangs and claws all scoring flesh and fur, an orgy of red on white. Come the thaw, by the time a search party reached the castaways the aftermath was chilling: bones in the main, but no commonplace bones.

Pegg’s remains were gone, taken by the winds, the dingoes, the dogs. The dogs were gone, lost to civilisation, perhaps alive in this very scrub around us. Only the angels remained, the searchers’ words, the snowgum angels.

At first they took the flashes in the trees for laggard snow. The next speculation was birds, a murder of albino crows nesting in the lower branches, but closer inspection found the creatures to be skeletons, an airborne boneyard dangling in the wind.

You see, the gums had offered oxen shelter, fodder, a place to breathe their last like here, for you, dear Yella. Down to their withers, melting into scaffold, the team slowly turned to bone, a carcass queue embedded in the snow. Ravens came. Wild dogs. Scavengers wolfing the last of the gristle. Next the spring, and the summit thawing, the empty ribs and fetlocks looping like bangles over boughs once the snowline receded, leaving the eeriness of so much aerial anatomy that hung in wait for the searchers, its music elegiac.

‘Just as good bullocks attended the birth of Jesus,’ spoke one searcher on the mountaintop, ‘so do the beasts remain in the Lord’s favour.’ The quote is Yella’s last morsel.
What’s a Barouche?

Yella is oblivious and so too the good souls of Aberfeldy. Cusack is banking on the fact. He borrows the muscle of Orion and I to haul the remnant freight back to the road.

I can only imagine Aberfeldy’s mayor as a self-important man, one who demands a token of aristocracy, a viceregal touch to flourish his might in the bush. Bring me a barouche, he probably demanded. A what? asked his people. Whatever Cusack can fudge from the catastrophe is what will ultimately be delivered. Our driver is desperate to claim his haulage fee.

Yella lies among us, his cooling beef a larder to add to the Aberfeldy load, a corpse of excellent meat and leather. Orion and I watch Cusack at work. Building. Tinkering. His improvisation knows no bounds. The purpose of our trip was to deliver a symbol of order to the wilds, but the symbol (and ten oxen) have been obliterated, and a new symbol needs inventing.

Cusack is industrious. Kegs become wheels, planks the chassis, chaff bags the upholstery. Fusing wire is plied into pinions, a pair of shovel hafts the make-do axles. A bolt of canvas mimics the hood. On the third day the only detail missing from Cusack’s crackpot vehicle is Australia’s coat of arms. The driver doodles in the clay, unsure. He combs the gully’s smithereens to find no such emblem as a stencil. His pockets are empty of money or any clue to the government’s authority.

A unicorn? The English lion? He chews a stick, dabs its gnawed end in a pool of sheep raddle, painting a couchant emu on the upright panel. He deletes the heresy with banksia and wonders what next to sketch. He looks around him. And thus he sees Yella’s inert repose, the noble *Bos taurus* that he was, his power and wasted generosity lying prone, an image for the ages, the soul of the road itself and all who travel on it. Strong, silent, callow: Australia embodied, the land’s true emblem, and who would be Aberfeldy to controvert this truth?

Orion and I drag the barouche into town. Cusack has lost his whip; he lapses to banter, the journey a peaceful cortege for the dead we leave on Mount Irwin. The dray is no longer a dray but a vehicle of Cusack’s ingenuity. The driver rides high with haywire for reins, steers for steeds, the man as punch-proud as we, the journey a steady procession into oxlore.

Starved of spectacle, the people of Aberfeldy cram the single dirt track to cheer their barouche, an indigenous chariot, a bullocky’s work of art and craftiness coasting into town. Still wet, the emblem on the facing panel is the outline of the noble ox, who is St Yella, who is every Ox.
Aberfeldy.

As sources of power Orion and I linger in town for a season or more, too spent to be hounded back to Mansfield, too canny to travel of our own volition. Besides, Aberfeldy suits our stage in life, a brittle outpost with laziness in bucketloads. We haul pay dirt from the penny-ante mines, we shoulder whims to draw summer water, we drag carts. Cusack himself has retired to the neighbouring hills, kept in tobacco by the language he possesses, the blue rapport that can coax a bullock from mud.

With yoke life waning our retirement soon follows. We pass our days by the schoolhouse grubbing lucerne, silk grass, getting fat on native dogwood, arguing less, finding time for philosophy. Orion is a fair companion. We exchange yarns – the great freight stories. The strongest beast, the vilest driver.

In quieter times I like to focus my good eye on Miss Stanhope’s lessons, picking up the basics in lettering and whatnot. Did you know OX, for example, is a furtive hug beside a kiss? And going by the crisscross games the children gouge in the playground, an O seems timeless foe to the X. Proof the ox comprises affections and contradictions.

Around us Aberfeldians have learned to rely on horses, plus a flash green contraption dubbed a locomotor with no visible means of propulsion. But the barouche remains a cherished icon of village life. If only St Yella could see the love the people afford his gay mausoleum, brighter for a coat of paint, rollicking on the roadways. Just now the mayor clopped past the butter factory with topper and quirt, winning a blush from Miss Stanhope at her gate. I know the young martyr would be proud.

As is a man named Owen Molloy. A month down the track he leads us by the nose to a shack reminiscent of the accident, its complex aroma of blood. Orion goes first. With a silver flash the cleaver unlatches the ox’s neck. His pelt is shucked like a glove. I stand to one side in naked admiration, ogling the might of Orion’s flanks, the chrism of his hooves, his tallow fat, the gristle glue, and last the sacrament that launched this telling, that flexes now and commemorates those before us and those magnificent oxen to come. Of course I speak of the coveted tongue.

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David Astle is the author of two novels and three non-fiction books, the most recent of which is Puzzled (Allen & Unwin, 2010). He appears on the SBS show Letters and Numbers and his cryptic crosswords are published, under the moniker DA, in Melbourne’s Age and the Sydney Morning Herald.
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