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GriffithREVIEW42

Once Upon a Time in Oz

Edited by Julianne Schultz and Carmel Bird

GriffithREVIEW42

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INTRODUCTION

Stories to live by

Dreams of pumpkins, toads, princesses and more

Julianne Schultz

OVER the past few years the body politic in Australia has had an exceptionally high temperature. If it were possible to take it in the way that one used to measure a child's fever – shaken thermometer under the tongue, counting, watching the mercury rising – it would probably have registered in the danger zone, even as other vital signs remained good. Cool washers, paracetamol and rest would have been called for.

In this febrile environment it is scarcely surprising that those shaping the public debate, and those commenting on it, unwittingly defaulted to the embedded language of fairy tales. The agitated dreams that accompany fever frequently dredge memories of wicked witches, marauding wolves, evil stepmothers, lurking strangers, shape shifting objects and disguised princes masquerading as frogs or other unlikely creatures.

The cartoonists, especially David Rowe in the *Australian Financial Review*, got it. Day after day he brilliantly skewered barely articulated nightmares and pricked the balloon of promise. David Rowe's work provides a stunning centrepiece for this edition of *Griffith REVIEW*.

But as is so often the way when one wakes from a dream, the detail is lost although the sentiment remains to tinge the coming day.

So it has been during the five weeks of the 2013 election campaign – appropriately, for my metaphor at least – during an unseasonably warm August. No

one actually used the language of evil stepmothers, wolves or avenging princes, but a campaign where the pitch was reduced to a handful of words, only made sense if the subtext, of culturally embedded stories, was understood.

So when one side talked about waking from paralysis, we instinctively understood that Sleeping Beauty did that, and when the other side talked about the dangers that lurked in the woods, we remembered what happened to Little Red Riding Hood.

You get the idea; Cinderella, Goldilocks, Rapunzel, and many others from childhood picture books and the two hundred-year legacy of the Brothers Grimm, all played silent, but important, supporting roles in a campaign that was generally regarded as lacklustre, without an original narrative.

OUR INSTINCTIVE UNDERSTANDING of myth and story is well developed – it is evident from earliest times, expressed in civilisations scattered over the globe, a characteristic of what makes us human, replicated in every culture as a short cut to making sense of the world, to surviving and flourishing, and learning how to engage with others. Whether it is relayed in stories told around campfires, or in multi-million-dollar extravaganzas on the big screen in a darkened cinema, the impulse to tell stories with a recognisable arc, that help us draw life lessons, is something essentially human.

The American scholar Joseph Campbell took this a step further by developing his notion of the 'monomyth'. He argued that there was a single tale that was told with variations of detail and character across time and civilisations to 'awaken a sense of awe, explain the universe, validate the existing order and provide a guide through life'. While others have vigorously disputed the notion that all mythic narratives were a variation of a single story, and argued that this is an oversimplification, the psychological origins and purpose of myth have been explored for at least a century.

As a scholar and teacher based in the epicentre of twentieth-century civilisation – New York City – Campbell's analysis gained a momentum and engagement that would not easily come to those postulating elsewhere. George Lucas credits Campbell with providing the intellectual and narrative tools for him to shape the extraordinary *Star Wars* films, Richard Adams used Campbell's writing as an inspiration for his cult classic *Watership Down*.

The list goes on – books and films which follow the hero's journey from the call to adventure, the trials of initiation and the resolution enriched by self knowledge and understanding. These are modern renderings of classic tales, which have informed the values and life patterns for generations in a way that transcends commercial success and (ubiquitous) products offered for sale.

While Campbell's research was informed by his mastery of languages, and delved into the structural devices used in many of the great novels, his starting point was a childhood journey with his father to the Museum of Natural History. There Native American artefacts and the accompanying myths and stories fascinated him. His intellectual quest to synthesise these tales with those of his Irish and Catholic heritage provided a springboard for a lifetime of inquiry.

In an Australian context, this is an important insight. We have inherited in our DNA the stories of Europe, the tales of the Brothers Grimm and the Bible that came in the memories and books of settlers over the past two hundred years, and we are increasingly integrating the stories of other cultures and civilisations in this region. We have yet to integrate the stories of the Dreamtime in a way that embeds them in our collective imagination, so that *once upon a time* has a resonance uniquely tied to this place.

THE VISION THAT Carmel Bird has brought to *Once Upon A Time in Oz* is designed to address this – reimagining the fairy tales that are deeply embedded in our collective unconscious, with a twist that locates them in twenty-first-century Australia, and provides an opportunity to hear tales of the Dreamtime.

The short stories we have selected for this edition follow a recognisable arc, but often with a flourish that takes you by surprise, before revealing their reassuring certainties; and the memoirs speak to the richness and importance of story telling across generations and cultures.

Meanwhile back in the public domain where fairy tales stealthily inform the way we understand the world, it remains to be seen how the politics plays out – will the carriage turn into a pumpkin, or will we live happily ever after?

Sweet dreams.

10 September 2013

ESSAY

Dreaming the place

An exploration of Antipodean narratives

Carmel Bird

ONCE upon a time – and the story begins. Story is one of the most powerful tools in the minds of human beings, having deep and far-reaching cultural and political significance. It depends on language and imagination, two other precious tools. It works its magic by its music. Once upon a time Australia 'existed' only in the imaginations of people in the northern hemisphere. It was an alluring dream, perhaps, or a myth, a paradise to be desired, a Great South Land below the equator, balancing the world, but unknown. Then explorers came by sea and gradually discovered the solid reality of the landmass, and bit by bit they mapped the coastline. Myth was then, and is now, never far from the surface in Australia. It is nourished by fact, explained and embellished by fiction, spoken and written, and in its turn it informs the way lives are lived and perceived.

One of my personal favourite tales of early historical Australian myth is the story of the Portuguese sailor Pedro Fernandez de Quirós who came in search of the Great South Land in 1605. He found Vanuatu, but believed it to be the place he sought. He named it *Australia Del Espiritu Santo*. So far the story is romantic but not really extraordinary, so why do I like it so much? Well, there's more. In the nineteenth century, Archbishop Moran of Sydney believed that de Quirós had in fact discovered Australia, had named it as

the land of the Holy Spirit, and had established the New Jerusalem near Gladstone in Queensland. This lovely Australian yarn was taught as historical fact in Australian Catholic schools for many years. I am not really being critical of the Archbishop, I look upon him tenderly, admiring his fine Irish ability to work so boldly with fairy tale to strengthen the faith of his flock. Yes, yes, children, you are living in the land of the Holy Spirit. Happy ever after. Of course I have here taken the Archbishop into a little narrative of my own, weaving his fiction into my fiction and coming up with a smile and a shamrock.

The stories that resonate and lodge in a culture are, after all, the expression of desires.

Already I have used several terms for 'story'. There are some distinctions to be made between, say, myths and legends, fables and parables and fairy tales, sagas, folk tales, and yarns, some genres depending on heroes, some on journeys, some on morals, some on magic, but finally, they are all stories of some kind. So I'm not too fussed here by fine distinctions. I am really looking at what I call 'common' stories, stories that are not strictly the property of anyone in particular, but of humanity itself. And then I will consider some stories invented in Australia, stories that express aspects of life that appeal to Australians, and that in their turn express the feeling of the country. I will look at how some of these stories appear to sit in the culture of Australia.

Australia is a story as well as a place. Aboriginal Australians see nothing unusual in that statement. From a fantasy paradise of pearls and spices, waiting to be discovered in the southern seas below the magical mirror of the equator, to the huge island reality of today, with all that has happened here in the meantime (oh, all that has happened!), Australia has been and continues to be imagined and told from the outside. It has been imagined and told also from the inside, taking into the story a vast number of narratives from – well, it seems to me, from everywhere. Some of these narratives resonate more loudly at one time than another, but the story is going on all the time. At this point I stop and ask myself – how is all this different from what goes on elsewhere? And I believe there is perhaps an answer to be found in the way the Aboriginal place was telling itself for at least those sixty thousand years, while outside other people were dreaming about it. Then in recent times, starting, say, in

1788, those other people began to come here to live, and brought with them narratives from afar. The shocking, defining moment in 1788 when the First Fleet landed fractures the backbone of the story, and sets off a whole galaxy of further plots and subplots that continue to play out.

IN 2013, IN the pharmacy of a central Victorian town, I asked for a bottle of camomile shampoo. The pharmacist's assistant skipped across the shop floor to get it from the shelf, singing: 'Hi ho! Hi ho! It's off to work we go!' She laughed; I laughed. We both got the reference, which was not particularly apt, but we were strangers suddenly drawn together by the marching dwarfs in Disney's *Snow White*, an animated movie from 1937 based on an old European fairy tale. This is a banal anecdote, yet I set it out here because it is a quick illustration of one of the ways ancient stories enter cultures, lodge in the imagination, and are reinforced by rituals and reminders. Neither the girl in the pharmacy nor I could have cared less right then about the princess and the wicked queen and the mirror and the apple, not to mention the prince, yet the story really was present in our brief moment of contact. We were in fact in the grip of the fairy tale, strangely in thrall to magic. There in regional Australia, in the twenty-first century, we were reacting to a slender reference to a nineteenth century retelling of a gruesome German story, as again retold in film and song.

Last year marked the bicentenary of the publication of those old stories collected and retold in German by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Amid the worldwide celebrations I reflected on the fact that there is much scholarship and other publication on the subject of fairy tales, particularly in North America and Britain, but that in Australia, although there is a vigorous interest, including the Fairy Tale Salon at Monash University, there isn't so much local exposure and publication. *Griffith REVIEW 42* provides the forum for local writers to reflect on the history and significance of all manner of old stories in the context of modern Australia, a place of many, many cultures, and has given the writers inspiration to create new fairy tales of their own, sometimes revising old tales, experimenting with them, putting a new spin on them. The anniversary of the Grimm stories was the trigger for a broad investigation of how old stories have lodged in Australian culture, and how

stories tell the country and the culture. Irrespective of genre, what *are* the tales that preoccupy, entertain and guide the culture today in the land of Oz? And how did they make their way here? What has happened to them here, over time?

Wherever people go they carry their personal and cultural stories with them. Storytelling is a mechanism for reflecting on what it is to be human in time and space. Storytelling consists of the story *and* the telling, and the telling must be to a degree an entertainment. The stories in question here are tales that mingle, in strange and seamless ways, the natural and the supernatural, but there are also plainer stories, less magical narratives that have lodged in the story of the country. Once upon a time in Australia. All cultures retell and refine the key narratives that speak to the heart. These are the narratives that carry darkness and light, good and evil, instructing, by the magic of words, all human beings in the truths of their own existence. Many 'common' stories take their elements from real events in the lives of the tellers, hence the Biblical story of a great flood, or the poverty and famine that give rise to such cruelty in *Hansel and Gretel*.

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST STORIES come from Australia's First Peoples, who have been here for at least sixty thousand years. The time, however long it might be, is known by the First Peoples to be forever, a time that stretches into the future as well as into the past – a fantastic circle of time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a story of a great flood, as do many cultures, a story well documented in rock art. The Flood, based in history, has become a motif in the narratives of many cultures, and is a sacred story in some. Current archeological wisdom puts Australian Aboriginal rock art as the most ancient art on the planet. Having said that, I pause for breath. And there, in the pictorial telling, is the story of the Flood. Considering that Europeans have been here only since 1788, and that non-Europeans have come later, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have what I might call the home ground of the Australian story. First Peoples developed and preserved their legends as oral stories, as images, as dance, as ceremony, as ritual and as visual art. Throughout the country there is a general pattern to the narratives, but details vary from place to place – place being central to the

stories. These stories, sacred to the lands and peoples who are their custodians, are, as I see the matter, a vast humming whisper of wisdom behind, around, within the fabric of modern Australia. Because the stories are sacred, they are owned by their people, and are not always available to be made public in the ordinary way. This makes them even more powerful. There are creation myths, nature myths and tales that dramatise the beauty and strangeness of everyday life. And although the resolution of a story may be an explanation of some natural phenomenon, the dreadful human passions found in stories across all cultures are also found in the Aboriginal narratives. You can see the jealousy, hatred and rage of some characters in European fairy tales coming out in the story of 'The Flowers of Blood', which also works with the motif of the doomed lovers. It isn't so far from Shakespeare. The beginning of the story has the arbitrary feeling of many a European tale, and has the concision of a Bible story. The violence and retribution also are familiar tropes from all the storytellers of the world, yet the whole narrative is beautifully stamped with the tone of an Aboriginal legend.

Here is the story:

> The elders decided that a young girl would marry a coarse old man of the tribe. Now the girl not only hated the old man, but she was planning to marry a fine young man from another tribe in the east. The lovers eloped and fled to the land of his people where they set up camp beside a lake. They lived happily and almost forgot all about the old man. But the jealousy of that man grew until he assembled his own people and attacked the tribe where the lovers were living, planning to take the young woman for himself. Everybody, including the woman, was killed, their blood staining the ground all around bright red. After a year the old man returned to the place to gloat over the skeletons of his victims. But all he found was a carpet of scarlet flowers with great big black eyes. These flowers had grown from the blood of the dead, and showed that the spirits of the dead were still active and powerful. When he tried to flee, a spear came flying out of a cloud and struck him lifeless to the ground. The tears of the spirits changed the sweet lake to salt,

> and now the man and the spear that killed him are just little stones on the shore of the water. Every year the Flowers of Blood bloom in memory of the lovers.

The Flowers of Blood are now known to gardeners as Sturt's Desert Pea, and are the floral emblem of South Australia. I chose to tell that story because I love it, but also because the flowers introduce to *my* narrative the name of Charles Sturt, one of the men who explored the Australian continent. The nineteenth century explorers, who moved inland from the coastal areas to map the rivers and mountains and deserts, created a key narrative of this country, the explorer narrative. Charles Sturt was an explorer who lived to tell the tale. Robert Burke and William Wills, both of whom died on their journey, and Ludwig Leichhardt, who actually disappeared, never to be seen again, during his search for a great inland sea, are much more romantic, the stuff of legend, forming motifs that are sometimes revisited in the imaginations of Australian writers.

Writers, I mustn't forget, have a key role in the invention, development and preservation of the stories that inform, haunt and perhaps shape the way people in Australia make and perceive their culture. Leichhardt's disappearance inspired legendary Australian writer Patrick White's classic novel *Voss* (1957). In 2013, when the hard copy printed word is giving way to electronic media, when film, for one thing, is more current than books, *Voss* remains unfilmed, although it has been produced as an opera. When, in a mythic future, it does make it to the screen, it will further deepen the grip that the story of the doomed explorer has on the story that is Australia.

The land itself has often been a character in the story, a land envisaged as vast and strange and dangerous. For to begin with, in 1788, when people came from English cities to take unlawful possession of the Aboriginal lands of Australia, the land put up its own resistance. The prison colony clung to the eastern shore, established in the name of the English king. But beyond the borders of the colony was a frightening world; its forests and deserts could and did swallow up not just explorers, but in particular, little children. This was not, after all, the paradise dreamt by the fantasists who longed for the Great South Land of jewels and palm trees, this was a nightmare that struck terror into the heart.

THE LOST CHILD, the stolen child – this must be a narrative that is lodged in the heart and imagination, nightmare and dream, of all human beings. In Australia the nightmare became reality. The child is the future, and if the child goes, there can be no future. The true stories and the folk tales on this theme are mirror images of each other. And the landscape of Australia played and plays its part in them, nourishing the anxiety, proving the validity of the fear. Australia, raw, rough and wild, where the people were already cut off from home by thousands of miles of ocean, was the perfect place for children to disappear, for the future to go missing. *Babes in the Wood* and *Hansel and Gretel* are just two common European oral narratives that speak to this theme, and they were carried here in some form by the people who came in 1788. In Australian folklore there is a most interesting hero who sometimes emerges – the Aboriginal tracker who recovers the children and returns them to their parents. The most heartbreaking and haunting of these stories are the ones where the children are never found. The stories collected by the Grimms and published in 1812 were brought here in translation by the educators of the colony in the early part of the nineteenth century, but many of the narratives were familiar in some form long before the collection was made.

Red Riding Hood, a very ancient and seemingly universal narrative, is retold by the Grimms, and is a warning to girls to keep out of the forest, for the wolf who lurks there will rape them and eat them. So it sits well in Australia alongside all the stories, fairy tale and non-fiction, of the dangers of the bush. The sad thing about this story, I think, is that its message has never really taken. For girls continue to listen to the wolf, and to stray from the straight and narrow, sometimes going to their doom. Girls will be girls and wolves will be wolves. The streets of the city are now a perfect stand-in for the paths of the forest, and although the story of *Red Riding Hood* is told over and over again, and children's eyes widen with horror at the sight of the wolf, it seems to make no difference. The girl in the story is usually resurrected, perhaps undercutting the dreadful warning.

All over the world children disappear, but I think I am right in observing that in Australia, probably because of the early experience of the vulnerability of the children, the narrative has a special edge and flavour. In 1980 a white baby girl disappeared from a tent near the vast red rock of Uluru in the centre

of the continent, and was never seen again. Her mother knew she had been taken and eaten by a wild dog, a dingo, but the mother was not believed and was herself convicted of killing the baby and concealing the body, and was imprisoned. After three years in prison, the mother was exonerated and was released from prison. On a scale of terrible true stories, this is one of the worst. If you are looking for demons, there's the dog of course, but worse than the dog is the society whose legal system allowed the mother to be cruelly punished for her own tragedy. Once upon a time in Australia. I think that if this story were not true, it could scarcely be imagined.

Then there's the matter of Joan Lindsay's novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), which was made into a movie in 1975. The movie has had the effect of lodging the narrative in the imaginations of people all over the world, including Australia. On St Valentine's Day 1900, the demonic Australian bush swallows up a group of beautiful young women who are never to be found. So far, so mythic. But the wonderful particularity of this whole thing is that many, many people believe the story to be true. People will swear they have read accounts of it in old newspapers. And, you see, in the world of Ludwig Leichhardt and the baby at Uluru, it could be true. Once upon a time in Australia. In 1966 three children, Jane, Arnna and Grant Beaumont disappeared forever from a sunny beach in South Australia. Such things happen. They feed into the story of the country, the story Australians tell themselves about themselves, and the story the outside world tells about Australia.

I AM INTERESTED in how easily the words 'the outside world' slipped into that sentence. I wonder if I feel there is an 'inside world' because Australia is an island, because it is geographically far from older cultures, even though the Aboriginal culture of Australia is the oldest in the world. Perhaps the short time between now and 1788 is also a factor in cutting and containing the place. Is Australia embattled? Threatened by the outside world? As I write, there is a heated, complex and omnipresent debate about how Australia as a country should treat the many people who are desperate refugees from other countries. Should they simply be welcomed and assimilated? Should they be put in special camps here? Should they be put in camps out on islands

off the mainland of Australia? Should they be allowed to drown? What to do? Who is in and who is out? I think the perception of inside and outside is quite common among Australians. Do other people, say, Americans, Chinese imagine in this way that there is an outside world from which they must be rigorously protected? Do they think like that? I believe it's quite tricky and dangerous to generalise about people, to say Australians believe this or that, Americans believe the other. But it is possible to examine the narratives that seem to capture the popular imagination, and to say that these are the stories that might make up some of the fabric of Australia. The narratives of inside and outside are found in many of those stories.

Many of the stories told to children in Australia today have come with people who have been welcomed from the outside world – immigrants from, well, everywhere, who have been coming here since the 1950s, and who have immeasurably enriched the culture of this country. Italian, Greek, Indian stories. The Chinese who came to the goldfields in the 1850s and 1880s have put down into the culture a bright strand of strange and beautiful stories of demons, princesses and ferocious dragons.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that the dominant narrative carried by the First Fleet was the Christian story. In the name of the king, in the name of a Christian God, they planted the Union Jack in that amazing arrogant and un-Christian gesture of the confident colonist. The stories of the Old and New Testaments are deeply woven into the culture of Australia, one way and another.

> Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,
> And you will find that Southern Continent
> Quiros' vision – and his hidalgo heart
> And mythical Australia, where reside
> All things in their imagined counterpart.
> – James McAuley, 'Terra Australis' (1946)

The outside world perceives Australia as a land of sport, and the inside world also sees itself and promotes itself as a place where sport is paramount, where legendary heroes are the gods and goddesses of sport. Those heroes

are part of the internal and ongoing story. Then there are the heroes of war, of science, of song. Dame Nellie Melba sang her way into myth in the early part of the twentieth century, and she is part of the language. These are the narratives that focus on goodness and greatness, and that fashion the legends. The story of the failure of the Anzac military landing in Turkey in 1915 is perhaps as deeply etched and as important as that first great fracture in the history of the country when the ships landed at Botany Bay in 1788. And so the legends build. With tales also of Ned Kelly, the rebel underdog who rose to the status and grandeur of legend. Ned Kelly, the outlaw who shot a policeman and was executed in 1880. Hero or villain? Hero in this land of Oz.

And what of the women in all these legends? Their myths begin perhaps in the stark stories of Barbara Baynton, in Henry Lawson's tale of 'The Drover's Wife'. This is a different kind of heroism. But really, the dominant myths in the land of Oz are the masculine myths.

NOW THE ORIGINAL Land of Oz was a magical place invented by L Frank Baum, an American, in stories he published in the early 1900s. These stories are what are sometimes called 'literary fairy tales', like the stories of Oscar Wilde, tales invented by one writer, but relating in tone and content to the oral narratives that spring from deep within a culture. The stories of Oz had a powerful influence on Americans who absorbed them into their own telling of themselves. Curiously enough, in the late 1930s 'Oz' became a popular term for 'Australia'. The movie *The Wizard of Oz* appeared in 1939, and it told a fairy tale in which dreams really do come true, although they are ultimately grounded in reality. It has become one of the most beloved and enduring movies of all time. Australia, Oz, is it a place, perhaps where dreams, like the dreams of de Quirós, can come true? Yet in reality?

Once upon a time in Oz there was a Magic Pudding. No matter how many times you cut it and ate it, it reformed, and you had a whole pudding again. That's a great dream. This 1918 story by Australian Norman Lindsay tells the hilarious adventures of some Australian animals, and it is characterised by a larrikin humour which is considered to be typically Australian both inside and outside of Oz. The larrikins of *Oz Magazine* from the 1960s took that humour out of Sydney and into London, a journey that, in those days

was seen as a rite of passage by young Australians. I always see it, perhaps fancifully, as a kind of mirror image of the journey of the First Fleet in 1788.

In my own adventures here in the essayland of Oz, I have wandered far from the Brothers Grimm, whose anniversary was once my inspiration. If their story of *Red Riding Hood* has not had the effect of keeping girls from wolves, their *Cinderella* (which has in fact been supplanted by the softer French version retold in 1950 by the Disney movie) is a dazzling success in the delivery of its message. Or perhaps I mean to say that *Cinderella* speaks to the heart and of the heart of the majority of people. Everywhere. Perhaps it doesn't exactly have a 'message' or a 'lesson', perhaps it just tells it how it is in the realm of hopeful magic in the human imagination. For irrespective of the details of the different versions (of which there are at least 1500 across many cultures, beginning with a Chinese narrative from 805 AD), the story of the good and beautiful girl who rises from obscurity and victimhood to marry the prince by the agency of magic, and lives happily ever after, is the story that captures the imaginations of girls everywhere. It forms the basis of romantic stories over and over again. Disney vigorously promotes the story of Cinderella, but she was ready and waiting for the Disney treatment and marketing. She is not the only princess who has had the Disney treatment, but she dominates, she leads the field. There's something about Cinderella. When Diana Spencer married Prince Charles in 1981, her wedding was widely describe as a fairy tale, as a Cinderella story, regardless of the fact that most of Diana's story was at odds with that of Cinderella. There was a prince and a beautiful girl and a fantastic wedding. Hey presto – Cinderella!

I think it would be difficult for any little girl in Australia today to escape the central narrative of 'Cinderella', even if she is ultimately going to reject its tropes. Fantasy is truly a wonderful and powerful magic, and stories of magic whisper to the heart the secret of the hope of happiness. Little girl, supposing you are beautiful, and then supposing you are good, and supposing there is some magic, you will marry a prince and you will be complete, and you will be happy. It's quite a story, really. The girl can't do it without the magic, mind you, and the prince is actually just a given, a necessary element of the plot, which is a tale of all sex and no death. It's really a story about an everlasting wedding party. It seems to me that attempts to

divert or subvert the power of this narrative are always doomed; the essence of the myth of Cinderella holds its ground. And the role of the prince gives boys their script too. The noble and beautiful girl with the miraculous shoe will be theirs, they don't have to do a great deal. The story of Cinderella might still be the underlying and even the dominant myth, the norm in the culture of Oz, where today the gay community seeks the happy ever after of a Cinderella wedding.

OH, ONCE UPON a time, children, there was a land of dreams where pearls were strung on amber vines, and bright birds sang long and sweet in the tall jasper trees. And in another country there was a king who banished from his land all the people who had done bad things. He sent them far, far away across the ocean to a place where they would have to steal the land and kill the people and make their own way in deep forests and wide deserts. There were fires and floods and wars. And after many years, and many troubles, those people learned to dream that place into the land of pearls and bright birds whistling in the jasper trees. There were rivers of precious gold, and great hillsides spilling with miraculous metals and volcanic glass. Whispering coral and whirling malachite. Oh milk and honey and marzipan! The people became known throughout the world for their great skill at games, for their courage, and for their kindness and good humour. They made peace with the people who had been there first, and they freely welcomed strangers from other lands. They all lived happily ever after in peace and harmony, working together, telling each other stories, singing songs, swimming in the lazy rolling surf. Bells rang out across the fields, fields of emerald green. The sapphire skies were forever clear and pure by day, the moon and stars bright in the skies by night. Eternally.

Yes? Once upon a time in Oz?

Carmel Bird writes fiction and essays and is a frequent contributor to Griffith REVIEW. Her most recent book is *Dear Writer Revisited* (Spineless Wonders, 2013).
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Cecilia Condon

Going on

Tell the e-books and the changing climate and the kids in space ships
to go on
without me.
Whip them
up in inside the hurricane of progress.
As the seconds hurl themselves forward
I'll sit, a sandy lump,
without the wish or the wings to fly into the future.
Let me blow away, grain by grain.
Let me spin off into an incoherent fog
until at last I am reduced to
silence, until nothing
but my most cumbersome parts remain.
My soul, insoluble
like a pebble tossed
across the water, carving everything I ever knew into the vast
liquid
surface.
For the shortest while,
strangers are free
to read the lake's skin and discover the only wisdom worth throwing forward.

But soon, too soon, all
knowing melts and we
sink, invisible.

Cecilia Condon is a Melbourne based writer and actor. She works at the Wheeler Centre for The Emerging Writers' Festival and blogs at shmockery.com.

MEMOIR

Stories as salvation

Slaying the dragons

Kate Forsyth

I WAS only a child when I faced death for the first time.

Aged just two years and four months old, I was savaged by my father's doberman pinscher in the back garden of our home in the Artarmon veterinary hospital. I was tossed like a rag doll, my ear was torn from my head and the dog's fangs penetrated straight through the thin bone of my skull and into the brain. My left eye was missed by a fraction of a millimetre.

Somehow my mother managed to wrest me from the dog's jaws. She wrapped me in towels and ran for help, my four-year-old sister Belinda running sobbing beside her. A young man driving down the Pacific Highway stopped and picked her up. At North Shore Hospital, when the nurse unwound the bloody towels from around my head, he fainted.

My mother was told to prepare herself. I was unlikely to live.

Somehow they patched me together again. My ear was sewn back on, albeit a little crooked. More than two hundred stitches covered my head and face. I must have looked like a tiny Frankenstein's monster.

I did not wake up. My temperature climbed higher and higher, and still I lay unwaking, like a cursed princess. No amount of kisses roused me.

TEN DAYS AFTER the accident, I was gripped by relentless fever, uttering constant high cries, red and floppy as a skinned rabbit. Still no one could wake me. The doctors told my mother I had bacterial meningitis. Think of it

as another savage dog, a crazed wolf, pinning me down with its heavy paw. No drugs could release me from its jaws. Prepare yourself, she was told. Few children survive meningitis.

I lay in ice like a glass coffin. I was white and red and black. I had gone away from this world, gone somewhere no one could reach me.

Days passed and still my fever climbed. My small body convulsed.

It's worse than meningitis, the doctors said. It's meningoencephalitis. A wild whirling word, full of holes and spikes. Other words came. Seizures. Toxic. Fatal. I heard none of them.

The doctors wanted to drill a hole in my skull to help drain away the infection sinking its claws into my brain. My mother would not let them. Come back, she said to me. Please come back.

The fever broke. Twenty days after the dog attack, I opened one eye (the other was lost inside a bruised mess of swelling and stitches.) I swallowed some milk. I spoke. A week later I was allowed to go home.

IT WAS NOT the last time that I would outface death.

The dog's fang had destroyed my tear duct. From the age of three years to the age of eleven, I was in and out of hospital with acute infections and dangerously high temperatures. I could hear the fever coming, a rattling roaring locomotion rushing upon me. I could feel it in my skin. Whitecaps of flame and frost. My body undulating, shrinking, stretching. Fingers like rainclouds. Whirling embers in my eyes. Mocking demonic faces.

I knew the hideous.

Flashes of memory are all that remain to me.

Sitting with my head under a towel, breathing in boiling steam.

A young doctor piercing the abscess with a needle. Screaming with pain.

The taste of pus.

Counting backwards from ten as I sink beneath the anaesthetic. Again. And again.

Proudly telling the nurse that I was very good at spelling, that I could spell anything! Her response: Spell diarrhoea.

My sister and brother coming to visit and telling me, in high excitement, that they were on their way to the Sydney Easter Show.

Lying in bed listening for the sound of the ding that meant the lift had arrived. It seemed as if the ding was hardly ever for me.

Some people came to visit me but their little girl had to be taken outside as she would not stop screaming at the sight of me.

Staring for hours out the one small dirty window. All I could see was a green hill crested with an immense old tree and what looked like a castle. I used to imagine galloping up that green hill on the back of a white horse that would fling out its great wings, leap into the air, and take me away.

Sometimes I would be well enough to get out of bed. I would walk around and around the corridors in my nightie, dragging my drip trolley with me. I'd look in all the doorways at the old, sick people with patches over their eyes. It was an old hospital. At one point the floor sloped downwards. I'd hop on my drip trolley and ride it down the slope. It was the most fun I could have – three seconds of wildness and freedom.

STORIES. MY ONLY source of sunshine, my only solace. I would read all day and as late into the night as the nurses would let me. I dreaded the light being turned off, I dreaded the empty hours of the night. Once my book was taken away from me, all I could do was lie there in pain, trying to imagine myself back in its pages. Stories were escape. Stories were magic.

Many years later I was to write a poem, *Scars*, about my childhood:

I bear many scars – the ones I show you
the ones I hide.
There are the marks everyone has
small white nicks
celebrating the meeting of elbows
and the asphalt of the playground.
this scar
the boys in class teased me
as they always did. I ran away,
the world distorted with tears
the broken paling in the fence that was my gate
drove splinters into my hand
so I stumbled

the long nail, red with rust,
punctured my knee
tore a hole
where now there is this shiny triangle
of scar.

But that is not the
hieroglyphic
I want to show you.
Anyone might have that.

This was my first,
the tooth-mark of ritual.
I might be named Dog-Slayer,
except the dog almost slew me.

You are lucky, people say,
the scars do not show.
I have to part my hair to show this
silky, uneven ribbon wrapped around my head.
It is thick and white
It divides my scalp like lines in a diagram
of the cerebral cortex.

If elders once drew upon the stone with sharpened stick
driving in the rhythms of their story
each repetition, over decades,
scoring deeper into the rock –
so too do I, tracing the jagged line of
my scars
tell again the story
of my childhood
the ripping apart of times
how my head was held in the jaws of the dog,
the slavering beast of myths,

who wrote these runes upon my scalp.
I do not remember Dog,
who taught me the precarious balance
between worlds.

I do remember a fevered world
pulsing
how the relation between objects is altered –
I am small, I am big
my hand floats a huge octopus
trees growing out of my heart
trees a planet away
sounds roaring, voices never real.

In fever,
time is not divided neatly
but quivers apart
dissolves.

This scar
this dog-emblem
has no power to hurt me with memory
only rarely do I shiver
when I see how faces clench
to see it wind through my hair
the tooth-mark of ritual.

ONE DAY, WHEN I was seven, my mother brought me a copy of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. The stories inside were full of wonder and peril and beauty and strangeness. Some made me laugh; others made me yearn to travel far, far away to lands of shadowy forests and towers hidden behind thorns; one or two made me shiver and creep into the sheltering tent of my white hospital blanket. All would come to haunt my imagination.

I read that book so many times the spine broke, pages falling out like white feathers. Of all the tales, it was *Rapunzel* that fascinated me the most.

She too was locked away from the world against her will. She too was lonely and afraid. Her tears healed the eyes of the blinded prince, as I so desperately longed to be healed. The uncanny parallels between Rapunzel and my life seemed to have some kind of potent meaning. I told myself: One day I too shall escape. One day I too shall be healed.

In time, of course, I was.

At the age of eleven, I became the first Australian to have a successful implantation of an artificial tear duct. A small glass tube, called a Jones tube, was inserted beside my eye, draining fluids down the back of my throat. It needs to be cleared out twice a day and often gets blocked, meaning more steam baths and more antibiotics. Although it does need to be replaced, meaning another trip to hospital, this happens only every five to ten years, instead of every few months.

So I too escaped my tower, my tears healed.

My fascination with *Rapunzel* – and with its key motifs of the tower, the impossibly long hair, and the healing tears – began in that cold white hospital room. In my novels, the themes of imprisonment and escape, wounding and redemption, appear again and again. Towers are a common motif, as is hair as a symbol of life and renewal (also roses and thorns, blindness and healing, and winged people and creatures).

As I grew up, I used to wonder about the story. Why did the witch lock Rapunzel away? Why didn't the prince bring Rapunzel a rope? Did she ever find her true parents again? I was troubled by the lacunae in the story, the gaps and holes and tatters. I began to cobble these holes together in my mind, weaving a new cloth of fancy.

AT LAST I knew I had to write my own retelling of *Rapunzel*. Not as a children's book, I thought. It is a story about sexual desire and obsession and cruelty. It had to be a novel for adults. I also did not want to write it as an otherworldly fantasy. I wanted to capture the charge of terror and despair that young girl must have felt. I wanted to remind readers that women have been locked up for centuries against their wills in this world.

Our world.

So I decided to set *Bitter Greens* (Random House Australia, 2012), my Rapunzel retelling, in a real place at a real time. This decision meant I could

not use magic to explain all the mysteries in the story – the tower without a door or a stair, the golden fathoms of her hair, the tears that heal the prince's eyes…my imagination caught fire.

But where and when would I set my story? I began to look at the historical roots of the tale, to find earlier versions of the story that might help me. I discovered that one of the earliest versions was written by a sixteenth century writer employed as a soldier by the Venetian Republic. Venice! I thought. What a wonderful setting for a Rapunzel tale. All those towers and walled gardens and dark alleyways. I had always wanted to set a novel in Venice, that most fairy-tale-like of cities…

Yet Giambattista Basile's tale had a different ending. His heroine escapes with the prince and throws three magical acorns over her shoulder that transform into savage animals that first impede and then devour the witch. It was the ending with the healing tears that spoke so powerfully to me. I wanted to know who first told that tale. I had to dig deeper.

That was how I stumbled across the fascinating life story of Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force, the woman who wrote the tale as it is best known. She wrote her story, *Persinette*, while locked away in a convent by Louis XIV, the Sun King, after outraging the royal court with her antics, which included dressing up as a dancing bear to gain access to her young lover. I was enchanted by this story. She was my kind of woman. And the more I found out about her, the more I realised what a gift her life was for a novelist. Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force is one of the most fascinating women ever forgotten by history.

Initially I had planned to use her life as a framing device around the main body of the novel, the retelling of the fairy tale. Charlotte-Rose would have none of that, however. She insisted her tale be the primary narrative thread, and her voice would not let me be until I did as I was told.

La Force wrote *Persinette* while locked up within the high walls of the convent. It was published in a collection of other tales in 1697, the same year as Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* and the Baroness d'Aulnoy's *Tales of Fairies*. It sold so well (along with a series of scandalous 'secret histories' of famous people) that she was eventually able to buy her way free of the convent and live the life she had always wanted in Paris. The final line of *Bitter Greens* is: *It was by telling stories that I would save myself.*

MY QUEST TO discover the first teller of *Rapunzel* led me to undertake a doctorate on the subject, with *Bitter Greens* written as the creative component, the theoretical being an in-depth examination of the fairy tale. It led me to spend seven years digging deeper and deeper into fascinating fairy tale lore, wandering through wild tangled forests of story. It led me to discovering the hidden history of the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, and so to another novel. *The Wild Girl* (Random House Australia, 2005) tells the story of the forbidden romance between Wilhelm Grimm and Dortchen Wild, the young woman who told him many of the world's most famous tales.

I first read about Wilhelm and Dortchen's romance in *Clever Maids: A Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales* (Basic Books, 2005) in which Dr Valerie Paradiz examines the oral sources of the famous tales. Dortchen Wild grew up next door to the Grimm family in the old medieval town of Cassel, in the kingdom of Hessen-Cassel. She was best friends with Lotte Grimm, the youngest child of the family, and had an intense childhood crush on her friend's handsome elder brother. Dortchen made an extraordinary contribution to the Grimms' fairy tale collection, telling almost one quarter of the eighty-six tales collected in the first edition. Then – in the final chapter – Dr Paradiz mentioned briefly that Wilhelm and Dortchen eventually married, after a long betrothal.

As soon as I read about them, I knew I had to write a novel about them. I was utterly electrified by the heartbreaking beauty and romance of their love affair and by the stories she told. I never knew that so many of my favourite fairy tales had been told to the Grimm brothers by this one young woman.

Dortchen Wild told Wilhelm Grimm *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Frog King*, *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Fitcher's Bird* (a very gruesome variant of *Bluebeard*), *Frau Holle* and *The Wishing Table and the Golden Ass*, about a donkey that spits out gold coins from its behind.

On one extraordinary day – 10 January 1812 – she told Wilhelm three stories back-to-back, while huddling about the stove in her sister's summer-house so her father would not know.

The tales she told that day were *The Singing Bone*, about a murdered boy whose bones are made into a flute that then sings to accuse his killers; *The Six Swans*, about a girl who must sew six shirts from nettles, without uttering a single sound, if she is to save her brothers from being swans; and

Sweetheart Roland about a girl who escapes from a cruel witch but is then forgotten by her beloved.

On 9 October 1812 – the day before the fairy tale collection was sent to the printers – Dortchen told Wilhelm another two tales. The first was about a good sister who is given the gift of spitting gold coins, while her evil sister is cursed to spit out snakes and toads. The second was *All-Kinds-of-Fur*, a dark and haunting tale about a king who falls in love with his own daughter.

Dortchen was eighteen and Wilhelm just twenty-five. Through the telling and writing down of these beautiful, romantic, and terrifying stories, the two fell passionately in love. However, Dortchen's father disapproved of the impoverished young scholar and forbade them from seeing each other. He did not want Dortchen to marry, but singled her out as the one to stay and look after him in his old age.

PARENTAL DISAPPROVAL AND poverty were not the only things keeping them apart. Wilhelm and Dortchen lived through the bloody turmoil of the Napoleonic wars, and the years of hardship and famine that followed. The collection was first published in 1812, the same year as Napoleon's fatal march on Moscow, and it was a critical and financial failure. Dortchen became the poor maiden aunt, looking after her sisters' children, while Wilhelm and his brothers burnt their furniture for firewood so their hands would not be too cramped for writing.

During this time, Wilhelm began to rewrite the tales, making them simpler, more poetic, more powerful. One of the tales he rewrote was Dortchen's tale of *All-Kinds-of-Fur*. The 1812 version, written down in haste and rushed to the printers, was word-for-word as she had told it, a terrible tale of incestuous desire and cruelty. The heroine escapes from her father-king, only to be captured again, abused, and ultimately married to a king who seemed very like her father; perhaps, it even was.

Wilhelm rewrote it so that much of the cruelty is reduced. Instead of being dressed in a disguise made of the skins of hundreds of flayed animals, the heroine's cloak is made from only small patches of fur. She is not dragged behind a cart, but lifted gently on to it and taken to safety. The second king does not throw his boot at her head anymore and speaks to her kindly. Most

importantly, Wilhelm made it very clear that the second king is not her father. Psychologists call the first account (Dortchen's oral version) a tale of incest fulfilled, and the second (Wilhelm's rewritten version) a tale of incest averted.

Hidden in the revised text was a small salute to Dortchen. Wilhelm described the heroine as a 'Wild deer', capitalising the W in a subtle reference to Dortchen's last name.

It is my belief that Wilhelm rewrote this tale as a gift to Dortchen. He knew that it is the stories we tell that shape our lives, just as much as our lives shape the stories we tell.

Eventually Dortchen's father died, Napoleon was defeated, and the fame of the fairy tale collection grew. Thirteen years after they fell in love, Dortchen and Wilhelm were at last able to marry, and they lived together happily for the rest of their lives.

DORTCHEN WILD IS but a footnote in history, yet her life was full of everything I love in a story: romance, passion, tragedy, struggle, and, finally, triumph. Most importantly, for me, however, was discovering the hidden history of the fairy tales she told, stories which have haunted me all my life.

Fairy tales endure because their messages – hidden within the metaphoric codes of princes and witches and curses and towers – still speak as strongly and clearly to people today as they ever did. We all have the same dragons in our psyche, as Ursula K Le Guin once said so powerfully. Our terrors and longings walk through the fairy tale landscape, and through our dreams and nightmares. Fairy tales tell us it is possible to face these fears – the ogres of our darkest imaginings – and triumph over them.

Stories can save us, as I know all too well.

'Scars' was first published in *Quadrant*, in March 1994, and subsequently in *Radiance* (Magellan Books, 2004).

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FICTION

THE GOOD MOTHER

DANIELLE WOOD

NOW that you think about it, you realise you've known her your whole life. On the magazine pages and billboards of your childhood, she was fair as Rapunzel with a trim shoulder-length haircut. You were indifferent to her, back then, barely registered her presence. Or so you think until you realise you can remember precisely the way her hands looked – their fingernails short and practical though still perfectly tipped with white crescent moons – as she drew V-shapes in menthol rub onto the chests of her ailing children.

She wasn't always the Vicks Mum, of course. Kneeling by the bath, she would soap her toddler's blond mop into a quiff of white foam and promise you No More Tears. To soothe the unsettled infant, she could provide her favoured brand of paracetamol as well as the comfort of her trim, moulded bosom inside a candy coloured shirt. With a plump, two-toothed cherub on her hip, she would de-holster a spray pack and vanquish the invisible nasties on the bright white porcelain of her toilets and sinks. For she was the Good Mother, as safe and mild and effective as every unguent she ever squeezed from a pinkly labelled tube.

The Good Mother had the powders to return muddied soccer shirts to brightness and the potions to ward off sore throats and flu,

but you realise now that her true power lay in those hands with their frenchly polished nails. Remember how she placed them coolly on fevered brows, cupped them around mugs of chocolately-yet-nutritious fluids, splayed them protectively over the shoulder blades of her sleeping babes? Yes, you remember, though it occurs to you only now how implausible it actually was that the peachy boys and girls they found to match her could have been born from her trim blue-jean hips. Come to think of it, where did those children come from? Did Dad ever come in from the breadwinning long enough for her to rest a hand on the honest chambray of his shirtfront? If he did, you cannot remember it.

This is how it is for the Good Mother. She pricks her finger when she's embroidering. The bauble of blood teetering on her fingertip sets her to thinking and soon she is noticing the deepness of the red and the way it shines against the snowy ground beyond her window. Add the ravenswing black of the windowframe, and *voila!* She's knocked up and chosen her child's colour scheme to boot.

This is how it is for you. Deep in denial, you hardly even tell yourself when you stop taking the Pill and start taking folate. Your partner would probably be quite interested if you were to let him know how much better is an unprotected ovulatory orgasm than a regular Pill-protected one, but this knowledge feels for some reason like a secret, so you keep it to yourself. Although you become obsessive about taking your temperature and despite your new habit of cooling your post-coital heels high on the bedhead, there's nothing doing. You get your many test kits from pharmacies in different suburbs so that the sales assistants don't start getting to know you, but no matter how many mornings you lock yourself in the bathroom with a bladder full of potent overnight piss, there's only ever one little line in the window of the white stick.

It's been three years since the rash of weddings in your life, and now it's thirtieth birthday parties. And there she is. Over there by the cheese plate, scooping a strand of fair hair behind one ear and staring down the camembert as if she knows its sole purpose in life is to kill her unborn child. You haven't thought of her for years, if ever you have thought of her consciously at all, which is why you don't recognise her. You say hello and she clinks her water glass against your thrice-emptied champagne

flute. Wearing something white, and tight, she sinks into a chair and sighs and it's only now that she stretches her hand a full octave across her belly that you notice her fingernails. They're exquisitely oval and pink as confectionery, each one smoothly iced with white. She gestures at the empty chair beside her and then somehow you are sitting in it.

At all those weddings, people would ask *so, what do you do?* Not anymore.

'Do you have children?' she asks, stroking herself as if she is her own pet.

'No,' you say.

'Not yet,' she soothes.

Fuck off, you wish.

'Your first?' you ask, tilting your champagne towards her belly.

'Oh, God no! This is my third.' She laughs and her free hand flies up into the air. When it lands again, it is on your knee. She looks right into your face now and smiles.

'I'm so fertile, my husband only has to *look* at me and I'm up the duff.'

You make deals with God. You make deals with the Devil. You're not fussy. But as a wise man once said: 'it's the saying you don't care what you get what gets you jiggered'. So you say it, and you're jiggered, but what you give birth to is a hedgehog. It's prickly and its cry is a noise so terrible that you wish that someone would scrape fingernails on a blackboard to give you some relief.

You learn that hedgehogs are both nocturnal and crepuscular, but yours doesn't sleep in daylight either. In search of support and camaraderie you join a mother's group. You turn up at the clinic covered in prickle-marks and with your squirming hedgehog in your arms. The other women are there already, sitting in a circle nursing their soft, boneless young. The only seat left is beside the Good Mother.

She's wearing pale pink and making smooth circles on her baby's back with her hand-model hands. Things are different since you last met, and you're prepared to forgive her for last time if only she'll tell you how it is that her eyes are so bright and her skin so clear. You're desperate to know how it is that her shiny golden hair is brushed. Clearly her child sleeps, but what is her secret?

'You know what they say,' she says, with a contented smile. 'Calm mother, calm child.'

ONE DAY, YOU fall into a deep, deep sleep. Valiantly the prince fights his way through forests of fully-laden clothes horses, past towers of empty nappy boxes, to reach you where you lie with your rapidly greying hair straggling around your face. He puckers up. His lips brush yours.

'You stupid fucking prick,' you yell at him. 'What the hell do you think you're doing? I only just got to sleep!'

This happens more than once.

Your hedgehog gradually morphs into a child, a boy whose sunny countenance is sufficiently beautiful to make you forget the spines and the sleeplessness. When you conceive again, you are pregnant with the vision of a placid, smooth-skinned human girl child, but what you give birth to – though female – is just another hedgehog.

When Hedgehog II is a year old, your partner announces he is leaving you.

'I think you have a personality disorder,' he says.

'Of course I have a personality disorder,' you say. 'I haven't slept for three years.'

So your partner moves out, just as your maternity leave expires. Your plan had been to go back to work part-time, but now that you're a single mother you have to work full-time to afford the childcare. The economics of this confuse you, but you're too busy thinking about how you're going to manage to worry about that as well. When you go into the childcare centre to make inquiries, the hedgehog clings to you and makes its sanity-withering cry. The carers hold closer the human children they have in their arms and offer you a three-day trial to settle in your hedgehog before you have to leave her there for real.

On the first day you leave her, she screams until she vomits, so you take her back home. On the second day you leave her, she screams until she vomits, so you take her back home. In a fairy tale, things are always different on the third go. But this is life and on the third day you leave her, she screams until she vomits, so you take her back home.

Then comes the day that you are to go back to work. Is that Rumpelstiltskin giggling in your mindscape as you hand over both your second-born *and* the bale of hay-spun gold? The carer takes a tentative hold of your hedgehog. You smile and coo. You turn your back and walk out the door and as you do, you hear your hedgehog screaming. The effect is like having your uterus torn out through your ear holes. You are sure you can smell vomit. You only just make it out the kiddy-proof gate before you begin to weep. The weeping makes you red and puffy in the face and now you are hardly presentable for work. In order to pull yourself together, you call in to a café. You open the door and look inside but every table is taken. There's one bar stool but you think perhaps it's the Good Mother sitting on the neighbouring seat nursing a peppermint tea. You're not certain, but there's something in the blond foils that makes you wonder and you're in no mood for *her* today. And besides, by now you're too experienced to fall for her ol' empty seat routine.

Outside there are no free tables either, but two women who are taking up only half of a large table gesture for you to join them, so you do.

'Thank you,' you say, and they nod in unison.

You take out your fold-out mirror and try to hide the blotches on your face with powder. Then you notice how peachy is the skin of the raven-haired woman sitting on the same side of the table as you. And the skin of the redhead sitting across from her. Each of them has a slim-line pram in a bright, interesting colour. They push their prams to and fro with gloved hands. The gloves are reasonable, aren't they? It's winter. It's cold. You're telling yourself all of this even though you already know.

No, no!

It's her. Both of them.

And although she's talking to herself across the table, she's really talking to you.

'How old?' one of her asks.

'One,' the other says, with a *can-you-believe-it* manoeuvre of the eyebrow.

'Incredible,' she says. 'I mean, is there *anybody* who thinks it's a good idea to a leave a one-year-old in childcare?'

You take a vow of silence. You will not speak to her. You will not look at her. You will not accept seats at her café table. Out of the corner of your eye you glimpse her, auburn-haired, in a Dettol advertisement, and wonder when you're going to clue up to the fact that these days her hair can be any colour at all?

You tell yourself that the consequence of breaking your vow is that your twelve brothers will turn into ravens, or something. In order to hold to your promise you make sudden reversals in supermarket aisles, hide from her in clothing store change rooms, buy bigger sunglasses for their greater protective surface area, teach yourself sign language out of a library book so that if she speaks to you, you can easily pretend to be deaf. You are doing well. Until your eldest child starts school.

You know which is the Good Mother's Volvo. It's the one with the My Family stickers on the back window; she's the one with the handbag and the mobile phone. At first, you think this knowledge will help you to avoid her. You can just make double the number of *Green Bottles* when you start singing as you lap the school in your Hyundai, but soon you realise the Volvo is parked multiple times around the perimeter, no matter how early or late you arrive. This is her territory. Here, she is omnipresent.

It's almost Mother's Day and the kids in your son's kindergarten class are given a photocopied page to fill in. Mostly, the page is taken up with a blank square in which each child is to draw a picture, but above the box there's a line of text that is followed by what you will come to recognise as the ellipsis of doom.

I really appreciate it when my mummy…

A week later you see the completed tributes where they're pinned up on the wall just inside the classroom. All the figures in the pictures wear bright colours and most have hands pronged with twelve or more fingers. Little Laura reports she really appreciates it when her mummy tucks her into bed at night. For Oliver, it's his mummy's cupcakes. Tara appreciates it when her mummy takes her to the library.

Already you are predisposed to like Clytemnestra, who is a tiny little skun rabbit of a thing to be lugging around the name-equivalent of four suitcases and hatbox. You see that Clytemnestra's had a go herself at changing 'mummy' to 'mummies'. Her picture is a constellation of mint green spots: she appreciates when her mummies don't cook peas.

You are still smiling at Clytemnestra's peas when the Good Mother materialises beside you in her black puffer jacket. She patrols the pin-up board with her eyes.

'Ummmm-aaahhh,' she says, happily shocked. 'Look what David's done.'

You haven't yet found your own son's handiwork. And now, even though the Good Mother's manicured index finger is pointing right at it, somehow your eyes are still missing the mark. They are slipping over all the generously endowed hands and circle-striped bellies. You don't want to know. You would like to dematerialise.

The Good Mother realises she's going to have to read it out for you.

'I…really…appreciate it…when…my mummy…'

She snickers, *snickers*, before she continues: '…buys takeaway.'

Under the sentence, written blackly at your son's instruction by one of the teacher's aides, there is a disturbingly accurate reproduction of the golden arches. You want to protest that you never take him there yourself. It's your ex who does it. And the birthday parties! It's not as if you can say no to these things. Well, not unless you're…

The Good Mother interrupts your thoughts with a hand on your upper arm.

'Oh, honey,' she says. 'You must be so embarrassed.'

LITERARY SCHOLARS TREAT it as a mystery to be solved by careful textual analysis. Psycholanalysts propose theories that involve words like *splitting* and *internalisation*.

But you could give them a much simpler explanation.

Yes, you could tell them, couldn't you?

There is no mystery for you.

You could tell them exactly why it is, in fairy tales, that the Good Mother is always dead.

Author note: Like most people, I did love fairy tales when I was a child. But I also loved them in my late teens, at which time I had an addiction to Jim Henson's *The Storyteller*. I am indebted to this funny, exquisite series (featuring John Hurt, a prosthetic nose and an indignant dog) for introducing me to tales including 'Hans My Hedgehog' and 'The Twelve Ravens' (which Henson scaled down to three). Those who know the series will recognise the nods and winks in 'The Good Mother'.

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MEMOIR

Return of the rings

To the land of Magnatutto and the Madonna

Anna Maria Dell'oso

IN the mid-2000s, my elderly parents died within eighteen months of each other. First Donato in his mid-eighties and then Lidia, who was younger by twelve years.

We siblings were left with their wedding rings.

None of us wanted to claim those rings. So Lidia and Don's thick gold bands sat in a velvet-lined box. Given that Lidia had organised, against all cultural expectations, that she would not be buried next to her husband – *nothing personal*, *I just want my own space* – it seemed wrong to keep those rings confined and uncomfortably bumping up against each other into eternity.

Which is how, in May 2007, I ended up in a van in the Apennine mountains of the central Italian region of Abruzzo, negotiating hairpin bends with my brother, my husband and our three children – two teenage girls and a nine-year-old boy – looking for a burial place and a hardware store where we could buy a spade, a short-handle mattock and a trowel, maybe some gloves, a few large stones or a couple of those terracotta plant markers.

'Why are we doing this crazy shit?'

'Are we there yet?'

'I want a pizza.'

No you can't have a pizza right now because we're on the road with Uncle Frank reading a map for Dad who's driving the diesel-fuelled van we hired

in Rome that has weak central heating and no snow chains in the middle of Abruzzese mountains on narrow roads fringed with black ice in the Parco Nazionale D'Abruzzo above the snowline in that part of the afternoon when not a single café or shop is open even if we could find one among the abandoned towns whose only form of life is eagles.

No we are not there yet because we don't know exactly where 'there' is going to be and we might not ever reach civilisation again unless Dad stops driving further and further up the mountains and either lets Uncle Frank read the map properly or allows me to ask a local, albeit in my crap Abruzzese dialect, where the hell we are – if there is any such local to be found who isn't sensibly at home eating their long lunch and wine in front of the fire.

As for *why we're doing this crazy shit:* I guess it's because Nonna and Nonno were born in a time and a place when poor people like them didn't have much say in what happened to them, as in who they married and where they lived and what they did for a living, and although none of us want to keep their wedding rings to wear or to hand on – because it wasn't the sort of marriage model you'd want to hand on to the next generation, although it was a good enough marriage and they were the best parents they could be in their own ways and with their limitations (Nonno being far better at it than Nonna). Unfortunately life is complicated as you will see in years to come and the fact is that life is rather more down to pure luck – in the circumstances of your birth and your environment and genetics – than people want to admit in our culture.

So what we wanted to do with their wedding rings is return them to the place where it all started.

Somewhere here, in these mountains.

IN AROUND 1968, as the eldest child, I was the first to realise there was something not entirely normal about our mother.

Lidia was then only in her late thirties, but she had stopped work to take up being a full-time invalid on the daybed in Kew in Melbourne. I'd be worrying about the dishes in the sink and laundry piled around chairs and the mantelpiece clock striking half past four, the beds unmade and the sun sinking in that way the Melbourne southern sun sinks – in a red cold defeat that just

makes you want to cry – and with dinner not remotely done nor thought of, and with our father due home in an hour, while Lidia, who, like the Fisher King, was terribly ill to the point of death with her mysterious disease, that never killed nor could ever be diagnosed or healed the rest of her life long – Lidia would be telling us the tale of *Riposare o Lavorare*: Rest or Work.

Un giorno l'aratro arrugginita
Sotto una pianta di ulivo si fermo…

One day a rusty old plough
Was left under an olive tree
Next to a half broken wheelbarrow.
The wheelbarrow asked the plough:
'What are you doing here?'
and the plough answered:
'I've just ploughed the last furrow,
My owner used to rest here, so I am too.'
The wheelbarrow then asked the olive tree:
'And when do you rest?'
The olive tree replied:
'No rest for me, I must always bear fruit
or I'll be put to the fire.'

Lidia was born in 1930 and rarely spoke directly of her family relationships or what kind of war she had, but it is more than likely she experienced trauma. Certainly by the time she was twenty-five and living in Australia, she had grown into a 'difficult character' prone to dark moods and controlling temper tantrums. Keeping Lidia happy tied my father up in knots all his life and caused friends and relatives to scatter. I always thought we had no relatives in Melbourne until I was in my thirties when I received a letter from a cousin on my father's side, who lived in Glen Waverley, but whom my mother hadn't spoken to since the early 1960s. This is particularly shocking to me since the underlying theme of her life is of profound loneliness and emptiness.

Each childbirth, including one stillbirth, increased Lidia's mood swings until, with the arrival of her last child, she was hospitalised and we children,

all under four, were for a short time placed in care with the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church. Lidia told me quite frankly and many, many times, that she was an unwilling conscript to marriage and motherhood. It was her attempt to explain why she was not a loving mother and why I should not hold it against her.

In the later years of her life, spurred by the publication of my book *Songs of the Suitcase* (HarperCollins, 1998), Lidia set to writing her own book, a collection of poems called *Un Angolo Della Mia Penna*. Lidia was then in her sixties, her health precarious as usual and she remained uneducated, having attended primary school to only the third grade and having been then placed under the tutelage of provincial convent nuns who gave farming girls an education in textiles, embroidery, religion and narrow-mindedness. Yet Lidia was able to read and recite large tracts of Dante's *Inferno* and knew her Verdi operas.

Despite a comfortable life with my mild-mannered father (whose steady nature helped us cope) Lidia had a tendency to make the worst of a good situation, so that when bad times actually happened, her reactions could be extreme. An accident, an illness, a fever, a temporary loss of employment, a clumsy word in a letter from a relative, a perceived social slight from a neighbour – it plunged her down and eventually into hospital. 'The melancholy that swirls around me,' she wrote, 'is like an awful disease…Pain makes no sound but it pierces the brain and makes the heart pound. That desperate desire to sleep so as not to face for a moment the terror of suffering, even to the point of giving up life…'

As a young woman Lidia was tall, honey-skinned, with thick black hair mildly wavy, perfect for victory rolls. Very fit through a lifestyle of farm work and the ultimate in organic diet, she had a figure like Megan Gale, that full-bosomed tiny-waisted look with flashing dark eyes that Italians adore. In a wartime photo, she's in the fields, wearing a denim sack and muddy work boots but you can see that she would have been a clear target for sexual attention. I was nothing like her, but resembled my short stocky father, and there, I suspect, lay the seeds of the distaste she felt for me – she was hostile to my father's family for reasons that will always be mysterious and I was the image of these paternal relatives.

Lidia was complex, childish, spiteful and stubborn, but she had brains, as we knew from her inventive tongue-lashings. I was terrified of her. Looking back, it was like being raised by a giant teenager. A fifteen-year-old giantess who needed to be appeased and treated with great care: any offence and the ground would rumble and you'd fall into crevasses of molten rage and the buildings of your little world would crash down upon you. Sometimes it was hard to tell the demonic in her from the storytelling. Harsh step-mothering, cruel punishment, vile curses, possession by evil spirits, impossible tasks given to hapless daughters, and having to appease the endless appetite of rampaging jealousies and resentments – all of these Joseph Campbell archetypal Road of Trials were happening to us for real as a result of growing up in my mother's world of long-term mental illness.

It seems to me not too fanciful to think it might have all been complications of post-traumatic stress disorder meeting a definite tendency in Lidia to display traits of narcissism; certainly she was a woman struggling with all the difficulties of emotional regulation and distress tolerance that such a personality involves.

IN THE 1960S my siblings and I were demon readers. Unsupervised after school, we had nothing to do but get up to mischief on the streets, set the house on fire in cooking experiments or go to the Kew Public Library. We all became life-long bookworms: my brother and sister are both in the book industry. We lived in Pakington Street, Kew, in a single-storey Victorian terrace. There was Mrs Davis and her prim adult daughter on one side, and across the road, a tribe of red-haired Irish-Australians whose laughing children tumbled out of a sunlit cottage fronted by a large garden of lawn, sweet peas and hydrangeas. There was even a white ironwork fence, a dog and a pair of cats.

Was I delivered to the wrong address? All the Enid Blyton I read suggested yes: in Pakington Street, Kew I was trapped under hungry Magnatutto's boot.

Beneath it was quite a landscape. The mountainous Abruzzo is beautiful in a wild way starkly different to the Italy of Frances Mayes and *Bella Tuscany*. Today it's emerging as a tourist destination, its abandoned properties in hillside villages being restored by British superannuants. But for centuries,

it was a poor and undeveloped region, part of the long-suffering Mezzogiorno in soul, politics and economics, if not in strict geography, for it is only a few hours east from Rome straight across the calf of Italy.

From an Australian sense of scale and distance, it seems inconceivable that a place so close to so many other centres of civilisation – Rome to the west, Naples to the south, and further east across the Adriatic, it is only a ferry ride to Dubrovnik, Split and the Balkan Peninsula. But in centuries past, before the construction of sleek *autostrade* into those forbidding mountains, Abruzzo was cut off by the Apennines, as remote as Nepal. If you were an eagle you could perhaps leave at sunrise from the dome of St Peters on the Mediterranean coast and soar up over the Apennines to within sight of the Adriatic coastline where, by nightfall, you would perch on Monte Amaro, the 'bitter peak', at 2,793 metres, of the Maiella in the cold high remote land of my ancestors.

L'Aquila, which means *the eagle*, is the capital city of the Abruzzo, and the name of one of its four provinces; the others are Chieti, Pescara and Teramo.

As Lidia told us: 'From its high hills, you can see all the small towns below. Their lights twinkle at night, as if the stars were bending down from the sky to kiss the earth. It's lovely to feel the breeze from La Maiella, and your gaze can't help but admire the Adriatic Sea. It really makes you want to sing when you hear the sound of the bells, which, as evening falls, calls everyone to prayer.'

But the mountains were also ominous, enclosing. I remember my father's reaction when I asked, what did you all do in the wintertime? His body stiffened as if a flurry of snow had burst through the door. I knew that wooden door of the stone cottage in his village and I could see it opening in 1928 and the cold from La Maiella blasting in. 'We stayed inside, by the fire,' he said. 'Nothing to be done. Fields under snow. Wolves in the forest. Long nights. We did as little as possible. Nothing but stay by the fire and tell stories.'

The great Abruzzese writer and anti-Fascist, Ignazio Silone, was trained in his narrative craft in those remote villages (in which he hid from the Fascist police by disguising himself as a priest): 'The monotony of that sky, circumscribed by the ampitheatre of mountains that surround the area like a barrier with no way out…the life of men, the beasts of the

field, and of the earth itself seemed enclosed in an immovable ring, held in the vice-like grip of the mountains…' he wrote in *The Abruzzese Trilogy* (Steerforth Press, 2000).

STILL, TO HER three wide-eyed children around the briquette heater's fire in the dismal rain of a Melbourne winter in 1968, Lidia was at least a demon storyteller.

Her best tale was about a single night during her teenage years in the 1940s: 'Night of the Long Harvest' was about the time her family of Abruzzese farmers – including the young brothers who had not been taken as soldiers in the Italian Army – had to fight sleep to stay up to shuck a mountain of corn cobs, with the unlikely help of a crippled older brother, Peppino, and a giant called Magnatutto.

It begins in the ominous heat of a summer's night, just before dawn. *'Quell lungo giorno d'agosto, verso le tre del mattino…* That long day of August, at around three in the morning…' their gentle mother wakes them, the women pack bread in checked napkins and wine in flasks and, 'all together and happy', they quietly cross the Osente River to one of their far fields.

Now on the wide plain
We started to gather the corn
Which was a good season's harvest.

Working swiftly under the rising sun, by mid-morning they've got the harvest back at the farmhouse in a cart. Their labours are not over and there will be no rest. After tending to the neglected farm work for the rest of the burning afternoon, in the evening the vast pile of corn sits as vulnerable as sacks of golden coins in the moonlight.

Too vulnerable, too beckoning, too valuable.

'It made me think we would need a good month to strip those cobs,' she said. But they didn't have a month – this corn harvest had to be processed that night. The youngest child at the Jewish Passover ritually asks: *Why is this night not like any other night?* But we children in the dining room in Kew didn't think to ask. To our childish ears, it was simply a given, the last of the

impossible tasks of a fairy tale where one must succeed or in the morning face terrible loss and wrath.

Eppure li Vorrei Rivivere, Lidia called the tale, when in her late sixties she decided to write it in the form of a long poem. *And Yet I Would Like to Relive Those Years*. Strange title. I never asked her why she called it that. *Eppure* – 'and yet' – but why would you not want to relive such a pastoral childhood, outdoors in Italy, with the gentle mother whispering, the flasks of wine, the bread in the checked napkins, the being 'all together and happy' as you cross the Osente in August on the way to a full harvest of corn?

Context is gained slowly; it can take a lifetime to truly understand a fairy tale told to you by your parents.

THOSE DAYS AND nights of my mother's stories unfolded in late spring in Abruzzo, in the little village of Torino di Sangro in the province of Chieti. Of course in the children's version of the tales, the exact year and the historical details were omitted. Such tales were designed to amuse her children and distract her. As teenagers, preoccupied with fitting into another culture, we weren't listening to a middle-aged Italian immigrant lady with poor health and a difficult personality.

It was only as adults that we figured that the Night of The Long Harvest may have occurred in 1943.

On 3 September 1943 the Allies invaded the Italian mainland, the invasion coinciding with an armistice made with the Italians who then re-entered the war on the Allied side. Soon the villages of the Abruzzo became the central battlefield in the fight between the Germans and Allied Forces, with Rommel against Montgomery along the Gustav line. Whole villages and towns were literally razed to the soil by the American bombings in the famous, long battle of the Sangro River. Probably not a good time to be thirteen years old on a farm on one of the *colle* outside Torino di Sangro.

We knew them simply as *i bombardamenti*; the dramatic catalysts that began Lidia's stories or as part of the uneasy balance of her settings. And in the tradition of the long-suffering *contadini* of southern Italy, Lidia turned for solace to archetypal religious imagery, ancient paganistic beliefs and an

Abruzzese fatalism almost Zen-like in its practice of the art of acceptance. While villages around them fell, Torino di Sangro, she told us gravely, survived the bombings due to the intervention of La Madonna di Loreto, whose protective mantle lay over the town that spilled gently down the mountain seven kilometres to its own beach, Torino di Sangro Marina, and the mouth of the Sangro River. '*O Regina del ciel, Maria*, *O sovrana sublime d'amore*, *Di Torino tu formi l'onore*…

But long odes to the Madonna di Loreto were not popular with her Australian post-war children and so she learned to get back fast to the Night of the Long Harvest.

E tutti inginocchiati…

So we all kneeled round in a circle
And started stripping the corn cobs
And throwing them into the basket.
But having done twenty or fifty
The pale white moon lulled us,
We all had our heads down, nodding off…

And so to prevent the family sinking into sleep – a dangerous sleep, a sleep of terrible consequences – Peppino, the crippled eldest of the Valerio brothers, tells a ghostly tale.

La favola dell'uomo gigante, *Di nome Magnatutto* …

The tale of a giant called Magnatutto
Who was happy to live on nothing but bread.
He wanted neither fish nor prosciutto
And had a ring with a large diamond
That he would have given to anyone who'd feed him.

Magnatutto, which means *to eat up everything*: a giant of endless hunger towering over the realm of mankind, eternal and god-like yet behaving in a touchingly familiar way as one of us. An affable giant, Magnatutto was like the sum of Lidia's Abruzzo, both mountains and people: mighty,

stolid and slow but with a relentless drive to have a fair share of a decent life – nothing fancy, *solo pane* and a place to live, in exchange for an honest, somewhat crude ring *con un grosso diamante,* a ring of loyalty and blessing as well as power.

He first tries a commercial ring-for-bread exchange with the baker, who finds Magnatutto's never-ending appetite too large and so kicks him out: *e a callci fuori lo ho mandato*.

Next he tries the monastery, whose subtle religious class try to cheat the Giant out of his ring.

> They ordered him to go to the house of the demons
> And bring the head demon back to the monastery.
> Magnatutto grabbed a large pair of pliers
> And obediently set off.

He succeeds at the impossible task by finding the *il capo* and *per il naso l'arferro, e al convento lo riporto*: grabbing the demon by the nose, dragging him back to the monastery. But it's a rigged deal – the monks have not only fortified the monastery against Magnatutto, they have also condemned him to death.

The revenge of Magnatutto is subtle. He waits a while – a patient while, a morning's wait and an afternoon's dally – until the monks, confident, relieved, venture forth to ring the bell for evening prayers. And then a looming shadow – a giant's shadow, a stand-over shadow, *un ombra come un deminione* – engulfs both monastery and monks, who tremble as they behold the daemonic in their midst.

Appeals to the saints cannot save them: Magnatutto is in charge. 'Light the fire,' he says, 'I'm bringing you back what you wanted.' The feckless monks obey but scatter to the far winds, leaving Magnatutto alone to dispatch *Il Capo Demonio* into the fire and take his just reward: possession of the monastery and its lands.

Lidia's brother Peppino was also a demon storyteller: 'In the silence of the night, his voice grew softer and softer and when he got to the bit about *Il Demonio* being thrown into the fire, he yelled and we all jumped out of our

skins.' Fully awake, the family renews its efforts 'talking, joking and laughing' and through the night the pile of corn disappears, ending up 'on the other side, clean and shiny like smiling teeth.'

> And when we opened our eyes the next morning
> The work was all done, thanks to Peppino's cunning.

Decades later, when I first began to travel to the Abruzzo, I was able to reflect on the haste in gathering that essential harvest of late August before the tanks of war rolled in September 1943. Under their farmhouse *in campagna* and in their townhouse in the village, Lidia's family must have staked their lives on that corn being safely stored; as did others in underground shelters where women, food, animals, prisoners of war, refugees from across the Gustav line and others on the run hid, trying to survive the Battle of the Sangro.

IN 2007 OUR plan, hatched in Australia, was that we would bury the rings somewhere between my parents' villages of Torino di Sangro and Pollutri. I envisaged a dusty road, a hillside, stone markers, trees and the sun setting as the rings sunk back into the soil. It would be like the end of *Wuthering Heights*, with the rings as two archetypal forces, anima and animus, buried 'under that benign sky'.

It turned out to be less about moths fluttering and more about the sort of practical grunt needed to haul a ring over the gates of Mordor. Burying something privately in a tiny village is not easy. We were watched by the locals as if on reality television; first, mistakenly, as The British Tourists Staying at the Casa Margherita, then as The Australians Related to the Old Folks on the Hill, then more intimately as Angelo's cousin's family from Sydney.

Finding a spot that won't be disturbed or remarked upon (or for which you have to get a permit) is not as simple as it looks on *Midsomer Murders*. So we procrastinate by driving to Lanciano to buy the last ski coats of the season and to the markets at Vasto where we stay on until nightfall, walking along the promenade overlooking the soft dark Adriatic Sea. 'The sea in September,' Lidia wrote, 'is calm and attractive. The children write in the sand: *My name*

is Mirella and *My name is Clementa* but a cruel wind erases them all, saying *This sea is all mine. I'm September and soon I'll sell it all away*.'

We spend our time driving to L'Aquila, visiting paternal relatives in Pollutri, going to Chieti Scalo to my cousin-in-law's uncle's large music emporium where my son tries out the classical guitars and plays Isaac Albeniz's *Asturias* for the delighted old man. The days flow between the Casa Margherita and the farmhouse, down to the Marina and shoreline, up into the snow-capped towns and ski fields of the Maiella and back to Torino di Sangro. Soon we have little more than a day left. I try to explore every alleyway, path and street in Torino di Sangro for a possible site but I succeed only in absorbing the afternoon light of the olive groves, the sound of Graziella chatting to her customers in her delicatessen, the streetscapes of old stone buildings, faded awnings and pale pink and blue shutters along the Corso Lauretano, the Juliet balconies and nineteenth century lamps of the Via S. Angelo, the children going to dance and choir classes in the church hall.

The Supermercato has a marvelous range of chocolate, *pane*, washing powders and Felce Azzura and Nesti Dante soaps but there is not a trowel to be found.

With only basic Italian, we are unable to find the complex vocabulary we think we need to explain to my relatives what we'd like to do with the rings.

They don't even know about the rings, which sit in my brother's room in the Casa Margherita, emitting an energy of obligation that only seems to intensify with each passing hour.

IL CASTELLO DI Roccascalegna is truly a castle in the air.

It seems I've never been up so high. From the valley, the eleventh-century Lombard castle in the old town of Roccascalegna looks like a witch's hat. Perhaps thrown down by Magnatutto in exasperation, leaving it – and the town behind it like a cloak – perched impossibly on one of the two limestone formations that rear up from the valley floor.

Spring is late in the Maiella and it's still so bitterly cold; too early for 'the scented paths of elderflower with honeyed orange locust tree blossoms and giant bright yellow cow parsley' described by the guidebooks.

Looking down and across the valley's snow-capped ridges, it feels more

like Nepal than Italy. Magnatutto might well have sat here to think, alone with the eagles and his impossible task.

Beneath the Castello, the medieval Chiesa di San Pietro hovers in the still air.

The great iron bells of the church are silent. Yet something is ringing inside my head. My brother is beside me taking photos. He stops as well.

You know, I say to him, I think we've been a bit obsessed with the land. Earth, digging, underground, soil, dirt.

Yes, he says. It's all so heavy, so weighed down.

We look down on the ridges of the Apennines flowing like white waves into the horizon.

We look at each other: we're agreed. We'll have to Skype our sister in Australia to discuss it but we're pretty sure she'll think it best as well.

We now know exactly what to do with the rings.

That evening, the last of the 2007 trip, we order pizza from the town to eat at the farmhouse because everyone's too tired to cook. My daughters are on Facebook to my various cousins' children, twentysomethings living and working all over Italy, global young people who are so proficient in English as to put us single-language educated Australians to shame. My son says they are first cousins once removed. I'm careful to hide my joy at these new relationships – growth on what I thought was an all but dead European family tree (keep a poker-face at all times with the girls, I tell myself, or you'll kill it with the flick of a teenagers's eye-roll).

My brother and I walk over to sit with my uncle. It's time to explain to Zio what we've been doing and what we've decided.

'We have to ask you something,' says my brother. 'We need your help.'

The day before I'd walked again with my uncle through the hills to the *cimiterio inglese*, the Sangro River War Cemetery. It is a quiet temple of thousands of meticulously tended white gravestones circling around lawns through paths of magnolias and hawthorn hedges. As I look down on those 2,616 Commonwealth burials of the Battle of the Sangro, he weeps and holds my hand and I think back to his war, away on another front while his sisters fought theirs, the Nazis coming down from the north through villages and fields, the Allied forces pushing through from the south – of tanks, shelling,

machine-gun fire, *bombardamenti*, the earth dust, the bodies piled in gullies and trenches, the Bailey bridges over the Sangro, the refugees fleeing with their animals from road to village and above the Allied aircraft. My uncle has his own Night of The Long Harvest. It's in the DVD of a fiery anti-war speech, which he appears to have given to the crowds outside the Commune di Torino in the Piazza Donato Iezzi or Vicolo II Umberto, on Italian Liberation Day (which like Anzac Day is on April 25). But that's another story.

In a poem called *Con un Filo di Coraggio*, Lidia said: 'When I was a farmer under the beating sun, my thoughts flew elsewhere, of changing country, changing jobs. It was then I signed up to be a migrant, to cross the ocean: a journey of hope, of another world. I didn't know what I would find but I thought there couldn't be times harder than those I left behind.'

Sadly for some souls what is left behind for mind and memory to process is just as hard and possibly harder, but in the end the uneducated peasant girl of the Night of the Long Harvest was able to complete her impossible task: she wrote a book in which lie the words that we inscribed on her grave: 'Friend don't ask if you feel at ease in this land. None of that matters. What matters is courage.'

Should a traveller arrive in Torino di Sangro one fine spring Sunday at the end of May, they will find themselves in the middle of the Festa di La Madonna di Loreto. From the thirteenth-century *chiesa*, a procession of men as strong as giants will carry on their shoulders Our Lady whose heavy mantle is covered in offerings and blessings of gold and money from the faithful.

And as Maria Santissima di Loreto weaves down the Corso Lauretano, Her cloak will sparkle with two newly-pinned golden wedding rings from a land far, far away.

Amended 25 September 2013.

Anna Maria Dell'oso is a Sydney-based writer and teacher of creative writing. Her book *Songs of the Suitcase* won the 1999 Steele Award. Anna has been published in many anthologies and reviews, and her essay 'O Maker of Distances' appears in *Griffith REVIEW 29: Prosper or Perish*. This memoir of her poet mother, Lidia Valerio, is intended as part of a larger work-in-progress, *Sweeping Up Shadows*.

FICTION

THE ATTIC

ARNOLD ZABLE

SHE does not want to be seen. 'What is there to see,' she says. 'I am old.' She prefers to converse by phone. As she speaks she grows more resolute. She rages against the state of the world: 'So much hatred. So much fighting.' She is forever railing against something. In time her tone softens. She moves from the talking to the telling, from complaint to story. She becomes light-headed, her voice playful. Time is receding. The pace gathers, and she is elsewhere, hurrying home through the streets of a distant city.

She turns at the tenement gateway into the courtyard, leaps over the threshold, and bounds two, three steps at a time, up the wooden stairway. She rejoices in the litheness of her body, her youthfulness. She is weightless. Her feet are lifting. She is on her toes, rising. The transition from rotting wooden stairs to elevation is effortless. Four flights and she is on the top floor, turning from the stairwell into the passage. The rooms of her neighbours rush by her. The floors beneath are non-existent. She is far above and beyond them, approaching her destination. She comes to an abrupt halt at the end of the passage. She has returned to the attic.

THE ATTIC DOOR opens directly into a kitchen. Before her there appears a woodstove and beside it a bed reserved for the

servant. Natalya, the servant-girl, is gutting a fish at the kitchen table. Something is pulsating inside it. Surely it is the fish's heart beating. She is nauseated at the sight of the bloodied fish. Appalled at the callousness.

She proceeds to the adjoining room, kicks off her shoes, and savours the touch of her feet upon the polished floorboards. The room is furnished with two beds, placed by the wall, end-to-end, and a table. Her brother sits by the table, drawing. She is eleven, he three years younger. They are fellow apprentices in the art of observation, conspirators of the imagination. All they hear and see about them they register as both reality and metaphor.

Brother and sister stand side by side at the window. From it can be seen the sky and a church steeple. The church bells are ringing, and brother and sister are singing. They use the bells as accompanists and improvise a melody around them. Their voices are in turn drowning, resurfacing. The bells are tolling louder, moving in and out of hearing. The teeming metropolis beyond the rooftops remains hidden. Its distant hum is a barely registered tremolo, a drone beneath the performance. It is something that will persist into adulthood, these improvised games, the tacit pact between them.

Their gaze falls upon the clothes strewn over the bedding. They feel sorry for the clothes – for the random nature of their abandonment, the sensation that the clothes at the bottom are choking. They extract the buried items and set them free of the darkness. In winter they take pity on the clothes on the top of the pile – surely they are freezing. They rotate them so that each item takes their turn at being warm, well tended. At night they put their clothes to bed and tuck them in beneath the blankets.

Brother and sister are always sorry for something. They are possessed by guilt for the poor and the forsaken. It is a curse they have inherited from Father. Even so they are young enough to see the world as miraculous, and inventive enough to view objects as human. The table is a friendly table, around which the family eats in the times that mother and father, son and daughter are in one place together. Evenings when Father is not away at the club or travelling in faraway places.

The second room is furnished with a single bed, a foot-pedal harmonium and a grand piano. How did the piano get there? Up the wooden stairs through the front door and into the room via the kitchen? How did it fit through successive doorways to where it now stands beneath a hooded window that looks out upon the sky and church steeple?

Father and Mother sleep separately – Mother beside the piano and harmonium, Father in the third of the three rooms in the attic. Mother sits by the harmonium and plays it to accompany her singing. She sings in Yiddish, Polish, Russian and German. The German songs she had acquired in Vienna, the city she lived in as a young woman on a music scholarship.

It was in Vienna that she met the man who had overwhelmed her with his tales and ambitions, and spirited her away to an attic in the heart of Warsaw. To assuage his conscience he had a grand piano and harmonium installed and awaiting her on arrival. He provided her with a servant so she need not cook nor clean or do the washing.

The piano and harmonium remind Mother of her folly. She sings the Lorelei. Her voice reverberates within the confines of the attic. Heine's lyrics are well served by her mezzo-soprano: *I wish I knew the meaning/A sadness has fallen on me/The ghost of an ancient legend/That will not let me be*.

THE THIRD ROOM is furnished with a single bed and a desk upon which there stands a typewriter. Father is a two-finger typist – poems, essays and meditations fly from his fingertips. He attacks the keys with a fury. His fingers are driven by obsession. He is cursed with an urge to record his every thought, every reflection. He is compelled to vest all he sees with significance. He cannot leave things be, but is driven to capture all that transpires in verse, a vignette, a fully blown story. He would record his every breath if it were possible, and only then would he finally accept he is fully living. He alternates between typewriter and long hand, and grips the pen between his thumb and middle finger, with the forefinger resting lightly upon them – just as his father did before him.

Over Father's bed dangles a black crucifix. Sister and brother have different versions as to how he acquired it. Wherever he travels Father

frequents cemeteries. This is, he says, where one can quickly discover the history of a town, a shtetl, an entire city, certainly a neighbourhood. The inscriptions can be read as a narrative, the repository of ancient memories. The sum total of the epitaphs constitutes a book of revelations. It was in one such remote cemetery that Father found the crucifix, claims the sister.

They were travelling in a horse and cart somewhere out in the Polish countryside, claims her brother, when Father glimpsed the cross lying in the mud, all but indistinguishable. His eyes became fixated upon it. He had to have it. He bid the driver stop, and jumped off the wagon to retrieve it. Whatever version is true, Father certainly kept the crucifix with him for the remainder of his life, and hung it on the walls of his various rooms in his sojourns in far-flung places.

Apart from the crucifix the room is austere, a monkish retreat – a writer's study. But wait. There is something else. On the wall hangs an etching of Baruch Spinoza. It is the only image displayed on the walls of the attic. It is a beautiful Spinoza – this is how brother and sister see it. His dark hair falls upon his shoulders. His face is youthful, his gaze thoughtful as befits a philosopher.

'He is a shpinozle,' says Mother. For her the etching is fair game for ridicule. She sees Spinoza as she sees her husband, as a rigid man imprisoned by his obsessions. Father worships Spinoza. The philosopher looks down upon his desk and typewriter. He is a guiding presence, a reminder of life's purpose. A school friend of his daughter's once looked at the portrait and asked: 'Is this your auntie?'

WE ARE NOT done with our preliminary reconnoitre. Not so long ago the toilets required a journey from the attic along the corridor, down the four flights out into the furthest reaches of the courtyard. At night the journey is hazardous. Some of the stairs are broken, others cracking. A toilet has since been installed on the fourth floor, and is located mere metres from the attic. It was a happy day when it was finally ready for use, an occasion fit for ribbon cutting.

Even so, it is a forbidding trek after nightfall, but once there, the rewards are plenty. Above the seat there is a skylight and from a certain

angle a cat can be observed, on full moon nights, sitting on the roof in silence. The eyes of human and animal meet in dumb communion. When the sitter extends the gaze a little further, she can take in a fair proportion of the roof and the cats that loiter upon it.

Brother and sister feel sorry for cats. The forlorn faces that peer through the attic windows disturb them. Mother adores cats. She had adopted one and allowed it to roam about the rooms, and in and out of the windows. On one of its rooftop forays the cat was impregnated. She was granted permission by Mother to give birth on a bed in the attic. Alas, the litter was stillborn. The cat abandoned her dead offspring, leapt through the window and was never seen again among the living.

Obviously she had committed suicide. Mother, Father, brother and sister discuss it while gathered around the friendly table. Not withstanding the friendlessness of the table, they are a family that argues, yet on this occasion they arrive, as one, at the same verdict: the cat had committed suicide. The verdict still stands eighty-five years later. She was a tragic cat and she took her own life, traumatised by the death of her litter. No doubt about it. The entire family felt sorry for her.

SHE IS ON the telephone, speaking from the apartment in Elwood, the seaside suburb she inhabits in her ageing. The apartment is weighed down by stuff accumulated over an epic lifetime – cluttered with memorabilia, newspaper cuttings, books and journals. There are books by the bed, on the chairs, books lining the walls and passageway.

The clutter is intertwined like vines in a rainforest, climbing ever higher, inhabiting every nook and cranny. She has long ignored it. It does not concern her. She has lived in this apartment for decades, but she is much too pre-occupied with 46 Novolipke, a tenement topped by an attic, enveloped by sky and a church steeple: circa 1930, circa 2013, the dates do not matter.

In the attic live our four central characters. Allow me to introduce them. Ruth, who flies up the stairs, and who is, for the time being, the principal narrator of the story, will become a dancer. Her brother Yosl, lost to his drawing, will become an artist, a painter. Father is the well-known, some say the renowned Yiddish poet, Melekh Ravich.

The name is a pseudonym. Over time his birth name has vanished and all that remains is Melekh, or simply – Ravich.

He is a man possessed by a healthy ego. He knows every Yiddish author of note in Poland, and he knows those who are struggling to be known, since he is the secretary of the Yiddish Writers Club, the hub of literary life in Warsaw. The legendary rooms of the Club are located at Tlomackie 13, a half hour walk or ten-minute tram ride from the attic. Ravich is a man who regards life as a mission. Long after his death he will remain a dominant force in the minds of his son and daughter.

WAIT A MINUTE. We have all but overlooked Mother. She is often overlooked. Her name is Fanya. She was once known as Feigele, 'little bird', a loving diminutive, a name she lost when she left her childhood behind her. Her stage name is Riva Ravich. The name has a certain ring about it, and she plans to retain it if she returns to performing, even though the marriage is unravelling. She holds to the memory of the solo concerts she performed in Vienna. She last performed when she was six months pregnant. She would have, surely, become a professional singer, except for that fatal encounter with a Yiddish poet.

Don't get Fanya wrong, mind you. She has a life of her own. Her Russian friends come to visit her. They talk and play cards by the friendly table. And she does not hang around moping. She leaves the attic and makes her way to Tlomackie 13, where she basks in the company of writers and poets, the hangers on and dandies who frequent the premises. She has many admirers and she comes to life in their company. It inspires her eccentric sense of humour – day-by-day we are becoming younger, she says, as she huddles with her admirers around a cafeteria table. One day we will be sitting around this table as infants, still discussing the urgent problems of the world. We will surely make more sense of it as babies.

When the mouse is away, and he is often away, she takes on a lover, one of the writers. Feigele is no wallflower.

MEMORY IS ATTACKING Ruth. It tugs her back with the force of a receding tide, and deposits her in the attic. She is compelled to

preserve it. She wills it back to life, and endows it with a certain grace, a certain feeling. The attic has assumed for her the attributes of a person. She has taken to writing about it.

She cannot write in her apartment. She has too many bloody things. She prefers to write in a local café. The apartment is in Milton Street, a thoroughfare named after the poet. The surrounding streets are named after English writers. Dickens. Shelley. Tennyson. Byron. Yet the streets mean nothing to her. No matter that she adores writers, and puts them on pedestals. She makes her way to the café, but is not interested in her immediate surroundings.

Sartre and Camus loved writing in cafés, she says. If you go sit in a café everything is right with the world, everything is in order. Is it not? This is what Sartre said, didn't he? Don't bring your nausea into a café? Or was it someone else who said it?

She orders a coffee and retrieves a book from her handbag. She is reading the autobiography of Thomas Mann's daughter. She is drawn to books about writers, thrice drawn to a book written by the daughter of a writer. She lays down the memoir and takes out a notebook. When she writes, she grips the pen between her thumb and middle finger, with the forefinger resting lightly upon them, just like her father before her, and his father before him. Her father's father had trembling hands. He had no choice but to hold it this way. As with many such things, trace them back to their origins and you will find a rational explanation.

Ruth closes her eyes. Scenes appear with a clarity that startles her. She retraces her steps through the tenement gate into the courtyard. The entrance traverses a narrow passage. On the left hand side of the passage there is a hole in the wall, a sort of cellar, and through the door she sees the single man who lives there. He is lying on a bed, sleeping. The bed is small and he, so tall, that his legs dangle over.

During the day the man in the hole in the wall sets out for the city with the aid of a staff. He is thin as a rod and apparently crippled. He is an emaciated Moses, sans beard, staff in hand, making his way from tenement to street in search of a living. One day Ruth sees he is neither crippled nor injured. He leans not on a staff but on a curtain rod. He is

a man as thin as a rod who makes a living selling curtain rods. People sold anything and everything. The poverty was frightening. Eighty-five years later she says this often. It peppers her talk – the poverty was frightening. The poverty was frightening.

One evening, through the open door, she saw the curtain-rod man foaming at the mouth. He was slumped over the edge of the bed, neck and arms dangling. He looked as if he were about to topple over. She stepped into the tiny room, and eased his sagging body back onto the mattress. At that moment he expired. This is the word Ruth uses, 'expired', when she recounts the story. It is one of the incidents she returns to often, both in the writing and the telling. Her English is superb for one who acquired it later in life. Her enunciation is precise and measured, her accent indeterminate. It belongs mid-ocean.

When the curtain-rod man expired Ruth fled from the hole in the wall into the courtyard, leapt over the stepping stones, and flew up the wooden stairs past the house of study for young boys that stood near the first floor landing.

By day the boys can be heard chanting verses from the scriptures, line by line in response to the teacher's calling, and at recess they can be seen running in and out of the apartment, their sidelocks fluttering. Others sit on the broken wooden stairs playing chess and dominos. The images flit through Ruth's mind as she flies, and for an instant they erase the sight of the curtain rod man sagging in her arms, expiring, his white corpse hardening into rigor mortis. The fear returns and propels her. She veers into the passage, and swoops past the rooms of her neighbours. She does not cease fleeing until she is through the front door and safely back in the attic.

ONE IMAGE BEGETS another. Father has returned from one of his journeys. Ruth walks beside him on a street in Warsaw. He is holding her by the hand. It is a windy day. Suddenly he stops, casts his eyes downwards. What is the matter, she asks. He remains silent. She follows his eyes. They are gazing at a piece of paper in the gutter. The paper is quivering. The wind lifts it and sets it down back down again. It looks like a dying bird, he says. She can see it now, the cobblestone

gutter, the bird in its death throes, quivering – the life force ebbing. Lingering.

SHE IS HURRYING home from the Yiddish school. She is always hurrying, head in the air, feet treading the pavement ever so lightly. They convey her above herself, above her thoughts, above the city, to visions of faraway countries and dreams of palm trees.

From the roof of a passing tenement a pigeon is falling. It lands by her feet, a dead weight in freefall. A group of passersby gather around it. The bird is wounded – its wings are urgently fluttering. There is going to be a lovely soup tonight, they say, smacking their lips. The whole world is drooling and she is running, weeping, bounding up the stairs, along the passage. She has made up her mind and will not deviate. She is twelve years old and it will be the last day she will ever eat meat again.

She announces her intentions to her brother. He too will take the vows of a vegetarian, he promises. Not everyone is won over, mind you. Fanya and Natalya remain committed carnivores. From time to time some meat goes missing. Yosl is surely the phantom meat gobbler. He flies into a rage at the accusation. He loves cats and pigeons and all living things as much as she does. How dare she.

Only after she has left the attic for the final time and made her way across the oceans, will he write a letter of confession. Yes. It was he who had stolen the meat and broken the pact he had made with his sister.

EACH YEAR, AS winter drew to an end, a horse-drawn cart arrived at the tenement, and from the attic they descended – brother and sister, Fanya and Ravich. They carried furniture, baskets, kitchen utensils, blankets and bedding down the four flights to the courtyard. The horse drew the cart from the city out into the countryside. A horse-drawn cart was a fitting way to make the annual journey to the dacha where they spent the summer, but alas, it conveyed only the furniture. The family followed by rail days later.

One summer, Father bought a doll as a present for his daughter. It was a beautiful doll. She took it with her everywhere. She seated it

in various locations in the attic. She took it with her to the dacha and down to the river. She sat the doll on the sand, and went swimming. When she returned there was no doll. She ran here and there in a panic. She dug into the sand, waded in the shallows, and searched the paths between river and dacha, but could not find it.

On her return to Warsaw, Father took her to the theatre. There was a girl, five years old – a wunderkind. She performed mime and dance and used them to convey stories. A master of ceremonies introduced her, and told jokes while she was offstage changing costumes. The wunderkind returned to mime the anguish of a girl who had lost her doll, and was frantically searching.

She ran here and there in a panic. She ran the length and breadth of the stage but could not find it. She dashed to the wings and returned empty handed. She peered behind the back curtain. Ruth cried throughout the performance. She was not weeping for the loss of the doll, but at the truth of the enactment. She saw that it was possible to tell stories of life through mime and dancing. She cried all night, and in the morning she announced that she had discovered her life's vocation. She would tell stories in movement. She intended to be a dancer.

RUTH LAYS DOWN her pen, closes her notebook. She is unhinged from the world, from the people who sit in adjoining tables anchored to their seats, chattering. She makes her way from the café back through the streets named after writers. She curses her compulsion to record her memories. Father was the writer. I am a dancer. A choreographer. I am an old woman. What business do I have with writing?

Excerpt from a novel-in-progress

Arnold Zable is a writer, novelist, storyteller and human rights advocate. His books include the memoir *Jewels and Ashes* (Scribe, 1991), three novels – *Café Scheherazade* (Text, 2001), *Scraps of Heaven* (Text, 2004), and *Sea of Many Returns* (Text, 2008), and two short story collections, *The Fig Tree* (Text, 2002), and most recently, *Violin Lessons* (Text, 2011). He is a Vice Chancellor's fellow at Melbourne University.

MEMOIR

Child

Finding story in place

Meme McDonald

DAWN is rising in a pink and grey shriek of galahs. Child, already out of close warmth of swag, tugs my hand. Campfire needs stoking but in the shiver of morning there is something more urgent. Five hours' drive the day before and we camped behind this ridge, a stand of she-oak nearby promising firewood, rare in desert country, a necessity after sundown. Raised on the muster of sheep and cattle and boiling the billy on open fire, I showed Child the way my mother had shown me to collect sticks, watching for spider and centipede, scorpion in this country; showed Child my father's way of bringing match to twig using the wind as breath. Nestling into earth, we linked pinkie fingers and swore to be at the top of ridge for dawn.

Child's hand soft in mine, we zig-zag between tussocks of spinifex, our tracks adding to those of bird and lizard imprinted in sand. The air is sweet. A swipe of gold hangs in the sky, horizon turning zesty green. Climbing over the lip of ridge, country beyond opens out and there, as close as a heartbeat, is The Rock. We stand still, silent, sun warming us to earth. Child tugs my hand again. In a voice pure as birdsong he asks, 'Mum, is Uluru the heart of the world?'

Child is not the first, nor will he be the last, to sense the livingness in rock and mountain, in ocean and waterway, in dance of fire and whirl of

wind, in sway of grasses across skin of flat land. The evolving formations, as with our own crawl out of the wet to stand up two-legged, is the stuff of story – Big Story – story some call myth.

WHEN CHILD OBSERVED Uluru beating as the heart of an even larger entity – the world – he was speaking from a story place to make sense of what he saw. This is the language of myth, a language carried in our human DNA, coded to see land and its inhabitants as one living system. As a blue-eyed blond boy, his own indigenous heritage is of another country, generations back in the shadowland of ancestry half a globe from where we stand. His storyline didn't survive the voyage to Australia. In his childhood, marauding Vikings in longboats inspired party costumes and schoolyard brawls, but were never much more than this.

Five generations ago, my family left the yule tree with its seven heavenly worlds above and seven underworlds below, deep in the verdant green forest. What they did not predict was the spiritual expense of severing their storyline. My childhood was cradled in a grass castle on a large holding in a country cleared and fenced in square miles. There was something missing. My ancestors owned this land, ran sheep and cattle on it, conquered and cultivated it. The memory of land owning its people was left behind. This flat-breasted land was an unfamiliar mother. Troubles had made my people want to forget they missed the rolling hills and their gods. They had moved beyond the Great Dividing Range. Mulga and water-guzzling gums were bulldozed. None of this scrub was sacred to a newcomer. There was not a yule in sight.

Shade was hard to find. The ancient stories from the old country seeped from the souls of my ancestors. Questions were left hanging on the Hill's Hoist. Time for contemplating answers was turned to toil, eyes fixed on one step in front of the next, walking towards a safe future in a land that could dry up your dreams and turn your flesh to salt.

My mother craved a cosy of green exotics around the homestead to buffer the ever ever brown. Our dam leaked. Artesian bore water was piped in. Abundant in minerals, it 'turned up the toes', my mother said, of her roses and sweet peas, her fruit trees and vegetables. Only tough and spiky succulents survived in these conditions. Her eyes turned to the sky looking for rain, to

messenger bird, to willy wagtail and blue wren as well as the overarching wedgetail, keeping us in eagle eye. My mother taught me to observe. I lay on earth staring up at clouds or stars, or fossicked beyond the garden fence and poked and picked up things.

There is an indelible influence that is Aboriginal in my life. Connection to nature is in my genes, but here in new country, wandering further from home, stones with sharp edges that another hand once held, thrilled me. A sense that others had lived here grew when I rode my horse to distant timber and sank into sand hollow and heard voices whispering in trees. I knew no language for this. There was no need for one.

AT BOARDING SCHOOL, science became my favourite. It was another way of seeing. It spoke of things as if they could be separated from one another. It was a way of hiding in detail, without needing to make sense of the whole. But science never quite quenched my thirst for something more than fact, something bigger, nor did it provide me a language to speak about my world. Science filled me up with information and left me bereft of knowing.

At eighteen I was an exchange student in the 'armpit of America'. Living in Wall Street's bedroom suburb a twenty-minute train ride from Manhattan, the bush girl fell away fast. I'd been carefully placed with a family that seemed to have similar values. Chatham was an all-white town next to the rioting black city, Newark, New Jersey. Our class was studying the poetry of African-American Rock. An African-American teacher was invited in from a neighbouring university. A question was asked. I shot my hand up to answer and was chosen and gave my answer. The teacher stopped, silent, looked at me.

'And where might that accent come from?' she drawled.

'Australia,' I beamed, coming to you from across the Pacific on the sheep's back.

'Oh.' Long pause. 'Isn't that one step away from coming from South Africa?'

South Africa? South Africa was apartheid. I had already marched the streets of Brisbane protesting this crime. This teacher was claiming I came from a country like that.

MY RETURN HOME to our dinner table in the dry land was uneasy. I began to ask questions. Drove into town and visited those from the other side. I spoke with black people. The awkwardness grew like an abscess, without voice, perhaps cancerous. None of us in my home town had a way of speaking of the atrocities of children buried in sand, their heads kicked in, or shootings within earshot of the picnic races. Our history sticks hard. My gut, stripped of the grooming that Big Story might have given, made wrong-doing mean we were wrong people, bad people, hellish.

Where are the stories of Vishnu teaching Arjuna of human darkness on the battlefield? With our Big Stories, our own Bhagavad Gita faint memory, how can the pain of massacre be acknowledged in the hearts of those that live on? How can guilt give way to greater good? Brave and few are those that can stand naked of their weapons and say, 'I am sorry. We did wrong.' And braver are those that can receive this apology into sorry hearts and stand taller, flanked by their Creator spirits who predicted this wrongdoing long before the white man came. These Creators also had their destroying time. The giant taipan and python did their damage. But their stories are told by their people, generation after generation, claimed and owned.

Stories of the massacres in my homeland are still stuck in our throats, breeding generations of rock-hard hearts carved out of unexpressed shame. We don't have a way of telling and so we don't have a way to stand with dignity on the land we walk.

My white heritage became the foreign country. I am not Aboriginal, yet the elders' stories laid tracks for me to find my way. Floundering around for traditional dress that could be mine, I went along with the obvious. I believed my surname, McDonald, was Scottish. Tartan mini skirts and The Bay City Rollers sang me through the swill of my teens. But it was Aboriginal stories that were the first to sail me home.

BOB RANDALL'S VOICE is made from quiet space. His face glows with his years, perhaps eighty-four of them, he has no record other than a faded newspaper article of when he was taken from his family at eight. At eight I was in boarding school. Nothing compares to being wrenched from the arms of your mother, but something about going solo in institutions crammed with

other children, something of the sadness of this, is in the hugs we share. When Bob's kindness reaches for you, it soothes the scars from years of separation.

Bob found his way back home to his Yankunytjatjara elders, re-uniting with his Uluru. He wakes each morning with his woman, Uluru, next to him.

'I open my eyes and she is there,' he smiles.

'So, Uluru is female?' I ask.

'She is whatever she is for you,' he says. 'The Rock is what it is for you.'

Bob calls me 'baby' when we meet. His Creator spirits sit with him. I hold no stories of big rocks in central desert. I sit with a void in my heart and listen.

Bob wrote in *Songman* (ABC Books, 2003)*:* 'The Dreamtime, the Tjukurrpa, has nothing to do with dreaming. It is much bigger than that. It is our reality. The Creation period is not something that just existed in the past. To us it is also part of the present and will continue to exist in the future. When I look at a certain rock, it is not just a rock, it is my link to Tjukurrpa and all the stories of Creation that exist in that rock. Within a grain of sand I see me and the universe. I am part of the whole of Tjukurrpa. It is the same when I hear the song of a bird or find the tracks of an animal. When I tell Tjukurrpa Stories or sing the songs, I too am part of the past, present and future of all Creation. Caring for the land by telling the stories, singing the songs and doing the dances and paintings is my responsibility. Separating me from that makes me weak.'

The first time I stayed in Bob's home beside The Rock, we walked across sand hills east of Uluru before sunrise. There was no talking. Child was not there tugging me out of sleep. It was my responsibility to be up and ready waiting outside.

Bob held my hand while dark was still close. Tilted his head towards animal tracks on red earth – goanna, snake, pigeon. We climbed to the top of a drift and stood, mountain of rock at our backs, open horizon in every other direction. Waiting.

The first ray of light speared over the horizon. Bob began to gesture in each direction. I followed, listening to the whispered words of dedication to north, south, east and west as we turned. We stood at the centre of all to welcome Sun to Earth, understood by Yankunytjatjara to be two sisters. We

stood to begin the day connected to the centre of Milky Way and to grain of sand beneath our feet. We stood within the circle of all horizons, at the point where seven directions meet, ready, in the way of the spiritual warrior of all traditions.

Walking home, daylight unveiled the cluster of corrugated iron lean-tos and the daily run-a-round on the fringe. Up ahead, Uluru kept the beat of a deeper rhythm. In all its chaos and variety, life was in order within the greater story of earth welcoming her sister sun home after the long night.

Bob looked out across the low scrub to the tourist buses that had arrived at the bitumened sunrise viewing platform several kilometres away. Helicopters circled overhead for those who wanted higher.

'Ceremony time,' he said. I thought he was being cynical and meant the buses and choppers. He didn't. In the bushland between our sand hill and the other, there was movement of feet. Anangu elders were gathering for important ceremony. To my unschooled eye there was nothing seen or heard. And yet walking pathways in the footsteps of their ancestors, those used to making themselves unseen continued a ceremony of secret business as it has been repeated for generations.

For Anangu, The Rock is not one place, but many. Each turn of the nine kilometre circumference is marked by its own story, its own teaching, its own ceremonies to be continued. Within the folds of rock are places that can only be visited by certain people and often only at special times. These 'secret-sacred' places are not to be viewed by others even from the distance of a car window.

Standing at the top of sand ridge, witness to the dawn awakening of The Rock invites story-making. Elders say we can re-dream our heritage, nothing is forever lost. Uluru is new born each morning, humming in the present, though time has weathered surface shale to flaky, old skin, making flesh of rock and silence breathe. The surrounding flatlands, remembering their oceanic past, rise and fall in wave motion; remnant shell holds sound of long-gone sea; fish bone rides shifting dune, rippled like the roof of mouth. This place is earth and air, solid rock and open space. There is fire crossing its horizons and precious water pooled in dark places. Science says erosion etched the harsh lines across the smooth rock. The old people say these are scars from

the Creation, from the battle zone of those who go before, giant ancestral beings. Both these are stories. Uluru invited me into my own.

MY FATHER WENT back to Ireland once, back to the soil that held the footsteps of his ancestors. I was there with him, still believing we were Scottish.

'We'll hire a car and drive to Kinsale.'

'Why Kinsale?' I asked.

'That's where we come from.'

That was it. Nothing more. I was an Irish McDonald.

In a mist of memory, my father dances like a leprechaun, kissing the Blarney Stone, the Stone of Eloquence, like a lover. 'Kiss it and you'll never be lost for words again,' they say over there. They did not come over here. Witnessing my father's joy in hearty nights sharing drinks with strangers as thick as family, the Paddy softening a tongue – feared like the sword in our house – around the words of Danny Boy, I tucked the Scottish tartan skirts away and grew into the green of another ancestry. Back on the flat plains, within a homestead held in space between bulge of southern sky and dry land, my father doesn't sing.

STORIES ARE GO-BETWEENS. They hold steady the conversation between one generation and the next, sometimes across thousands of years, and at times, between cultures. They point in the direction of knowledge rather than cement information in the way of science. They provide nourishment between the land and her people in a lifelong relationship of mutual care for the well-being of both. But there is something more they do. Those cultures that hold stories strong know of their healing powers. Bob knows of the energy held within place. We believe this invisible energy can't be measured and so it can't be. This way of thinking severs deeper connection with story and its power to do more than keep children in their beds at night.

'Once something bad has happened, the memory is carried by that place,' Bob told me. 'This kind of bad energy takes a long time to clear. It can be on an emotional or spiritual level, it doesn't have to be on the physical level. Unnecessary thought in mind, word or action will leave memory that is

retained in that place. You stay away from places that have been poisoned. It is the same with buildings and rooms, with any place. In our tradition, secret-sacred places have been determined by our ancestors and we follow the way we have been taught usually through story. The places to be avoided and the sacred places are secret and have been handed down. It's not always that we know why. It could be from something that took place in Creation time or it could be from events since then.'

WHAT BOORI MONTY Pryor and I share is not at first obvious. It is about digestion. I am a white woman and Boori is a black man. I am from the bush, Boori is urban. Boori is a saltwater man. I am from a no-water place. We are both Queenslanders. Boori's Kunggandji and Birri-Gubba ancestors walked in rainforest for tens of thousands of years.

'You'd enjoy a cappuccino too if you'd been waiting forty thousand years for one,' he jokes.

Boori made me laugh. He gave me voice. He gave me a way to fit words to my childhood of messenger birds and spirits, and dust beneath bare feet, of being story naked. I wanted to hear more about myself from Boori.

What Boori and I share is the need to digest the pain in our systems.

'Where you come from?' Boori's Uncle Henry asked me on first meeting.

'From beyond the Great Dividing Range,' I answered.

The question that followed came fast on my tracks, yet was softly spoken. 'They kill people there, eh?'

This was not the first I heard of the massacres in my homeland but it was the most personally delivered.

'I'm sorry if I have insulted your people.' Uncle Henry was gracious. 'Family down that way tell us these things. They killed our people in big mobs where you from.'

The oppressed know most about the oppressor – how they think and act; what they know and what they presume to know; how they smell, touch, taste. What sets Boori apart is that he makes you laugh and ask for more while slapping you around with the hard stories of our shared history. He offers a soft pillow for the anger of those lost. While my ancestors were presuming

at best to be smoothing the pillow for a dying race, Boori's elders, the ones like Uncle Henry, were providing a pillow for our anger.

In Boori's words, 'When it's dying time, you are lost if you haven't made the journey to belong. To know who you are and where you belong you need to know the land you walk. Our paintings, stories, dances and songs are all ways to express our belonging. They are us.' In many ways, Boori's story path is easier to retrace than my own. Boori is never far away from his country. Distanced from my ancestral lands, I had to invent new language. The old stories from across the seas were too thick a fabric to express my delicate dance on this soil. And yet the dance of ancient stories, songs and paintings of desert and dry plains, even of rainforests, are not my language either although I have learnt some of their rhythm.

I AM NEW mythology. I don't belong back in the old country. When I delve into the old stories of that place I am in love with the creatures, the landscape and the gods. They wave to me in dreams but are no longer who I am. I am new story that comes of the interplay between two others. I am migration story. I am Wanderer, a mythology in itself as old as human evolution.

Child's hand soft in mine, we stand at the gates of the marae and wait. A lone voice calls out, sings in haunting tone descending.

'Haere mai, haere mai, haere mai.'

We are welcomed by Maori elder. Tattooed face and warrior stance, he speaks as one who carries his own canoe.

'Where are you from?' he asks. 'If you come here to know my culture you must first know your own. If you don't know who you are or where you are from, how can we meet face to face?'

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ESSAY

The myths of Azaria, so many

Superstition ain't the way

John Bryson

A YOUNG trial lawyer will soon come to understand that some stories are likely to be believed while others are not, and the factor which sets them apart is not to do with fact or with falsehood.

Around a time when Lindy Chamberlain was well pregnant with Azaria, the chief ranger at Ayers Rock National Park, Derek Roff, was warning the Northern Territory Conservation Commission (NTCC) about the increasing aggression of local dingoes, and the danger now to children. 'Babies and small children may be considered possible prey,' he wrote in his report. He asked to cull the worst.

As Mrs Chamberlain's pregnancy came closer to term, Roff and his rangers cast about for measures to protect campers while they awaited instructions. The rangers fashioned notices warning campers against feeding dingoes and urging caution. Azaria Chamberlain was born on 11 June 1980 in Mount Isa. Close to that date ranger Ian Cawood shot the most troublesome male, which had been entering staff houses and pilfering food.

On 16 August, when the Chamberlain family set up their tent in the park camping ground, and the following evening, when Azaria was taken from the tent by a pack, or singly, Roff's warning lay unanswered at the NTCC. The report carried a warning of peril which was not to be believed.

For two days the happening was known by everyone to do with the

event – campers, searchers, Aborigines, rangers, police, park staff. A tragedy: a tiny babe taken, eaten by a dingo pack. These two days provided the one period when the world was clear about the truth of the event. Here we watched a brief absence of myth.

The first journalists off the flight to Ayers Rock were sceptical. Their vehemence infected investigating detectives. At this moment died the period of clarity. The new scepticism provided a warm and verdant solution in which to grow a bubbling culture of belief, an urban myth: dingoes don't behave like this. Exactly here, at this very point, the first phase of Azaria mythmaking took its shape: the child was slaughtered, this is a family of madcap religious beliefs, Seventh-day Adventists, worse, the father is a pastor. The cities began to buzz with Myth One: Azaria was dispatched by the pastor on Ayers Rock to atone for the sins of the world.

Then surfaced, through the *Melbourne Truth*, the intelligence from a Mount Isa general practitioner, mistaking an entry in a dictionary of Christian names: Azaria means 'Sacrifice in the Wilderness'.

I recall an argument with a woman in Melbourne's Carlton, at a pub bar where writers met most Friday evenings. Lurie was there, Moorhouse in from Sydney, Oakley was a local then, all talking of the latest suspicions. She was a retired journalist. 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of,' she quoted. She was merely one of many throughout the nation. I held no belief about the baby's death, but I had known some Seventh-day Adventists. Why were we so anxious to believe this of them?

Within a few weeks the volume of rumour swelled. Azaria had been dressed in black clothing; Azaria had been hurt falling from a shopping trolley and was irreparably damaged; a tiny coffin made for Azaria was found in the Chamberlains' garage; a passage in the Chamberlains' Bible was highlighted in red providing a template for Azaria's execution.

The myth of sacrifice high on Ayers Rock by the pastor was itself killed off when investigators found Florence Wilkin and Gwen Eccles, who each nursed Azaria in their arms while the pastor and the two boys scaled the rock, and the neighbouring campers Greg and Sally Lowe saw the baby alive and active at the barbecue until her mother laid her down in the tent for the evening meal.

The pastor stood at the barbecue eating with the Lowes while Azaria was taken; this was first made plain to public interest at coroner Denis Barritt's

inquest, at which three extraordinary events occurred: a Chamberlain-hater phoned in a bomb threat which cleared the courthouse awhile; Barritt made his decision to televise his finding live to the nation to halt the rumour mongering; Barritt apologised to the Chamberlains for the nation's behaviour and criticised the NTCC for allowing danger to build in the park.

The backswell of the Barritt inquest left a confused eddy of stories and beliefs about Azaria's death, from Hobart to Darwin, but for the most part the nation was content enough to conclude we had been too hurried to attribute evil to this family which many regarded as suspiciously over-religious.

FOR MONTHS, PUBLIC interest in the Chamberlains remained doldrum calm. In government departments interest was furious. A new investigation, Operation Ochre, was formed in secret. Selected journalists were fed leaks: of the baby's clothing now in London for examination, of experiments in a zoo with dingoes peeling baby clothes from cuts of meat, of the pattern of bite marks on knitted clothing. A TV crew was invited to film an experiment with a dummy baby pulled through desert brush, another to film a search of the sewer of a motel room in which the Chamberlains had slept the night of the tragedy. We began to watch the development of two mechanisms of crowd behaviour: the 'urge to chase', followed by the 'urge to lynch'.

The rumours travelled by gossip in pubs and at dinner tables, and by journalists who put them to police and to law officers as questions, who refused to confirm or deny, although sometimes this was the very officer who had leaked this information to this journalist initially. The ruse allowed an editor to put the rumour into print. So effective was the drama of the chase that the Melbourne *Sun* reported it increased its print run by sixty thousand whenever an edition carried an item about the Chamberlains.

Because this had become a story about the decapitation of a baby by her mother on holiday in the central desert, the next well-publicised event was the seizure of the family car. The yellow Holden Torana hatchback was surrendered by the Chamberlains on police request, but this was not reported as part of the narrative. Its impoundment at a forensic laboratory was.

Officers would neither confirm nor deny scientific findings, but the word on the street was clear: the car was awash with the baby's blood.

The establishment of an unsupported but widely held belief, and its

maintenance was, in this case, made possible by keeping the victims ignorant of the allegations against them, so they could not prepare anything in rebuttal, had no defending argument, could collect no evidence of their own innocence. Barritt's inquest finding was now quashed in secret, Barritt was removed from the case because he insisted the Chamberlains be entitled to notice of the secret session to reopen the inquest. The first notification of a second hearing into the death of Azaria given to the Chamberlains was in the form of a subpoena to attend it. Some officer had the foresight to alert the television stations, so film of the delivery of the subpoenas could be taken from the helicopters overhead, and make the evening news.

The one contribution the Chamberlains could make to the burgeoning storyline was that they knew nothing about any of these sensational developments. Their prosecution carried through the second inquest hearing according to procedures never before seen in an Australian court. Knowledge of all scientific evidence was denied them and denied to their lawyers until it was given from the witness stand. This was contrary to the usual procedures of fair notice. The Chamberlains were denied protection usually given to parties in jeopardy, that they be called to testify last, so to know how the case against them is made, here they were summoned first, so to be questioned in ignorance of any evidence to come. Here the prosecution began as it was to finish, with an easy ride. Belief in the mother's guilt was close to nationwide.

At this hearing the Chamberlains, their lawyers, along with the rest of the world, were to be told the prosecution case. Instead of putting Azaria down, her mother walked with son Aiden to the tent, sat with the baby in the passenger seat of the hatchback, decapitated her with a pair of nail scissors, secreted her head and her body in the pastor's camera bag while Aiden wasn't looking, and returned composed to the group at fireside, after a few minutes away. One finds difficulty, now, uttering that storyline without a snarl of derision but, after the Chamberlains' convictions at the inevitable trial, a poll found a strong majority of the nation believed the parents guilty, the mother of murder, the pastor as an accessory.

The witch myth was to be believed. Worth noting here are the words of laboratory technician Joy Kuhl, who identified baby's blood in the car. During the trial in Darwin, at a dinner at a hotel with police and journalists, she said, 'I have no doubt the woman is a witch.' She nodded. 'Seriously.'

Mrs Chamberlain was consigned to Berrima Prison. The convictions were given headline reception from media, but also prompted unique reactions from an important few. Campsite eyewitnesses formed a band of travelling speakers protesting the verdict, where one woman said, 'We may be only little people, but we know right from wrong'; Trial Judge James Muirhead began to campaign against the use of juries in criminal trials, since he had considered his charge to the jury had favoured acquittal; chief ranger Derek Roff wrote to newspapers in protest; scientists at Behringwerke AG in Germany warned its chemicals were wrongly applied to identify blood in the Chamberlain car and could return false results.

PUBLIC HATRED OF the Chamberlains allows us to examine the mechanisms of the 'urge to chase', perhaps with the shape of an algorithm in mind. What are 'conditions precedent' to large numbers of a population believing the absurd?

The magnitude of horror may provide a fine starting point. The magnitude of horror seems to manipulate several aspects of human judgment. The more horrifying the real, or supposed, crime, the more likely it is that the community will demand speedy action, investigators be inclined to improve the evidence, prosecutors be prepared to lower standards of fairness, media to increase levels of agitation, onlookers to believe suspicions they would not otherwise consider. In the Chamberlain case the horror was of, as writer Morris Lurie phrased it, 'the spectre of the evil mother.'

Victims of suspicion who are disliked will find difficulty escaping it, even if unpopularity is as moderate as belonging to an out-group, while the accusers are mainstream. An accelerant we saw in this case was the rumor that 'police knew more than they could publicly say.' An instance of this was to do with a supposed Health Department file of child cruelty by the Chamberlains when they lived in Tasmania. Some years later, at a gathering of friends in Hobart, I met the forensic pathologist briefed to find the file. It did not exist, he told the investigators, although this did not scotch the rumour.

A propensity for superstitious belief may be thought a predisposing factor, and I am including the populous religions here, for this purpose. I have no measurement for this, simply an impression that people of religious background seemed more ready to join the growing suspicions of the

Chamberlains, Catholics particularly. Since Seventh-day Adventists are more critical of Catholicism than are other Protestants, this may have a bearing. Witch belief is associated with the power of Satan, and certainly with Evil, so is of religious origin.

Should we take into account the cultural influences of the times? Massachusetts in 1692 was in a hysteria of witchcraft allegations following outbreaks of disease and pestilence which a medical practitioner ascribed to devilish works because he couldn't cure his patients. In PNG we watch the horrifying practice of witch burning which has a history immemorial. At the time of writing, in Perugia, American Amanda Knox faces retrial on murder and sex crime charges in a city facing a drug crimewave and is referred to in the press as 'a she-Devil' and 'a Luciferina.' Knox likens her predicament to Lindy Chamberlain's. Worth recalling here is an epidemic of exorcist movies over the decade before the Chamberlain persecution. Clearly much of the nation was in a mood to suspend belief.

No lynch mob formed for the Chamberlains, but the bomb threats and letters recorded by the Territory's newspapers, ('They ought to burn the bitch,' and 'She should be strung up') brings the 'urge to lynch' close enough for interest. One suspects lynching follows a suspect's escape from proper punishment or, as in the post-slavery Southern US, from racial fear. Mrs Chamberlain's protection, before her exoneration in 1987, was first provided by her gaolers.

The belief of the nation in the myth that science had proven the guilt of Azaria's parents, was the force which made the eyewitness evidence superfluous, out-manoeuvered defence lawyers, avoided Judge Muirhead's cautions, and dislocated the mechanisms of appeal. We had watched this progression: a bereaved mother changed by a band of conjurors into a vile beast and cast into the dungeon, but lifted by the voices of the Little People, to again become the gentle and bereaved mother as at the beginning. When might we be permitted to unmask the conjurors?

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MEMOIR

Old women's business

Indigenous story and cultural resilience

Leonie Norrington

MY parents, or 'your parents' as we siblings call them, had very conflicting ideas on child rearing.

My dad's idea was to feed us, smack us and send us out to play. He trusted us to grow up without too much help. I remember going to work with him as a young child. He sat me on the back of a truck in a tangle of rope. 'Undo that rope for me will you,' he said, and walked into the shed. I felt so important untying those knots that I didn't realise until he came back that he'd tied me to the truck so I couldn't fall off.

Mum corrected our English, taught us manners, ensured we were kind to animals and other people, and measured us against charts and books on child development. She believed that good parenting and educational opportunities developed great intellects. And she always believed us, no matter what lies we told.

We grew up in a remote community, so we also had adopted Mayali parents. Our Mayali mother, Albadjan as we called her, was quick with a slap or scornful tease for any humbug or annoying behaviour. But she trusted us. She believed that a spirit had come from a sacred place in the earth and became us. That we were each a fully formed human from the moment we were born, one that had lived many millions of times before and was perfectly able to

make decisions for themselves. She was confident that all we needed was to be reminded of the laws and sacred places, only needed to hear the stories and myths to remember how to live properly on the land.

The only thing these parents of mine had in common was their belief in the power of story.

Our dad told us stories of floods and cyclones, of people getting thrown off horses and breaking their necks, of the idiots who thought that Fords were better than Holdens. We heard about heroes who swam crocodile-infested rivers to take a child to safety or kept an engine running with a length of tie-wire to save a family from death in the desert. We heard about children who were stolen by winds or tides, sucked into drainpipes or fell into mineshafts where they struggled, their cries unheard, they drowned alone, their bodies never found, their families wailing and cutting themselves with grief.

When Albadjan found us playing in the cinder-dry long grass during the fire season, she told us about the cheeky debil-debil that rode a dingo in the long grass when it was drying. That debil-debil had great lengths of curly red hair – the colour of drying speargrass seeds. With her massive nostrils, she could suck in all the air and taste it for blood. 'Might be wallaby, might be man or dog, but more better children,' she'd tell us. And when the debil-debil found a child, she would send a song around it to cover up its cries. Then steal it and eat it, her sharp teeth ripping the flesh from the bone. That story definitely kept us out of the long grass when it was dry waiting to burn.

Mum was a great storyteller too. Each night she'd put on one of her classical music records and tell us stories. We loved it. We would lie there on the floor, big kids playing with little kid's hair or tickling their backs to keep them still, and we'd wallow in the sound of her voice.

One night she was telling us the story of the Ugly Duckling. We were at the point where the little ducking was out in the cold, nearly dying, when my baby sister scoffed, 'That's gammon. You can't die from being cold!' We had no concept of cold. In our country, it rarely gets below 20 degrees. We knew you could die from heat. We'd all suffered dehydration and sunstroke. But dying of cold? What a joke.

So Mum stopped the story. She got up and changed the record to Grieg's 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' and, sitting down again, waiting for the

music to take hold of us, she told us about when she was a child. How, when the Japanese invaded, she was evacuated from New Guinea with her mother and little sister while my grandfather stayed behind.

How, when they got into Australia, my grandmother was classified as a single parent so her children were taken away. My mum was six and her sister four. They were sent to live in an old stone convent in Adelaide where the floors and the walls were made of black ice.

Mum wasn't trying to tell us a story about pain or suffering, she was telling us how it feels to be cold. Through her story we came to understand cold, not just the physical cold that cuts through your skin and makes your bones so brittle they shatter when you run, but the cold of loneliness, desperation and abandonment; the real story of the Ugly Duckling.

Unlike the story of the Ugly Duckling, which made no sense to us – ducks are something you eat, not feel sorry for – this was a story we knew instinctively to fear, not cold, but of being taken away from your parents. Of being subject to a power much greater than yourself. We understood without experiencing it ourselves, the coldness of being alone and shunned. It's a deep knowing that sits with me still.

Recently, I met up with Albadjan and some other old ladies in Darwin. We'd been at a meeting about the federal government's intervention (*Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act* 2007). It wasn't a consultation, no questions were asked. It was a day of listening; statistics, directives, blame and guilt. Men hung their heads in bewilderment. Women bristled with anger.

After the meeting, we collected children and grandchildren and went to the beach. There we spilled from the cars, doors left ajar, and spread out along the sand hunting and fishing. Children squealed as they rushed to kick and splash in the water.

As each woman caught enough to eat, we gathered around a fire. Albadjan made tea, thick and sweet. The billycan passed from one to the next as we sipped in turn from the brim. Stories, gossip, laughter and criticism floated around me in Mayali and Kriol.

The sun sank into the ocean like an orange balloon, sucking the colour from the sea. The kids played in the shallows, their bodies sparkling with

seawater as they cartwheeled and back-flipped, silhouetted against the great expanse of pink and purple sky. The air was moist with the smell of fish and crustaceans cooking on the fire.

Suddenly there was a noise. Oooooo. Ooooo. Is it a curlew? An owl? I looked up searching the trees and the open forest. Behind me a scream brought the children rushing back.

All the woman were huddled around the fire, terrified, whispering to each other.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

Their faces turned away from me.

'What's wrong?' me again.

'The Poinciana woman,' someone whispered.

'Don't say that name!' another voice growled.

'Who? What is it? A ghost? Should we go?' I ask.

I'm ignored.

Albadjan and the other oldest lady are arguing formally in Mayali.

'She's all right,' Albadjan is saying. 'I grew her up. We can talk in front of her.'

'But she is white. Will she be ashamed? Our history is different from hers.'

'We come from the same country!' Albadjan is determined.

'Please tell me,' I say. 'I will understand.'

The oldest lady straightens her shoulders. With a curve of her hand she tells the children to move closer and stay quiet. A finger orders a young girl to put more wood on the fire.

'Long time ago,' she starts the story. 'When white people first came to our country, they came hunting for pearl shell. In those days they had no plastic. They used pearl shell to make combs, buttons and earrings. Collecting pearl shell was a profitable business. No royalties then. They could take everything they wanted from our country. They didn't pay us for anything.

'These men came in boats. They went diving deep into the ocean with helmets on their heads. At the bottom of the ocean they captured pearl shell, put them in the net bags and brought them up. On the boats they scrubbed

the pearl shell and packed it into huge bags. They sent the bags of pearl shell back to the King of England.

'But cleaning the pearl shell was hard work. The barnacles cut their fingers and the hot sun burned their fair skin. So, they come ashore with their guns to hunt for Aboriginal families.'

She stopped and looked at the children, their faces bright in the firelight.

'You know this story,' she tells them. 'You remember the station time stories. How the white people used to hunt Aboriginal people and kill them. Collect the bodies and burn them. Same thing here in this country. But this story is different.

'These men hunted for Aboriginal people. Footwalking. They didn't have horses.

'When they found a family they surrounded them. They shot the fathers, the mothers, the grandparents, brothers, uncles…little children too. But they didn't kill everyone. They kept the young girls. Your age now.' She points to a girl of nine or ten. 'They wanted them for slaves to clean the pearl shell and pack it in the bags.

'And they wanted them for wives.'

She sits for a moment to let the information sink in. Then she asks us all, 'Why did they want young girls? If they wanted wives or slaves, why didn't they take older girls? Or women, who were strong and knew how to enjoy being married?'

'No. They chose young girls deliberately. They wanted to break them. To make them forget their families and the songs of their country. They only wanted the shell of a woman.'

She sits back now, swallowing the emotion in her voice, her arms folded over her breasts and belly, her white hair glowing in the light from the fire.

'The young girls worked hard,' she continued. 'They had to be wives for many men. They screamed and tried to run away. But the men tied them to the boat so they couldn't escape. They fed them grog to make them forget who they were. When they got used to it the men untied them and kept them as slaves.

'One day a young girl is taken,' the oldest lady continues. 'But she never gets used to it. She stops crying and fighting. After two moons they take the rope from her leg and they don't beat her now. Or threaten to throw her

overboard when they see a shark. But she doesn't forget. At night the sadness washes over her like the waves. In her dreams she sings her families' faces to her, remembering them.

'Then one night, she looks across the water and sees a light. That's my countrymen, she thinks. That's a cooking fire on the beach. We must be close to the shore.

'She jumps up, runs and dives into the ocean.

'Behind her the men scream and shout, crocodile! Shark! But she doesn't listen. She swims away from the boat, out past the boat's lights into the dark water. She swims, and swims.

'But it is too far.

'And she drowns. And her body washed up here now,' the oldest lady opened her hand to say, this beach. 'Her ghost still lives here… That was her now calling out. Oooooo. Oooo… Every evening she sings out, crying to her families. Reminding us of our history.'

Silence.

Slowly the children got up and left the fire to play in the sand. 'Don't go too far, crocodile there! Debil-debil there too in them trees!'

FROM THE SEXUAL abuse of this young girl all those years ago, the conversation turned quickly to the intervention. How the *Little Children are Sacred* report was a cry for more consultation. How it identified poverty and disempowerment as the main cause of child abuse and neglect. It asked for help. 'But what we got was the intervention,' one woman said. 'Shame, blame and more of the same,' another scoffed.

One woman told the story of Bob Collins, a former federal minister charged with the sexual abuse of young children in Arnhem Land. One of them was her nephew. She talked about how Bob Collins' court case was put off for years until he finally committed suicide. Suicide, everyone agreed, was a right way for him to die. Most of his victims had also already committed suicide. His early death meant his spirit could go back to the land and perhaps return a more decent man.

They talked about Nhulunbuy and other mining communities where girls as young as twelve are regularly sexually abused by non-Aboriginal

miners. White taxi drivers act as pimps. How the report had documented this. But, 'They reckon it's the kids fault!' one old lady growls.

And they did. I remember being shocked at the official line in the report, 'the girls would actively approach the workers… The local police were aware of this "sex trade"…but there was little they could do because of a "culture of silence" among the workers…'

IT WAS DARK now and the children came back to lie in laps or in the sand, the firelight sparkling in their eyes.

A new pre-school and childcare centre had just opened up on our community to help transition children into formal schooling. I asked the little girl on my lap about it. Was it fun? What did they do there? Were there books and toys? 'Child care!' The oldest woman scoffed. She held her mouth in a stiff line for a moment then cleared her throat to tell another story.

'Not far from here, a girl child was born and the great morning star gave her its name,' she said.

'Gurrdji's mother and father loved her dearly for they had two boy children and longed to give them a sister.

'Gurrdji's brothers taught her how to read the stories in the sand. Her mother reminded her of the memory maps and legends of their people. And her father taught her to fear the great evilness that humans create out of resentment, and the devils that lurk in the darkness to catch children unawares.

'Surrounded by her family's tenderness and care, Gurrdji worked hard at her learning and was generous and kind toward other creatures.

'Then one day, a great hunger came creeping in from across the sea. Like the wind that lifts the sand from the tips of the dunes and buries the rocks below, the hunger crept into the adults' minds, settling deep in their thoughts, hiding the ancient stories and maps they had always known, unsettling the love and tenderness they had for their children.

'The adults became greedy. They worked to buy and accumulate. When the parents came home from work their arms were so full, they couldn't carry their children, their minds so hungry for more they couldn't feed them. When the parents left for work, the children cried. But their mothers turned their

ears away. The little children tried to comfort each other. But their bodies were too small to hold enough love to share. So they fought and squabbled for the tiny bits of adult care that was available.

'Gurrdji and her friends grew tall and strong but inside them, instead of love and pride, instead of the songs and dances of their people and their land, there was a great hollow filled with want.

'One night Gurrdji felt so empty that she walked away from her home, up into the sand dunes. A handsome young man came. He smiled at her and stroked her hair. Gurrdji, desperate for touch, leant against the young man, accepting him. But as she held him she felt the invisible long hair that covered his skin.

'She jumped back and before her the young man transformed into Doolagarl, the hairy man. He grabbed her and held her tight. He wanted to take her for his wife. She screamed and fought but he was too strong. She couldn't escape. He hurt her so much her spirit lifted out of body, up into the air. She was floating. As she ascended, the pain disappeared. She felt warm and shiny. She became star.

'Gurrdji's mother ran across the sand following her daughter's footsteps, "Gurrdji," she screamed, "Gurrdji." She saw the tracks where the Doolagarl had grabbed Gurrdji. Then nothing. Her daughter had vanished.

'She fell to the ground screaming and crying.

'Up in the sky Gurrdji was shining and silver. She felt warm and peaceful inside. Below her she could see all the camps. All the people. Some waking up, some going to sleep.

'She saw her community. And her mother and father. Her mother was sitting on the ground crying, hitting her head, making herself bleed as if someone was dead. "My daughter. My daughter", she screamed.

'As Gurrdji watched her, her heart thickened, her throat swelled up and a silver tear trickled down her cheek.

'At once her body changed back into a human form. For stars can't cry. 'Slowly, Gurrdji floated down and landed by her mother. "Mum," she said. "I'm here. I'm not dead. Please don't cry."

'Her mother cried holding her. "My daughter. My daughter."'

In the silence that followed, mothers pulled their children closer and hugged them. Older children leaned against siblings, aunties and grandparents. I stroked the tiny child on my lap. She was my little grandmother (Skinway).

LATER THAT NIGHT I lay in bed with Albadjan and nine children. There were three bedrooms in the house yet we crammed the mattresses into one so we could all sleep together. Thinking about this, and the night's conversations, it occurred to me that we have completely different histories in Australia, and different storylines through which we interpret and understand the present. Negative stories about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities sanctioned the federal government suspending the Racial Discrimination Act, and making legislation that specifically targeted families on remote communities. And they in turn often have negative views of mainstream culture.

I remember helping a woman prepare for a tutorial. She had drawn a picture to show the hierarchy in her community.

At the bottom of the page there was a narrow section with the words 'Elders / Country / Law' written inside. In the large section in the middle, she wrote 'School / Council / Clinic.' At the very top of the page, in another narrow section was written 'Whitefellas and Whitefella Law'.

'So are whitefellas and whitefella law the most powerful?' I asked. They were at the top of the page so…

'No,' she laughed. 'This is like the ocean. Our elders, our country and our law are the rocks at the bottom of the ocean,' she touched them with her fingertips. 'They are and always will be there.'

'The school, council, and clinic, are like the sea,' She placed her hand on the large section in the middle section. 'It feeds us, connects us, and regulates our lives.'

'And the Whitefellas and Whitefella law,' she said pointing to the top section, 'is like the flotsam and jetsam that comes and goes on top of the ocean, constantly changing, disconnected, and haphazard.'

STORIES ARE POWERFUL. My Mum and Dad's stories, like the rope I felt so important untangling as a child, were the threads through which I

came to understand my culture and my place within it. Albadjan's stories exposed me to a completely different way of seeing the world and continue to remind me that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have their own values and aspirations. That rather than understanding themselves as dysfunctional members of the mainstream, as we often do, they come from a different culture and have a different, just as valid worldview. Their histories and culture are grounded in story. I only hope that these storytellers and their stories are resilient enough to survive the negation and bombardment of the mainstream. And that through story they will be able to claw back some dignity after this latest intervention.

Leonie Norrington grew up on a remote community in northern Australia. Her award-winning novels and picture books are set in the remote north. Her picture book *Look See, Look at Me!* (Allen & Unwin, 2010) was written with women from Barunga, Wugularr and Manyalaluk.

FICTION

BIG YENGO

BRUCE PASCOE

HE'S got a temper on him. You have to watch your Ps and Qs. Sometimes the entire alphabet. But he can cook, sing, play the guitar, set up a great camp. Bastard.

He patronised me a bit. Never had previous opportunities so this was his time to be in charge. Watch your lip.

'There's something I want to show you,' he said. I've made it sound like he was looking down his nose, but he wasn't. Just particular about what wood went on the fire, how it was stacked, where the billy sat. That's alright, I knew where he'd learnt it. From an expert. Damn near genius.

'Good,' I replied having no idea what he thought I should see.

This was his job. Tracking feral animals. I drove the 4WD and he ran ahead as we travelled the kilometre between each of the sand pads. Fit as a Mallee bull. I was proud. He was a man in his prime; and a good one at that.

He was showing off to his father, but only a bit, just needing to convince me of his strength and capabilities. And I was.

He didn't need me there but it was an OH and S thing to have an offsider and his footy mates were over it or in Afghanistan. He

played in Richmond, near the air force base. Their political discussions were proscribed.

I liked that about him. No point hating people just because you disagreed. And half the flying lads knew it was a dud war. But dud wars were how they made a living; and retired early on a comfortable pension. Attractive package. If you don't get shot.

'It's over there.' He pointed toward a high ridge line just visible through the forest. 'Look down over the whole valley from up there.'

He finished recording the tracks on the sand pads, checked the images on the movement sensor cameras. He was after cats and foxes but most of the visitors had been wombats and wallabies.

He shifted me out of the driver's seat and took over for the climb up to the distant ridge. Creek crossings, switchbacks, fallen logs across the track. It was almost dusk when we arrived.

We stood on an exposed ramp of granite.

'See them,' he said, 'the emu feet?' He pointed at them as he walked up the sloping granite, 'and this, where they stop, is where Baiame left the earth and went up into the sky.'

My son telling me about Aboriginal heritage.

'They've drawn his…well not drawn, chiselled his image across there, can you see it, same as in the Milky Way, the Dark Emu.' We were silent, looking at these ancient marks of god's passage.

'Darug mob did it.'

A third of Australia believed in Baiame as the creator, but this was his story, the Darug had shown him and so it was his story to tell me. I was moved, it meant a lot to me. Not just Baiame's ascension from this granite tor, but that my son should find it precious, and beautiful.

We were almost silent on the way back to camp. We'd be more animated in the morning when we discovered a goanna had swallowed my sandshoe but now it was dark and we concentrated on the curry which had excelled itself sitting in the bed of warm coals. There was a smokiness to it. He'd chosen blackwood for the fire and its smoke was just the right flavour.

He handed me a cold beer he'd stashed in his chiller, a lovely surprise. He picked up his guitar and sang all of his blues including two I'd sung to him from the day he'd been born.

'Black girl, black girl,
Don't lie to me
Tell me where did you sleep last night.
In the pines in the pines where the sun never shines
I was shiverin' the whole night through.'

We disagreed about the lyrics but he was insistent. He'd Googled them. I'd been wrong for fifty years. Except everyone had sung this song and the lyrics changed depending on whether the singer was incarcerated, black, white, rich or poor. But not worth arguing about.

He found two more beers as the owls began to call. I let him tell me which owl was which.

He strummed away and then found his way to Woody Guthrie, another song I'd sung to him while he was still a baby. He wasn't to know my version of the lyrics were as accurate as poor memory and deafness would allow.

'Snow, snow, falling down
Falling down all over the old town,
Smothers the garbage dumps, smothers the tracks,
All of the footsteps of those who knocked me back.'

I began to wonder about the man who would sing those songs to his babies, but before regret could become guilt, he was singing,

'Keep a watch on the shoreline

There's a boat that's lost out there…'

WHEN HE WAS a baby, a baby who found it difficult to sleep, we used to take him at dusk to a sandstone ledge from where we could see the Cape Otway Lighthouse begin its watch on the shoreline.

It was a habit, a ritual for our tiny family, and we knew it was imprinting itself on each of us, even the dog; too lovely for even a border collie to ignore.

Anytime my wife and I see a lighthouse we still call out, 'Look out, look out, there's rocks out there', and look at each other wishing that period of our lives could last forever…rubbish, he was a baby who hardly slept and we had so little money we didn't have two cups that matched.

We can grieve for that time of his innocence, but it's a luxury, a trick of memory, because now we own a complete set of cutlery…even if our cups still don't match.

I look at his camp things. He goes for the classical. Camp oven with a dished lid so you can pile the coals on to cook bread. Old fashioned enamelled mugs, a billy as black as the inside of a dog. Classical.

The owls call for five minutes, maybe longer, but I was asleep as soon as I'd drawn the sleeping bag up to my neck. Happy as any man the universe had created.

Next day he waves me down as I draw the ute up beside his sand pad.

'Something else you'd better see.'

It's not grudging, patronising, I can tell by now that it delights him to show me something I've never seen. Who's the big man now?

We sit on a grassy bank to take off our boots so we can wade across the stream to a low broken plateau. He has to check his bearings and make corrections to our course until finally we are below the edge of the escarpment.

'In here,' he says and we climb behind the boulders and up into the cave. He's not looking at me, waiting to see if I can see it. The hands. Three sets of hands, one big, one with two fingers missing, one tiny. I'm broken with grief, surprised to have been so vulnerable to the ambush of story.

We're still only half way through the day's work but I give up the driving and he doesn't even mention the fact that I've left all the work to him. I have a pad and biro and grapple with both as the ute bucks and climbs and slews its path around the mountain.

LAMENT FOR THREE HANDS
(For Jack and the last three hands at Big Yengo)

We were both married to other people. Now we're not. She's got this kid. Looks at me as if I'm not his father. True. I'm not. Can't be helped. That's how it is.

She looks at me as if I'm not her husband. Correct. But that's not my fault either. But we're living together. The way it works out. She looks about the new joint as if she's lived in better places.

Doesn't say anything. Looks after the place: keeps it clean, cooks, keeps the kid quiet. Brings it in to bed with her though, when it cries.

Not a bad kid. Not saying that. Not at all. But my guts are twisted up with its sorrow. And hers. And I've already got my own. None of us would have chosen this. None of us.

But that's how it is. So I'm sitting out the front frigging around with a stick, just stripping the bark off it. Nothing particular in mind. Looking out over the valley. Thinking.

It's a million dollar view. Grassy flats beside the winding river, forest climbing the mountain behind it. Beautiful. Anyone would say so, but we're not from here. The previous owner's pet bird is dancing around in front of me. Chitter, chitter, chitter, sweet, sweet, sweet. Yes, yes, I know, we're strangers. No, I have no idea where your mates are. Although I could guess. But how's that going to help?

Meat and potatoes cooking. Smells alright. Nothing wrong with her cooking. And she brought me a drink. Handed it to me. Said nothing but looked at me as if to say, I'm trying. We all are. Even the kid. Washed the potatoes. Didn't have to be asked. Put 'em in the oven. Helped his mother do the meat. He's having a go. No doubt about it. Just can't bring himself to look at me. Much. Better off without the much.

She's younger than my first wife. Happens a lot I suppose. And there's no doubt that she's prettier. Well, the old girl was getting on fifty-five. The breasts, you know what

I mean. Not cheeky, not pouting, not thumbing their noses at you like this one's are. And the old girl's bum, you know what I mean.

But I'd have her back tomorrow. Except it can't be.

Oh I've fucked this one. Too right, and even though her heart wasn't in it, it was good. You know what I mean, a young woman's body. The hardness, the springiness of the waist, those firm little tits nudging at you, like possums giving cheek. Oh I enjoyed it alright. And I'm not ashamed. It's how it is. Now.

But, yes, I'd take the old girl back, slack belly and droopy tits notwithstanding. She used to run her hands all over me. If she felt like it. She'd even take a grip of me, take things into her own hands so to speak. And when we were into it her hands would roam over my back and neck…but this one, her hands are still. Just waiting. For it to be over.

Chitter, chitter, chitter. sweet, sweet, sweet. Yes, yes, I know. Grown man crying. Yes, a sorry stage of proceedings indeed.

A quarkel doo, kool parkle dark, koo dool poo keep. Bloody friar bird, clown prince with a buckled nose. Of course I know all their names, know their stories too, well, we're country people after all. Still no reason to laugh at me.

Those birds should be our comfort, our balm, we should be reassured to hear them, but all they're saying is, you're not from here, you're not from here, I want the lady who fed me crumbs.

Well it's not my fault I can tell you, living in someone else's place. Sleeping in their bed, cooking in their oven. Not our bloody fault. None of us.

We sat together and ate, but she served me first, gave me the best bits, the leg and breast, the kid got the wings and rib cage. Still nice what they had, but she's making sure she does it right. To please me. I appreciate that. I really do. A tiny comfort.

Neither she nor the kid say anything, don't meet my eye. I finish my meal, wipe my hands. Look at them.

'Alright, I know what you're thinking, I know you wouldn't have chosen this. Me. But that's how it is, we're stuck with each other and we'll have to make the best of it. This,' and I indicated the room where we sat, 'this is as good as I can do. I wish we could be in the old place, but…things have changed. You know…you…look, none of us wanted this but…but I'm telling you this is the best I can do for us. What I'm saying is we'll have to make the best of it. If I could find us a better place I would, but look… I mean we've got the river, the hills, it's not bad. Not as good as the last place but…I think we should make the best of it.'

The boy had his head down, pretending to be engrossed in getting meat off the wing. At least he was eating again.

I stared at her and she looked at me askance. I indicated the boy with a jut of my chin. Her eyes understood.

'I think we should see if we can…just make the best of it…try and make it a home, make it ours.' I looked around the place again, saw how stark it was.

'Don't think I'm proud this is the best I can do. I'm not. And don't think I'm not feeling…just…what I'm saying is… what alternative is there?'

They said nothing. They weren't rude or anything, they just couldn't get their spirits up. And I couldn't blame them.

But that's what I'll do tomorrow, I'll bring home something really nice to eat. There's enough potatoes and salad vegetables in the previous tenant's garden. They'd obviously put a lot of work in. Sorry they're not here to see the fruits of their labour. You could see they loved their fruit and vegies.

You wouldn't change anything, the way they'd organised it. Wonder how long they'd been here.

When I got up next morning, nothing much had changed. But she did look at me, didn't smile, but it was like, sorry, I can't help it. I knew that. But I was grateful for that look. Small mercies.

Bugger it, that look lifted my heart enough, just enough, to think bugger it, I'll go fishing.

There was a corner where the river did a big turn hard up against a dark, flat wall of rock. Maidenhair ferns cascaded off the terraces where the rock was flawed and fissured. Nice. For a bit of a quiet fish. I wish…now, now, what did I tell myself about thinking like that. It's over and she's not coming back…this is now and besides… there's fish.

These scrub worms are just fantastic bait. Look, he's picked it up, feeling it, ready, ready, careful, there he goes, off like a shot, let him go a bit, let him swallow it, hold, hold, hold, steady, got him, big bastard…oh this will do it, surely, bring a smile…but really, maybe even the biggest perch I've ever caught may not be enough. Still, we'll see.

I looked at the fish in my hands. A grand animal. The undershot jaw giving it the look of a real hunter, a sharp shooter of the pool.

I put him in the basket and threw another bait in, knowing I probably wouldn't get another fish out of this hole. Leant back against the rock feeling the cool shade on my face. Dozed a bit. Thought about her. Getting home. Trying to make it up to her. And the boy. Not his fault.

Platypus. I woke up and a platypus was drifting in the middle of the pool. Looking at me. Well, in my direction, anyway. Short-sighted little bastard. Something else to tell them about.

And when I got back, the oven was ready and she had the barbecue prepared for the fish. Her confidence pleased me. I tried to catch her eye. Not biting.

It was a terrific meal. She got the coals on the barbecue just right. The skin of the perch blistered away from the perfectly white, juicy flesh. It heartened me. If we kept doing this for a while, we'd…you know, just kept going…

'I know,' I said as she was cleaning up after dinner, 'let's paint the house, together, brighten it up a bit.'

They looked at me. Waiting.

'It'll be good, make it ours.'

They turned away so I got up and ground up some pigment and mixed it with water.

'Here,' I said to the boy, 'come on, you first. Put your hand like this.'

Dutifully, and I'll have to say it, sorrowfully, he put his hand against the wall and I scooped a handful of ochre yellow, put a portion in my mouth and stencilled around his hand.

'See, look at that,' I said, 'that's fantastic.' This cheeriness was killing me. Specially with a mouthful of ochre.

I put my own hand against the wall and sprayed it with colour.

'Now you,' I said, as brightly as I could manage and tried to smile at her, but even to me it felt like the creak of a girth strap.

She put her hand against the wall but averted her face, looking neither at me nor her hand. I held her wrist as I sprayed the ochre.

When I came to the gap between the first and little fingers I thought I felt a sort of spasm in her arm, but I held it and completed the job.

Kept hanging on to her hand, holding it there to make a good impression. Such a young hand to have two missing fingers. For the two dead husbands lost in the war.

I rinsed my mouth but never let go of her wrist.

'There,' I said, '*chez nous*.'

You have to treasure the moments of happiness. The cave torched mine.

We made the old homestead paddock of the abandoned Big Yengo station our base for the final days.

We were going to use the kitchen in the shearers' quarters but didn't because of the smell of rats and damp mattresses. We sleep outside by the fire.

There's cold beer again because the kero fridge that hasn't worked for years is almost the same as the one we had when he was a child.

He mucked around with the curry and I pulled out all the gas jets and flues and cleaned them with a tooth brush and fencing wire. Act of genius. I earn my supper and a cold beer. Well, coldish, I wasn't that successful.

The owls call, the guitar plays but my heart is caught in a cave as I stare at Baiame, the Dark Emu, a vast black shape in the Milky Way with the tail of Scorpio twining around his belly. Oh why hast thou forsaken me?

At dawn I follow wombats as they go about their task of undermining the old dairy. I fossick amongst ancient machinery for hours: checking the set of plough tines, examining the oil in an old Allis-Chalmers tractor sump, testing the action of hand shears, trying to read the instructions poked between post and wall iron for a machine that sounds like it might have been some kind of boiler.

I wander about the garden to see what sort of woman lived here and in what degree of happiness, but my heart wasn't in it.

Those cave hands are so new they may be separated by months, perhaps not even that, from the woman who liked to plant columbines and the man who kept instructions for every machine he ever owned. Maybe those hands were still being stencilled while the first fences of Big Yengo were erected by the father or grandfather of the man who liked machines.

The machines that ploughed the land, husked the grain, pumped the water and cut the wood on a farm that showed not one ounce of profit, but nevertheless had been taken, perhaps, for we shall never really know, from a man whose new wife had lost two husbands and ran out of time to remove one more joint to celebrate one final loss.

I'll never forget what you showed me, my son, of yourself and of your world, but all it revealed is that we, you and I, are never far from the horror of the past.

Bruce Pascoe is an award-winning author and editor and a board member of the Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. His latest novel, *Fog a Dox* (Magabala, 2012), won the 2013 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction.

ESSAY

Strung with contour lines

Imagining impossible tales

Alice Curry

'I can't believe that*!' said Alice.*
'Can't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.'
Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't *believe impossible things.'*
'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'
– Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

IN an old fairy tale from the Uttar Pradesh region of India, the Rajah proclaims that his daughter will marry the man who can weave a rope of ash. In a fairy tale from Cameroon in West Africa, the king commands his daughter to marry the man or beast who can sew a crown of smoke.

A rope of ash or a crown of smoke: impossible objects, ethereal and insubstantial. Yet a rope of ash is merely a rope of hemp burnt to cinders, as the wise mother of the daughter's future husband knows, and a crown of smoke is, well, a crown that will fare less well on a king's head than a crown of gold or silver, as the wise tortoise makes it known.

Today, many tasks that were once impossible are routine. A four-minute mile was once a whimsical aspiration; the moon a muse not a destination. If birds do not chirp merrily while we do our household chores, as they did for Cinderella, our phones and tablets beep day and night while we do the tweeting. So what is the role of the impossible to a modern reader of these age-old tales? What do these elaborate tests, these exaggerated trials, mean for young people who no longer *believe* in the impossible?

I am not so young as to claim to speak for the young people of Australia. I cannot claim to speak for Australians at all, since I can count the years since my arrival in this country: exactly seven, that fairy tale number of dwarves, brides and brothers.

But I do know something about the impossible. The impossible for me was imagining life without the stories that underpinned my sense of self as I grew up in rural England. Geography was defined by the stories that built our village. They offered me a fairy tale compass to navigate my childish imagination. Down my road and across from the church was the herringbone cottage where an adulterous wife had poisoned her husband and two sons by baking arsenic in a pie. To the east and over the fields was the market town in which, legend had it, a black and gold basilisk with the head of a rooster and the wings of a bat used to lie in wait for unwary passers-by. To the south and past the old windmill were the stables in which a bad-tempered brownie had helped young Jack groom the horses until Jack's curiosity had sent this midnight helper scurrying into the night.

Coming to Australia meant leaving this cushion of fairy tales behind and falling painfully onto the hard and naked ground. The cushion may have been ethereal and insubstantial, a mere rope of ash or crown of smoke, but it underpinned my understanding of where I belonged.

I will not speak of Australia as an empty land – a damaging misconception – but of my intangible sense of unease when confronted by such a vast and beautiful space, with no understanding its topography. I wanted to know the tales hiding beneath each grain of sand, murmuring in each lap of wave. I wanted to know the myths and histories that underpinned its rugged geography. I thought often of Atha Westbury's anguished exclamation: 'AUSTRALIA! Hast thou no enchanted castles within thy vast domain? Is there not one gallant youth, ready armed to do battle for the fair ones,

sleeping 'neath the spell of wicked genii?' – a cry that Westbury met by inventing his own Australian fairies, brownies and the like and supplanting them from the quaint European forests to the wilder Australian bush.

I knew that to impose my own stories would be futile. There was no space for my wicked poisoning wife, my ferocious basilisk or my bad-tempered brownie in this land of sun and sea. So I had a test ahead of me, a trial to which many migrants might give no more than a passing thought, but to me felt like an impossible task.

THERE IS AN old Korean fairy tale about a boy called Dong Chin who likes to keep the stories he is told and refuses to share them. He listens closely as the tales are told and then closes his bedroom door behind him, leaving the story spirits to hover around his bed as the seasons turn and the boy grows into a man. On the eve of Dong Chin's wedding, a faithful servant overhears the story spirits plotting revenge against the man who has kept them prisoner. One is a story of poisoned fruit, another of poisoned drink, a third of red-hot iron, and a fourth of a snake's fatal bite. The stories plan to position themselves along the route of the wedding procession so that they may harm Dong Chin as he passes. The horrified servant, wishing to protect his young master, manipulates his way to the front of the bridal party, making excuse after excuse for why the groom may not eat, may not drink, may not step on the bag of chaff under which the red-hot poker lies, or lay his head on the pillow under which the deadly serpent waits. When the king can take the old servant's impertinent behaviour no longer, the stories' dreadful plots are revealed and the old man is rewarded for saving Dong Chin's life.

The moral of the tale is that stories must be shared, that tales must be passed from mouth to ear, and that stories may turn wicked if forbidden to run free.

Can one be poisoned by a wicked story? Burnt or bitten by a vengeful tale? I thought about this as I began my life in Australia, as I contemplated my impossible task. At the back of my mind was the ridiculous fear that the stories of my childhood village might similarly turn vengeful now that I had forsaken them for new ones. And what of Australia's stories? Did they want to be shared? A country's living, dreaming imagination is a concept about which Australia's First Peoples know so much and speak so eloquently, but

what was I to make of it: an average British migrant, unsure about where she belonged? I felt like a would-be explorer, armed not with a fleet of imperial ambitions, but with my fairy tale compass and reading glasses. I envisaged stories, buried like fossils below the dusty ground. I knew that the desire to dig for hidden treasures is a dangerous impulse. Too often it has led to imposition and appropriation: the taking of others' narratives to style them as one's own. But, to navigate the landscape via those tea-stained corners where the dragons of old might lurk? That, surely, would be a worthwhile task. And perhaps a possible one.

In those early years of my life in Australia, a fairy tale from the Kannada-speaking part of south-west India kept coming back to me. It too tells of jealous stories and a desire for revenge against those who try to stifle them. In this tale, a housewife knows a story and a song but never speaks or sings them to anyone. The story and the song become suffocated within her and escape one night while she sleeps, her mouth agape. One takes the form of a pair of man's shoes, the other a man's coat. Tidily, they place themselves on pegs and a shoe rack beside the door. When the husband returns home, he sees these garments at the door and demands an explanation. Unable to give one, the poor wife can only watch as her husband flies into a rage and slams the door, trudging off into the night to sleep beneath the monkey god's temple. But luck is on the woman's side. The lamp flame that had merrily lit the room in which the couple argued travels to the monkey god's temple to tell his friends, the other lamp flames, what had occurred. The husband, lying beneath the gossiping lamps, hears how the story and the song had become a pair of shoes and a coat beside the door. His suspicions assuaged, he walks back home at dawn and asks his wife to tell him the story and sing him the song. But, in the way of all things magical, the power of naming has whisked them away and she can only respond: 'What story? What song?'

I always felt sorry for the wife whose presumed infidelity casts a pall over the story's close. Her crime, I suppose, was to keep the story and the song to herself, yet was it because she wished to guard them or was it simply because she loved them too much? To be left with nothing, not even a memory of having held the story and the song close to her heart – there is something truly tragic in that. One must grieve for something one cannot quite recall, feel an absence for something one never really knew was missing. I wondered

whether this sense of loss was felt by those who disbelieve in the impossible: an absence of those older metanarratives, those ancient tales that embed us in our landscapes. Like a phantom itch in a limb long lost: a sense of unease that our foundations are shaky, that our connections with our 'once upon a times' are as liable to unravel as a rope of ash or a crown of smoke. It is tempting to hoard these stories and keep them to ourselves, to hide them in secret places like Dong Chin or bury them inside us like the wife of the Indian tale. It is a way of warding against the threat of loss, shoring oneself up against a more embedded existential fear of losing one's rootedness to the place we call home.

The Ashanti people of West Africa tell the tale of Ananse and the sky god, Nyame, who keeps the world's stories locked away in a golden box in the heavens. Ananse the man-spider, deeming this selfish, undertakes the impossible task of freeing the stories from the sky god's box and sharing them amongst the people on Earth. Unperturbed by the recounts of princes and chiefs who have already forfeited their lives to the task, Ananse agrees the price of the wager: four of the most dangerous and elusive creatures of the jungle – the python, the leopard, the hornet and the bad-tempered fairy who is invisible to the human eye. Sliding down his web from the sky, Anansi wracks his brain for a way to achieve his task. Luckily his wife, Aso, has more wits than the hapless wife in the Indian tale. She devises a plan to trick the python into measuring himself against a long stick, to which Ananse quickly ties him. The leopard is caught with the aid of a concealed pit and Ananse's strong and sticky web to reel him out. The hornets with their deadly stings are misled into thinking the rains have come and are trapped within the empty gourd in which they take shelter. And the invisible fairy, so enraged by the apparent rudeness of a hand-made doll, slaps and kicks the creature until she is stuck fast to the gum with which Ananse has coated her. Dragging his haul up his long spider rope to the heavens, Ananse presents the prisoners to Nyame with a sly and triumphant smile. The sky god has no choice but to hand the story box to Ananse who carries it back to earth, opening it up when he reaches the ground so that each and every story in the world can fly out and spread its joy across the earth.

ANANSE ACHIEVED HIS elaborate test, his exaggerated trial, although many men had failed before him. I wondered, as the years rolled on and I settled into life in Australia, if it was not *right* to disbelieve in the impossible,

to have confidence that every impossible task could be achieved. With my fledgling map laid out before me, I set about learning Australia's stories, or at least a few – those discovered by my fairy tale compass, now south-facing, rather than north. Each story gave me a tiny glimpse into Australia's living imagination. Stories of laughing kookaburras, thirsty toads, boxing kangaroos, dancing brolgas. Tales of gumnut babies, magic puddings, bushrangers, convicts and lost children. Stories based on qualities that I was beginning to recognise in the people around me: camaraderie, sportsmanship, resilience, openness. These stories became landmarks on my internal map, strung with contour lines of my own imagining. Having grown up in countryside surrounded by woods and fields but far away from the sea, it was a revelation to see how Australia's stories were rooted both in the hard rock of earth and the fluid ocean wave. It gave them a sense of timelessness and contemplation that I had seen in other tales from island nations, those of the Pacific and the Caribbean especially. Gradually, I began to navigate my way around Australia's vast geography. And with each story, I became more comfortable in this land I had made my home.

Now, in my seventh year in Australia, the cushion of fairy tales that had protected me from life's rougher edges has begun to re-weave itself beneath me. What had once been impossible is proving not to be so. Perhaps I am simply growing up, learning that human beings are infinitely adaptable to life's changing possibilities. Fairy tales can be mischievous, devious, life-saving, as anyone who has read the *Arabian Nights* knows. They exist to help us negotiate those elaborate tests, those exaggerated trials, that life often seems to throw at us. As the Queen tells Alice, believing in the impossible is just a matter of practice. Looking back over my seven years in Australia, she may well have a point.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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ESSAY & FICTION

Two tales of the sea

Pat Hoffie

THE MERMAID STORY

LONG, long ago, there was a time – a long time – when people believed they would find a utopia on earth. A piece of heaven. A garden, an island, a spot of perfection where all would be well. They believed that God's perfect plan was symmetrical, and they knew that the worlds of the northern hemisphere would be mirrored in the southern worlds beyond the equator.

Such beliefs set fires in their souls, rang a beat in their hearts that sent the blood coursing through their veins until their imaginations swelled, their hopes billowed like sails. Their eyes steadily fixed on the outlines of a dream, they willed themselves to attempt the impossible. The Great Age of Discovery had propelled northern hemisphere men towards the southern oceans. Some had travelled under the guise of explorers, others as merchants. They included pirates and runaways, the hopeful, the maimed, the seers, the blind. But, sacred or profane, saint or sinner, they breathed the same prayer at the break of each dawn: 'Steer our course to the promised land, O Lord. Guide us to the arcadia of our dreams.'

Samuel Fallours was such a man. When the plundering he'd made from soldiering was put to an abrupt and unceremonious end, he decided he'd turn assistant to a clergyman. Setting his sights on the unknown lands of which he'd only heard whispers, Fallours put his talents as a draughtsman to the services of colonialism, the profits of subjugation, and the glory of the Lord. Eventually the barnacle-encrusted boat in which he and his pastor island-hopped all the way down the coastline of Indonesia made its way to the

Banda Sea. Trailed by the currents of unfathomable waters, the boat eventually disintegrated into its own dream and, wearied from travelling, the two men set up a kind of wishful mission on the shoreline of Ambon.

In the time he stole from supporting his clergyman, Samuel Fallours scrupulously attended to itemising and describing the details of the region. He was well aware of the hunger for knowledge of those shores, and he knew that such hunger paid. His beautiful watercolours of marine life were treasures for which Britain would send spies to the Netherlands, in order to sleuth out their details. Page after page of his diary entries were later copied and transformed into hand-coloured engravings, then in 1719 they appeared in the form of a book by Louis Renard, publisher and British spy.

The images are remarkable for their clear, luminescent colour, the delicacy of form, the attention to detail, and the scientific clarity with which they were described. The documentation includes descriptions of 416 fish, forty crustaceans and one dugong, and an important part of the booty of discovery which was later transferred to the collections of Governors Coyett and van der Stel in the Netherlands.

Perhaps the most remarkable inclusion in this collection of drawings and notations is Fallours' description of the capture of a mermaid somewhere off the coast of Borneo during the Dutch exploration of the Pacific. The description serves as a caption for the delicate little watercolour of the specimen that accompanied the tract.

> Monster representing a Siren caught on the coast of Borne or Boeren in the province of Ambon. It was 59 inches long, and of eel-like proportion. It lived on shore in a tub for four days and seven hours. It occasionally uttered cries like those of a mouse. It did not wish to eat, even though small fishes, molluscs, crabs, crayfish, etc. were offered. After its death a few feces, similar to those of a cat, were found in the tub.

The image of the siren – or mermaid – is even more disarming than the text. Drawn above an exquisitely refined rendering of an elegant lobster, she appears perhaps less seductive than we might expect from someone whom legend describes as capable of luring centuries of innocent seamen to a watery

grave. However, she seems to evoke a gritty determination – her eyes sparkle, her eyebrows bristle, her somewhat dumpy little arms are outstretched, ready to give and receive. Her little cleft chin seems resolute, and above it her simple mouth offers neither seduction nor reprimand. Altogether the unremarkable features of her face suggest a spirit of enterprise and matter-of-fact capability. Her hair caps and frames this somewhat stoic little visage, but falls far short of the floating, seductive tendrils in more fanciful illustrations. It is in the regions beyond her dumpy waistline that she evokes anything at all of the sinuous sensuousness that proved so alluring to sailors and scientists alike; here her body appears to move with the suppleness of an eel. The green scales glisten and shimmer. The fins are perfectly fluted, and edged with a glorious carmine. The symmetrical tail offers a precise parting that brings the undulations of her nether torso to a sublime half-crown. At the other end her loins are girt with a flurry of finny artifice, above which is a belt of glowing yellow cockles. No wonder her disposition appears so phlegmatic; the means she has developed for survival in her watery world is magnificent. Imagine the wonder she must have aroused for the sailors on that ship, anchored off the coast of Borneo. Sun-battered months and sea-faring miles from the familiarities of their homes, the men would stand transfixed. Here she was, antipodean woman, with all the promises of otherness and mystery intact. Here she lay, abandoned and gasping on their deck, torn from the element she had made her own.

But what does one do when the shadows of one's dreams become reality? All too often it is too much of a burden to bear. For dreams to remain seductive, their liminal nature must be preserved. A fish-woman gasping for life on a burning deck is a far cry away from the shadows that darted before the prow in the emerald waters. The fish-maiden had to be minded, once captured. What to do?

The siren who had slipped into the sailors' nightly dreams, who had caught the corner of their sight as they daily searched the horizon for signs of land, who arose from the depths and vanished into the incandescence of the sun on water, had seemed to be beyond the possibility of ownership. Playful, evasive, joyous in her realm, her lack of need for anything they could offer was infuriating.

But now that they had her, what to do, what to do? A tub was brought from the bilges, a common tin tub in which she was laid. She was carried from the dripping nets on the steamy decks and deposited without ceremony. For four days and seven hours she was studied and measured and observed and documented, then taunted and poked and prodded, after wonderment had turned sour.

During those slow four days and nights the sailors came to realise the truth. For months at a time over the long years at sea they had striven to know the Pacific and its shorelines. Both had proved elusive. Yet here, now, in front of them lay the evidence that a woman, small, strange, but a woman nevertheless, had done what they had all been trying to do for so long. Here lay a woman who had so surrendered herself to this new hemisphere, this new terrain, this new cosmology, that she had completely re-adapted her body, her style, her way of life so that she was one with this place. And clearly she and her sisters had been doing it for a long time before the mariners had set sail.

The official records state that she was offered small fish, molluscs, crabs, crayfish, but that she would not eat. They say she occasionally uttered cries like those of a mouse. And surely there were many small acts performed on her out of jealousy, spite, then hatred during those four days and seven hours of hell?

During the time of her capture, and throughout the time of her incarceration, her many sisters never left the vicinity. All along the lonely sullen shoreline of Ambon the tepid air was swelled by a million tiny cries as her sisters called back to her: 'We are here. We are here. We hear you. We are with you.' The off-shore waters were constantly a-ruffle with their nervous turnings and tumblings, weaving and wavings so that the seas bubbled with their wrath and the air was filled with their grief.

She died in the tub. Vanished. But not quite.

At dawn on the fifth day the unkempt, deranged and listless sailors woke uneasily from sleep on the shoreline around their captive. One by one they approached to witness the impossible; the siren had evaporated. Gone. Dissolved.

Except that, in her place, she had left tiny traces of what she had become for them…a few faeces, similar to those of a cat, were found in the tub. The

little antipodean siren-woman who had proved so elusive, so desirable, so haunting for so many centuries was reduced to so many pellets of cat-shit, once they'd gotten hold of her. Here the official account ends. But old tales from the shorelines of Ambon, and carried by canoes to other shorelines across the Pacific, tell of another ending.

Once the sailors' unbelieving eyes had wearied from surveying the rusting, crumbling bath, they looked shipwards to be presented with yet another wonder. In the slowly growing light of early dawn, from the shoreline to the ship-bow, the entire ocean bobbed and twinkled with the cast-off tails of a million mermaids. And beyond to the new sun, the ocean was paved with a path of glistening, glinting discarded tales, sensuous and slinky, carmine and yellow and blue and green.

The sailors panicked. There were too many. They were too beautiful. And their beauty was poised to fester and rot and stink and engulf and infect and inflame as soon as that new sun reached its zenith.

So the ship set sail from the coastlines of Ambon that morning with a silent crew, turned towards the home journey to the Netherlands, and hugged the earth's curve northwards with a terror that clung like infection of another kind.

Even with the most finely tuned scepticism intact, I doubt whether any of this is fable. But the story does, of course, present serious difficulty for scientists, scholars, explorers, historians and theorists. Like legends and desires, such tales have a tendency to evaporate when scrutinised too closely.

THE BOAT STORY

The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. *In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.*
– Michel Foucault

THE fact that the entire country had lost its grip – lost its heartbeat – wasn't immediately evident on the outside. On the outside a thin mantle of grey cladding held everything in check with the veneer of order and efficiency. The tarred-over suburban streets, the reflective sheen of the shopping malls, the slick sameness of the TV programs, the silky efficiency of the business suits – all had a polish that held the groaning oldness of the land itself hostage.

The clues lay on the outskirts of the main agendas – in places and incidents and news stories that seemed to have nothing to do with what was happening on the surface during those years. Like the dreams of others. The dreams of others.

From time to time these dreams were washed to shore. But they were immediately captured and incarcerated. Or sent back to that place from whence they had come.

Some of these stories were collected and recorded as 'national incidents'. The dreamers were never named. Their travels and travails were dismissed as of no interest. The conditions of their exile, the spirit of their embarkation, the hopes that had kept them afloat, were never permitted to be spoken of within the shoreline of the old old land, the land which for thousands of years had depended on such stories to continue the slow beat of its ancient heart.

For in the hearts and minds of all people, this land had always been The Antipodes. For while other regions of the earth had had the option of playing that role, it was in the great flat island in the Southern Hemisphere that the term had come to rest. Here was buried that magnet to which otherness was always drawn.

Even for the custodians of this place, the land itself offered a space for stories that connected the elsewheres of past and future to

the present. It was a place where ancestor spirits could mumble and toss in their long sleeps, and could grudgingly engage, from time to time, with the living. But in these times of which I speak all that possibility had ceased. The land had been denied its role as a compass point for dreamings. Only from time to time small stories escaped and drifted along un-noticed in the grey currents of the official news.

This is such a story. I heard it on Radio National when I was painting, one afternoon in my studio in 2002.

In 1999 a Russian man had decided to set sail for the Antipodes. He had heard of the region. Only imagined it. The fact that he lived in a tiny apartment in a land-locked city did not deter his dreams. He held true to them, and began to build his boat inside his apartment. Slowly. Like part of the furniture of the room, it occupied the waking and sleeping architecture of his days.

In time, the boat grew too big for the room itself. It had grown into a dream that could not be contained within the daily practicalities of his life. And so the man slung it from the balcony of his apartment and continued to build. It was colder there working outside during the long winter months, and there was the derision of the neighbours to be endured. But his slow work continued. He rugged up, wore thick mittens and fur ear-warmers, and tied himself to the hull with strips of blanket as the snow swirled around him driven by great windy gusts from the north. The nails were nailed, the planks were glued and caulked, and steadily shaved and shaped.

The boat was not a large one in terms of the great oceans and currents of the planet. It was modest even in terms of his inner-city apartment balcony. Its total length ran to 3.7 metres. Yet it had ample room to house the man's dreams.

When the man turned sixty-nine he decided his boat was finished. He had it pulled slowly and carefully down from its makeshift cradle attached like an ice-encrusted cocoon to his tiny balcony. A small crowd of hunched locals gathered in mufflers and thick coats to watch the procedure. When the boat had safely been lowered to touch the Russian soil, he and three stalwart believers from the village managed to slowly pull the vessel through the snow to the shorelines of the

Caspian Sea. He quit his job, arranged his affairs, closed the door to his apartment and set off along the road his boat had taken to the sullen shores of the Caspian.

His adventures to the Antipodes took many, many months, through places and perils he had never imagined. There had been pirates. And there had been six-metre swells that surged beneath his tiny craft for weeks on end. There had been giant squid. They welled up from the depths on full-moon nights until the entire surface of the sea seemed alive with thrashing tentacles. They broke the surface, turning towards his boat and burning, burning into his dreams with their one perfect eye glinting in concentration under a steely moon.

On his seventieth birthday the Russian reached the northern shore of Australia. His small craft had shrivelled along the way – burned by the equator, sucked dry by searching tentacles, and pirated by disappointed buccaneers. Its hull had grown as thin as silver foil, and as dry as a desert wind. His entry into the harbour was heralded by shoals of silvery fish and soaring clouds of turning birds, so that it seemed the boat was moving suspended by both water and sky. As locals and sailors turned as one to watch this spectacle, the old man seemed oblivious to the strangeness he brought with him. For the inhabitants of this southern continent had not seen a dreamer for a long, long time. They gathered around him silently, for that was their way, and their silence encouraged him to tell his tale.

The tale took time – how long, no one who had been present was sure – but within seconds, it seemed, the man was taken ashore and checked and found wanting by the authorities. His passport, they told him, was expired, and because of his lack of identity he was to make his way back to the nearest harbour. He must set off for somewhere else where he could obtain a visa, South Africa perhaps.

The man was old, his boat had passed into another state belonging to the vessels of the dreaming, yet he seemed unperturbed. He stayed for a meal, told of his story without regret or bitterness to Radio National, and set sail again. His Antipodes denied him; he still had his story to cling to.

When the Lockmaster of Darwin Harbour was interviewed on Radio National, he said that the old man had made him remember a time when he could believe in other worlds. That he had been an inspiration. As it came down the airwaves, the Lockmaster's accent was parched and flat. He sounded disbelieving. Self-doubting. Like a man who had seen an apparition. To those who listened, the short news item seemed like a dream. Something from a very, very long time ago. And then the grey news washed over the story again, and buried it beneath the sea of statistics and data that had come to take the place of the sea of dreams.

Illustration and references at www.griffithreview.com

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ESSAY

Slow and steady

Lost in translation

Jane Downing

WHEN I got back to the Ministry the electricity was still down. Our open plan office was a cavernous space, quiet now without the hum of the air conditioning and the clickety-clack of the one desktop computer. The bags I carried came under scrutiny – there was little else to do. I was single and childless and my sister had just had a son back in Australia so the bags were full of delightful 'little' things that got my Marshallese colleagues clucking. I'd particularly fallen in love with one tiny T-shirt at the one tiny department store on the island. The stencil was bright and cheerful: a pink hermit crab and a startled, elongated green fish over three wavy blue lines representing the water all around us. *Om eo im tak eo*, it read.

'What does that mean?' I asked.

'You don't know the story of *Om eo im tak eo*?'

Kiaben, my counterpart on the UN project, piped up then. Every kid on the island knew the fable so they all appreciated the opportunity of a fresh audience. *Bwebwenato*, storytelling, was the national pastime. So we sat in the dark office around a mythical fireside, and I first heard the story of the Hermit Crab and the Needlefish. It had a familiar rhythm. For a moment I didn't feel so far from home.

NEEDLEFISH ARE LICKETY-SPLIT fast; hermit crabs lumber over the land slowly with a scavenged shell on their back. Any race between them would be unlikely, and unequal. But that is the way of fables. 'Let's race,' shouts the Needlefish, and isn't he startled when the Hermit Crab says yes. Being of a pedantic – slow – nature, the Hermit Crab sets the rules. They will start here, tomorrow, the Needlefish in the lagoon and the Hermit Crab on the land.

A little geography lesson is perhaps needed at this point. The Marshall Islands, the home of the fable, and my home of four years, are made up of atolls. Each atoll is a ring of islands, often likened to beads on a necklace, dropped around an internal body of water called a lagoon. Any visual image will probably revolve around the word bikini. Bikini clad westerners on picture postcard beaches beside turquoise lagoons, or a mushroom cloud rising in awesome wrath above the atoll which gave its name to the shocking apparel.

Further south of Bikini Atoll, Kiaben explained the Hermit Crab's rules. The race course would be a circle, starting and ending where they now stood. So that, the Hermit Crab said, the Needlefish couldn't just swim about in one place and simply claim he won, he was to call out each time he got to a new island in the chain. He was to call out, 'little crab where are you?' The Hermit Crab would call back. The Needlefish agreed this sounded sensible and spent the night boasting to all his aquatic friends about how he was going to win the race.

The next morning they met again at the spot and off they went, the Needlefish swimming faster than lightening, faster than a shooting star. At each island he called, 'little crab, where are you?' and each time he heard a voice from the shore, assuring him and taunting him, 'here I am, here I am in front of you.' He couldn't believe it. He swam faster. There was no way slow-poke Hermit Crab could beat lickety-split Needlefish.

When he got to the finish line, the Hermit Crab called out, 'what took you?' And the Needlefish disappeared below the surface of the lagoon, never to be an arrogant prick again.

The Hermit Crab had a big feast to celebrate with his cousins and brothers, uncles and sisters. Each had played their part well, calling from an island, 'here I am, here in front of you.' They may not be the fastest creatures on the atoll, but together they had won the race.

'BUT THAT'S CHEATING.' I didn't say this out loud. It wasn't my country. But the sense of umbrage stayed even as the electricity came back on and I put away my nephew's new clothes. I took it – the umbrage, not the T-shirt – to dinner that evening and discussed it with the new man in my life, a German Indiana Jones, who'd arrived on the island a month before. I told him about *Om eo im tak eo* and he too recognised the rhythms. But instead of the collusive evening I'd imagined championing the slow and steady tortoise over the arrogant hare, he told me the German version: The Hare and the Hedgehog.

We sat in the bar above Reimer's department store looking out over the lagoon and another perfect sunset that would blot out the rusting tankers and half-finished breeze-block constructions. He could tell a good story, large hands giving a visual accompaniment. He described the arrogant Hare teasing the Hedgehog until he was goaded into a race. They agreed on the course, from one end of the field to the other and then back, but once again, this momentous competition was, on the Hedgehog's request, held off until the next day. They met anon, as agreed, and they were off, the Hare leaping down the field faster than lightening, faster than a shooting star, *et cetera*. When he got to the far end of the field, the Hedgehog called out, 'I'm already here.' The Hare ran even faster back up the field only to find the Hedgehog standing there. 'I won,' he said.

'Again! Run again!' shouted the Hare and he ran up and down the field, finding the Hedgehog had beaten him every time, and was hardly panting, until the Hare dropped dead of exhaustion. The Hedgehog and his helpmate, his brother, celebrated in style.

This time I did say it out loud. 'But that's cheating.'

BUT I AM being completely ethnocentric here, assuming in Australia we all have Aesop's Tortoise and the Hare as our touchstone story from childhood, the true template against which to judge the cheating Hermit Crab and the lying Hedgehog? Perhaps in multicultural Australia this version needs to be retold.

I heard it first at pre-school, sitting comfortably cross-legged on the reading mat, hands folded in my lap, the teacher holding our attention with a sing-song voice and the turning pages of an over-sized book. Hare was long and lean. I think I have superimposed his carrot from a later cartoon. The

Tortoise wore glasses – implying wisdom – because he was wise enough to have a winning strategy.

You should have the rhythm of the story by now: the fast creature, the slow creature, the race, the astounding victory by the slower of the two. In the Tortoise and the Hare, our hero has no help from family. He runs the race, and he keeps on going, completing the course in his methodical way. He wins because the Hare is the victim of hubris. He is so sure of his speed he thinks he can spare the time for a nap. While sleeping, he is overtaken. His self-delight brings him down. And so we were taught at pre-school, and onward, a lesson to take into life: slow and steady wins the race.

DESPITE OUR CULTURAL differences, I married the German Indiana Jones. We joined our cultures in a child. (I sang our son nursery rhymes; his father saw the pictures in the book. He exclaimed, 'what, Humpty Dumpty is an egg?') Motherhood is a slow and steady race, day by day, minute by minute some days.

We came to Australia and I took our child to Reading Time up the perilous stairs of the local library. It was Multicultural Week, and Anansi was our hero: the well-known trickster of the Caribbean who often presented himself as a spider. His race was through a swamp with a mud turtle who had to use the road and the bridges. The clever, but physically slow, Mud Turtle enlisted the help of his family, one stationed on each of the bridges. 'Here I am, in front of you,' each in turn shouted as Anansi popped up along the course. So the slow creature won again.

I was sensing a pattern. It was becoming clear: the version of the Aesop's fable popular in the English language was the odd one out.

Of course Anansi, being an archetypal trickster, won in the end. He challenged the mud turtle to a second test, who could hold their breath the longest underwater, and while the turtle was patiently holding on, under water, Anansi disappeared with the prize. Nevertheless, the race result remained. And it was won by collusion, cheating and trickery.

OVER THE YEARS a second child arrived and I came across more versions of the fable, half-deliberately, while never truly searching. Stories are like viruses, they infect us so they get retold again and again. This one got

itself around the world and back. On Pentecost Island it is the Crab and the Kingfisher, in Polynesia the Rat races the Octopus. Across in Africa, there is the Snail (and his identical brother) and the Squirrel of Zaire.

Interestingly, there was one gap. I worked as a community development officer at an Indigenous corporation during this time but never came across a version from Australia. I worked with mainly Wiradjuri and Barkindji people and the corporation ran a pre-school, so we were always on the lookout for good stories from other language groups too. Maybe the culture is so ancient their stories developed separately and there is no equivalent. I keep my ears open though, hoping one day to find an Indigenous version. When writing this I looked and drew another blank, but I did discover the Malay King Crow and Water Snail. The snail's friends helped him win the race.

And so, the version I grew up with remains the odd one out. It makes me wonder why my lot, the white Anglo-Saxons, so opposed the moral found everywhere else in the world that we adopted the fable with such different internal workings. What did it reflect in us? How did it mould us? We are told to rely on ourselves, that the individual is all, that hard work will pay off. So we delight when high-flyers falter and fall. We deny nepotism and inherited wealth even exist as forces in Australia. We worship the cult of the individual. We believe in the Tortoise; though who cannot say they've never felt the tiresome, steady, pedantic life is not for them…

When the German Indiana Jones left for a sequel elsewhere, I had to go on telling our children the stories on my own. Though my world had ended, the world had to go on. Life's race had to go on. The UN Project I'd been working on in the Marshall Islands was titled 'Family Life Education' and I, at least, had learnt a lot. Now when I read *Om eo im tak eo* I don't think about the hermit crabs cheating. They won because the family pulled together and helped. Just as I know I would not still be in the race without the help of my family. The little T-shirt bought on the slow day in the Marshalls had been handed down through all the cousins. It's a symbol of a greater whole: that we share. Together – that's how we get through.

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FICTION

A CASTLE IN TOORAK

MARION HALLIGAN

THE bouncer was cute. I gave him a wicked smile, he frowned, looked us up and down slowly, and let us in. I knew he would. We looked good, our clothes were right, we were young and pretty. Me more so than my sister Annie, who's younger than me, everybody says so, about being prettier, but she doesn't mind, I look after her, and make sure she's dressed properly. That's my career, clothes, or will be, and she's going to help me.

And then it's not that big a deal. It's a new *in* place, but hardly crowded with celebrities. I thought I saw Lara Bingle with some hunk, and maybe that was Miranda Kerr, but no, just someone with the same eyes-too-wide-apart face. Of course it was very dark, hard to see anything at all. The lighting cast strange flaring shadows, you wouldn't have known your own family.

Annie and I usually go out on Friday nights. We allow ourselves one cocktail, the most glamorous and extravagant they've got, and leave it at that. We don't binge drink, and don't waste money, either. We rather like the kind in big round glasses with cream in them as well as exotic liqueurs, then it's as though you are having dessert as well. We make the drink last, taking small luxurious sips, and see what happens. Sometimes we dance with one another, sometimes

some guy asks us, it's nice sitting over an amazing cocktail and wondering what will happen next.

Annie saw the guy first, standing against the bar, with a head of curls and a tiny goatee beard. I looked at him, and he came over. Would you ladies permit me to join you, he asked, in a posh voice, and we said, Why not.

It all started from there. He wanted to buy us another cocktail, but we said we only ever had the one, and he said, How elegant. He did have a rather funny way of talking, old-fashioned, as if he belonged to another era. He gave us his card, and said he would like to see us for coffee the next day, so we arranged to meet at Caph's, late in the morning after we'd been shopping. In the bright light of day he was very colourful, with his reddish curls and beard, his bright blue eyes, his pale clothes. We knew from his card that his name was Frederick Barbour. We used to have an uncle Fred who was lovely, so that seemed a good omen, somehow.

He was very polite and not at all pushy. His manners were lovely. At first we didn't know which of us he was interested in, he included both in any suggestions he made, but gradually it became clear that it was me he cared most about. It's you, Cat, of course it is, said Annie, and I did feel pleased. But at first the three of us went around together. He was an IT specialist, he said, had his own business, but he was more interested in talking about his family history than in his present circumstances. He told us he was descended from Frederick the Holy Roman Emperor, that Frederick called Barbarossa, which you know, he said, means red beard, and you can see it persists til this day. He pinched his little red goatee. Got excommunicated by the pope and walked barefoot to Canossa, and waited in the snow until the pope relented. Do you have a title, I asked. Oh, mobs, he said, King of Germany, King of Burgundy, King of Arles, not to mention Duke of this and that and Holy Roman et cetera, but what's the point, these days. They're all out of date. Plain Frederick Barbour does me.

HE WAS REALLY very handsome. And very romantic. And kind. After a good while he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. We planned it for the end of the year, when I would have finished my

fashion course. I didn't have anybody to talk to about it. No parents. There was a stepmother somewhere, but we hadn't seen anything of her since our father died. She was the worst kind. Didn't quite dress us in rags and put us to work in the ashes, but just about. Favoured her own horrible children. When she was little, Annie called her *that stepwoman*, which I thought was marvellous, and we always thought of her like that. We escaped when we were sent to boarding school, a good one, we flourished there. That was the good thing our father did for us.

Frederick gave me great wads of notes and told me to buy a wedding dress and a trousseau. He didn't actually say so but I could tell from his attitude that he always had plenty of money, that's IT for you, I suppose. But I wasn't going to buy the dress, I was going to design and make it for myself. For a graduation project we had to do a cocktail dress, and that's what it would be, I didn't want the full meringue. And I'd design something for Annie too. I wasn't going to have the usual hideous bridesmaid business, as though the mean bride thinks she will look better if her attendants have ugly dresses. Annie was also interested in fashion, she was at the beginning of the course, and we were going to go into business together. I'd be the designer, mainly, she'd do the books, she's clever like that. She was an excellent seamstress, too, we both were, we were famous for our exquisite handsewing. We were going to sell our clothes under the label Annicat; Annie's idea, and brilliant I thought. She said she was sorry her name had to come first, but that was the only way to put them together.

My dress was very classical, with a scooped neckline and tiny sleeves, a fitted waist and a bell-shaped skirt. Plain, plain, just my figure and the ivory silk taffeta perfectly cut. I don't care for strapless dresses on brides. They make their flesh look ugly, either too bulgy or too skinny. Annie's was similar, in silver grey, very flattering. I am fair, she is dark. I spent money on shoes, and silk underwear, a pashmina shawl and some honeymoon outfits.

I could tell Frederick liked my dress by the way he looked at me, his gaze somehow moist, and yearning, and a bit breathtaken. He put his hand out and reverently brushed my shoulder, and I knew he liked the modesty and the understated sexiness of my appearance. We went

to Port Douglas for our honeymoon, and I was so glad we had waited to be together, we had a suite and hardly came out of it except to swim in the pool sometimes. We flew back to Sydney and moved into his apartment in Elizabeth Bay. Annie and I had had a tiny flat in Potts Point, and Annie stayed on there.

EARLY IN THE new year, Frederick said we would be moving to Melbourne. I wasn't happy at leaving my sister behind but he said we would take her with us, he had a house there, quite big, we could all live together and she could transfer her fashion course to Melbourne. I suppose most new brides feel like me, that life with this new husband is just wonderful, that he makes everything so clear and easy and such a delight. Annie was quite keen on going to Melbourne, but she found a tiny place to live near the college, and came to us mainly for weekends. I was back to designing, mainly drawing, but I was turning some designs into actual clothes. I was working on a collection for the next summer, that would keep me busy enough. Frederick suggested we rent a shop and sell them through that but I thought that was too big an enterprise for this moment, it would be better to sell into some boutiques and get a name first, and then when Annie was ready we could think about a shop. It's a big job, a shop is.

Frederick's working hours were erratic, sometimes he was off for long days and I only saw him at night, sometimes he had time to spare and we lived a life that was another sort of honeymoon, going to galleries and out for lunch and shopping. He loved shopping, loved buying us things. His house was a '30s mansion in Toorak, with towers and crenellations and a row of machicolations across the front, a kind of castle really, but it wasn't furnished in period style, thank goodness, but with wonderful timeless modern pieces. He said he wanted me to feel that it was mine, that I should buy things for it. He'd given me a credit card instead of the wads of notes, it had a $50,000 limit on it. I didn't expect to get anywhere near that. Sometimes we bought paintings, always choosing them together, and he paid. There were a lot of walls in the house, plenty of room to display them.

One day Annie said, You know, I think this house is a kind of reverse TARDIS. Bigger on the outside than the inside.

What?

She took me outside. Look, she said, how much house there is. I'm sure there are more rooms than we have been into on the inside.

The keys to the house were kept in a small mirrored cupboard in the hall. Not all of the rooms were locked. Frederick had pointed out the keys to me and said I could go wherever I liked. Annie and I wandered around, sometimes unlocking doors. There were bedrooms and sitting rooms, far more than we could use. Annie had a suite to herself. There was a nursery, decorated in lemon colours, everything was tidy and clean, a couple came in every morning and kept it like that. As far as I could see, we had been in every room. It just looks as though there should be more of them, said Annie. Optical illusion, I laughed, and she did too.

Annie liked to tease me about the titles. She'd call me *your majesty*, and say things like, which country are you queen of this week? Burgundy? Arles? I think you should be living in your palace in Arles, that would be good. It was a bit unfair to Frederick, who didn't ever boast of his family background. He liked it, yes, was proud of it, but in a tucked-away, taken-for-granted manner.

There was a framed picture in the house, a sheet of vellum from a medieval illuminated manuscript, of Frederick Barbarossa. Astonishingly like my Frederick. The pale heart-shaped face, the slender figure, the red-gold curls, the bright blue eyes.

YOU KNOW, SAID Annie, you know more about his twelfth century background than about the present one. What about his parents? Brothers and sisters? Where was he born?

He might be an orphan, like us, I said. I couldn't see that any of these things mattered much. I was very happy, married to Frederick. He was sweet tempered. Some people might think he was rather controlling, but it gave me pleasure to fit in with his wishes. He was so gentle and loving, there seemed no point in being self-willed or foolishly independent. He indulged me in everything I wanted. I was designing and making my clothes, they were much in demand, and I was employing some people to help me sew them. Think of opening that shop, said Frederick, who was very proud of me, maybe not

immediately, but keep it in mind. Frederick set me up a website, and the clothes were photographed and displayed on that. Perhaps that's the way to go, I said. Could be, said Frederick.

I sold some of my clothes through a small boutique round the corner. Annie was on the point of finishing her course and was thinking what to do next. She managed to get a job in this boutique, so she could learn the trade at first hand; it seemed a good idea. She wasn't as keen on designing as I was, and learning management skills would come in handy when we opened the shop.

At about this time Frederick had to go to New York on a business trip. I thought he might have taken me but he said it would be too rushed, he wouldn't have time to look after me, I wouldn't enjoy it. When he came back we would go to Paris. I liked the idea of Paris. I'd never been out of Australia, and Paris was a dream of mine. Before he went he took the keys out of the mirrored cupboard. You know about these, he said, and now there's this – he showed me a small lacquered oval, with a series of numbers and letters engraved on it, not making any sense. This is the password to the big computer, he said, but I don't want you to use it. It's here, and it's safe, but you must never key it in.

So why leave it, said Annie when I told her, why not just hide it in a drawer somewhere?

Maybe it's a test, I said, like Pandora, or Eve. To see if he can trust me.

Huh, said Annie. Of course she is not the focus of Frederick's affection, the way I am, she is inclined to be a bit more critical, even though he has always been so good to her.

Still passing the test? she'd say, when she came to visit. It irritated me, rather. When Frederick came back he hugged me and we went to bed for the afternoon, as we sometimes did, it was lovely.

We booked our tickets for Paris, we weren't taking Annie, I thought she should make her own life, but before we went he had to make a quick business trip to Sydney. I took the rings of keys out of the cupboard and looked at the small lacquered oval. I wondered what would happen if I typed it in. I put the keys back.

Several times I did this, and then I thought, Why don't I just look. I always thought what Eve and Pandora did was important,

it had immediate disastrous consequences but the result was finally immensely significant, bringing free will to the world and that. And there was no way Frederick would ever find out. I'd go in, look, and come out again. I was curious to see what he didn't want me to see.

I typed in the code and straightaway up came a film. Or maybe it was a video clip. Anyway, it seemed to be some sort of narrative. A beautiful pale woman lying naked on satin sheets, with fair curls tumbling about her shoulders. She smiled in a bewitching manner. Then a man came in. You couldn't see his face, but there was a flash of reddish hair, and that elegant white bottom, I'd have known it anywhere. He began to make love to the woman. That I recognised too, Frederick's loving foreplay, it was disturbing to see it on a screen before me, something that I thought belonged to me alone, and here was this other woman, luxuriating in his caresses. He entered her, and she threw her head back in ecstasy, then there was a faint pause and he put his arms around her throat and began to strangle her. Her eyes flew open and she choked, the music reached a crescendo, and as he came to orgasm she did too, in a kind of way, she convulsed and then went very still, her face twisted in an ugly mask. He walked away and left her dead on the couch.

I SAT STUNNED for a moment. I had heard of snuff movies, of course I had, although people said they were fake, people didn't really die in them. But this woman was dead, I was sure of it, the ugly details of the soiled bed and her gaping face made that clear. I exited from the clip but that didn't work, it started playing over again. The more I tried to get rid of it the more frenzied it became, and then the screen started to flash as other women, but always the same man, went through similar motions, but with all sorts of variations. They cut back and forwards in a kind of frenzied fashion, and nothing I did could get rid of them. I looked for the cord to unplug it but it was fixed through the wall, I wondered about cutting it but thought maybe it would electrocute me. And how would I explain that to Frederick? I tried to do a force quit, tried to turn it off at the back. Nothing worked. I stared at this flashing screen in a panic. Telling myself to think, it was a computer, it must be possible to turn it off.

Now there was blood, red washes of it, and worse, I couldn't look any longer. And always the nipped waist and shapely buttocks of Frederick.

I took out my phone and called Annie, she's better at computers than I am. She didn't answer, I had to leave a message. I'm not sure what I said. Sex and death, maybe; did I use the word snuff? Something garbled and panicky. I put the phone back in my pocket and tried again to turn the infernal machine off.

Cat, what are you doing? It was Frederick, home early. I sat with tears pouring out of my eyes. Oh silly Cat, he said fondly, why? You make me so sad, I didn't think you would succumb, I didn't think you'd be like the others, oh, I am so sorry. He pressed some combination of keys, and the screen went dark. Come, he said. And took me to the bedroom, tucked me up under the doona, soothed me, but I was still panicking. He brought me a sweetish drink, and I must have gone to sleep. When I woke up he was lying beside me. I felt quite at peace, the images seemed a long way away, vaguely disquieting but somehow not immediately concerning. Frederick was naked, and so was I. He took me in his arms, his dear soothing self, and gently pulled away the doona. Something was worrying me. He stretched me out on the piled up pillows. A part of the panelling slid open, it seemed to be a door into a room I hadn't known was there. A man came out, carrying a large video camera. Frederick began to make love to me.

WELL, YOU'VE GATHERED I lived to tell my tale. I did not become the unwitting star of my own snuff movie. When Frederick began to caress my drugged and languid flesh I could hardly move, but after a moment I was repulsed by his touch. That other woman's tormented face filled my mind. I couldn't move, hardly, but I could scream, and I did. Frederick put his hand over my mouth, and I bit him. I screamed again. But he was stronger than me, his slenderness was iron hard, underneath. I was helpless, and I thought I was doomed.

Annie had got my message, finally. She'd been at a party in the north west of the state, at the home of a girl she went to school with. One of those country places with no telephone reception. She came as soon as she heard it, driving down with the brother of the girl. He

was a handsome brown farmery type called Sean. She let herself into the house and looked for me, running round the passages with Sean's hand in hers. It was very quiet, she said, I knew there was something wrong. Near my bedroom she saw a door hidden in the wall, leading into the room the cameraman had come from. It had been left open. She glanced in, through into the bedroom, and was transfixed by what she saw. By this time Frederick was trying to put a pillow over my face. My legs moved like a zombie's, she said. She dialled the emergency number on her mobile. Sean ran in and punched Frederick. He rose in the air and fell flat to the ground, his face pale, the hair on his head, face and groin shining golden red, his limbs splayed like a puppet. Apparently the cameraman said, Hey, watch it, mate, this camera's worth a fortune. He did his best to run away, but stopping to pack up his equipment. The police came, quite quickly, I don't know what Annie said but it got them moving.

Frederick had deleted all the stuff from his own computer, but there was another hidden room, in one of the towers, a kind of fortress, with a bank of computers. Lists of names of customers, the business was huge, international. Mainly online, but there were also some DVDs to be posted out. All in the trade name of Snuff/Love. Frederick was tried for various murders, and convicted. All the money sort of disappeared, being proceeds of crime, but he had put the house in my name so I had that. I sold it and we opened a dress shop in Armadale. Our Annicat label. It did well. Annie proved a great businesswoman, and I was a good designer. The scandal could have helped. People came to stare, and stayed to buy.

Marion Halligan writes novels, short stories and essays, and regularly reviews books. She has received an AM for her services to literature. She has been short-listed for most of the prizes on offer, and has won some. *Valley of Grace* (Allen & Unwin, 2009) won the ACT Book of the Year and was long-listed for the IMPAC Prize. Her latest is a collection of short stories, *Shooting the Fox* (Allen & Unwin, 2011). She is a frequent contributor to Griffith REVIEW.

MEMOIR

Happily ever after

The possibility of another ending

Michelle Law

I DON'T remember much about my twenty-first birthday besides being heartbroken. A few weeks before my birthday, my boyfriend and I split up, and I was too preoccupied with the fallout to celebrate anything. We'd been together for nearly three years and were each other's first loves, and like many first loves, we believed that we would be together forever. We planned to travel the world visiting relatives and learning new languages. After a few years, we would get married and settle down. Kids would come along after we bought a house. He wanted two children, because a pair was manageable, and I wanted more, because I loved growing up in a loud household with my four siblings. We could never decide on a number and when we found ourselves arguing too earnestly about the subject, we became uncomfortable and fell silent. But the point was that we had a plan. So when our relationship fell apart, I began drifting.

My ex-boyfriend moved overseas and I stayed in Brisbane. In the immediate weeks afterwards I wandered around my apartment, occasionally stopping to stare at myself in the mirror to remind myself I existed, or to make a packet of two-minute noodles. I took long, hot showers to ready myself for the outside world, and then I would collapse into my bed and cry. On the days I willed myself to leave the house, everything reminded me of

what I had lost. We'd eaten at that restaurant to celebrate graduation despite the food being beyond our budgets. We'd stood at that bridge and watched the city lights reflected in the river the night he found out his grandmother died. At that park, he'd sat me on his handlebars and biked us up a steep hill until he had an asthma attack. I needed to escape, so I took a trip home to the Sunshine Coast.

'How are you feeling?' said my sister Candy, winding down the car windows.

'Better than I was expecting,' I said.

I took in the sights on the long drive to Dad's house: flat, main streets flanked by lawnmower outlets and used car dealerships; warehouses selling custom-made kayaks; men blasting hip hop from their utes; and girls with fake tan and hair extensions chatting into their iPhones. Further along, beach-goers rode BMX bikes across the canal with the sun beating down on their bare shoulders. I was home, and for the first time, I didn't hate it.

Growing up, I'd found the coast isolating and stifling. Being Chinese and bookish, I learnt that if you lived on the Sunshine Coast and looked different or had an interest in something beyond water sports, shopping, or drinking, it meant that you were invisible. But it was for those same reasons that I appreciated being back. Right now, I needed to disappear.

I STAYED AT Dad's house for a week longer than I planned. Dad gave up his bed and slept on the couch despite his lame leg, and made me supper each night when he returned from work at our family's restaurant. I'd spend the day reading and snacking and trying to forget I was ever in a relationship at all. It was liberating being somewhere I was a stranger and could wallow without restraint. But Dad saw my moods as a bad sign, and each night he would sit me down at the kitchen counter and attempt to make me feel better.

'What's the use in being sad?' he said one evening, sharpening a cleaver with the base of a china bowl. 'Be like your Dad: happy-go-lucky.'

He proceeded to fill the bowl with chopped fruit and nudged it towards me. Eating fruit after work had been Dad's ritual since before I could remember. He'd been managing restaurants for thirty years and most of my childhood memories of him involved apple slices and orange segments

at midnight. Depending on the season, he'd come home bearing boxes overflowing with kiwi fruits, or cherries, or bananas, or mangoes. He would set the fruit down, sharpen his knife, and then catch up on his Chinese soaps with my siblings or myself sitting happily at his side.

Dad was in his mid-sixties now and semi-retired, which for him meant working seven-hour shifts, seven days a week, all year. But despite his intense work ethic, I witnessed Dad tiring over the years, and with age came his philosophical and chatty side.

'You can't feel sad forever – you move on,' said Dad. 'For example, even though your mum and I didn't work out, I still hope that she can find someone.'

MUM HADN'T DATED anyone since she and Dad separated in 1994. She instigated their separation, and she was often very lonely, but their marriage made her cynical enough to want to wait for someone who would meet her high standards. She wanted a man who was a feminist, but also believed in chivalry and treated her like a queen. He needed to be approved by her children. He couldn't smoke. He needed an STD screening before they had sex. And he should preferably resemble Pierce Brosnan.

'Why kiss so many Mr Wrongs to get to Mr Right?' Mum will say, when we press her about her love life. We try explaining that that is how dating works. She needs to give people a chance. 'I haven't slept with a man in twenty years,' she'll announce proudly. 'I'm in no rush.'

On the flipside, Dad has a very different attitude.

'It's easy to make friends!' he'll say.

'Friends' are what Dad calls the women he's dated since he and Mum divorced. He finds them through mutual friends, or on the internet, or in the classifieds section of the Chinese newspaper. They will send him pictures of themselves standing expressionless before a sculpted hedge, or by a majestic fountain, or in a glamour shot in gaudy clothing beneath harsh studio lights. When we visit Dad, he hands us a stack of printed profiles and asks us to assess and trade them with each other over lunch like baseball cards. Using this love philosophy, Dad attempted to comfort me.

'There are plenty of fish in the sea!' he said.

'I'm not thinking about dating right now, Dad. I just loved someone and it feels strange that we're not together anymore. Do you know what I mean?' Dad stared at me and gave me a half nod. I wanted him to understand. 'Do you think you've ever been in love?' I said, hoping to open up the conversation. He and Mum had been married for nearly twenty years and he was gutted after the split – surely he understood.

Dad popped a piece of apple into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. He paused and then answered, 'No, I don't think so.'

JENNY HAD HEARD that Danny was very handsome. He was her brother-in-law's best friend and according to her sister, Danny was tall, sophisticated and charming – everything Jenny envisioned a man should be.

As a child growing up in Malaysia, Jenny loved western pop stars and crooners. The Beatles, Elvis, and the Bee Gees were her favourites because they were romantic, young men who were sensitive and expressed their feelings. They called their girls the prettiest in the world, and Jenny hoped to meet a boy who treated her the same. But it wasn't difficult for Jenny to meet boys. They came to her. From a young age, people were enamored by Jenny's beauty. Photographers approached her on the street and begged her to sign with their agencies. In Hong Kong, classmates lined up at her door, hoping to be the lucky one who walked her to school. Jenny had the pick of the litter, but she had her eye on the perfect man: David.

David was a consultant at the carpet store opposite the boutique where Jenny worked as a sales girl. He was smart, good-looking, had a great sense of humour, and surprised Jenny on her lunch breaks with gifts of candy and perfume. David even gained the trust of Jenny's overprotective father, which meant they were free to date.

After being together a year or so, David brought up the subject of sex, about which Jenny was reluctant. She wanted to wait until they were married and David agreed. So they waited, until some months later when David broke down in tears. He confessed that he had slept with a call girl and now they were seeing each other regularly.

'She seduced me,' said David. 'I was fitting carpet in her apartment for a quote and then she lured me into her shower. I couldn't resist.'

Jenny went home and through tears, relayed what happened to her father. He ordered that Jenny forget about David – he was scum. But no matter how hard she tried, Jenny couldn't stop thinking about him or the call girl. She called David and told him she wanted to meet his new girlfriend to see what made her so desirable.

Later that week, Jenny, David, and the call girl met in a crowded bar in Kowloon. Jenny wore a long, pleated skirt and a batik shirt. The call girl wore thick make-up, a showy blouse, and expensive jewelry. She was surprisingly pretty.

'You're a child,' said the call girl, lighting a cigarette and surveying Jenny. David shifted on his seat nervously. 'He needs a woman.'

Afterwards, Jenny ripped David's photo into pieces and flushed it down the toilet. When David called the following week, saying that he'd been dumped and was begging for Jenny's forgiveness, Jenny's father forbade them from meeting. So Jenny ignored David's messages, which he left daily, and tried to move on.

'Forget about David,' said Josephine, Jenny's eldest sister. 'Danny is a good man. It wouldn't hurt just to meet him.'

Jenny agreed, and Danny was just as wonderful as Josephine had described. He was charming and worldly and came from a good family. He bought Jenny jewellery, and took her to the movies, and introduced her to his mother. In the months they spent together, she forgot about David. So when Danny proposed, Jenny accepted without hesitation. When he asked her to move to Australia with him, leaving her family behind in Hong Kong, she saw it as her duty as his wife. It was a new adventure with the love of her life, and she was willing to follow him anywhere.

But at the wedding, Jenny couldn't ignore the feeling that perhaps she had made a mistake marrying Danny. Danny had chosen the wedding venue and her dress, which she hated, and he had booked a photographer for his side of the family but not hers. It wasn't an accident: he just hadn't bothered.

It got worse when they moved to Australia. Despite speaking English fluently, Jenny felt culture shocked: the food and landscape were alien and the people were uninviting. To Jenny, the Sunshine Coast was a 'ghost town' because it was empty, and because everyone who lived there was white. Jenny

and Danny went on fewer dates and spoke to each other less. She spent more and more time at home, and Danny spent all of his time focusing on making their restaurant a success.

When Jenny was pregnant with their first child, she waitressed at the restaurant full time until her water broke. Danny became more distant after the child was born, and Jenny missed her family, who she spoke to sporadically over the phone.

'I'm lonely,' she would tell them. 'I miss everyone.'

'This was your decision,' they'd say. 'You have to follow your husband.'

At her lowest points, Jenny considered taking her own life, but now she had a daughter to live for. And then she had a son, and then another son and two more daughters. It didn't matter that she and Danny were falling apart, because now she had someone else to love and be loved by.

DANNY WAS LOOKING for a wife. He was resistant to the idea of marriage, but he was nearing thirty and was an only child, and his mother wanted to see him settled down. He had been engaged once, but his mother broke it off after the matchmaker discovered the girls' parents had died in a car crash. As a superstitious woman, she believed the deaths would bring bad luck. But Danny's family had had its own share of bad luck.

Danny grew up in Guangzhou without his father, who lived in San Francisco. There, his father managed a successful Mandarin Club for expats and wired his earnings back to his wife and son in China. He did this for more than a decade, never once visiting his wife, who was twenty years his junior, or their son.

When Danny turned twelve, he met his father for the first time in Hong Kong, where the family planned to start their new life together. His father had earned enough money in America to secure them a comfortable life.

In their new apartment, Danny watched as a tall, bespectacled man in a suit approached him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

'You're a big boy now,' said his father, smiling.

Moments later, his father fell to the ground, clutching his chest. After a decade of alcohol and cigarettes used to dull his loneliness, he'd become overwhelmed meeting his grown son and had a heart attack. He died on the

spot. Danny felt sad about his father's death, and sad for his father, but the man was practically a stranger. Life carried on.

As a child, Danny had been raised to be sensible and pragmatic. His mother had survived World War II and was a hard woman whose main preoccupations were ensuring the house was in order and her son had a bright future. Despite her friends' pleas to remarry, she felt she was an old maid in her mid twenties and didn't want to compromise her son's upbringing. They had each other, and he was such a dutiful boy she didn't need any more children.

'Danny is happy on his own,' she said. 'He's independent.'

Danny was accustomed to solitude. His favorite pastime was climbing trees, picking ripe papayas and snatching bird's eggs from nests and feasting in the treetops. As he ate, he watched the village down below and spat seeds into the air, enjoying the breeze as it cut through the tree branches.

When Danny came of age, he left home and travelled the world by ship. He made his longest stop in America, where he tracked down gangsters who owed his father money and used the money to travel to Australia. In Australia, he discovered he had a knack for drawing, and was offered a scholarship at a visual arts school in Sydney. But there was little money in art, so he declined and returned to Hong Kong, where his mother urged him to meet with his friend's sister-in-law.

'I hear she looks like a movie star,' she said. 'And she comes from a very respectable family.'

Jenny came from Ipoh, where it was believed something in the town's water was responsible for producing gorgeous girls. She was also hardworking and intelligent, and could speak three languages including English, which was a major drawcard for Danny. He was planning to move to Australia after hearing rumours about Hong Kong's handover from British to Chinese rule. Compared to China, Australia was paradise: people were relaxed, it was warm, and there was lots of space. It was the perfect place to raise a family and start a business. He'd heard that Chinese food in Australia was popular; customers found Asian culture exotic.

When Danny and Jenny moved to Caloundra in 1975, their restaurant was a booming success. Word spread about Sunny Village Chinese Restaurant

on Bulcock Street and the locals couldn't get enough. Plates piled high with fried rice and sweet and sour pork left the kitchen and returned scraped clean.

Danny devoted his life to the restaurant: cooking, cleaning, and doing the accounts himself. He worked every day, from morning to midnight, when he would escape into the back room amongst tomorrow's stock and play mah jong into the early morning.

As the family grew, Jenny came to Danny with more anxieties. She felt alone, and no longer felt like they were a couple. Where was the romance? Didn't he care for her anymore? Danny didn't understand and found her melodramatic. He was working for the family and simply didn't have time to worry about trivial things.

One day, after a trip to Hong Kong visiting her family, Jenny returned home and told Danny she wanted a divorce. Their fights had become more frequent and intense over the past year, and their interactions with each other were increasingly volatile. The children hid in the master bedroom as Danny and Jenny's fight, their most colossal yet, weaved around the house like an angry beast. At its climax, Danny stood poised before Jenny with his hand raised before lowering it, defeated, and walking away.

During the long, four-year process of their separation, Danny begged Jenny to take him back. He promised he would be a better husband and would try harder. But Jenny said no – even she had given up on the fairy tale.

AS A CHILD, I never fantasised about my parents reconciling because the concept was simply inconceivable. I was four years old when they separated, and I couldn't remember them being a happy couple, let alone being together in the same room. The only words I remember Mum saying about Dad were hateful things about child support and him brainwashing us with money, whereas Dad was passive-aggressive and bitter and rarely acknowledged Mum's existence at all. These days, at family events, Mum and Dad happily coexist in the same space but they never speak to each other. They have a history, but much of their tension can also be attributed to how incompatible they are as people.

Despite my parents' breakup, I still believe in fairy tales. However, they are usually the ones that entail people choosing the life that makes them

happy. I'm in my early twenties and in a long-term relationship. My eldest sister Candy is in her late thirties and dating. My eldest brother Andrew lives alone and is looking. My brother Ben and his boyfriend have been together for eleven years. And my sister Tammy is getting married this year, despite always being vehemently against the concept. We all lead very different lives, because that makes us happier than pining after a fairytale we've been taught to believe everyone should want: a straight, monogamous relationship that leads to marriage and children. To me, there's nothing wrong with that story, but it doesn't always end with 'happily ever after', and it doesn't remain simple or static, and it isn't always fair to those who are excluded from its narrative. It's also not the only story – there are countless other endings that are up to us to determine.

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FICTION

LIGHT DAWNS

JULIE KEARNEY

And Lo! The Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.
– The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám

EDWARD Patten, born in England but still eligible in the first decades after India, independence to be made Bishop of the Church of South India, was not a worldly man, especially when it concerned his daughter. In fact, in everything concerning Nalini he was a doting fool. Now he frowned, tapping his pen on the desk. Arranging a marriage wasn't a man's job and more than ever he missed Vijaya who had known it to be hers.

Vijaya never had any doubts about how to find a husband for their daughter. Before her death from a heart attack she had sat each morning at the computer, scrolling through prospective grooms on the Anglo-Indian matrimonial websites. None had met with Nalini's approval. Too fat, too old, too ugly – no one pleased their precious girl.

Born to them in later life, the Pattens' only child was beautiful, willful and clever. Having completed her BA she intended further studies and it was accepted that whoever she married must fall in with

these plans. But married she must be. At twenty-two, time wasn't on her side. Bishop Patten sighed and took up his Waterman.

Dear Cousin Nita… He penned a paragraph of greetings and chewed his lip as he came to the nub of the matter:

Nalini tells me that Griffith University in your city offers an excellent course in feminist theory which she hopes to enrol in. But her mother also had a dearly held wish which was to see our Nellie married. This is a difficult subject to broach, but I was wondering if you might have some suggestions regarding a suitable…

Nita replied with the promptness of a woman called upon to match-make. Bishop Patten scanned her letter:

…arranged marriages aren't the way here of course but as it happens I do have someone who might meet with your approval – John's nephew, Harry King. Dr King, actually. (I've enclosed a photo of him taken at our last Christmas party.) Harry is thirty-one and lectures at the same university Nalini wishes to attend. To be honest, I must tell you we are a little worried about him lately. He's become quite reclusive since that wretched wife of his left him. Is that a problem by the way? They're divorced now and there are no children to complicate matters…

Bishop Patten's skin crawled. Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea after all. And Nalini had just told him she liked the fellow's photo.

'But it's only a photo and you'll be going so far. Let's find out more about this chap first.'

'No, Daddy-ji. I told you, I like him. Ask Nita to do her stuff.' Nalini arched her toes, looking at them thoughtfully. Outside the window the coconut palms shivered as if in sympathy.

Dear Edward,

Well I'm afraid you won't like my news. I went over to Harry's place – he's holed up there now he's on sabbatical, writing some book or other – and the upshot is he's agreed, but with one proviso. He's prepared to marry Nalini but in name only. He said he quite understood a bright young student in a developing country might want to further her studies and if the antiquated notions of her father – you must remember Harry is Australian so please don't take offence – if that meant she wasn't allowed unless as a married woman, it was no skin off his nose etc. etc. I believe he thought he was striking a blow for something. So of course I said that wasn't…

Bishop Patten threw down the letter. Insolent pup! How dare he insult Nalini with such a proposal. A marriage in name only indeed!

But when he told Nellie at dinner that night she laughed. 'Don't worry, Daddy.'

Bishop Patten spluttered. 'Don't worry? I'm surprised you aren't insulted.'

'On the contrary, I think it's gone very well. Just as I like in fact.'

'Good heavens, how has it gone well and not badly? The proposal that man has made is dishonourable.'

Nalini jumped up from her chair. Her red sari shimmered like a flame. She stamped her slender foot on the polished tiles; her dark eyes flashed, her lips pouted.

'Honour schmonner! Honestly, Daddy, if you understood men you'd know he's not called King for nothing.' She pulled the photo from her tight *choli* and waved it at him. 'Can't you see? He's a king among men.'

Bishop Patten stared at the limp, breast-warmed photo, then at Nalini who was laughing. 'Don't think twice about it,' she told him. 'I'm going to Brisbane and when I get there we'll see how long Dr King wants a marriage in name only.'

AT DAWN THE first rays of the sun struck rainbow-coloured light from the bevelled edge of the mirror. Harry opened one eye to scowl at it. He groaned, groped for his jogging pants beside the bed, shrugged them on and stumbled out to the kitchen.

Through the french doors came assorted warblings and twitterings. A vista of smoke-blue hills framed in leafy light pressed up at every window but Harry didn't glance at it. He'd seen the view often enough in the five years he and Jennifer had lived in this converted farmhouse on the outskirts of Brisbane. Not that he noticed anything much these days; he was too busy working on his manuscript. Today was 1 September, most of his sabbatical gone and the bloody thing was still dragging. He carried his coffee to the veranda and sat staring blankly at the trees. Slivers of light pushed above the eastern hills and the whole valley trembled in welcome

with the tiny movements of millions of back-lit leaves. The only thing not moving was Harry.

A car was coming up the driveway – a red Astra. Who on earth? At this hour?

He watched the car crawl towards him. It stopped and a young woman wearing a sari got out. *Christ!* Not that Indian student. He'd made it clear he wasn't to be bothered by her. It was strictly a Clayton's marriage so she could study in Australia. He was already having misgivings about his grand gesture and now for God's sake, it looked like she had come out here to bother him. Well, he'd soon get rid of her. He got up and walked to the edge of the steps.

The girl wore a deep blue sari with a shiny gold hem. A tinkling sound came from the bangles on her arms as she walked up the path. She looked up and smiled. 'I was hoping it wasn't too early but I see you're up already.'

She came up the steps and put out her hand. 'Hello. I'm Usha, pronounced as in bush.' Her red lips curved in a smile. 'Usha Saraswati.'

'Saraswati?' Harry was relieved. 'Uh…you're not related to Professor Saraswati by any chance are you?'

Usha nodded. 'His daughter actually. I have him to thank for my divine name.'

'It is? Er, won't you sit down?' He gestured at the table. Best not invite her in the house.

'Yes, all Daddy's fault,' she said, sinking into a chair. 'Usha is the dawn goddess and Papa saw fit to name me after her.' She laughed. 'And here I am, visiting you at dawn.'

Harry nodded, a little dazed by her smiles.

'I'm a friend of Nalini Patten's,' she went on. 'My father and hers are old friends so of course we offered to put her up.'

'Right.' Harry realised he was staring at her. She was extraordinarily pretty, but then Indian girls often were. 'Sorry. Would you like a drink? Tea, coffee?'

'I'd love a coffee. I've just come off night shift and I'm exhausted.'

She looked cool and self-possessed and not exhausted at all. 'I'm a

nurse at the retirement village down the road so it was easier to drop by on my way home. Coffee would be great.'

When he came back from the kitchen Usha was staring at a magpie on the railing. He passed her the mug and sat down. 'So you've come about your friend?'

'Yes. Nalini wanted me to bring you this.' Usha opened her carry-bag and brought out a spray of jasmine which she put on the table. The starry white flowers with their delicate pink throats lay there looking absurdly feminine and frivolous. An almost indecently languorous scent floated to Harry's nostrils. He drew back as if offended.

'A flower?'

'It's traditional where she comes from. The bride must send gifts to her betrothed for five days before the wedding.'

'There's no need,' Harry frowned. 'The marriage is just a formality.'

'Nalini wants to do it for her mother's sake. Vijaya, that's her mother, would have been upset if she omitted the custom. We talked it over and Nalini decided, since it's not a proper marriage, she needn't send anything of value.'

'I'd rather she didn't just the same. Isn't her mother dead anyway? So, um, Miss Patten doesn't have to worry.'

'That's not the point. Just because her mother is…' Usha played with her fingers. 'It might be polite to show some sensitivity regarding her feelings, don't you think?'

Harry assumed a solemn face. He had been politically incorrect. 'Of course, if it's customary where she comes from.'

She stood up and stretched out a hand. The gold border of her sari falling across her arm caught fire in the slanting light, momentarily dazzling him. 'So, shall we say each morning around this time? It suits me and if you're not up I'll leave the flowers here. On this table.'

Harry watched Usha's bum as she went down the path, watched her get in the Astra, watched it disappear down the driveway. He picked up the jasmine, tossed it over the railing and went inside. A pushy young thing, he decided as he poured out muesli. After breakfast he rang Nita to complain about the intrusion on his privacy.

'Does Professor Saraswati have a daughter?' Nita said vaguely. 'I thought it was just the two boys. Well, that's nice. It'll be good for Nalini to have a girlfriend to help her adjust. Not that she needs much help there, I must say. She drove herself over here the other day in –'

'But Nita,' interrupted Harry, 'it's a bit much if I'm to be constantly visited by her friend. I didn't expect this when I offered to help out and I can tell you I don't appreciate it.'

'Well it won't be for long, only four more days. You can cope with that surely? Now don't forget, it's 10 o'clock at the Customs House. I think I told you that.'

'Of course I won't forget.' Harry hated the way Nita talked to him as if he was still a child.

'And perhaps if you wore a suit. I know it's none of my business but it would look better wouldn't it? We don't want Nalini thinking Australians are uncouth.'

'Mmm…sure…well I'd better keep going, Nita. Busy day.' Harry hung up in no better mood than when he began.

NEXT MORNING, GLOOMILY spooning up muesli, he heard a car. That woman again? He wiped his mouth and went out to investigate. Yes, the Astra. Two rosella parrots swooped over it and landed in the grevillea bush beside the steps, making soft clucking sounds as they inched towards the flowers. The sun was just rising, throwing a band of pale light across the valley. Somewhere in the distance magpies carolled.

Usha came quickly up the path. Her sari, a gauzy peach colour today, was half hidden by yellow wattle.

'I had to pick so many,' she said, glancing down when she saw Harry looking. 'The trees are so bursting it seemed mean not to be generous.'

She put the flowers on the table where they lay in a circle of pollen dust. He noticed a smudge of it on her cheek which for some reason was charming, though not charming enough. He knew he would have to offer her coffee and get involved in meaningless chit-chat.

'Cup of coffee?' he said, making off through the french doors without waiting for a reply. It was hardly a question. She followed him to the door.

'Please don't trouble. I know you're busy.' She looked around the room.

'Come in. It's no trouble. I was going to have another one anyway.'

He might just as well he thought, turning on the tap. He watched Usha drift round the room, her sari shimmering whenever she paused in one of the bars of light that streamed through the windows. She picked up a book from the coffee table and made a space for herself among the ones on the couch. She was reading when he brought over the mugs.

'Thanks.' She held up the book. 'This looks interesting. Is it part of what you're studying?'

Harry sat down opposite. 'It throws a little light on what I'm writing about.'

'Which is?'

'Post-modernist theory you could call it, insofar as that term has any meaning.' He paused. What was he doing, gabbing about post-modernism to some nurse who'd just come off night duty?

Politely he stifled a yawn. As often happened nowadays he had slept badly. He noticed the kilim-covered cushions Usha was leaning against, cushions which Jennifer had bought. He remembered how she had spread them out to admire and he'd pushed her down on them and made love to her. His eyes travelled upwards encountering Usha's, and he realised he'd been staring at her hips outlined against the cushions.

She looked at him thoughtfully, then at the book. '*Intellectual Impostures*,' she said, reading out the title. 'Ideas pretending to be what they're not I suppose. Is that it, Dr King?'

'More or less.' He shifted in his seat. 'It's written by two mathematicians, complaining about the way some academics borrow terms from science and apply them to their own areas of study.'

'You mean like Kristeva's use of maths to describe poetry? What do they say about that?'

Harry did a double-take. 'You're into Kristeva?' he said, recovering.

'Only because Nalini always talks about her,' Usha wrinkled her nose. 'Kristeva's difficult, don't you find?'

In no time at all Harry found himself launched on a sea of Derrida-speak while his coffee grew cold and scummy on the table. Usha had an excellent understanding of the functional limits of metaphor and he had just reached an interesting point when she stood up and announced she must go. She gestured at the windows, now filled with sunlight. 'My namesake has departed,' she said, smiling, 'so this Usha must depart too.'

Brushing aside Harry's protests, she prepared to leave. He watched the little ritual of sari-patting and hair-smoothing and when it was over, walked her out to the car.

SPRING IN BRISBANE is not a particularly noticeable event. The weather grows warmer, certain flowers appear, but it is not the spring you read about in the northern hemisphere – the beginning of new life after a hard, cold winter. When he woke up next morning Harry decided dispensing with the blanket was overdue. He went into the kitchen where he smelled the verbena outside the window and decided to clean his teeth. While he was cleaning his teeth he decided to find a clean shirt, but the reason for these decisions did not impinge on his consciousness.

Sitting on the veranda in a clean shirt with clean teeth, he looked out at the wooded hills. A bird was calling, distinct from all the rest, four notes rising except for the last which fell away in a dying cadence like the embodiment of longing. Over and over the bell-like tones sounded, remote and distilled by distance. He had the sensation of being caught and held in the moment, pinned by the notes of the invisible bird. For the first time in a long while he noticed the light on the leaves. Overhead, small fluffy clouds tinged with gold floated in a sky of baby-blue. Canaletto clouds, he thought idly. Downstairs in the computer room work was waiting but Harry gave no thought to it as he usually did at this hour. The clinking of frogs came up from the creek and he wondered if they really were frogs or if they were toads. In his present mood he preferred to think they were frogs. It went with the morning which was hopeful, calmly expectant, waiting for the sun to rise.

The clouds were now palely, ecstatically gold and he stared at them in surprise, even a little wonder. Time to make a move, he decided. The Astra appeared at the gateway and began crawling up the driveway like an industrious red beetle.

THAT NIGHT HARRY dreamed he was running. In his dream he came to the base of a hill that rose in a perfect hemisphere, a child's drawing of a hill, a hill like a breast. He began to run up its grassy flank and found he was flying, or not quite flying but floating up the hill and the sensation of joy this gave was very sweet. He saw that Usha was floating beside him, the two of them moving together towards the crest of the hill. They were almost there when he began to lose speed; he was not going to make it and his disappointment was intense. Usha looked back and held out her hand. He grasped it and together they floated to the top of the hill.

Harry woke with a feeling of euphoria and immediately realised he was in love with Usha Saraswati. And just as quickly remembered that in two days time he was to marry Nalini Patten.

Bloody hell!

But even this thought couldn't dispel the delicious feeling the dream had left behind. He would not think, he could not think, until he'd made himself a coffee.

Ten minutes later, sitting on the veranda, he still couldn't think. There *was* nothing to think, and even if there were, he couldn't think anyway because the whole crazy fact of Usha pushed all other thoughts aside. He lusted for her, that much was certain. He was also about to marry another woman and there wasn't a dead dog's chance of getting out of it. Harry knew himself trapped; he had made a promise and must keep it.

He listened for Usha's car. A number of cars went by but none were hers. At eight o'clock he cursed the world and all its misbegotten inhabitants and went downstairs to the computer-room where he spent a miserable, unproductive morning.

At midday he was upstairs again, slumped on the couch in the living-room, apathetically picking at a cheese sandwich when Mrs Ford came bustling into the room.

'Shift your feet, Dr King,' she ordered. 'I gotta get this room done before I start downstairs.'

A tiny dumpy woman with a high, unhealthy colour, she began sweeping under Harry's raised feet and engaging him in conversation. 'How's the book coming along? Nearly finished I s'pose.'

She liked Dr King and had noticed his glooms ever since that wife of his upped and left him. Each cleaning day Mrs Ford had noticed the pile-up of empty bottles in the kitchen and wished something would come into Dr King's life to cheer him.

'Still working on it, Mrs Ford,' muttered Harry.

'Complicated plot I suppose.'

'Not really.' *Yes, really*. He knew the evasion was patronising but the thought of discussing post-modernism with Mrs Ford was too awful to contemplate.

'What's this then?'

Mrs Ford's broom had hooked an earring from under the couch. She picked it up and eyed it severely as if demanding an explanation from it. Perhaps Dr King had a friend, which would be all to the good in her opinion. The secrets of his bedroom were known to her and she knew no woman except herself had been there since Jennifer. She handed him the loop of gold.

'Someone will be missing that, you can bet your bottom dollar.' She watched him attentively, noticing the way he stared at it, noting also that he pocketed it with a furtive air. She was instantly alerted. 'Whose could that be I wonder? That's an expensive piece of jewellery that is. The owner will be looking everywhere.'

Long experience told Harry that she wouldn't give up. 'It belongs to a friend of mine.'

'Well that's good,' Mrs Ford said, beginning to sweep again. 'Nice to know you're having friends over.' She eyed him shrewdly.

'Not a friend exactly. Just a – a messenger.'

'A courier?'

'No. Well, yes, sort of.'

'That would be papers from the university then?'

Harry wasn't about to explain the details of his private life to Mrs Ford. He knew if she had any inkling he was about to marry a woman he'd never met, she would be appalled. He felt the same way. 'We, er, we just talk.'

'Talking's good.' Mrs Ford continued sweeping. 'It never hurts to talk. Get a few things aired, get them off your chest.'

'I suppose so,' said Harry, adding, 'she brings me flowers.'

Mrs Ford was confused. 'I didn't know you'd took up gardening,' she ventured at last.

Suddenly Harry found he was unburdening himself. 'I haven't, but the thing is, I don't know what to do about it.'

Mrs Ford was so astonished she stopped sweeping. 'You don't know what to do? I'd of thought you'd know most things.' She spoke truthfully. She was deeply suspicious of this mystery woman who was coming to Dr King's house and upsetting him.

'And do you give her anything in return?'

Harry felt a rush of gratitude. *Of course!* It was all one way.

THE DAWN CHORUS was getting underway, the sun nudging hills dreaming under a veil of blue; luminous ribbons of light fell along the grassy lower slopes. It was the morning before the day Harry was to marry Nalini Patten. In the kitchen he put freshly-ground coffee in the percolator. A jug of red roses stood on the bench. The familiar sound of the Astra reached his ears and he grabbed the flowers and hurried out to the veranda.

'Come in, come in. You're just in time for coffee.' She was wearing apple-green today, very fetching. He held out the roses but she made no move to take them.

'For you, Usha.'

'You mean for Nalini.'

'No, for you.' Harry smiled extravagantly. 'I'll put them in water shall I? Where would you like to sit? Oh, is that a water-lily?' He saw she was putting down a flower.

'It's a lotus. From Nalini.' Her clipped tones told her annoyance. The lotus lay as though floating, its petals seeming to give off light.

'Uh, thanks. I mean, please thank Miss Patten for me.' He pulled out a chair for her. 'I'll get the coffee.'

When the coffee was on the table he drew up his chair. 'I was thinking, if you're not busy today, if you like, maybe –'

'If you're asking me out the answer is no. Aren't you forgetting you're getting married tomorrow?'

'But –'

'I don't go out with married men, not even ones who won't sleep with their wives.'

Harry protested. 'But surely Miss Patten told you it's an arrangement. It means nothing.'

'I'm sorry. That's how it is.'

He slumped in his chair and as though in triumph at his defeat, a magpie carolled joyfully.

'So lovely,' breathed Usha, leaning forward to peer at the fig-tree outside the veranda. 'Madge-pies have beautiful songs.'

Madge-pies?

Suspicion slithered into Harry's brain. He tried to calculate. To his knowledge Professor Saraswati had been teaching history for decades which meant Usha was brought up in Australia. So what was this madge-pie business?

'And how do you think they compare with the bakerbirds?'

'The bakerbirds?' She hesitated.

'Yes.' He gestured at the fig-tree where butcherbirds were enjoying a game of chase. 'Their song is beautiful too.'

'Oh, the bakerbirds. Yes, they're lovely.'

'Liar!' Harry leapt to his feet. 'What the hell's going on? Who are you anyway?' His heart was jumping.

'Who am I?' She too had risen. Her eyes were dilated. They looked enormous. 'Can't you guess?'

'What?' He took a step towards her, glowering. 'I don't –' He breathed heavily. 'Oh God!' He let out a shuddering sigh. '*You!* You're her! I mean she's *you*. I'm marrying *you!*'

She smiled faintly. 'Does that please you?'

'I'm marrying you,' he repeated slowly. Tentatively he put his

arms around her, breathing her scent. He started kissing her, her ear, her lips, but she was pulling away.

'No Harry, wait. Just let me – wait I said! I have to make a phone call.'

She had her mobile out and was busy keying numbers.

'A phone call?' Harry was shell-shocked. 'Then you'd better – you'll have to go outside. The reception isn't too good here.'

Dazed, he followed her down the steps.

'Hello Daddy. Did I get you up? No, everything's fine. Yes, tomorrow. No, it'll be just as you wish, a proper marriage. Yes, of course there'll be a party afterwards. Mrs Saraswati has seen to that. Would you like to speak to Harry? He's here beside me.'

She handed Harry the phone. Above them in the fig-tree, the magpie burst into song.

Julie Kearney is a Brisbane artist who also writes. Her work has appeared in *Griffith REVIEW, Hecate, Idiom* and *Imprint* as well as several anthologies. She has completed a fictional autobiography of her great-grandmother titled *True History of Annie Callaghan*.

MEMOIR

A touch of silk

A (post)modern faerie tale

Victor Marsh

DURING the 1970s and ’80s I taught meditation in a dozen or so countries throughout East Asia and the Pacific on behalf of my guru. Although dressed in plain clothes, in most respects I lived and worked as a latter-day monk. After a three-year relationship with a brilliant young woman had failed to resolve my attraction to men, the option of celibacy required for this service was a welcome alternative; I was happy to lob sexuality into the too-hard basket.

With that issue on hiatus, I settled down to concentrate on something else; just as, in a scientific experiment, you attempt to eliminate as many variables as possible in order to focus on the element or process that you want to examine. Who or what is a ‘homosexual’ when he is not having sex? Is sexuality a sufficient basis on which to build an identity?

AT A RETREAT near Mt Fuji, I was preparing a group of aspirants for initiation into the meditation practices. When the time came to rehearse the techniques together, fewer and fewer words were necessary. The room became still and the silence thickened as we slipped into the subtle sound of the infinite. After months of talking, all the telling finally resolved into this precise demonstration of grace, where a subtle presence, smoother than

anything I – its mere instrument – could say or do, drew us deeply into one original vibration, revealing itself as the deepest centre of being. Meditation is listening, inside.

I was performing the duties of an 'instructor', but this coming together was not orchestrated by me. Nor was it happening 'through' me, as some kind of 'channel'. You might say it happened around me, under me, above me, *in spite of me*; in fact, the less of 'me' there was, the better. That's why it was always a confronting experience, no matter how many times I convened such a session (in an average of seventy-two towns a year); I had to become virtually transparent in order to tune in to this underlying presence – at one and the same time the subtlest and the most powerful reality. 'Being', usually concealed behind the everyday business of 'doing' and all its attendant preoccupations – could then gently step forward to claim our undivided attention.

In Tokyo, a young model chastised me when I interrupted her meditation to ask how she was going. 'You put me here,' she said, quietly, 'now please leave me be…' In Taipei and Seoul young Buddhists learning the practice would affirm: 'The Buddha nature is in every heart.'

The work underlined for me the reality of a common unity at the deepest levels of human being, lying *behind* the multiplicity of differences in culture, religion, language, politics and class and, both in my own practice and in this wider setting, I found a deep healing of the anxiety and alienation that had been my *modus vivendum,* growing up as a faerie boy in Australia.

It was a rare privilege to work in this service. However, after more than a decade, I reached the point where it became necessary to face my sexuality squarely, and find out how to embrace it as a legitimate part of my life, even as I continued with the daily practice of meditation.

What I found (of course!) was that my deep and regular connection to the infinite 'self-beyond-self', 'being-beyond-doing', had not miraculously transformed me into a well-adjusted heterosexual. Now I had to find a way to re-connect with everyday society, where the normative, binary constructions of gender and sexual mores that I was familiar with from my upbringing had changed hardly at all. I needed to understand how I could reconcile my renovated awareness *and* my newly embraced sexuality within an Australian

setting. Also, the supposed hallmarks of my alleged type were not easy to adopt, for the putative 'gay community' had its own strictures. I didn't like musical theatre, found Judy Garland excessively maudlin and couldn't cook a quiche to save my life.

FLASHBACK TO MY early teens: After being accused by a relative of being a 'homosexual', I resort to science to gather information on my 'condition'. Furtive research in a public library uncovers the term in a volume by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. This is what I have to go on:

'von Krafft-Ebing, R. 1924. *Psychopathia Sexualis with especial reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*. Only authorised English adaptation of the Twelfth German Edition. New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company.'

I flip to the index at the back. There I am, right after 'Hermaphroditism, psychical':

Homosexuality (*vide* Antipathic sexuality), p. 286
Homosexual feeling as an abnormal congenital manifestation

followed closely by:

Hysteria

then:

Ideal sadism, 118
Impotence, 13
Immorality, 502
Incest, 612
Injury to women, 105
Insanity among the Scythians, 302.

So that's the company I keep… Then follows a lengthy entry on 'pederasty', and various references regarding:

Pathology, special, 462
Psychopathological cases, 554
Sexual instinct, homosexual, 282
– perversions of, 79, 462

I must be seriously sick. Flicking back to the listings for 'sodomy', I go to page 561, where the German expert has listed kindly for my perusal:

7. Unnatural Abuse (Sodomy).
7(a). Violation of Animals (Bestiality).

So this is my condition – a 'mental condition', in fact, an 'abnormal perversion'. I am not so much a legal problem, I see, as I am a specimen for the scientific study of 'Inverts'.

If scientists already know me better than I know myself, are they telling my future, too? On page 573 I find that for 'many neuropathic individuals' (and *'Urnings'* are almost always 'neuropathic', apparently): Before them lies mental despair, – even insanity and suicide, – at the very least, nervous disease; behind them, shame, loss of position, etc.'

Nothing to look forward to but despair, insanity and suicide? I search out 'neurasthenic' in the index, and flip through some case studies. For example, 'hysteria gravis': '…there was no amnesia. Thoroughly virile. Decent appearance. Genitals normal. Short imprisonment.'

Imprisonment! But you said I am not a criminal, I am an 'irresponsible insane person'. Even before being identified as a psycho-medical disorder it appears I have already achieved the status of criminal offender – now a sexual, medical and social outlaw. Moreover, I have already found my way onto the path to perdition, for on page 447, I read: …puberty teaches the youthful sinner to know his true sex soon enough… The homosexual act committed *after* puberty has set in, is the *decisive* step in the wrong direction.'

A *moral* outcast, too. Even the scientist names me as sinner.

I needed a new narrative, a less pathological model to understand myself and my place in the world; one, too, that could integrate the healing instigated

by the sustained practice of meditation. A myth to sustain me in (post)modern times and reclaim my faerie wings.

THE NEUROLOGIST OLIVER Sacks has written that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative', and that this narrative *is* in fact us, our identity. Were I to sift through the events of my life, could I recuperate experiences of wholeness that had been effectively edited out, according to the dominant narratives that structured meaning in my Aussie milieu?

The dominant cultural expectations of what it might be possible for a marginalised 'homosexual' to know are part of a complex economy of power, produced by what Michel Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' – power/knowledge relations that constitute 'a set of rules by which truth is produced' ('The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom'). In sociologist Peter Berger's terms, any 'threat to the social definitions of reality' is neutralised by 'assigning an inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status, to all definitions existing outside the symbolic universe'. That symbolic universe characterised me as a religious pariah and within the dominant paradigm, any knowledge or insight gained by the 'homosexual' from his practical training in an *alien* religious tradition (that I came to value highly), might be easily dismissed. Drawing on spiritual resources in the pursuit of self-knowledge, this non-conformist faerie thinker was rehearsing what Judith Butler identifies as 'unforeseen and unsanctioned modes of identity', effectively disrupting authorised versions of masculinity and the various disempowering constructions of the 'homosexual' as religious (and psycho-medical) pariah.

The faerie feels his wing stubs tingling.

But how to construct a new imaginary that could accommodate all aspects of being, including those ruled out of bounds by the toxic metanarratives of a buttoned-down, homophobic culture?

Erich Fromm, who was one of the first in his field to address the relationship of psychoanalysis to the practices of Zen Buddhism, has helped me understand how dominant metanarratives occlude the possibility of a faerie man recovering meaning. In his long essay 'Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism' (Harper & Row, 1960), Fromm wrote:

> [E]xperience can enter into awareness only under the condition that it can be perceived, related and ordered in terms of a conceptual system and of its categories. This system is in itself a result of social evolution. Every society, by its own practice of living and by the mode of relatedness, of feeling, and perceiving, develops a system of categories which determines the forms of awareness. This system works, as it were, like a socially conditioned filter…

And, he asserts, 'experience cannot enter awareness unless it can penetrate this filter'.

WHEN I WAS growing up, religion was part of a sociological system of inclusion and exclusion, gathering some within and others *outside* the fold. Apparently, in this set of narratives, 'God' is the biggest homophobe of all. Years of deep meditation practice had reinforced my connection with the underlying Ground of Being (Tillich) and also shown me a new way to conceive of my life, yet I kept running into this entrenched exclusivist, divisive discourse. Many of its proponents had even lost sight of the religious origins of their prejudice and happily carried them forward, now armed with the medical discourse that would characterise me as a 'developmental failure'.

I lived and worked for a long time in the United States, where a radio talk show host with a huge listening audience – one Laura Schlessinger, whose PhD was in physiology and whose moral teaching derived, she said, from her instruction by Jewish rabbis after her conversion to that faith – described gay people as 'biological errors'. The US military launched a marketing campaign inviting young people to 'become all that you can be' in their ranks, that is of course only if you were heterosexual, with queer folk somehow rendered incapable of being all that *they* could be.

These toxic narratives were profoundly disempowering for queer folk struggling to recognise a positive life path of growth and integration. Suicide rates among the young continued to be much higher than for straight kids. On an internet discussion board devoted to the promulgation of Christian values that I came across on Compuserve, a serious discussion was going on discussing whether gays should be 'put to death', as per Old Testament teachings, while

the pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church maintained a website directing his faithful congregation to opportunities for picketing the funerals of gay men with hate-filled signage proclaiming that 'God hates fags', citing Leviticus.

None of this religious framing rang true to the insights gained from my dedicated meditation training, tested not only within the setting of my guru's ashrams, but nearly twenty years of working in the 'real' world, in television production in Melbourne, Sydney and Los Angeles. Where, then, were the mythic stories that would cast my life's potential in a more positive light?

I recall a time when I was working with a kindly Indian saint, dressed in saffron and his head shaved. He had been asking me to explicate the meaning of texts from the Christian New Testament. This turned into a hilarious exercise, with mixed results: I would read a verse and try to explain it, whereupon he would begin to expound at length on its meaning from his own store of wisdom. After half an hour of earnest effort he gave up, expostulating: 'Bah! You need to read the scripture of your *own* life!'

Just what would I find if I began to sift through my own life history? It wasn't hard to recognise the value of years of daily meditation practice in the very focused environment of the ashrams, and I went on to test its value in the 'real' world, working in TV. But I wanted to see if I could recover other parts of life experience that had been filtered out by the social world of my upbringing, experiences that were not supported by conventional, hegemonic religious and psycho-medical discourses that operated in my culture.

Looking through some of the turning points in my own lived experience I started to re-examine some of my earliest memories, the very first of which began to carry me beyond the conventional framing. Here's the first pointer that I uncovered:

> In the formal sitting room, the curtains are drawn. Thick carpet and upholstered furniture muffle all sound. The boy seeks out this place to be alone. But first he goes to the room across the hall, to the cupboard where his mother's dresses hang, bereft of form.
>
> He climbs into the wardrobe to reach for one of these that is special to him; dappled yellow, flecked with green, it glows. Clambering down from the cupboard, he slips the gown over his

head and it hangs loose around him, its folds cascading onto the floor. Silky texture is cool where it skims his skin.

Women's voices murmur in the kitchen, off.

Suitably attired, the boy returns to the sitting room, where he twirls slowly in the half light, head cocked, gazing down at the skirt as it rises around him in the air. Entranced by its golden glow, he settles down to sit on his heels, spreading the ample folds of fabric in a perfect circle around him on the floor.

Eyes closed, he rests in peace, ears singing in the silence. Dust motes float, lazy, in the light.

Sometime later, he returns the dress to its waiting place.

But one day, when he reaches into the cupboard, the cool fabric isn't there to meet his touch. He wants to catch the magic feeling – wrap it around him, disappear. He tries the cupboard again, but no matter how carefully he repeats his actions he fails to make the dress appear. A heavy feeling, like dread, drags in his chest.

Another day: he's in the washhouse, in the back yard. A copper tub squats above the fireplace where they boil the water to wash the clothes, on Mondays. Sifting through the ashes, he finds the charred remains of the dress… this lovely thing banished to dirty dust in his hands.

In the fowl run a hen murmurs *cluck cluck*, slow. The heaviness returns to roost in him as, inside the house, a door clicks shut.

This faerie had his wings clipped. His initiation into gender was an exile into a life of insidious shame. But what level of awareness had he been invoking with his private, atavistic ritual? In his Edenic state he was an inhabitant of a primary state of undifferentiated unity that preceded the bifurcations of the secondary development, gender.

It would be years before sexuality – a third state – reared its ugly head. So I ask: Can you erect a building with only a second and third storey? How will it stand? Trying to develop an integrated identity without the fundamental, primary state becomes problematic. Rootless. What was 'queer' about this child was his perverse recall of an original homeland that the combined coercive forces of Family, Religion, the Law and Medical science were configured precisely to make him forget.

WORKING IN LOS Angeles in the '90s I meet an anthropologist named Walter Williams who has done field work among indigenous people in North America and further afield. He is particularly interested in the early reports of contact between the explorers, traders and missionaries of colonial times with 'two-spirit' figures (in earlier times known as 'berdache') who exhibited attributes of mixed gender.

Approaching his informants as an 'out, gay' anthropologist, Williams earned their trust and in some situations he was introduced to living exponents of the tradition who were otherwise hidden, denied or suppressed, post colonisation and the shame-filled impact of Christian missionaries. Inspired by Williams, I start to dig into the large body of ethnographic literature to do with cross-dressing as an aid to accessing altered states of consciousness among shamans in various parts of the world. Such work opens up the possibility that at different times in different cultures the value of such 'gender deviance' might have been construed in *positive* terms. Williams quotes an informant from this tradition, a Hawaiian *mahu*, as saying: 'On the mainland [referring to the United States] the religion doesn't allow a culture of acceptance. Gays have liberated themselves sexually, but they have not yet learned their place in a spiritual sense.'

From their own re-examination of shamanistic practices, Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis suggest: 'It may be that men whose sexuality is ambiguous, or who are marginalised because of sexuality, are in a position where they must attend to levels of meaning that escape from or that are not obvious to those privileged by dominant discourses of gender.'

In his study of the 'gynemimetic' shaman, William Dragoin writes of the 'associated talents' of sexual inversion, which include ecstatic trance, and he proposes that:

> contrary to the idea of illness or defect…such an individual might better be considered talented or gifted, with a readiness to learn to enter a trance state or a native ability to readily alter ordinary states of consciousness, and in so doing become the ecstatic visionary…to become the shaman for one's people.

Dragoin concludes that such individuals have been a part of non-literate societies for many millennia.

What was the three-year old faerie boy doing then, wearing a yellow dress and going into trance, in suburban Western Australia, pre-1950?

Ruth Benedict also considered the significance of the North American 'berdache', observing that a culture may 'value and make socially available even highly unstable human types'. If such a culture chooses to treat the 'peculiarities' of these types as *valued* variants of human behaviour, Benedict finds that the individuals in question might 'rise to the occasion' and perform useful social roles without reference to the 'usual ideas' of the types that can function in our society. Further, she points out, those who 'function inadequately' in any society are not those with 'abnormal' traits, per se, but may well be those 'whose responses have received no support' from the institutions of their culture; those whose 'native responses' were not reaffirmed by society.

This kind of re-framing adroitly finesses what I call 'Fromm's filter effect', and allows me to re-incorporate aspects of my experience in the recuperation of a fully integrated self.

When I listen to Dr Williams introduce some of these findings to a roomful of queer folk in a meeting room in West Hollywood, the effect is electrifying, as we recognise what it might have been like to be welcomed into and respected rather than shamed by our tribes (to the mutual enrichment of us as individuals and to the collective). I begin to understand that the constructions produced within the social and political contexts of one's time are ideologically charged and quite particular artefacts of culture, politically and epistemologically constructed at any point in history. They are not universal laws of a putative 'human nature'. Stepping outside of the Abrahamic traditions to learn of other possibilities of meaning and knowing, constructed with different values by other cultures, helps me to destabilise the presumed authority of forms of knowledge that might be politically powerful now. Those approved, culturally sanctioned ways of knowing are arranged to switch off certain neural pathways as prohibited, no-go zones.

Much later, at a conference of Asian and Pacific scholars in Sydney I felt a similar frisson when a professor from southern India described the androgynous Hindu deity *Ardhanarishvara,* a Siva/Sakti representation that blends male and female elements in a kind of holographic representation of divinity.

Faerie men have to dream their own mythologies.

The amnesia induced by my initiation into gender has been alleviated by years of sustained meditation practice, re-introducing the numinous aspects of being into conscious awareness. May I now respectfully propose that if queer folk centre their own self-narratives strictly around the genital expression of sexuality they are at risk of losing the fullest apprehension of their *faerie* potential which, from my experience, can be reclaimed without in any way repudiating our sexuality.

THE MATERIAL UNIVERSE is irradiated with energy, and this includes me, too. Using the techniques of meditative introspection over more than four decades now, I can withdraw my attention from the densely trivial preoccupations of everyday life into communion with that original source of being, in the same way that the focal length of a lens can be shifted to reveal deeper layers to the field of perception. The sense of 'coming home' that this process releases is saturated with peace. The boy in the yellow dress was at home with this state but was shamed and sent into exile from his original homeland.

While continuing to respond to the challenges of everyday living, this inward re-focusing has been awakening previously dormant pathways of perception and knowing. Now, through writing my own life, with the missing parts reinstated, I am engaging with a reclamation project that is profoundly healing. In a paper for *Theology and Sexuality,* Peter Savastano says that 'queer' men are forced to 'forge a diverse array of spiritual practices, re-interpret or invent alternative sacred myths, produce their own mystical writings, and form diverse intentional spiritual communities'. Perhaps they might even become what Savastano calls virtuosi 'in the holy art of bricolage'.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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FICTION

SNOW WHITE AND THE CHILD SOLDIER

ALI ALIZADEH

'LISA thinks she's the hottest girl around.'

'She's so up herself. She doesn't even have a Facebook page.'

'Guys! Guys! Who's the hottest girl in this school?'

'You're the hottest girl in this school, Charlize.'

'You've got like the sexiest legs, Charlize.'

'So why do boys pay so much attention to Lisa when I'm around?'

'That guy over there likes you. Oh my God, he's staring right at us!'

'Which guy?'

'That one. The…African guy. You know, the black guy.'

'The refo from Sudan or Egypt or wherever? He's so gross. What's his name, anyway?'

'I don't know, Charlize.'

'Oh my God, you're right. He's staring at me. I bet he's a Muslim and wants to rape me or something. He's so disgusting.'

'He's a pervert.'

'He's so black!'

'Shoosh! Maybe he can hear us, Charlize.'

'He probably can't speak any English anyway. He looks so dumb.'

'It's like he knows we're talking about him. He looks sad.'

'No he doesn't. They don't have the same feelings as us. Where is he going?'

'I think we've, like, offended him.'

'Where are all the normal guys, anyway?'

'They're at footy practice, Charlize.'

'I hope they're not hanging around that ugly slut Lisa.'

'I bet she thinks she's prettier than you, Charlize.'

'I'll show that bitch. I fucking will.'

HASSAN IS BECOMING used to being laughed at. And ridicule by a handful of teenage girls should technically be nowhere near as upsetting as everything that happened back in Somalia. But being called 'dumb' and 'gross' – the latter must mean something like 'ugly', he assumes – is still quite hurtful. He is, in spite of himself and his mother's warnings, starting to feel attracted to frankly obnoxious Australian girls such as Charlize Stevenson.

He knows very well that a girl like Charlize would never go out with him. He tries to suppress his disappointment and trudges away from this latest scene of humiliation. He'll go to the library, the only place that offers him some respite from the sorrows of the playground. He'll spend the rest of lunchtime there, pretending to be improving his English by flicking through magazines or looking at American music videos online.

But an unusual sound distracts and attracts him as he walks past the empty assembly hall.

There's nothing strange about a student practicing the piano. And Hassan, despite having been born and raised in one of the most damaged and impoverished places on the planet, is no stranger to the sound of the classy Western musical apparatus. He had once been to a piano concert in Mogadishu before he turned ten, before the militants came and took him and the other boys from his school. Hassan and his classmates were marched to a camp and caned before being told to choose between fighting for God against the Infidel Government or getting shot for being Godless Apostates.

He breathes heavily and forces himself to forget his past. He's in Australia now, in a public high school in Melbourne. And it is only an unsettling coincidence that the tender melody emanating from somewhere behind the assembly hall reminds him of the tune he heard at the UN concert before the horrors of his childhood.

He can't help desiring to seek the source of this soft music. He traverses the hall cautiously and reaches the music room. There is no one here other than him and the invisible pianist inside the room. He steps towards the entrance and stops, wondering if he should be there at all. He feels anxious and decides to turn around before anyone has noticed him.

And the restrained yet resonant notes of music continue to enter Hassan's mind. It's as though the fingers producing them are magically seeping through his scalp and caressing the knots in his brain. He feels calm and happy. Confident that the person behind this soothing music will not find him intrusive; that such a soulful artist will not be gruff and dismissive like everyone else in this school.

Hassan puts down his bag and walks to the rhythm of the piece, towards the open door of the music room. He takes a deep breath, steps in and moves his eyes towards the figure behind the piano.

And his lips are forced open by the exhalation of intensified air. The girl behind the instrument, with her faultless face and brilliant long reddish hair – or is it what they call 'strawberry blond'? – is the meaning of that odd English word, 'breathtaking'. And her mesmerisingly pale complexion is the colour of morning light or snow and nothing like the shades of other white people's skin.

She notices him and stops playing. He's often anxious about speaking to strangers or speaking at all – most kids at school, and even a few teachers, either laugh at his accent when he speaks English, pretend not to understand him, or obsessively correct his grammar – but there's something about this girl which makes him happy to talk.

'I'm sorry. I disturb you. I am so sorry.'

'That's okay. Did you want to practice too? I'll only be another couple of minutes.'

'No. I don't play piano. I don't know music pieces. I hear your music. It is so beautiful. It is Mozart? Beethoven?'

The girl smiles faintly and her opalescent face assumes a touch of pinkness.

'Oh no. It's something I made up. You're too nice.'

'You compositioned that music yourself? You are amazing.'

She is now nearly laughing and the sight fills Hassan with an entirely novel, entirely unbelievable sensation.

'No I'm not. I'm just…Lisa. I've seen you around. What's your name?'

'DON'T BE ANGRY, Charlize. Everyone knows you're the sexiest girl…'

'Shut up you bitch! Didn't you see Dan chatting to Lisa, that stupid ugly whore! Dan knows how much I love him. Why is he trying to come on to that frigid pale ginger bitch? She's like a fucking ghost!'

'He's just a male, Charlize. Guys can be really insensitive.'

'I don't give a shit. I want that bitch dead. Stupid skinny arty bitch. I hate her so much. I wish she had a Twitter account so I could send her pictures of dirty redheaded sluts like her getting raped and kicked and shit.'

'Hey, Charlize. I've got an idea. Something I saw in a movie.'

'What did you say? Can't hear you. Speak up, will you?'

'No, listen. Come closer. You know about Joel's party next weekend?'

'Of course I do, you stupid cow. I was one of the first people to get invited.'

'Maybe we should invite Lisa to come along with us.'

'What the fuck for?! I just told you I want that bitch wiped off the face of the earth.'

'Keep it down, Charlize. Listen. In this movie I saw, the cool hot girls got this dorky chick really drunk, right, and then…'

'Oh my God! That's a great fucking idea! You're a bloody genius!'

'We'll post photos of her all over Facebook and Instagram.'

'My brother knows a drug dealer. He can get us something to spike Lisa's drinks.'

'We'll take her to one of the bedrooms and then we'll get Joel and his mate from the footy team to…'

'Oh my God! That'd be so much fun!'

HASSAN OPENS HIS lunch box and offers Lisa one of the pastries. She takes a *sambuusa* and inspects it temporarily before taking a small bite. She frowns and grunts delicately.

'I am so sorry, Lisa. You don't like? It is too hot?'

'No, it's just… I think it has meat in it.'

'Meat? No, it's green pepper and fish and…'

'It's the fish then. I'm sorry, Hassan. I haven't had any meat or seafood for years. I'm a strict vegetarian. I can't eat this. Here, you can finish it for me.'

'I have banana too. Do you want it?'

'No, Hassan. It's very generous of you, but I've actually had my lunch. I don't eat much anyway. I'd rather listen to music, go for walks and read books. I can't stand the Internet. Do you like reading books?'

'My English is not too good to read books. The book we're studying for English now is very hard.'

'*Everyone* struggles with *Hamlet*, Hassan. Did you know Mr Anderson can't say most of the archaic phrases properly? And your English is very, very good, anyway. You're new to Australia. Soon you'll be speaking better than most of the idiots around here. Anyway, let me know if you want a good book to read. Are you going to Joel's party this Saturday?'

'Who is Joel?'

'Oh I'm sorry. I thought everyone had been invited. I'm sure it'll be pretty boring anyway. I'm going with Charlize and her crew. Do you know her? I thought she hated me but it looks like she wants to be my friend.'

'I don't like Charlize. She is cruel and treacherous.'

'There you go! You have a great vocabulary, Hassan. I don't really like Charlize either, but it'd be nice to make a few new friends.'

'I am your new friend, Lisa.'

'I know, Hassan. And I'm your friend too.'

Hassan closes his eyes so that the image of Lisa's ethereal, spell-binding beauty won't intimidate him from saying what he's been meaning to say since he first met her.

'I love you, Lisa.'

'Oh Hassan, you hardly know me. And I'm just…not ready for a relationship or a boyfriend. Are you…are you okay?'

HASSAN AVOIDS HIS mother and brothers. He nurses his broken heart in the back shed, the only quite place in their overcrowded house. This is not the first time he has been let down by life. He experienced a much stronger sense of self-loathing and terror after the first raid on a Somali Government military convoy. The older Al-Shabbab militants had forced him, then only twelve or thirteen, to use a bayonet on a dying soldier to prove his loyalty to God. It's this vile recollection which haunts Hassan as he stands motionless and weeps among the stacks of boxes and suitcases in a suburb of Melbourne, so far away from the bloody wars of Africa.

But there is sadness and conflict in this new country too. He returns inside to help his mother with supper and tries not to think about Lisa. But he can't do it. It is not that he is infatuated with her – or at least it's not only because of his infatuation – that her gorgeous, angelic face appears before his eyes every time he blinks. He feeds one of his baby brothers and gives the other one a bath while wondering why someone as sadistic as Charlize Stevenson would want to take Lisa along to a party with her. Hassan may not understand Australians all that well, but he knows malevolence when he sees it. Should he try to talk Lisa out of going to the party?

He wrestles with the idea all night and the following morning, which is the morning of the party, and sends her a text: *hello lisa. i am sorry to be emotional and teary at school. i promise not to say i love you again & not to make u uncomfortable with me. But lisa pls dont go to the joel party with nasty girls. pls give me a call.* He waits all day to hear from her and finally decides to act. After dinner and putting his baby brothers to bed, he tells his mother that he wants to go for a very long jog.

'YOU'VE NEVER HAD apple cider? It's yummy. Here, let me pour you a glass.'

'That's really nice of you Charlize. I just…don't want to get drunk. I don't drink much.'

'Just one drink won't get you drunk, Lisa. You wait here. I'll go to the kitchen and fix you a drink. You look lovely tonight, by the way. You're so hot.'

Lisa ignores the ogling boys. There are seven boys and five girls, including Lisa, in the backyard of a large suburban house. Loud techno music and occasional outbursts of animalistic laughter from the boys do not diminish the unease in the air. Lisa feels as though she's under surveillance. She drinks two glasses of apple cider slowly while trying to join in the gossip with Charlize and her friends. She soon finds herself dancing with the girls, and is having too much fun to wonder why she's feeling so intoxicated so quickly.

'How you feeling, Lisa?'

'I'm just…great. Thanks, Charlize. Thanks for inviting me…I thought you didn't like me…Charlize.'

'Are you kidding, Lisa? You're the most awesome chick. Hey, are you OK?'

'I'm feeling…tired.'

'Here, let me help you. Guys! Come and help me get Lisa inside. I think she needs to have a lie down.'

Joel and two other boys help Lisa back into the house. The other boys run up the stairs ahead of them. Charlize and the girls are giggling with excitement and preparing their smartphones. Charlize orders the girls to let the guys get started before they go in to take pictures. Lisa is fast asleep by now. The boys lift her and carry her like a corpse up the stairs. The seven boys then dump Lisa on Joel's parents' bed and take off her clothes.

'OH MY GOD this is gonna be so awesome!'

'We should get the guys some condoms, Charlize. What if they get her pregnant?'

'That'll show the bitch.'

'Did you hear that, Charlize? I think there's someone in the kitchen.'

'Who's…oh my God! A black guy! How the fuck did you get in?'

'Quick someone, call the police.'

'Wait a minute. You're the guy from school. The African refo. What the hell are you doing here? Were you invited to the party?'

Hassan shakes his head and glares at Charlize Stevenson. He has quickly located and taken possession of a suitable weapon upon breaking into the enemy compound. It is a large bread knife not too dissimilar to the serrated blades he used when he was a child soldier with the brutal insurgents in Somalia. He holds the knife's handle with assurance behind his back and speaks with as much calmness as he can muster.

'Where is Lisa?'

The pimply blond hisses.

'Lisa?! Who gives a fuck about Lisa? Get out of here before I tell the boys you're here.'

Hassan notices that Charlize's eyes shifted, almost imperceptibly and no doubt unintentionally, in the direction of the stairway when she uttered 'boys'. That's all he needs to know. He pushes her out of the way and marches up the stairs. The girls start to scream and three half-naked adolescent boys appear outside the door at the top of the stairs. They seem only mildly annoyed to find Hassan interrupting what they're planning to do to Lisa. They exchange conspiratorial glances and run at Hassan as though they're on a football field and the young Somali is a member of the opposing team.

Sadly for them, their tackle is no match for Hassan's knife. He would have chosen a sharper knife – what they call in English, rather understandably, a 'steak knife' – if he was planning to stab the enemy fighters. But he has chosen to not simply cause injury to incapacitate the oppressors.

He jumps back a few steps down the stairs as the boys – all of them shorter than him, appearing quite dwarfish in comparison – hurl themselves at him. Hassan calculates where the head of their leader would be in five seconds, and dashes his free hand to that spot in front

of his body. He takes hold of the boy's rough curly hair and, with the knife in his other hand, slices the attacker's throat.

He lets go of the first kill instantly and runs back down the stairs while howling a customary battle cry in Arabic. This is to frighten the enemy. The other two boys are now tumbling down the stairs, as Hassan had expected, having tripped over the first corpse.

Hassan pounces on the larger one of the two and ends his life with a determined incision. The last fighter of the first wave of the enemy counterattack – a boy called Tom or Tim or maybe even Tex – is horrified by what's happened to his two comrades and is crawling away towards the sofas and armchairs in the downstairs living room. The beaten boy is desperate to join the shivering cluster of petrified girls hiding there, but Hassan cannot take the risk of letting him live, and he cannot take a prisoner. He clasps his hand on the nape of Tom's (or Tim's or Tex's) neck to stop him from moving, squats and carefully cuts into the boy's neck.

He then sprints back up the stairs and kicks open the door to the bedroom. As he expected, Lisa is on the bed, unconscious and naked. Hassan remembers that an old militiaman once told him that rape is a potent weapon of war. So this is the case in this advanced affluent Western nation as well. He knows that the remaining enemy combatants must be either in the room or nearby, so he cannot check on Lisa yet. She is no doubt being used as bait. The rapists must be hiding under the bed and in the closet.

Hassan howls the war cry again – it means 'There Is No God But God' – to unsettle and provoke the enemy into an ambush, and it works. Two boys crawl from under the bed, one with a cricket bat and the other with clenched fists. Hassan slaughters them quite easily before the last two have had the chance to emerge from the closet. These two are so shaken by what they see – the no doubt horrific sight of a towering black man covered in blood standing above the corpses of their friends – that they break to their knees and start to whimper, cursing and begging to be spared.

Hassan walks over to the two kneeling adversaries and butchers them methodically. He then cleans his hands as best as he can on the quilt, and finds Lisa's pulse. She is alive, and seems unharmed. He tries

to wake her up, but she's deep asleep. Hassan wonders what the vicious foes have given her. He should take her to a hospital. He dresses her and carries her in his arms downstairs. The girls have escaped and there's increasing noise coming from outside the house.

He walks out with the figure of his petite beloved.

It's very dark but Hassan can make out the blue and red lights of a police car at one end of the street. He places Lisa on his right shoulder and starts to run. Someone shouts and a shot is fired. Hassan feels a fierce pain in his back but has no time to stop and inspect the gunshot wound. He growls '*Yallah'* and commands his body to supersede pain and carry Lisa. He's not a wounded boy but an indestructible warrior. He quivers, jumps over a fence into the front yard of a house and runs towards the backyard. He climbs over a fence and finds himself in a very dark back alley. He runs in what he hopes is the opposite direction to the shooters.

Hassan's instinct is right and his pursuers are nowhere to be seen. He finds himself on the bank of a small creek and sits down on a park bench. He lowers Lisa from his back and lies her on the bench with her head resting on his lap. He sighs and groans. His wound is much worse than it feels. He knows too well that so much bleeding can only result in death. He doesn't bother with thinking of ways to seal the hole where the bullet came out.

Hassan apologies to his mother and also to the souls of those he was forced to kill in Somalia. He even mumbles a prayer of contrition to the ghosts of his latest, Australian victims. He then looks down at the sacred face of the only woman he has ever loved. She is extraordinarily beautiful or, as they say in English, a 'stunner'. He lowers his head towards hers, knowing that he may not possess the strength to lift it back up. With the last of his energy he aims his lips at her forehead, and plants a blood-soaked kiss. He dies a happy young man, sensing that Lisa is slowly waking up. She has recovered from the poison.

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FICTION

A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE

CATE KENNEDY

I WAS head over heels about Steven, and that's the truth. And having such a spectacular house didn't hurt either, so far removed from my one-bedroom apartment that it was hard not to show my covetousness for it right from the start and make him run a mile. I had to settle for merely admiring his leadlight bay windows and seven-setting massage showerhead and so on.

'It's fantastic to share it with someone who shares my taste,' he said, which made me hold out a secret hope that pretty soon, inevitably, we'd have the crucial conversation about how it was crazy to be paying two mortgages and how maybe I should move more in there than just my toiletries bag and a spare change of clothes.

Proof positive of how infatuated I was: I bought new toiletries to leave at his place. A set of the expensive all-natural ones, your cinnamon and tangerine body-scrub variety, stuff full of aloe-vera and green tea, no chemicals or perfumes; toiletries designed to signal loud and clear how low-maintenance I was, how beyond petty vanities and clutter. I wasn't taking any chances.

Another confession: I researched recipes so I could pretend I was an ace at whipping up gourmet dinners in his commercial-grade kitchen. But the opportunity almost never arose, because Steven liked

going out to dinner, or getting Thai takeaway from a particular place whose number he had on speed dial.

'You work so hard,' he said, 'I don't want you to feel you have to cook when you come over to my house.'

So who was I to argue? Who in their right mind would?

I MET HIM in the foyer at TAFE, picking up my friend Anna from her salsa class. He was there to enrol in a class to learn how to make outdoor pizza ovens, and we got chatting. Anna was furious when she learned I had a date.

'Just from standing in the foyer,' she fumed, 'while I was in there dancing with a bunch of sweaty creeps who still live at home with their mothers.'

My mother, when I rang, was as cautious as ever. 'Are you sure he's solvent?' she said suspiciously.

'Mum, he's an investment banker. He owns his own house.'

'Are you sure he's actually single? He hasn't told you he's technically married but planning to divorce, has he? Because men like that…'

'Mum, he's not married. He has no kids. He's pretty well-off and you know what? He's actually pretty good-looking. Why aren't you cracking open the champagne?'

'I just want you to find someone who's got their life under control. Someone who's a bit…organised.' Mum never let me forget that one heady year, when I was twenty-three, I'd lived with a bass guitarist.

'Trust me, Mum, he's so organised he's got an app to tell him when to change the battery in his smoke alarms.'

There was a silence. I'd been a bit startled by this myself when he told me, I admit. But all my mother said was, 'Lucy, what on earth's an *app*?'

ANYWAY, I WAS head-over-heels, because I wanted the package. Is that so wrong? I wanted the man, and also I wanted the bank of bi-fold doors that opened out onto his glorious vine-trellised courtyard. Even as Steven was showing me where he was planning to build the pizza-oven on our first date, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in them, and maybe it was a slight elongating distortion in the glass but I didn't

care; I looked taller and more willowy in those reflections. I sized up the vision of the two of us in that stunning garden talking wood-fired pizza and I thought *God just give me this and I'll never ask You for anything else again*. And I don't even believe in God. That's how far gone I was. Organised is probably the wrong word. Methodical, maybe. Or hypercompetent. I'm a kindergarten teacher so I'm used to working in a world of glue and paint and mess and stray sharp bits of Lego, so to drag myself from this into a world of wine and deep leather-lounge comfort and music playing from Steven's state-of-the-art iPod dock… well, it was like a glimpse of paradise. I *liked* the feeling that someone else was happy to be in charge for once. I loved it. A man who kept his house gleaming clean and had Egyptian cotton sheets and yet was indisputably heterosexual, a man who had a remote in his car that opened the garage door as he turned into the driveway and a walk-in wardrobe full of dark and expensive suits which smelled, thrillingly, like power and cologne and boardrooms – what's not to like?

There was plenty of space on the other side of that wardrobe, open shelves and drawers left invitingly empty. Clean. As if they'd been wiped. By someone thorough and meticulous who had the foresight to actually key a smoke-alarm app into their phone. Someone who murmured, as he disentangled a piece of playdough gently from my hair, that it was kind of crazy, both of us paying mortgages like this, and doing a cross-town commute just so we could be together every night.

'I don't want to rush into anything,' I lied. It was a warm night and the miraculous slimming doors were open onto the garden, letting a flood of fragrance into the room from the jasmine and lavender outside. In the twilight I could see his winding path of rosebushes, including the variety he called Amnesia Lavender which struck me as a perfect shade for a striking and unusual wedding dress, a rose which bloomed profusely in October, eight months away, so not altogether out of the question.

'It's something I really need to think about,' I said gravely. 'We both do.' Actually thinking: *October, cheap fares to Fiji*.

I'VE LEARNED THAT a romantic gesture is not always what you think it's going to be – you have to learn to read between the lines. So

when Steven rang and told me to meet him after work one day at a restaurant we both liked and said, 'Lucy, listen. I've got something I'd like to give you,' I had to concentrate on slowing down my tearaway heartbeat so I didn't feel physically sick with longing and nerves.

'Ooh, this sounds serious,' I said lightly. It took everything I had to compose my face into a mask of curious independent woman for whom the thought of living together has barely registered, a woman for whom it is a pleasure to pay a mortgage on a crappy flat with no balcony, a woman who would be loath to exchange this life for another.

'I've been thinking about this for a while, and I think it's time,' he went on. 'Hold out your hand.'

I did as he said, all a-tremble, and looked down at my palm as he dropped into it not a ring or small velvet box, but a key. I stared at it. A shining, freshly cut key with a small hard plastic tag attached. I concentrated on the key's sharply jagged teeth for a few seconds before raising my face again.

'It's a key to my place,' he said, smiling. 'I want you to know you're welcome to come and let yourself in, even if I'm not there.'

Okay, better than a ring, really, when you thought about it, a bigger sign of trust and confidence, especially for someone like Steven. A symbol of trust I would use very, very sparingly, something I would not abuse or take for granted. He sat back expectantly, still smiling. Watching me.

'Thank you,' I said. 'That means a lot to me.'

'This little tag here,' he said, pointing, 'is for the burglar alarm. You wave it once in front of the sensor at the front door and the red light will flash blue, so you'll know.'

'Are you sure about this?' I said, and he nodded as he picked up the menu.

NONE OF US come without baggage in our mid-thirties, Anna says, except weird men in dance classes who sneak fake profiles onto rsvp.com.au, and who wants one of them? You had to expect that adults have some serious relationships in their pasts, she said, otherwise they wouldn't be normal. God knows I've had a few crash-and-burn

relationships myself, and obviously there would have been something odd about Steven if he hadn't had a couple himself. An ex-wife, in fact, who now lived overseas and was, he assured me, entirely off the scene. Oh, and a couple of girlfriends after that – one he'd lived with for a year or two, who'd left after the house was finally renovated. *A year, or two?* I thought a bit obsessively to myself, *that seems like quite a difference to me*, but he went on to explain that was why the house and garden were so important to him; he'd worked hard to make them exactly as he wanted and he didn't want to make any more relationship mistakes like that again. 'I mean,' he said, 'a man's home is his castle, right?'

I thought of all this in the restaurant as I accepted the key.

'So just wave that in front of the alarm and it flashes blue, then this opens the front-door deadlock?' I prompted hesitantly, wanting, I guess, to hear him say more about this overture of trust, and why me, and why now.

'Yes, when you come over and I'm not there,' he said, turning from the wine list to study me again, his eyes dark and serious. 'Like on Fridays? Isn't that when you get off work early?'

'Well, yes, the kids at the kinder have those two half-days, remember…um, this means a lot to me, Steven, knowing I can keep these and make myself welcome…'

'Fridays, then,' he said.

Back to the wine, and I saw suddenly how he'd be in the boardroom when a deal was clearly closed. Still, it meant something, it was an overture. Giving me the key, I realised, now asked a little something of me in return. If I wanted to push things along, I mean. Some symbol to bridge the first heat of this early, charmed infatuation, and settle down to the slow cosy burn of long-term commitment.

I bought him a tree.

A Tahitian lime tree. Feeling impetuous, I lugged it out of Bunnings a few weeks later and laid it down in the back of my car, then drove around to his place. Once kinder had finished but before he got home from the city, I usually had a two-hour window I generally spent at home spritzing my hair and ironing the clothes I was secreting, garment by garment, into the wardrobe at his place. This time, though, I'd surprise him. I lifted the tree carefully out of the car and carried it around the

back, through the tall garden gate with the special catch, before returning for the bag of slow-release fertiliser I'd purchased at the same time, because one thing I didn't need right now was my symbolic gift curling up and dying within a week. In fact it was the fertiliser which made me realise I meant business. This wasn't a tree given in an accompanying pot, to be lifted and moved if things didn't work out. This was a tree to be planted in the *actual earth*. I stood there looking at it, and it was as if someone persuasive who'd sidled up noiselessly spoke softly into my ear, and what they said was: *why not plant it for him now?*

Good question. Why not? Hadn't Steven said he'd like a lime tree out here, and hadn't it been as we were standing drinking gin and tonics, right here on this spot on the lawn where I now stood, breathing in the heady scent of everything flowering?

I was too timid, that was my trouble; way too nervous about overstepping the mark and reading the signs right, (*listen to yourself*, whispered the voice) this was a man who had given me his HOUSE KEY, a man who had gestured down at the lawn and fragrant rosebushes and said, 'I love being able to share this with you', and if that wasn't practically a declaration of lifelong commitment, what was? Hell, why not plan a reception right here, in this courtyard, it would fit about eighty people and we could hire some chairs…anyway, why not just quell this ridiculous apprehension right now and seize the day and plant this tree myself? There were instructions on the label, after all.

All I needed was a spade.

DOWN BEHIND THE garage Steven had a garden shed I hadn't been in, but judging from the magnificence of his garden I knew he would have a range of tools in there to make a grown man weep. Except that its door was padlocked. I swore to myself, then suddenly visualised a double row of hooks with keys on them, neatly labelled, and just where I'd seen them too – in the kitchen pantry. Inside the house. To which he had given me the key. I could have this tree in and then have a shower and slip on a fresh white shirt and check my hair for errant glue and glitter before he got back. At the front door, I cautiously swiped the security tag and the sensor light flashed as blue as a cloudless, untroubled sky. The key went in with barely a snicker.

IT WAS COOL in the shed after the sunshine outside, and I hesitated in the doorway, my eyes adjusting to the gloom. It was a workshop with every tool, from hacksaw to orbital sander to leaf blower, lined up on the wall with hooks. Against the opposite wall was a set of shelves stacked with tins of paint, glue guns, silicone, grout mix and everything else Steven had mastered the use of to make his home his castle. I walked past the shelves, smelling two-stroke fuel and noting the mower, the brushcutter and the pressure hose, the folded tarps and dropsheets. Hanging beside them, right in the corner and covered with a fine film of dust, was a rain jacket.

I have no idea what made me lift it down, except the sudden certainty that it was one female garment that had escaped the purges of the house's interior. If this were a movie, you'd have me slip my hand inside a pocket, wouldn't you, and find something incriminating – a hotel bill, say, or a love letter, but all that was in there was a single hair-tie and a tissue, and the long-lost hint, under the shed smells of oil and fuel, of some unfamiliar perfume. I roused myself and went over to the spades and shovels, arranged by size. They all gleamed like new, but I didn't dawdle anymore, because I was thinking now of him getting home. I didn't want to be hot and sweaty and dirty with a half-dug hole, I wanted to be finished and reclining, smelling faintly of tangerine body scrub, smiling in welcome. I just selected the closest one and ran back to the lawn where the tree was waiting.

I chose a spot and hacked up a neat circle of grass, then started to dig. It's only a hole a foot deep for a little tree, I thought to myself as I chopped and levered up dirt. If it's not in exactly the right spot we can…well, *he* can always replant it. He'll be really happy. He'll be delighted at my impulsiveness. *Of course he will,* said the voice in my ear, *that's just what he loves about you*. About a spade-length down, I hit something, and my babbling, nervous thoughts braked to a skidding halt.

My spade crunched then clanged, as the jolt went up my arms. Something metallic. Feeling a cringe of dread that I'd hit a sprinkler attachment or a pipe, I knelt down to clear the dirt away with my fingers and stared in bewilderment at what was exposed.

It was a chain. A smooth taut line of chain buried there, straight as a railroad track. I stood up slowly and took a step back, my eyes travelling from the hole to the house, making a mental straight line, in the direction of the chain, up to a concrete pillar supporting a tap beside the courtyard. Then the other way, right down past the trellises and the sweeping lawn, arrow-straight, to the rendered garden wall and the boundary of Steven's property.

Still mystified, I dropped my spade and walked down there, my feet tracking along the invisible line where the chain was buried. Everything getting slow now.

I came up short at a marble birdbath, on a little pedestal. I'd barely noticed it before.

I stood there, squinting up to the house and back, baffled. The only possible answer prodded at me now, as insistent as a dentist's probe looking for an exposed nerve. This thing was chained to the house. Which meant that Steven had, at some point in the past, taken one of his tempered-steel spades and dug an underground trench fifteen metres long for this purpose alone – to secure a lawn ornament. So that nobody could reach over the wall and steal it.

I put my hand flat into the birdbath, mesmerised, feeling the heat rising from its baking, shallow bowl. Maybe he'd forgotten about it, screened here behind shrubbery. Maybe it had a slow-leaking crack in it.

I had an inkling, though, who might have purchased it, and kept it filled. I could see her, in a season much less benign and flowery than this one, walking the boundaries of this garden alone in the drizzle, in a rain-jacket. Taking out some tissues to wipe her eyes over something. One of my predecessors, anyway. One of the ones who'd broken the tether.

THE BIRDBATH WAS decorated with a cherub sitting on the brim, hand on cheek. It looked like something decorating a gravestone, this figure, something you'd find tenderly guarding an inscription that says *not dead, just sleeping*. It looked pretty disconsolate as it stared down into the dry basin of the birdbath. Possibly not so tender; depending on how you looked at it, possibly baleful and morose. Just possibly, I thought as I stood there staring at it, slow on the uptake as usual, a brattish, obese little angel, slumped in a sulk, with ridiculous, stunted little wings.

I ran awkwardly back up the lawn – funny, it had a slope to it I hadn't noticed before – heart pounding as I tried to calculate how long I'd been here. He could catch me red-handed, sprung and stuttering, evidence of trespass everywhere. But I could make it alright. All I had to do was to shovel all this dirt back in and then rearrange that grass over the hole and press it down and hope to God it didn't die in a telltale circle, giving me away. Then get a grip and *think* what needed to be done – key back inside, door relocked, alarm reset, tree back in car. Then *go*. I wiped the last traces of dirt off the spade and noticed a tiny scratch glinting, where it had scraped the chain. If I got this back in the shed in time on the right hook and padlocked it and replaced that key too, then nobody, surely, would ever notice a single tiny scratch, not on a garden tool. Nobody in their right mind.

I hear the garage door groan as it swings open via remote control, and his car engine comes up the driveway then cuts out as he stops. The burglar alarm. Some automatic verification system sent to his phone, no doubt, some electronic sentry guarding the fortress. Or maybe I should just believe him when he says he's home early. Maybe he's going to come through the gate and smile with surprise and pleasure at the sight of me here, and I could say *Steven! I was just going to plant this lime tree for you for a surprise!* because of course he will have seen my car and know it's me. *Where do you think it should go?* I might say innocently, free of guile, full of love. I see his hand come through the gate to release the spring-loaded catch. Too late to flee, then. I swallow, weighted and held fast with something, bound helpless to the spot.

'Where are you?' I hear him call. I lower the spade to the ground, turning it so the scratch is hidden against my shoe, and I wait.

Cate Kennedy writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry and lives in north-east Victoria. Her most recent short story collection is *Like a House on Fire* (Scribe, 2012).

ESSAY

Hairy tales

Confronting the evil within

Jane Sullivan

ONCE upon a time in Wyoming, I watched a pack of wolves hunt and kill. I stopped the car and got out because a row of people were standing by the road, staring out over the scrubby hills of Yellowstone National Park. At first I couldn't see anything, but then a flicker of movement in the far distance, black against a pool of snow, caught my eye. Something – several things – were running very fast indeed.

Next to me were a huge man and his little wife. They were serious wildlife watchers, with several pairs of high-powered binoculars and a lens on a tripod. The man said grudgingly that I could take a look through the lens, as long as I didn't touch it. The flickers turned into a line of tiny wolves racing after an elk. They twisted and turned, sometimes I lost them altogether, but they always reappeared. After a few minutes they took down the elk and it was all over. I could see them gathered round the body but no blood, no tearing and devouring, even with the lens it was too far away.

What I remember is not so much the sight of the wolves, which was thrilling in a way a wildlife documentary never is, but the way the man standing next to me made me feel angry. The whole time he was shouting. Go, Alpha, Go. Don't let that runt in front, he's no killer, he don't know what to do. Get in there. Yeah. DON'T TOUCH IT (that last was to me). She's ruining it (to his wife). Yeah, Alpha's in front. YEAH.

I was angry with the man because on some level he thought he was a wolf, which was clearly ridiculous. But what made me even angrier was that he thought I wasn't a wolf. I couldn't share the excitement of the kill. I was just some bumbling fool who might mess up his equipment.

What a day, he said at the end. What a day.

Not much of a day for the elk, said his wife.

About the same time, I was beginning to write a novel about a teenage boy who turns into a werewolf. I was having trouble finding a form that would embody the impulse that originally led me to start. That impulse is still there, still strong.

I don't remember when I first heard werewolf stories, it's like they were always there.

The teen werewolf idea surfaced after my son turned fifteen. One moment, he was a sweet blond child: the next, a huge, shambling creature in bare control of his lengthening limbs. Dark hair was sprouting everywhere, the voiced yodelled between treble and bass, conversation was reduced to grunts. He smelled different. He spent most of his time in his lair. He didn't howl, but his guitar did it for him. It was only to be expected and I joked about it with his dad, as parents do, but there was something frightening about it.

Don't get me wrong. People think my son is a pretty nice, gentle person. People think that about me too, I suppose. I know they are right. I also know that if I had to, I would kill to protect him.

A CONTEMPORARY WEREWOLF story was not, I admit, an original idea. As I'm sure you've noticed, werewolves are busting out everywhere in popular culture, a close third behind vampires and zombies. The werewolf has invaded Hogwarts. Buffed and handsome, he has presented as a rival for Bella's affections in the *Twilight* series. In films and on TV we've seen werewolves as teenage jocks, bikie gangs, flatmates to vampires, enemies of vampires, presidential aides, corporate raiders. While we're short of a classic novel in the way *Dracula* is the classic vampire novel, there is no shortage of werewolf literature. Recent works include Glen Duncan's gory and sexy *The Last Werewolf* (Canongate, 2011) and his follow-up *Tallula Rising* (2012); and Benjamin Percy's apocalyptic thriller *Red Moon* (Breakneck Books, 2007).

The first thing I noticed when I looked up werewolves in legend and history (the two are so closely intertwined it's sometimes hard to separate them) is they are everywhere, and they go back thousands of years. Virtually every place in the world that has had wolves, or similar creatures, has stories about people who change into them, and back. You become a werewolf through sorcery, either your own spells or through a curse from another, or a punishment from a god. Sometimes it runs in the family. You put on a belt or a hide, you perform a ritual inside a circle, you take off your clothes, you drink from a certain stream or pick a certain flower, or you turn your skin inside out. Then you're a *loup garou*, a *brouch*, a *lupo*, a *vargulfr*, a *varulf*, a *vulkolak*, a *versipellis*, to give just a few of your names. You retain your human reason but your nature is bestial and your bloodlust insatiable. You run like the wind, you have prodigious strength and size, you may kill and devour men, women and children in great numbers, including your own family. You may either suffer or enjoy your new role, but one thing is certain: you are terrifying.

Mankind is locked in battle against you. Men will try to remove your magic belt or wolfskin, steal your clothes where you have left them, force you to drink a newborn's blood, flog you until you are covered in blood, or draw your blood, which is black. They will exorcise you with cauldrons of water that have been boiled with live toads inside. If they even suspect you of being a werewolf they will cut you open to see if you have hair growing on your insides. Or they spot you through telltale signs: you are the wolf with human eyes, a human voice, with a constant thirst, with no tail. If you are wounded or lose a limb in wolf form, your deformity will betray you when you become human again. They will kill you with swords, knives and guns; they will capture you, torture you and burn you alive.

As I trawled through the stories, I gradually discovered I was on the werewolf's side. I tut-tutted at myself: this was absurd, futile and totally unethical. Here was a creature by definition savage, ruthless and devoted to ripping humans into little pieces. But for some reason my hunch was important. I felt indignant and protective, like the counsel for the defence. Or maybe like the man at Yellowstone, cheering on the Alpha male and his pack. Or maybe the demonic equivalent of Brian's mother in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*: he's not Satan, he's just a naughty boy.

And as I discovered, I could make out a case for a werewolf hero. But it was very difficult, and both legend and history were stacked against me. And however good you make a werewolf, he's still immensely frightening.

THE EARLIEST MANIFESTATIONS of werewolfery are not evil. Many cultures around the world had and still have shamanistic beliefs and rituals about the power that is bestowed on you when you leave your body and enter the body of another being, and the wolf is one of the most potent animal totems. This shapeshifting is seen as either literal or psychic, and it's often thought to bring great benefits. There was a wolf goddess cult in ancient Rome – Romulus and Remus were suckled by a wolf mother. Native Americans believe the Wolf is the Grand Teacher of mankind. I like this quote from the shaman Ghost Wolf: 'Wolf will look deep into your heart and share the greatest of knowledge, but will demand full participation and absolute sincerity. Wolf will rekindle old memories within your soul.'

HOW DID THIS formidable but largely benevolent deity or sacred being become a totally hellish creature? In Europe, the Church outlawed werewolves. Outlaws can be attractive characters – think of Robin Hood or Ned Kelly. But not the werewolf. For hundreds of years, and sometimes to the present day, he was seen as a real creature, possessed by an evil spirit and damned beyond redemption. He was methodically hunted down, tried, tortured and murdered in the most ghastly manner.

Montague Summers, an occultist who published his book *The Werewolf in Lore and Legend* as late as 1933, believed his subject really existed and was 'one of the most terrible and depraved of all the bond-slaves of Satan. He was even whilst in human form a creature within whom the beast – and not without prevailing – struggled with the man.' That 'not without prevailing' sets the tone: here is a being where the evil within will always triumph. I wanted to argue that he didn't choose to become what he is, but there's an answer to that too. Sometimes the man is already so depraved, he deliberately becomes a werewolf through sorcery, and he relishes his savagery. Or it's Satan's reward for his good service.

Was he sexually evil too? There's a famous woodcut of a huge man-wolf beast carrying off a revealingly clad maiden in its jaws, but the rape element

isn't played up much. Maybe the werewolves were too busy with death to worry about a fate worse than death. Sexy werewolves are more of a twentieth-century invention. Which is odd, because surely they've always been sexy? The wolf is a dazzlingly beautiful and seductive animal. The killing and the visceral stuff is the ultimate release of inhibition, an ecstasy similar to orgasm. Whether you're attacker or victim, you don't care any more about anything. People in the jaws of a wild beast are said to go into a euphoric trance. Women's fantasies of rape are about giving up control, responsibility. The church must have been very successful in repressing all that.

The werewolf hysteria of the past is similar to the witch trials or the Inquisition, though less well-known. It's classic projection: apparently we were so frightened of sin we had to find some vessel into which we could dump all our badness. The scale staggered me: in France, where the cases were best documented, between 1520 and 1630 there were about thirty thousand declared cases of werewolfery. A law was passed allowing citizens to bear arms, assemble and chase and kill suspected werewolves. The vast majority who made it to court confessed to their crimes, often in elaborate and grisly detail that included accounts of black sabbaths and traffic with the Devil. The confessions were no doubt helped along by the wheel or the rack. The condemned men, women and children were often burnt alive because it was believed animals reverted to their human form in the flames, which would also stop them becoming vampires after they died.

If the stories are true, some of the so-called werewolves were appalling criminals. One German, Peter Stump, would nowadays be demonised as a cannibalistic serial killer: he was accused of murdering thirteen children, raping his own daughter, killing his own son and eating his brains. His execution in 1589 was just as barbarous as his own deeds: 'flesh of divers parts of his body' was pulled out with hot tongs, his limbs were broken on a wheel and his body was burnt. His poor daughter was also executed. As usual, it suited the narrative that Stump should accept his fate: he asked for his body not to be spared torment so that his soul might be saved, though probably nobody had much hope of that.

For every serial killer, there were probably hundreds or even thousands of more or less innocent victims of the hysteria, targets of informers' revenge,

or just plain unlucky – it took very flimsy evidence to get a conviction. And some monsters, such as the Beast of Gévaudan, said to have killed more than one hundred people by ripping off their faces, were probably unusually ferocious wolves whose exploits were wildly exaggerated.

The villain for me in the werewolf trials is not Stump but a French judge, Henri Boguet, a methodical fanatic who carried out a sustained campaign of torture and terror. There's a woodcut of him among dozens of naked men bound to wheels: he walks around questioning each prisoner while the scribe takes down the confession. It's a perfect illustration of the banality of evil.

I WONDERED FOR a while if I would find a heroic werewolf among the trial histories. After all, these were persecuted and horribly wronged victims. I wanted them to be at least potentially heroic, but they were the opposite. There was something vaguely repulsive about all of them, even allowing for the propaganda of the scribes. One famous teen werewolf of the day was Jean Grenier, a thirteen-year old lad who boasted of having killed and eaten young girls, encouraged by the Lord of the Forest, a Satanic being who seemed to lurk in all the confessions. I felt sorry for Jean but I couldn't like him. He was ugly, bestial, weak, snivelling: he reminded me of Gollum. Remarkably, the judge decided he was too stupid to be a werewolf and condemned him to captivity in a monastery, where he died some years later. Maybe it's the way the stories are written, but it's almost impossible to feel much pity for the trial victims.

So are there any stories of heroic werewolves? Among the scores I read, I found just four basic tales, with variations. The Livonian werewolves, on trial in 1692, claimed they were the 'Hounds of God', who went down to hell to battle with witches and demons and were welcomed into heaven when they died. The man who told this story was let off lightly, with ten lashes for idolatry and superstitious belief. There was a touching fragment about a wolf who asked the priest to bless his dying wife – when his claw lifted her pelt, the priest saw the woman's body underneath. In the story of William and the Werewolf, a king's little son is abducted and cared for by a wolf. William grows up and goes through many hair-raising adventures, always helped by his wolf guardian, who behaves like Lassie the loyal wonder dog and is of

course a human under a spell. Eventually the spell is lifted, all ends happily and William becomes a warrior with a wolf on his shield.

The longest and most detailed story was the Breton tale of Bisclavret, an enchanted young man who every now and then has to go and take off his clothes and become a wolf. He keeps this a secret from his wife, but she spies on him and steals his clothes so he is trapped in wolf form. Meanwhile his treacherous wife marries her lover. The wolf hunts in the forest until one day the King's hunting party pursues him. When the hounds are about to rip him apart, he comes to the King's stirrup and fawns upon his foot. Amazed at his tameness, the King takes him to court, where he becomes the royal pet.

The wolf is always tame and gentle until he comes across his false wife and her knight. He attacks them and bites off the woman's nose. But the king doesn't punish his wolf; instead, he locks up the couple and questions them, and the terrified lady confesses all. The wolf is left in private with his clothes, he changes back into a man, the King restores his land and banishes the faithless wife and her lover.

There are elements of this story that bother me: the way the wolf cringes to authority, and the blatant misogyny (there's a more brutal Arthurian version with two treacherous ladies and much worse punishments). Above all, what strikes me is that the King believes his wolf must be in the right, and the people he attacks so horribly must be in the wrong. It flies in the face of practically every other werewolf story, and certainly the accounts of the trials, where everyone instantly believes the alleged werewolf is guilty, including the accused himself. There's a welcome lifting of the pall, a feeling that good behaviour will win you respect and trust.

But there's a cost: the wolf has to bury his wild nature and become tame. Is it true, then, that the only werewolf you can admire is either dead or has his wolfishness suppressed? Does he have to become a humble, doggy pet, like Bisclavret; or a sniveling wretch, like Jean Grenier? Where is a figure like Tony Soprano, or Dexter the serial killer, or Walter White, the meek family man turned drug lord in *Breaking Bad* – a powerful and frightening hero who does terrible things, but you're still barracking for him? A creature who wrenches you into a vile world that on some atavistic level you know only too well?

WE HAVE TO wait for the twentieth century and Hollywood to see another version of the heroic werewolf – or at least a creature that arouses pity as well as horror. The movie industry has invented or popularised new werewolf myths: that it's a contagious condition passed on by bites (why would a werewolf stop at a bite, one wonders?); that transformation only happens at the full moon; that the next werewolf is marked by a sign, usually a pentangle; that a werewolf can only be killed by a silver bullet, and so on.

Above all, the movies have given us the wolf man, a hybrid creature part wolf and part man, when the traditional werewolf is either fully human or fully animal. And almost for the first time, we are not witnessing the creature as Other, the horror that is not us. We are in his head, in his body, we know how he feels. We see him change. We know for sure something always implicit in the werewolf myth, something that over hundreds of years has been played down, or flatly denied, and never before so clearly shown: the horror is within all of us.

Of course the quality of werewolf movies varies wildly, from chilling artistry to jokey schlockery and exploitation. My favourite is *The Wolf Man*, the eerily poetic 1941 classic that established the genre. Lon Chaney Junior plays Lawrence Talbot, a mild-mannered young fellow who comes back to his ancestral home in a curious black-and-white fairy-tale version of Wales. Lawrence has a thing for a young girl in the village, but you know she will fall for the handsome regular guy. There is plenty of anticipation of bad magic to come with sinister gypsies, a mysterious old rhyme, a silver-headed walking stick; and rather like *King Kong*, the girl is spared but it all ends very sadly when the wolf man – spoiler and psychologist alert – is killed by his own father.

After he is bitten by a werewolf, Lawrence is transformed into a creature half-man and half-beast. We see it happen via make-up and time-lapse photography, primitive compared to modern digital horror but strangely effective because it is so low-key. There is a moment where he's looking down at his bare feet and suddenly they are covered in a fungus-like fur. Somehow I find this much more repulsive and shocking than the cracking bones and emerging snouts and fangs that characterise later werewolf films. Lawrence finds it pretty horrible too. After the transformation he doesn't remember anything – until he sees the footprints leading to the window.

The closest analogy to Lawrence's plight is the onset of a terrible disease, and this is another version of werewolfery with ancient origins. From the earliest times, doctors were keen to observe, diagnose and cure something called lycanthropy, which was described either as a supernatural affliction or as a mental or physical illness where the patient had delusions he was a wolf, or showed compulsive ghoulish or wolf-like behaviour. There were attempts to link it to recognised diseases: porphyria, hypertrichosis, rabies. None of these seemed an exact fit.

Sigmund Freud introduced us to the most famous Wolf Man in science, one of his patients, and psychology and popular media offered us a number of absorbing twentieth-century case studies of people convinced they were wolves, sometimes leading to uncontrollable outbursts of violence. It was claimed in a 1991 book that an Englishman, Bill Ramsey, had to be forcibly restrained, tried once to kill his wife in bed when the mood came upon him, and could only be cured by exorcism. Also in Britain in 1975, a seventeen-year-old boy convinced he was a wolf tried to kill himself. I became fascinated by the sad, creepy absurdity of a growling woman who offered herself doggy-style to her own mother for sex and claimed to be looking for a 'hairy man' who could satisfy her. When she looked in the mirror, she saw one normal eye and one evil wolf's eye that wanted to destroy her. Somehow the idea of one evil eye seemed much worse than two.

LATELY I'VE FOUND some more sympathetic contemporary portrayals of werewolves very close to home. Australian women are drawing on European heritage to imagine female creatures (most werewolves are unmistakably masculine). Anna Dusk's exuberantly murderous novel *In-Human* (Transit Lounge, 2010) introduces us to a Tasmanian teenage girl werewolf, inspired by the power of her menstrual blood. A new young adult novel, *Waer*, to be published shortly, is set in a fantasy world of werewolves, thieves and magic. Significantly, perhaps, its young author, Meg Caddy, has been working on the book since she was fourteen.

Dusk is also an artist who uses the wolf theme in her work; and another Australian artist, Jazmina Cininas, has produced a series of woodcut images of wolf-girls in the style of traditional fairy-tale

illustration with the charming name *The Girlie Werewolf Project*. The wolf in popular mythology parallels constructs of women, she says: 'Its classic identities as either the selfless nurturing mother (as in *The Jungle Book* and Romulus and Remus stories), the diabolical werewolf, and as the ravening man-eater respectively mirror the chaste wife, heretic witch and femme fatale archetypes traditionally reserved for representations of women.' I don't know yet if this heralds a new approach to the legend. I am still exploring, in the hope of reconciling different levels of human nature and rekindling what the shamans might call the old memories in my soul. I think my search for a heroic werewolf came out of a deep-seated mix of pride and fear at the physical changes in my teenage son; the darker impulses in my own wolf-mother psyche; and the bloodlust of the man in Yellowstone. I hated that rude aggressive man because he shut me out of the wolf club, but I honestly didn't care if it was a bad day for the elk.

How pervasive and deeply stirring the werewolf myth can be, even now. Our own visceral knot of savage emotions still simultaneously terrifies us and fascinates us.

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FICTION

SNAKE IN THE GRASS

CLAIRE CORBETT

I BAKE on the smooth clay of dried creekbed. Soak in light the colour of sandstone. Sun-heavy air. Heat-hushed noon. Stillness, silence, warmth are the things I love. I'm a length of sun-powered muscle, arrowing one way, looping eternally. I love dry country but must drink sometime.

I smell water but as I slide over packed earth to sip from a bowl the scarred dog, who was safely on his chain as Mr Lawson said, breaks it and dashes at me, slavering. His barking, the whirl and stamp of your children, pound through the hard earth, rattling my spine. The children scream and flail at me with sticks. I slip into the woodpile, turn and peer out from its dark safe hollow. Will you, *gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman,* drover's wife, take it apart, drive me into the open? I can't risk it. Just as the dog's jaws snap on air where my tail was, I vanish under the house. With my jawbone earthed I can hear the dog digging. The digging stops. His sounds all come from one spot now; you've wrestled him back onto his chain.

A dish of milk appears next to the wall. Do I like milk? I have no idea but I'm not foolish enough to be lured into the open so you can break my back with a stick. The myth that we milk your cows

shows you see us as sneak-thieves gifted with supernatural cunning. We come into your barns to eat the rats and mice lured there by grain and slop, not to steal your milk. You brought that story with you from another country.

You see nothing but the maze of mirrors you've built, reflecting your own stories at you, stories that wall you within a tight circumference, chain you like your dog, eternally circling the same spot. Stories that blind you with their dazzle, the second-hand light thrown off by eternal reflection. Do you never tire of your endlessly refracting, distorting stories? Do you never want to see what's outside? Do you *never* want to break the glass?

I can tell you one thing: your snake-dreaming is from other deserts and describes very different snakes but you know nothing of the differences between snakes. You tar us all with the same brush.

Come out you evil black brute, you mutter. To you I'm satanic, cunning. If I seem surprisingly literate, well you said yourself in your sacred book, *Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made*.

Come out. Believe me, I'd like nothing more than to get away but my only safety lies in waiting. I am good at waiting, unlike you hot-blooded scurrying mammals, darting here and there, barking, yelling, talking, playing, wasting more energy in a day than I'd use in a month. No wonder it's hard for you to survive out here, your bodies shedding white heat like stars, burning through your fuel. You need so much food! I could eat three mice or rats a week but often don't. I can make do with much less.

As heat fades from the day I sink into torpor. I will wait here under the house 'til you sleep and then with the last of the day's warmth in my muscles I will slip away.

I've miscalculated.

A storm is blowing up and twilight has fallen sharp and there's so much cold air falling to earth, churning away the day's heat too fast. Usually I have hours of sunsoaked stone and earth to power me. Energy drains from my body; now I'm too slow to dart away to safety. I must keep waiting. I hear you moving your children and dog into the big bark kitchen.

Then I smell it, sense it with every scale and muscle fibre. A little yellow sun crackles and smokes, throwing off energy that radiates into the room and away into the sky. You've built a fire. I need that heat. I slide behind the kitchen wall, watching you through the cracks. The dog turns his head. I freeze. Warmth flows in through the crack. I doze, waiting. You lot must sleep sometime.

No?

No. Adrenaline pulses from you, I taste the metallic taint of it on the air. Your fear keeps you awake. What do you think I will do to your children? You know I can't eat them. Too big a meal for me. We have many hours ahead. If only I could talk my way out of this.

Do you have a name for me? Some call me a King Brown.

Class: *Reptilia*. Order: *Squamata*. Suborder: *Serpentes*. Family: *Elapidae*. Genus: *Pseudechis*. Species: *Australis*.

A complex naming but I kind of like it. It's so grand it seems respectful and part of a more hopeful story than the one in your Good Book, in which I am *The Father of Lies*. And I'm no Father. Like you, drover's wife, I'm a mother. The difference between us is that you want to kill my young.

You should have been an ally. My sister. Another mother.

You've been slandered by the same lies spread about me and my kin.

It is useless to speak. A forked tongue can only tell lies. But even if you could listen to me, you could not hear.

And the Lord God said unto the serpent…I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed…

What do you, drover's wife, think I am going to do? You think I'd waste my precious venom on your children for…what? Sport? That's your thing. Not mine.

So we've a long night ahead. A night of fear for you and near torpor for me. A long night in which I could plead for my life, a long night in which I could try to persuade you not to kill me.

Could others speak for me? Perhaps the men who worked the 'Snakepit', where snake-handling shows went on for over a hundred years? Mr Lawson would have known these

snake-men in their battered hats and dungarees, their hessian bags and hooked poles. Families flocked to La Perouse on a Sunday to be horrified, thrilled, amazed. They never forgot those shows. The showmen circled the pit, pacing between legend and reality, telling stories of good snakes and bad snakes: my cousin, the Red-Bellied Black, is the good girl who eats Brown Snakes and Tiger Snakes and keeps you safe. They talk up the danger, then play it down, draping pythons over the shoulders of little girls, handling Tigers and Taipans.

There are those who tell stories. Writers. Artists. Scientists. It takes a story to counteract a story. An antidote if you will. Antivenom.

> The venomous snake in the paddock is tolerated,
> it is snakes in the home yard that are loathed.
> – Geoffrey Lehmann, 'Supper with a black snake'

You cannot know what it costs me to make my venom. Like the spider's web, it is drawn from my body's wealth, made from complex proteins. I cannot waste it. The spider, hated almost as much as I am, must eat her web if it is ruined. She cannot spin it out of nothing.

You call me King Brown but this name is not helpful as I'm classed as a black snake. Should you be silly enough to be *envenomated* by me, you'd need black snake antivenom, not brown.

The Drover, your husband, would likely call me a Mulga Snake. His mates further west would call me a Pilbara Python. My mob ranges over more of Australia than any other snake and in some places we look black. Such a drab description tells you nothing of my subtle beauty, of the way each scale is lighter-toned at the edges, netting me in gold. Enamelled, I shimmer as I move.

> Sun glazed his curves of diamond scale,
> And we lost breath to watch him pass.
> – Judith Wright, 'Hunting Snake'

Average length: 1.5 metres up to maximum exceeding 2.7 metres.

Description: Broad head, bulbous cheeks, large scales.

Colour: Varies from light to dark brown, coppery red to almost yellow. Southern specimens darker, sometimes nearly black.

> We park at Hargreaves Lookout. Alone at the lookout, I stare down into the blue-green valley framed by pink cliffs. I turn to walk back and stop. About five metres away a large snake lies right across the path. Must be a King Brown. I've seen my share of Red-Bellied Black Snakes but this snake is brown-gold and big. I'm not afraid but I'm not about to step over it either. I wait, watching in fascination as it basks on the warm sand. After a few minutes the snake glides away into the bushes. A few weeks later I learn this snake is indeed a King Brown and a celebrity.

Venom: LD50 = 1.9 yield: 180mg. King Brown snakes can express enormous quantities of venom. The actions of the venom are mainly haemolytic (destructive to red blood cells); cytotoxic (poisonous to cells); and also mildly neurotoxic (poisonous to nerves) and mytotoxic (poisonous to muscles).

Specific antivenom: Black Snake.

Initial dose: 18,000 units.

Special feature: King Brown snake venom has a devastating effect on other venomous snakes but the King Brown appears to be immune itself to the venom of other snakes. It is not immune to the Cane Toad.

Food: Rats, mice, lizards, other species of snakes. Eggs. Birds. Carrion.

> I learn more about this King Brown from a story in the local newspaper. The snake is a mother well-known to locals, who often see her at the lookout. Their unobtrusive respect leads to her death. Despite the King Brown's fearsome reputation, she is known to be inoffensive. But as happens to many

> wild animals who learn not to fear humans, this snake was unafraid of the wrong humans, men who kill her, breaking her back, destroying her eggs. I grieve, having seen her so briefly. Our untrustworthiness is even more shameful than our cruelty. If we were consistently kind – or even consistently aggressive – she might have survived.

Venom toxicity rating: Lethal Dose (LD) calculated as the dose resulting in the death of 50 per cent of test subjects. Which are mice.

You boast we're the world's most venomous snakes. It's true Australian snakes are very venomous: to mice and rats. You don't have a good way of testing how toxic my venom is and so you test it on rodents. Not surprisingly, my venom is fatal to them because they're the very prey it was designed for. I doubt I'm as dangerous to you; mice are not necessarily a good guide. After all, adult mice don't react to funnel-web venom. I wouldn't rely on that mob if I were you.

We're the demons alright. We've even been used to strike fear into the hearts of refugees. Your government made three videos to show people who might try to sail to Australia the horrors of a land surrounded by sharks, burnt by fire and infested with venomous snakes. I feel such videos say more about you, Drover's Wife, than about Australia. In countries where people have lived with snakes for a long time, they coexist well. The cobra coils under the house, the python sleeps in the rafters, keeping down the rats.

Cobra venom is rated 1 on the scale of toxicity. My cousin, the Inland Taipan, is rated 49.5 or nearly 50 times more venomous than the cobra. I myself am thought less dangerous only than the Taipan, not for toxicity but for the amount I inject. Our reasons are good for having so much venom and making it so potent. We used to be massive constricting creatures, like the anaconda or the boa. We don't need all that muscle now; our venom means we can be lighter, faster.

Just as well your mob never met *wonambi*; those fellas grew up to six metres long, as long as a small bus. They lived in Australia from 100 million years ago until about thirty thousand years ago. Some say *wonambi* inspired tales of the rainbow serpent.

Then there's *Titanoboa*, a monster rivalling Leviathan, Typhon, the Midgard Serpent. A prehistoric South American snake 43 metres long, or almost as long as an Olympic swimming pool, she weighed in at a mighty 1140 kilograms. You might want to consider this though: as the climate warms we snakes grow larger.

If those fellas were still around you'd really have something to be scared of.

Another reason our venom is so potent: we are not vipers.

That wouldn't mean much to you, Drover's Wife: a snake is a snake is a snake… But vipers, which don't exist in this country, kill many more people across the world than Australian snakes do. Vipers have folding teeth. They pack them away neatly in their mouths and then when they strike the fangs spring up and out, a far more efficient venom delivery than my cousins and I use.

Our fangs are fixed so we must bite our prey. Some part of its flesh must be between our upper and lower fangs for the venom to be injected. Would it help if I told you my teeth are quite small? They can't penetrate jeans or shoes. A simple strike will not do for us. Many of our strikes fail or are intentionally 'dry'. We're just warning you. Go away. Leave us alone. *Don't tread on me*.

Huge, high as my waist,
Rearing with lightning's tongue,
So brown with heat like the fallen
Dry sticks it hid among,
– Douglas Alexander Stewart, 'The Brown Snake'

Which brings me back to you, Drover's Wife. Do you have a name? You call me a black brute – seems to me there are quite a few black brutes that you and that Drover husband of yours would prefer not to have around cluttering up the landscape. I am also described as having 'an evil pair of small, bright beadlike eyes'.

You should have been an ally.

The same snake-hating religion that said you were the door for all evil into this world said the same of me. I'm a snake, no symbol for anything. You are a woman, no symbol for anything.

Snakes are like a line
Of poetry; a chill
Wind in the noon,
– David Campbell, 'Snake'

I am curled up behind your wall, not inside your kitchen. If I come out at night to hunt I won't bite you or your babies. I can smell where you are and though I'm no pit viper, with their oh-so-fancy heat-locating facial pits, I can still feel your heat. That's how I know your size and that I can't eat you. If you stopped to think about it, Drover's Wife, you'd see I'm a blessing to your hut, to your shed, to your barn, eating the vermin, the rats and mice that destroy your food and spread disease. Your farmers are finding that the more of us they kill, the more severe the plagues of rats and mice eating their crops. You protect your crops in one way, destroy them in another.

People in India live with cobras under their homes. Cobras are powerful, good luck. If you can't see us without a symbol standing in between us, let us be like the cobra. Let us be Shiva, destroying, regenerating. Let us be protectors of the Buddha, bringers of rain, thunder, fertility. Carved in Hawkesbury River sandstone, we will guard the entrances to your temples, your churches. Your churches! Imagine. You could celebrate the lunar holiday of Nag Panchami and refrain from your plowing and field work out of respect for us.

We are cosmic, ranging across the universe. Scientists recently described the Milky Way as 'a pit of writhing snakes.' Giant rivers of turbulent gas, coiling their way across the deep, show up on a radio telescope image as 'gas snakes'. Your scientists are persistent, I'll give them that. Took them thirty years to capture an image of the gas snakes. Cosmic gas snakes help stars form, make the galaxy and the universe magnetic and spread warmth around. How appropriate. We snakes all need heat from the stars.

To bring things down to earth: bushies say the other deadly King Brown is the 'shearer's glass', a big bottle of beer. Men are bitten when they try to kill one of us while drunk. One man lost his arm and said *I made the stupid mistake of grabbing a wild King Brown with my left hand because I was holding a beer in my right one!*

You mammals are not rational creatures – too hotblooded. A thousand things in this land are more dangerous than I. The sun itself invades your skin, poisoning your cells. Men that pass your hut. Fires, floods. A picture on a page stuck to the wall of your hut shows Mary, infant in arms, crushing a serpent beneath her heel. Do you see yourself this way? It is you yourself you crush.

Mr Lawson said my eyes were evil. *Evil to him who evil thinks*. He said that wretched dog shook me as if he felt the original curse in common with all mankind. The same curse that oppresses you then, woman, vessel of evil? Crushing me, you side with those who hate you. I am not an enemy nor The Enemy. I expected more of you.

How do I shed
this fusty skin of fear
and walk
with artfully reckless
bared ankles?
– Dorothy Porter 'Snake Story'

At least when Mr Lawson wrote there were no cane toads. Some say up to 90 per cent of my mob are now gone because of cane toads. Others say toads make us adapt, that evolution is proceeding swiftly because of this pressure.

The writers who followed Mr Lawson, the man and woman who took up the story from him, understood me no better, I feel. The man said my grace and beauty symbolised a human penis; the comparison leaves me speechless. The vainest man alive could not be so arrogant. What could be more feminine, if it comes to that, then my shining flow?

No one who has seen our coils loop one on another so effortlessly could think of such a thing without laughing. I've been here harmlessly behind the wall before, enjoying the heat from your tiny captive sun. You never knew I was there. I saw you and your Drover begetting one of your urchins. Perhaps we're agreed on saying no more about that. It was nothing like my languid entwinings with my mate. That Drover will never waste five hours winding himself

around you. As in all things, you are too quick, your racing heartbeats, the roaring furnace of your overheated greedy metabolisms, driving you on. This land has heat to spare. I soak in its energy, energy raining from our star, radiating from our stones. I'm the original, efficient solar-powered creature.

The other writer, she had a few points. She said Mr Lawson could only write of your strength as it seemed to him like a man's strength, killing snakes and fighting bushfires. And yet you do not need to do the one and don't know how to manage the other.

You are outside, scrabbling at the skin, scratching in the dust. You do not get in to where the country can talk to you, tell you where you can go, where you should stay away. I am black. Black like Black Mary, black like the man who didn't build your woodpile well enough, the man described as a 'stray blackfellow' as if he were a dog and yet also 'the last of his tribe and a King'. How do you know he was a King? Did he sport one of those half-moon copper or brass King plates like 'King Billy, king of the Barwon Blacks' or 'King Mickey Johnson', crowned at Wollongong, 30 January, 1896? Am I a King Brown in the same way? In some sense I'm a King. Or Queen. I *belong* here. I've been here for twenty million years.

> Take time to look, look again —
> feel the land through your feet;
> the Snake will not harm those
> who show the proper respect.
> Those who rush in must be strangers.
>
> – Billy Marshall-Stoneking, 'Singing the Snake'

Every spring your ABC reports that I and my cousins will be out and about, so watch out! You could try leaving me alone. I will show many signs of distress before I bite. I may whip my tail like a rattlesnake. If you don't walk away then, I'll show you how big I am, flattening my head. If you still don't get my message, I'll raise the first part of my body from the ground and feint at you, practising mock strikes. Could speech be clearer than the language of my body? My first strike will just be bluffing you. Then I'll put my head down,

looking at you with both eyes, measuring the distance for my strike. Even now you can walk away and be safe.

I glide out from the wall. If I can just reach the other side of this kitchen I will flee into the grey dawn, the heat from the fire giving me strength for just long enough to get away.

This time the story will have a happy ending. This time, I'll escape.

That devil of a dog stirs. I've made no noise, how is it possible he's awake? His growl wakes you and you grab your stick. One metre, two metres.

This time, freedom is so close. Maybe this time it will be different.

Snakes are guardians. If you can't understand me, you can't understand anything here. It is your fear, not I, that keeps you on the outside. If it had not been me, it would have been something else and perhaps finally the terror of the empty sky that drove you mad.

The dog springs, his jaws closing on my back.

You should have understood.

Perhaps on another day there will be another story.

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ESSAY

Metafur

Literary representations of animals

Helen Hopcroft

LONG ago, when the world was just as unfair as it is today, villagers gathered at nights and told each other stories. By the light of the fire, they spun and chattered and passed on stories that had been floating around for centuries, or perhaps even longer. Nobody could read, everybody worked hard, and at night they continued their tasks, the constant labour disfiguring bodies, crippling hands, until spinning wheels became like crucifixes for uneducated women. To occupy their minds, these early tales were bawdy and unrestrained, designed to take both listener and teller to another place. Never originally intended for children, in John Updike's words they were 'the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples'.

It was only later, much later, that an aristocratic Frenchwoman would call these stories *conte de fees* or fairy tales. Like any cultural product involving oral transmission, these stories varied widely, but certain key traits persisted. There were magical reversals of fortune: the poor became rich, evildoers were punished for their deeds, and in the end the protagonist enjoyed a life of ease. As fairy tale scholar Marina Warner notes, the schematic characterisations, such as 'Prince Charming' or the 'beautiful princess', meant that you could slip yourself into the lead role, easily imagining the story was about you. They were blank slates to write your fears and desires. Not surprisingly,

fairy tales became incredibly popular, spreading virus-like across the world, intermingling through a combination of publication and oral storytelling.

Despite the many years that have passed, traces of agrarian societies still permeate these narratives. This is a magical world of kings and princesses, brutal feudal succession and inheritance laws, poor servants, villages and royal hunts. It was an era when women often died in childbirth, leaving daughters to be raised by their father's new wife: the evil stepmother. However evil and desperate are sometimes interchangeable, and without legal rights or independent income, many of these women would have few options, all of them unpleasant. It was a time when, if your husband or father died early, you were screwed.

Poor women and abandoned girls are not the only literary remnants of an earlier era. When you read these stories, pay attention to the many animals that populate the narratives. Notice the talking birds, human–animal hybrids, helpful cats, ravenous wolves, lizard footmen, animal brides and grooms or lecherous frogs. If you start to focus on animals, particularly those in the periphery of the action, a perceptual shift takes place. Like looking at a painting's background, when your eyes return to the subject, it appears to have changed.

WHEN I THINK of fairy tales, I think of heroes. As children, alive with our first experiences of injustice, we paste our face onto the body of Cinderella, our detested cousin's mug onto the despot. Hearts soar with the narrative arc: we listen enthralled as we transcend obscurity to become powerful. Preoccupied with wish fulfillment, the pleasures of being 'big', we barely notice the animal characters, brushing past them like strangers on the train. With the exception of charismatic entities, such as Red Riding Hood's wolf or Beauty's beast, we aren't that interested, viewing animals as peripheral to the action. It would not occur to us to see the same story from their perspective, or to consider questions of agency and power: like sober people at a drunken party, they're 'just there'. As Lewis C Seifert, professor of French Studies at Brown University, points out, generally speaking we do not perceive an animal character as the literary shadow of a once living creature, an entity with its own set of needs, motivations and expectations.

A satisfyingly literal explanation for the frequent presence of animals in fairy tales is that they're just part of their agrarian roots. In the past, tending domestic animals, breeding and slaughtering them, or hunting wild beasts were everyday events. The lives of humans and animals were much more closely entwined than they are now. People lived alongside animals, relying on them for warmth, clothing, transport, wealth creation and status. So it makes sense that these stories are populated with animals. If we take this view, animals operate to make the magical world more convincing, for what is a wood without a wolf?

The problem with this view, however, is that representation is never this straightforward. When we make a picture of something, either in words or imagery, it is mediated through the human filter of perception, telling us just as much about the individual creator and their cultural context as the object itself. In other words, culture is just the tangible product of what happens in people's heads. So these animals not only signify themselves, but our human understanding of our relationship with other species: we fear the wolf, the tiger and the snake, but we embrace the helpful cat or the goose that serves us by laying golden eggs. Our use of animals determines how we imagine them, with the process of sorting animals into domestic or wild categories determining whether they are represented as 'good' or 'bad'. There is, after all, nothing intrinsically wicked about a predator species, other than it has the potential to eat us.

It becomes clear at this point that representation involves an exercise of power. If an image tells us about the relationship between the viewer and the thing being represented, then the pivot point of this act of imagining is power. Past racist and sexist images clearly illustrate this, as well as campaigns to disenfranchise them; there's a very good reason anti-discrimination campaigns begin by creating imagery that communicates equal and inclusive power relationships. So when we read fairy tales that contain representations of animals, they implicitly communicate how we should relate to these creatures, which is governed by our perception of their status.

Fairy tales are enormously popular, everyone knows these stories, they're foundational in terms of literacy, and play a major role in internalising gender roles. Jack Zipes, a key figure in the world of fairy tale scholarship, writes

passionately about their memetic appeal, asking why are we hardwired to absorb and repeat these narratives? And there's an enormous power in numbers. If you think of an aligned genre, such as romance writing, the readership levels are staggering. When you have a popular genre, reinforcing conventions regarding human–animal relationships, the force becomes apparent. This is a cultural live wire that won't stop being relevant any time soon.

And representation involves an exercise of power. Acts of representation affect how we treat real animals. The act becomes an action, with an image not only telling us how we think about animals, but how we should engage with them. This is a cyclic notion, where representation both reflects and pre-empts actual experience, and our treatment of animals guides our imagining. Therefore, if we regard animals as pieces on a human chessboard, our literature will reinforce this perception. It is strangely liberating to look at any work of art, and ask the question 'who has the power to picture another'?

WHILE REPRESENTATION TEACHES us how to see animals, it also expresses fundamental understandings about how we view ourselves. The line between humans and other animals, the so-called 'species barrier', is like a semi-permeable membrane. We use representation to picture our relationships with animals, but we also use animals as a mirror for the self.

One of the ways literature does this is by emphasising, through the process of anthropomorphisation, the human qualities within an animal; for example, a representation of a kind dog is contrasted with his brutish master. When we search for animal attributes in the human, this stream flows in the other direction. Indeed, it seems that we are wired up to look for the beast in the man, the man in the beast. Particularly in schematic literary forms like the fairy tale, this is a potent device that neatly communicates a great deal of character information. Little Red Riding Hood's wolf is at once a ravenous animal and a sexual predator, and all the scarier for it. It's a strange case of the animal object humanising the two-legged subject.

Anthropomorphisation is often communicated via metaphorical thinking and language. Metaphor operates by looking for similarities and differences between entities; effectively, it's how we sort and categorise information about the world around us. We understand ourselves via a constant, though

largely unconscious, process of thinking: 'I am like…' or 'I am not like…' Thus when we use metaphorical language, such as 'busy as a bee' or 'like a pig', we are reinforcing our own identity through negation and mutuality, as well as how we feel about bees and pigs. And while we define ourselves with and against many things, animals are deeply entangled with what it means to be human. Simply put, we see the best and worst of ourselves in animals.

While looking for ourselves, and others, in animals is a compelling discourse, it is just one of the ways we discover our humanity. Fairy tales are part of a long literary tradition that uses animal characters as an emotive counterpoint to human ones. Fairy tales often set up an animal entity alongside a powerful character, acting as a litmus test of human virtue. A common pattern features the protagonist helping an animal, with a reward, often supplied by the creature, soon following. As Marina Warner observes, this threshold test of kindness is a neat, shorthand way of indicating that the character is worthy of fairy tale largesse. It conveys the comforting message that any fool can triumph in an impossible quest, just as long as he stops to pat the cat along the way. As ever, our treatment of the most vulnerable speaks volumes about our character. In the magic world of fairy tales, where power relationships are often inverted, compassion brings conquest.

WHAT THEN OF the proliferation of human–animal hybrids in these tales? Or the many, many stories in which a human turns into an animal, or vice versa. There is an extensive cycle of 'Animal Groom' tales, such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Frog Prince*, where a nobleman is magically transformed into an animal, only to be redeemed by his true love's touch. These have often been interpreted as didactic tales designed to ease young women into marital roles. The underlying message is that it is a woman's duty to civilise her new husband, and that her efforts in doing so will be rewarded by a worthy partner: one who is no longer brutish, indecorous and unclean. While this is a sensible interpretation, rooted in both the historical context and psychological subtext of arranged marriages, there are however other ways of looking at these tales.

Within literature, animals are often read as signifiers for the body. Representations that pair humans with animals tend to set up a mind/body,

rationality/sensuality, male/female and control/subservience dichotomies. We like to think of the human psyche as being like a 'strict but fair' rider atop an unruly stallion, and our literature reflects this hierarchical view of mind dominating body. Cultural objects, such as books or paintings, frequently communicate our dominium over beasts, picturing us as benevolent dictators, wise farmers or loving pet owners. So an entity that straddles the species barrier, existing comfortably in neither human nor animal category, raises some intriguing questions. It is an entity that synthesises dominance and subservience, and by moving us beyond our usual frame of reference, disrupts power relationships. We know how to relate to a human or an animal, but can't find a category to slot the hybrid into. Given the recent popularity of hybrids (vampires, werewolves, cyborgs, bio-tech beings and the like) it is worth asking what we can learn from these strange creatures.

A great deal of current scholarship is looking at the divide between human and animal, and trying to pick apart the many boundaries we've put between ourselves and other living entities. Writers as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway and Peter Goldsworthy have engaged with these ideas, with a range of approaches, both creative and critical. Loosely bracketed as the emerging field of Human–Animal Studies (HAS) this disparate group includes academics, artists, activists, scientists and industry. Despite varying aims and motivations, a common interest is how we create and sustain the species barrier. If we read fairy tales from a HAS perspective, these ancient stories become sharply relevant to our lives today.

One of the key texts being explored by HAS thinkers is the 'becoming animal' sequences in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's influential work *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987). These extracts have received a great deal of critical attention, attracting various interpretations, yet remain difficult, compelling texts that resist literal or metaphorical readings. The writers insist that the process of becoming animal is real, but not an imitative one: we do not become an animal by pretending, yet neither do we sprout whiskers and grow a tail. An interesting, yet admittedly trivial, aspect of the whole debate is that Deleuze, a cult French philosopher, grew his fingernails long, reportedly telling a friend that he wanted to 'write like a rat'. If we read these fingernails as the physical embodiment of inner change,

as markers towards transition, the first steps towards hybridity, then the category-defying human–animal may appear in a new light.

A human–animal hybrid is the living embodiment of change, transformation and potentiality. By presenting an enchanted entity, one clearly not destined to remain in its present form, it privileges the process of becoming over the fixity of being. In other words, identity is no longer a given, we are no longer thinking in terms of established categories, and a whole world of possibility opens up. Categories are useful, they help us to understand the world, but they can also be limiting, shrinking how we see ourselves and other entities, including animals. When we no longer examine categories, our thinking atrophies, and with it our actions. Something like a hybrid reminds us that things are permeable, open to negotiation, in a constant state of flux: I am myself today, but this does not necessarily mean that I will be the same tomorrow. In this ability to imagine changed states lies power.

We have always used fiction as a platform to imagine other selves, live other lives, crawl into someone's skull and see the world through their eyes. A good story transports you to another world and you return with an expanded sense of what is possible in your own life. In short, what begins as an act of imagination ends with empowerment. Within this literary tradition, fairy tales, with their strong emphasis on transformation, engrave a potent narrative arc on the reader's mind. When readers encounter a fairy tale protagonist, they engage with this character, and try to slip themselves into its skin. Thus a hybrid protagonist forces an unexpected sense of empathy, as we struggle to connect with something that is both foreign and familiar. We are reading between categories. My argument is that this tension, this sense of difference, is the key to changing our perceptions, whether this is of ourselves, animals or the text.

Perhaps another way of reading hybrids demonstrates more clearly the value of departing from thinking in terms of established categories. While in the past, our conception of animals was more fluid, it is not the only schism to have opened up in how we see ourselves and the world. Our relationship with our body parallels our relationship with the animal: we see our body as an Other, something that exists at a distance, akin to property, a thing to be utilised – but lacking the full rights of an owner – not necessarily

enjoyed. We no longer properly inhabit our own bodies. I would argue that this Cartesian mind-body split is fundamentally disempowering for women. A fairy tale hybrid, operating within a literary genre that appeals to women, folds together the signifiers for mind and body, human and animal, subject and object. By collapsing these categories, it potentially removes the space between ourselves and our skin. It opens up an imaginary liminal zone, a space where a transformative re-territorialisation of one's physical self becomes possible. Like Deleuze's fingernails, the physical manifestation of an internal shift, a fairy tale hybrid suggests transformative possibilities and dissolving boundaries.

If this all sounds suspiciously airy-fairy, then I'd like to close by noting two things. The first is the observation that if power does not start in the mind, where does it begin? And the second is an extract from Angela Carter's short story 'The Tiger's Bride' from *The Bloody Chamber* (Gollancz, 1979,) describing the moment when a woman metamorphoses into a tiger. Carter writes across the species barrier, embracing the moment mind and body become one:

'And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.'

References at www.griffithreview.com

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FICTION

BLACK SWAN EVENT

MARGO LANAGAN

THE first thing Dawn heard every morning was her brother stretching his wing. The soft whooping travelled down the hall and woke her from whatever doze or dream she lay in. Through the first bird-calls, or the wind hissing or the rain rattling or the traffic whining and rumbling on the distant highway, came the *whoop* and settle, *whoop* and settle, as Neddy worked the itch out, worked the cramp out, oiled the joints of the thing, before binding it to himself for another day of pretending it wasn't there.

He made no other sound as he stretched it, no groan or yawn. And he kept that room as neat as a pin, with nothing loose to fall or fly about. *Whoop* and settle. *Whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop* and settle. She would watch the wall, or the lightening ceiling, or her own clutter, the knick-knacks from her children that would be swept off and smashed by such wing-beats here, the yarn-scraps that would whirl into flight all colours. She watched their stillness, and listened to the air being struck and stretched down the hall, and felt nothing in particular, not anymore.

SHE HAD THOUGHT she must be sickening for something. She had not quite a headache, not quite an earache, not quite sinus pain.

And maybe that last period eight months ago *hadn't* been the last after all. Was that what this feeling meant?

She got up early, troubled after a troubled night's sleep. The kitchen was cold but tidy; last night's casserole dish stood soaking on the stovetop. She got the jug boiling for tea, emptied the dish, turned on the hot water and put a fingertip into the first cold streaming.

She felt it then, very strong and unpleasant, in her womb and her bowel, in her thighs, something being torn up by the roots. Her hand snatched itself out of the water, and the dish thunked to the sink-bottom. The feeling stopped, just like that.

She stood breathing hard. The water twined down, warming. Slowly she brought her fingertip to just beside it. Yes, there was the ghost of what she'd felt, a dragging in her throat, a horrid anxiety in her guts. Her knees locked, ready should she put her finger in further.

She washed the dish, careful not to touch the running water. She towelled it dry, and bent and put it away.

Ned's footsteps sounded in the hall, his work boots, though he'd had no work in how long? She straightened and backed up to the cupboard as he came in. She must not greet him, must not speak. She knew this for a hard rule, and with that knowledge things began to come clear.

He saw the way she stood. 'What's up?'

She put her fingertips to her mouth and shook her head. The water scrambled in the jug, coming to the boil.

'Are you all right, Dawnie?' he said. 'Do I need to get you to the doctor's?'

The jug clicked off and she rushed to it, poured their tea. She brought the mugs to the table, snatched the calendar from the wall and a pen from the bench-top, and returned to sit, kicking out a chair for him. By mark and hand-sign she managed to tell him that she would not be going to little Josie's christening tomorrow, or the girlfriends' book club Thursday evening, that Phillip and Martha could not come to stay next weekend as planned and the whole family gather for dinner on Saturday night – and that Neddy must break this news to everyone.

'What'll I say, though?' he said after all this busy silence.

She shrugged and looked at him, made a motion of zipping her lips. *The boys will understand,* she wrote on the back of the calendar.

'It's not so much the boys I'm worried about,' he said. 'Does Martha even *know* about that stuff? You'll be really in the poo with her.'

Phil might have to tell her, wrote Dawn. She sat back, looked at Ned levelly, sat forward again to write. *You know how important this is*. Her gaze fell from his eyes to the misshapen shoulder of his shirt.

'Don't muck me around, Dawnie,' he said, very low, very hard. 'We're both too old for that.'

She put her hand on his, wishing he could feel her certainty. But he only looked terribly vulnerable, so sad and so old, her baby brother.

Well, he'd see, wouldn't he. She patted his hand, drank down her tea and got up from the table.

THERE'D BEEN THAT one speaking glance. He'd cried out, as close to a human 'No!' as a beak and swan-throat could shape; he had fallen back from her, and flung out his wings.

But Dawn had been exultant. Look at what she'd already done, her five brothers standing there! And Neddy was youngest and smallest, after all – perhaps the unfinished shirt would be enough. So she'd thrown it over him.

She had un-thrown it in her mind again and again over the years. It doesn't matter, the dream-crowd said, between cheers. With those other five handsome and whole, what do you need to prove? Finish it properly, girl; cast it then. The boy won't mind waiting, now that he sees you free. The boy can be a bird a while longer.

SHE KNEW EXACTLY how much nettle to cut, for a sleeve. Ah, the smell of it! It was the smell of her youth, the smell of steadfast hope and solitude, out in the open, her urgency all the sharper for everything else idling, oblivious, around her – magpies gliding across the clear morning sky, rosellas flocking squeaking to a tree, Mason's cows tearing up grass beyond the fence there, a breeze flurrying the nettle-tops.

When she got back to the house, she found the old canvas wading-pool assembled, the hose lying in a couple of centimetres of water already, and Ned burrowing into the shed, bringing out boxes to make space to hunt deeper.

She sat by the pool, stripping the leaves off the nettle-stalks. One by one, the brothers who lived nearest came by to confer with Ned, to speak to Dawn just to see for themselves that she wouldn't answer. Neville even hugged her, as if she were sick somehow. She acknowledged them but did not pause in her work, and Ned saw them off as quickly as he could, to dig some more in the shed. Her own children visited, bringing her grandchildren, and it was *very* hard not to speak to the little ones. Dawn smiled and kissed and hugged them, but signed that they must leave, that she was busy.

SEVEN CHILDREN CAN create a world of their own, and a populous one. You can lose one brother to a job at the mines, another to the city or the next big town, and there are still plenty left. And each must get himself a wife, mustn't he? And breed up a storm of kids. Dawn had had her own four, two boys, two girls, so neat. What a whirl it had been, the babies, the schools, the sports, the get-togethers! This house had been the centre, of course; *she,* Dawn, had been the centre. If it hadn't been for her, they would all have been in the reeds raising cygnets, Gus liked to joke at a certain point in the evening. Not if Ned was around, of course. He wasn't totally heartless.

Neddy had had a wife, too, stringy little Adriane who must have thought she could do no better. He'd had a son, too, for a few weeks, born early but it had looked hopeful for a while there. Well, Dawn hadn't hoped; she'd known there was no point crossing her fingers for that one.

When the boy died, Neddy took it all on himself; he'd always been quiet, but his silence went denser, more complete. And all the wind went out of Adriane, too, as you'd expect. She looked around at them all, their houses and vehicles, recipes and hairdos, their kids running around reaching developmental milestones and bringing home trophies and yapping and crying. And the contrast must have been too much for her, just her

and her flattened husband with the wing everyone pretended not to see, pretended didn't matter. All their unspoken pity finally got to her. She left, and Ned didn't go after her. She sent papers, and he signed and returned them. He sold their house and moved back in with Dawn, as her brothers always did when they visited, or were down on their luck.

DAWN SPREAD THE nettle stalks in the water in the early afternoon. Ned came out of the shed as she was pressing them down, the heddle from the loom in his hand. 'Set her up in the lounge-room, I'm thinking.'

She shook her head; he might need the lounge for hard-to-fend-off visitors. She led him instead to the lean-to at the back of the house, indicated with a wave that the two grandkids' beds could be stacked one on the other.

'You serious? You'll freeze out here!'

She took the heddle from him and propped it against the wall.

SHE MUST NOT have worked fast enough, all those six silent years. She had thought she could go no faster – she'd hardly had time to eat! Thin as a rail, she'd been; she didn't know how Jeff King had been able to see anything in that poor scrawny girl… But he had. Her mouth softened in a smile. Everyone smiled, memories of Jeff, but she most of all, of course. She'd had the best of him.

Right after the bird-business and everything coming right, her first period had started. She'd been sitting in a room full of girlfriends, butterfly cakes and laughter, talking nineteen to the dozen as she ran up her wedding dress, of creamy satin woven by some wonderful machine.

Your first? Cora had cried. *You lucky thing! I've been getting them for years, a week out of every month flat out on the couch with a hottie.*

Well, this has come just in time for Dawn and her *hottie.* Sylvie had grinned, pouring Saxa Salt thickly on the stain on the sewing-stool cushion.

Whip that skirt off, Dawn, said Jill. *Soak it in cold water. You got a belt and pads?*

Dawn had stared at her, mortally embarrassed by the whole business.

Of course she doesn't. Cora had snatched up her handbag. *I'll run down the chemist, shall I?*

Cora had gone through the change early, too, middle of her forties. The rest of them had pitied her then, but now they were all envious that she was done with it, the uncertainty, the insomnia, the dressing in layers – and the fear of old-hagdom, spilling at them like fog over the rim of the ranges. They joked loudly about it all the time, but that didn't make it go away.

IN THE NIGHT she went out, drained the pool and hosed down the stalks, filled the pool afresh. Even through the hose-plastic, even with gloves on, she felt the grab of the water. It took nothing from her, but oh, it wanted to. She paced around the filling pool, trailing clouds of white breath, and the blotched moon watched her, and she didn't speak a word to it, either.

EVERYTHING HAD BEEN fast, crowded and noisy after the boys came back. *As soon as I have a minute,* she'd said to Neddy, *I'll sew up that last sleeve.*

No worries, sis, he'd said. *You've got a lot on your plate, haven't you?* He'd had a rare, slow smile that lit up the room. How long was it since she'd seen that smile? *And most of me's right, hey? I can manage one-armed for a bit.*

As soon as she and Jeff got back from Bateman's Bay she'd gone out to the gully and cut nettles, brought them home, stripped and retted and pounded them and spun. Queasy, she was, with the beginnings of her eldest, Charmaine. She had ploughed on, knowing in her heart that something important had gone from her, that her life was no longer quiet enough, or sad enough, to bring what was necessary to the weaving.

How embarrassed they'd been, she and Neddy, trying to fit the finished sleeve over the wing, cramming the feathers in, and neither feathers nor cloth firming up into flesh.

I don't understand, she'd said. *I never spoke a word to spoil it. I made it just the same as all the others.*

Neddy had put his hand on her shoulder. *Maybe they had to be made all of a piece, those shirts. It makes sense, sort of.* So anxious to ease her dismay, he'd been – and too young, then, to know how much he should mind for his own sake.

And he'd hidden the wing away in shirts with the sleeve turned inside out. He wouldn't let her sew up the armholes – he held out that much hope, at least. So just the shape of him reminded her, the shoulder too wide and too shallow, the back too rounded on one side, but no worse than that scoliosis that all Dennis's kids were born with. The wing edge curved down his side and into the back of his pants. All that his nieces and nephews knew was that Uncle Ned didn't go swimming. He'd lost his arm in a threshing machine, was the story the grown-ups spun them. *Don't ask him about it. And don't stare.*

ALL THROUGH THE days of retting she maintained her silence, kept to it as if the old rule still applied, that Ned would die if she spoke. Cleaning and spinning the fibres, she never so much as hummed a tune to herself. The telephone rang, and if Ned was out she didn't answer it; the doorknocker sounded, and she sat motionless until the person went away, or if they were one of her blustering family and came around the back, wanting her to chat, wanting her usual noise, she sent them packing with a note.

Ned sometimes stood at the lean-to door, watching the sleeve creep into being. Everything he wasn't saying pressed against the back of her neck, but she didn't shoo him away. He had a right, didn't he, to watch and worry and hope there? Besides, she was more than occupied with her work, with the thread that was being spun from her and laid down in the fabric with the back and forth of the shuttle. She didn't remember this feeling from before, of being *expended* this way, from some deep store.

She measured the sleeve length, then went out to find Ned. He was on the front veranda reading the Saturday paper, pretending to be interested in the doings of the world. She knelt beside him and

pressed the metal end into his armpit where his shirt seams crossed. Her thumbnail on the tape lay halfway down his shirt cuff. 'Nearly there, eh?' he said softly.

She went back to the lean-to, wove, measured again and began the shaping; it all came back to her across the decades. She was that girl again, determined, lonely, with the whole town against her, in the dark before the day when everything would crash and burn for her. This flow through her fingers was all she had, its sureness, its grace, its knowledge of the shape and size of each brother's body.

She passed the shuttle through for the last time and snipped the thread. She took the piece from the loom and sewed in the hem of the cuff, left the threads loose at the armhole end, took fresh thread and sewed the inside seam from cuff to armpit. And then it was completed, as grey as clouds, as soft as smoke.

As she sat with it across her lap, a car came along the road, and she raised her head to listen. Yes, it was slowing, and turning in on the gravel at her gate. She stood up and took the sleeve through the house, impatient for an end to this, ready to speak now, to come back to life; she hoped the visitor wasn't some stranger who would require hiding from.

She pushed the screen door open; the low autumn sun gleamed on the veranda boards. Ned was out of his chair. 'It's Phillip,' he said, but she had seen that. 'They've come anyway, when I asked them not to. Shall I tell him to – '

He saw the sleeve and stopped. She gestured that he should take off his shirt. 'Here? Now?' She nodded. Warily he pulled the shirt-tails free of his trousers.

Phillip killed the engine as Ned undid the first button. Car doors opened. 'Aunty Dawn, Aunty Dawn! Uncle Neddy!' cried the kids strapped into the back seat. Said Phillip, 'No, you stay *right there,* Nathan.'

Dawn hadn't seen the wing in years, but it was exactly as she remembered it. That corner of Ned flowed seamlessly from man to bird. The first feathers were hardly more than glitters in his skin; the

muscle and bone adjusted millimetre by millimetre as human chest gave way to feathered wing. Young Nathan, running from the car, stopped on the frost-burnt lawn to stare. Dawn stared herself, and Phillip and Martha stared, at the reality of Ned that he alone had lived with all these years, binding his secret to his side to protect them all from the sight, from the impossible sight.

He cast a glance of dismay and shame across his nephew, his brother, his sister-in-law, the other children open-mouthed in the car. Tears stood in his eyes as he turned from them, jabbing the wingtip at Dawn; feather whispered on feather, and the trailing edge rustled.

'Come on, Dawnie,' he said. 'Make this right for me.'

She threw the sleeve over the wing as she'd thrown all those shirts years before, wildly, almost carelessly, the crowd silenced around her. It filled with air as it flew in the sunlight; it landed and sank away into the shining dark feathers. She had known it would. The loose threads of the armhole knitted inside him, rippling the feather-sketched flesh of his shoulder. When they were done, this arm would plump out to match the other one.

She looked to Ned's face, to reassure him or to be reassured herself. One of his tears fell, but the emotion behind it had passed; he was busy now with all the changes being worked on him.

They amazed him, those changes. He lifted his slow smile to Dawn. His eyes were bright blood-stained gold, with pinprick pupils.

'Oh, Neddy! But I didn't mean – '

'It's all right, it's all *right,* honestly –' And then words were beyond him to form, as his mouth reddened, flattened, lengthened out of his face. Black feathers sprang flat across his cheeks, fanned out on his forehead, and in the next moment he was wholly swan, a cob the size of a man, wings out, grey webbed feet paddling above the sunny veranda-boards, the shoulder-mass of him sunk and spread into the shining belly, the long black neck kinked to keep his elegant head clear of the veranda-rafters. Martha exclaimed, but Dawn had no voice to spare; hands to her cheeks, she only gasped in the air that the vast wings huffed her way.

The change complete, Ned shrank to swan size. He fitted his

wings in against his feathery body, and the *cosiness* of that, the tidy self-satisfaction, turned Dawn's next gasp into a hoot of laughter. From the car came the tiny voice of her niece: 'Wow, Uncle Neddy turned into a *bird,* Daniel! Did you *see*?'

The swan lumbered to the edge of the veranda. It spread its wings, tipped out over the flowerbed, and after brushing the lawn grass with its breast-feathers, rose over a quailing Nathan, and Phillip who flung up his arms, and began a great circle out along the drive, over the fields and cows, the sheds, the dam, the stands of gum-trees with their loose heads of leaves.

Dawn went down the steps to the grass. Nathan ran up and clung to her, and she held him at her side while the long-necked bird passed trumpeting over the house and the lawn again, and began another circle.

'Can you change him back?' said the boy.

'I don't know, Nathan.' The three little ones were out of the car now, and all seven faces swung as one to follow the swan's flight. 'Do you think he wants to be changed back?'

'Yeah,' said Phillip, 'would *you* want to be a person again, if you could do that?'

Martha turned, baby Daniel in her arms. Phillip's head was tilted back to watch the swan fly over. But Dawn saw the look his wife gave him, and the shock in Martha's face, the betrayal, pierced her to the very heart.

Margo Lanagan is the author of two novels based on traditional tales, *Tender Morsels* (Knopf, 2008) and *Sea Hearts* (Allen & Unwin, 2012), and of five collections of short stories. Her work has won four World Fantasy Awards, has been longlisted in the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and the Commonwealth Writers' prize, and was shortlisted for the inaugural Stella Prize.

MEMOIR

Three bunyips

Ways of seeing and not seeing

Meredith Jelbart

MY first encounter with a bunyip was in a School Paper, the monthly supplement to the *Victorian School Readers: Eighth Book* (HJ Green, Government Printer, 1928) still current in Victorian primary schools in the 1950s and '60s. It was Andrew Lang's version from *The Brown Fairy Book* (Longman, Green and Co, 1904).

A group of young men go fishing, one of them catches a bunyip cub, and though its mother rises from her den 'rage flashing from her horrible yellow eyes', he insists upon taking his prize home. The mother bunyip follows hard on his heels, bringing with her all of the water in which she dwells. As the young man takes 'his sweetheart', to climb a tall tree and escape the catastrophe, he feels the water touching his feet and

> when he looked down he saw that he had feet no longer, but bird's claws. He looked at the girl he was clasping, and beheld a great black bird standing at his side; he turned to his friends, but a flock of great awkward flapping creatures stood in their place; he put up his hands to cover his face, but they were no more hands, only the ends of wings; and when he tried to speak, a noise such as he had never heard before seemed to come from his throat, which had suddenly become narrow and slender. Already the water had risen

> to his waist, and he found himself sitting easily upon it, while its surface reflected back the image of a black swan, one of many.

You could wonder if Grendel and his mother had somehow crept into the tale. And in view of the history of white treatment of black and half-caste children, that stolen child is disturbing.

There are details that seem a bit off key. The little bunyip is described as something between a seal, an unlikely reference for people living in the hot dry country described, and a calf, a clear anachronism. But then Lang was writing for European children, for whom descriptions like 'between a seal and a calf' make perfect sense, and it might be argued that as much attention be paid to the audience, as the race from which the story derives.

At the end of the story

> the little Bunyip was carried home by its mother…people say that underneath the black waters of the pool she has a house filled with beautiful things, such as mortals who dwell on the earth have no idea of. Though how they know I cannot tell you, as nobody has ever seen it.

This is lovely. There is something very appealing in the suggestion that the story contains more mystery than Lang can tell, or know of, since it has not been seen. But that wonderful image of the house beneath black water filled with unknowably beautiful things, simply does not come from the world-view of nomadic hunter-gatherers.

'No,' says the librarian from the Koori Heritage Centre, 'that's not one of ours. Well, that used to happen all the time. People would take something like the bunyip, which is from our culture, and add to it.'

How much does this matter? It is still a good story, well written.

The reader receives accurate information about Aboriginal way of life, the weaponry, spears and boomerangs, the division of labour between men, who hunt and fish, and women, who gather roots into baskets.

It is a gesture of respect, only proper, for Lang to place this tale among the great body of world mythology.

If he got the details wrong, altered or embellished the story, or merged details from some other culture, surely that was done in all innocence.

The piece begins, as others in the collection do, 'Long, long ago, far, far away…' This is like, 'Once upon a time…' It's a signal to settle down, listen and enjoy. Aboriginal myths are ancient, so it is perfectly appropriate that Lang makes that clear.

INNOCENCE WAS THE dominant mood of all the pieces about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the *Victorian School Readers*. And such innocence had a lot to do with that notion of 'Long, long ago, far, far away…'.

There is Thomas Mitchell's, 'On Pyramid Hill, Victoria, 1836'.

> As I stood, the first intruder in the sublime solitude of those verdant plains…this highly interesting region lay before me with all its features new and untouched as they fell from the hands of the Creator. Of this Eden it seemed like I was the only Adam…

Technically, this excerpt does not have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theme, since they are not mentioned, seen or heard, but that not seeing, hearing or mentioning was at the heart of race relations after European invasion. The *terra* is *nullius*. And Mitchell himself is innocent. He is harming no one, for there is no one to harm. His is the absolutely, perfectly pure innocence of Adam in Eden, before the Fall.

On the whole, the *Victorian Readers* did not ignore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, we heard quite a bit about them. But there was a very particular way that they were placed, at some infinitely large distance away from us. Not geographically, but in time.

In 'The Old Inhabitants', CEW Bean offered intriguing information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tools and weaponry, the boomerang and woomera. The piece is sparked off by the writer finding a selection of cutting and grinding stones while out walking somewhere in the inland. They are right there before him, at his feet, and reproduced in sketches for us to see and admire. This is how he places them in time.

> Those stones spoke of an age before the dawn of history. On the spot we stood, we knew that some one – some one in the blank, utter darkness before Australian history began, some human belonging to a time of which no history will ever be written, nor yet even the bare outline of it ever be known – some woman in a long forgotten camp must have knelt there…

Such humans were right back there in the blameless and unreachable past, way out beyond the Romans and Greeks and Babylonians. Too far away for there to be any real moral link between our race and theirs.

Donald MacDonald, in an excerpt from *Gum boughs and Wattle Bloom, gathered on Australian hills and plains*, describes western Victoria. 'When the white man came here, aborigines wandered over these plains in thousands. Where are they today?'

But it's a rhetorical question and he moves on.

Gum Boughs and Wattle Bloom was published by Cassell in 1887. The very first white settlement in Victoria was in 1834. A space of little over fifty years.

At primary school we were told how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were susceptible to European illnesses. Smallpox was not mentioned so much as the common cold, which we'd all had and did not seem too sinister, and who could blame us for coming here and sneezing?

There are theories that the Aboriginal communities of southern Australia were devastated by smallpox even before the arrival of European settlers. There are suggestions that the disease came all the way south from the Macassans and the Northern Territory, so not our fault at all.

And that's doubtless part of the story. But along the south coast of MacDonald's western plains are surf breaks, visited by my children. One of them is called 'Massacres'.

'So,' I asked, perhaps tempted by the selective vision like that of MacDonald, 'are there particularly dangerous waves there?'

'No, Mum,' my kids sighed at my stupidity. 'There are really high cliffs…'

The men of the local tribe, perhaps because they were armed and fought back, were all shot dead in a nearby swampy area. It was the women and children who were just driven over those cliffs into the sea.

'All this talk of Aboriginal massacres,' my mother would say. 'Such nonsense.' She was cross, prepared to fight for our innocence. The unpleasantness of massacres was so uncalled for. 'I never heard of anything like that happening.'

'If Victorian Aboriginals weren't killed,' I asked, 'where are they?'

My mother gazed at me, amazed that I could not see the simple answer. 'They died of old age.'

FRANK DALBY DAVISON'S *Children of the Dark People* (Angus & Robertson, 1936) was a book I liked a great deal when I was a child. Consequently, I was very pleased to find a copy in a second-hand shop, hard cover, with the original Pixie O'Harris wood-cut illustrations. I was a little surprised that the book had not been reprinted, was not still easily available in children's bookshops.

When I glanced through it at home, however, I became uneasy.

The story is about an Aboriginal boy and girl, Jackadgery and Nimmitybel, names which incorporated the comfortably familiar Jack and Bel. One day when they have gone a little further than they should in Jackadgery's canoe, the tribe's wicked witch doctor magically throws up a mountain range where there had once been a river, they are cut off from their families and must spend the rest of the book finding their way home.

Along the way, they are assisted by the spirits of the billabong and the plains and the caves and Grandfather Gumtree, all of whom clearly have more in common with naiads and dryads than anything from Aboriginal myth.

There is a supreme spirit, Old Mr Bunyip. He cares for all creatures (yes, great and small), 'the wild creatures of the bush and the beasts of the paddocks'. He is described, and depicted by Pixie O'Harris, as looking like an elder from the tribe. But he does have a long white beard and does stride about with a walking staff.

Like Bean, Davison conveys some information about Aboriginal weapons and tools and canoe making. He explains how their way of life allowed the land to regenerate, so that it could be handed on undamaged from one generation to another. In this time of impending environmental catastrophe, that is a striking achievement, and it is good to have it acknowledged with respect.

Davison makes no false claims to Aboriginality. His prologue, rather curiously headed 'A Note for Guardians', has an air of good-hearted openness and candour.

The Spirit of the Brumbies, he admits, in 'the primitive Australian scene has been pointed out to me as an anachronism… Youthful sticklers for the facts of natural history – if any such exist – may substitute emus for brumbies…

'Though [the tale] embodies considerable bush and dark folk lore it makes no pretence to being Aboriginal legend – except' (and this was the point where I first realised I might not read the book to my kids) 'to the extent that a tale of lost children probably belongs to all races…'

Children of the Dark People was published in 1936. The phrase 'the stolen generation' was not coined until 1981.

In the '50s, when I read the book, no word was spoken out loud, by anyone I knew, about the widespread removal of children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent by church and state throughout much of the twentieth century.

But at Christmas an Anglican nun would come down from the mission in Alice Springs to visit her family in Eltham. She would bring with her a group of Aboriginal girls. Orphans, we were all told, a concept that fitted quite comfortably into my view of the world – just like Anne of Green Gables, the Little Match Girl and Oliver Twist.

All the mothers in the Church got together and organised picnics and outings and games days.

A photograph of me and one of the kids from central Australia appeared in *The Sun's* central pictorial pages. We were about the same height, both had pony-tails and, yes, my hair was very fair. We were supposed to be pulling together on a tug-of-war team, though that was a set-up, the other end of the rope being held by a photographer's assistant.

The girls were all very quiet and obedient. I remember them dutifully catching a basketball and throwing it on again, as they had been told to do. Sometimes a glance would pass between them. As if they really did not get the point. Or as though there were some point we really weren't getting.

Who knew what when? Who should have known what when?

In *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (Macmillan, 1995), Gitta Sereny argues that it is unimportant whether Speer had specifically received information about the planned extermination of the Jews. There were very obvious questions he chose not to ask. If you choose not to ask, you have a fair idea what the answer will be and know that it is something you do not wish to hear. You cannot look away from something without knowing it is there.

Children of the Dark People has an epilogue.

> Time rolled on… There came a day when, from the high ranges, [Mr Bunyip] saw for the first time, on the hunting-ground of a tribe, the square green patches of the white man's crops, the slow sails of their gristing mills, and their cattle, sheep and horses grazing northward, southward and westward across the country. For a long while, without moving, he watched these things with deeply troubled eyes. Then, in his nobility, he took them also into his care.

When I read these words as a child, I found them deeply, deeply comforting. It had to be moral comfort, a desire for absolution.

When I came across this passage again as an adult, I knew decisively that I would not read the book to my children.

The whole history that is not being squarely faced in these few lines, the history concealed in these lines, is terrible and important.

Davison knew about it. Why else are Mr Bunyip's eyes 'troubled'? Why is it that we, the white race, can only be taken into care by a being of great 'nobility'? As an educated adult, Davison may have known in some detail what he was not saying.

As a child, I did not know any details. But I knew, perhaps by the very silences and omissions, the things that were not looked upon, that there was something terribly wrong. Why else did I so deeply crave moral comfort?

A BOOK FROM my children's era is Jenny Wagner's *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (Longman Young Books, 1973). 'Late one night, for no particular reason, something stirred in the black mud at the bottom of Berkeley's

Creek.' This bunyip, drawn by Ron Brookes, is an endearing creature. Nearly spherical, he is just waiting for an arm to be put around him from one side or the other, he has no hard edges, no angular elbows with which to fend off any gesture of affection. His smile reveals large and slightly protruding teeth, which do not look sharp. His feet have long toes, rather than claws. In times of distress he clasps both his fingers and toes together. He radiates harmlessness.

Once he's got his eyes clear of mud, he asks the eternal question, 'What am I?' Followed by the anxious post-script, 'Am I handsome?'

Will I do? Will I find acceptance? Love? Respect?

He has a series of encounters with other creatures, who all answer with differing versions of hostility to the Other.

The wallaby says bunyips look horrible with webbed feet and feathers, the emu says bunyips have fur and tails. 'Horrible tails. And even more horrible fur.' They are the mean kids from the playground.

But the character by whom the bunyip is completely undone is the man.

'The man was busy with his notebook and pencil and did not look up at the bunyip.'

The bunyip lies upon his couch, reminiscent of a psychiatrist's room, while various bits of him – head, teeth, tail – are projected onto laboratory screens.

The man is not cruelly critical of the bunyip's appearance. He says simply,

> 'Bunyips don't look like anything.'
> 'Like nothing?' said the bunyip.
> 'Like nothing at all,' said the man.
> 'Are you sure?' said the bunyip.
> 'Quite sure,' said the man, and looked right through him.
> 'Bunyips simply don't exist.'

There are those vicious games kids will play where they refuse to speak to some designated victim. And there is the game where they will simply look through someone and refuse to acknowledge that the person exists.

'I wonder where Meredith is. I'm sure she got onto the train, but she's nowhere in the carriage.' Another hour's train trip, and no way to respond.

The bunyip, a gentle soul, does not try to argue with the man.

'What a pity,' he says mildly on receiving the news of his non-existence.

And in a state of entirely understandable devastation, he stumbles away with his little swag of possessions, including a small mirror, to go back alone to his billabong, where he can be as handsome as he likes. And where, 'late at night, for no particular reason' a female bunyip (you can tell by her eyelashes) emerges from the mud, and he can tell her what she is.

'A bunyip. Just like me.'

After everything that he and the compassionate reader have been through, no other ending would do.

I am quite untroubled by this borrowing of the bunyip from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

For better or for worse, there is little attempt to be faithful to the original myth, where the creature was not endearing and did not wear a kind of furry trousers with frilly, scaly cuffs.

It is such a good story. Universal themes. Such good morals. Do not fear or denigrate anyone simply because they may be different from you. Beware notebooks and computer screens and other cultural blinkers. Never look through people as if they did not exist, as if the wide land before you were quite empty for the taking.

Keep your eyes wide open. See for yourself.

Meredith Jelbart was born and educated in Melbourne. After graduating from Melbourne University she taught English and Film in secondary schools and TAFE. Presently, she is working on a novel.

ESSAY

The myth of Charlie McMahon

The wind through the keyhole

Dusk Dundler

THERE'S a man and a musician who's been behind the scenes and across this country for many a year. You could even say he helped Australia grow up a bit. Through it all he's carried many weary struggles and still wears a steady grin. A hub of creation surrounds him. The need to do. To the core. To continue.

At a festival you can make him out dressed in black with his bushman's hat, grey moustache, sparkling eyes. And so now know some of his adventures to glimpse a secret that helps you understand those who forge through.

Here we may find some of the tracts from our unsung visionary's life.

The Blue Mountains. Eucalypts tower above a slivery road that houses cling to. Charlie crawls outside watching his grandfather tend the garden. Pop grows wondrous things by grafting plants. He can smell the heady mulch and feel nature brimming.

It's the mid 1950s and the McMahons are going on a family outing. The shady village of Glenbrook boasts a cinema. Inside with his brothers, Charlie sees the outback. Tribal Aboriginal men are projected in colour. Then a raw new sound registers. A man is playing a didgeridoo. *Brrrriiooong*, *Brrrrrioooooing*, *Brrrrr*, *Brrrr*, *Grrrr*. The bass through the speakers shakes the seats. When he gets home

Charlie imitates the man with a vacuum cleaner pipe. His family look on and encourage him. 'Go Charlie Go, more, more…' And he's just four.

After Charlie's folks divorce he goes to live at his uncle and aunt's farm near Yass. Real rural. Sheep and wheat country. He undertakes correspondence schooling and after his work is done wanders out alone into wide paddocks feeling very happy. When he's wild they say lightly, 'that kid's a bit myall, eh!' Myall being slang for an uncivilised blackfella.

CHARLIE MOVES TO Blacktown a year later with his mum and brothers. West of Sydney, Blacktown has grown with a huge housing commission development. Built in a flash. Settled by European migrants, war vets and low-income families. Great open storm water drains run behind the blocks and beside the roads.

At Seven Hills Primary he's often caught looking out the window. Just wondering what else is out there. 'Hey,' the teacher says, 'McMahon, dreamer, wake up!' All through school Charlie's off to his uncle and aunt's farm for holidays. Often with his brothers. Shooting rabbits, collecting dead-wool, catching fish and shrimp. He even catches birds. Tries to figure out how to cook 'em. Sometimes he takes off as much of his clothing as he can get away with and runs around the bush.

So the '60s hit and odd times they are. On a railway overpass between Blacktown and Seven Hills someone has painted the slogan *Build Bombs Defend Freedom*. Parallel to the tracks a vast rubbish tip swallows the land. It's even filled in a creek. The tip burns, stinks, breeds rats and filth. Each arvo when the old manager Jock closes up, it's then that a swarm of kids descend. It's their playground. Some kids even live off it. The gang go through and collect scrap metal for a buck. And where the earth is deeply gouged out Charlie excavates fossil beds of reeds and insects.

But there's bigger kicks to be had. Some older Bodgies are making explosions from stuff found at the tip. Bang goes the sound in Charlie's head. He starts at Blacktown Boys' High and pays particular attention to chemistry. With money made from the scrap metal, he buys chemicals, chlorate by the kilo. Sulphur too. Charlie starts his own rocket-making crew with Ronnie – an apprentice fitter who makes the fuselages. They're pretty serious about

it. Do compression tests. It's a fine line between exploding and flaring. Pipe bombs are the go. Back down at the tip underground explosions eventuate, splashing the trains passing above with mud. Who knows where that came from? Charlie knows. He's sixteen now.

In his mum's backyard is a corrugated iron shed. Inside it Ronnie sits on a bag of potatoes reading a magazine. Charlie pours chlorate into a 200 millimetre pipe he has in a vice. His right hand is burnt from a flare the day before. He's bandaged it from the Boy Scouts' first aid kit and hopes no one will see it. Won't stop Charlie though. He's sealing off the pipe with a pair of trusty Stilsons. There's a friction problem. Suddenly everything goes into nothing. The shed disappears. Ronnie disappears. Charlie gets blasted into a plum tree. He thuds to the ground with shrapnel in his mouth and leg and can't see or hear properly, he's a real mess. He wakes later in intensive care and realises, 'Oh shit, I've got no arm!'

The doctor tells him he's lucky to still have his left leg. Only saved because he has a double artery. Ronnie's there with eye injuries and a few fingers amputated. A friend, Bob, a bit dismayed when Charlie's too weak to drink his smuggled-in beer, leans over the hospital bed and says, 'You're only half a man now, mate.'

So our young rebel has survived and straightened his act, no hanging with car thieves, it's a journey through the HSC getting used to his prosthetic arm, but he succeeds. Winning high jump again, and jamming on steel pipes with his new friend Biafra (who's real skinny). And after being told that he's ineligible for teaching, Charlie makes it to Sydney Uni on a scholarship from the Water Board.

IT'S 1970 AND a wave of alternative awakening is lapping up on Australian shores. Change is in the air. Charlie gets into the radicalism of the time. The youth are not accepting the old social norms. He perks up when he slips on a hook instead of the prosthetic hand. It's a lot more useful, too. He's less self conscious and is getting out there. He buys his first didj at the Aboriginal Advancement League shop. He sells literature and socialist books down Main St, Blacktown, and puts on alternative film nights at the Prospect Church Graveyard, showing films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Super 8 films shot

by himself and friends. And he brings music too. But the forces around are antagonistic. The council and the cops. After all, Charlie's mob are making their own fun. It's not sanctioned, it's not in the pubs or sports clubs and these kids look wild, so they're eventually run out of town. But they don't care. Down by the sandbars and willow forests on the banks of the Hawkesbury River they carry on. Taking drums, they dress up, paint their faces and dance, jamming into the night. It feels like a mad corroboree where the kids are breaking free.

Charlie travels up to the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin to play and has his mind opened to experimental music by a strange dulcimer player named Peter who's performing with the White Company. Charlie also begins to circular breathe on the didj. It just happens intuitively.

After a year at the Water Board, Charlie becomes a town planning tutor with the Department of Social Work back at Sydney Uni. He has different ideas to some about the academic paths being taken, alerting students to the danger of shopping malls destroying neighbourhoods by keeping zoning areas separate and sterile. The rooms at the uni are a bit stifling so they usually take class outside, until one rainy day they land down in the Fisher Library basement. It's dull and dingy. Why were they sent here? It's certainly not conducive to imagining towns.

'Oh we could paint some windows,' a student says, meant as a joke.

'Oh, we won't be allowed to do that,' another quips.

But Charlie's mind races ahead.

'Go ahead, paint some windows on the walls,' he says, 'make your own social comment about this environment, once you finish your degrees you're probably gonna end up working for big institutions and occasionally you have to speak out.'

The head professor freaks out over the painting incident so Charlie finds himself sitting alone in the Vice Chancellor's office. In the centre of the huge desk Charlie's dossier lies open. He has a quick look to see his prior education.

When the VC enters he has a quick look at it too then stares straight up to Charlie.

'And what school did you go to Mr McMahon?'

It's too bleeding obvious. But Charlie chews the bait and spits it back out.

'One of the best, Mister Chancellor,' he replies.

Then he states his case calmly, but really he's had enough.

Charlie then sends the VC a memo on a point missed in the meeting. It's written on a pie bag. The gathered senate members grin as it is handed around with his file. So the boy from Blackie is sent out the gate.

CHARLIE IS OUT of the race and he buys a bush block with his brothers. They work it hard, clearing and fencing, planting an orchard, building a shack, himself succeeding in these things that he never imagined only half a man could do. He works out how to amplify his didj and when he visits Sydney he always carries one, wrapped up. Walking along Oxford Street one night he hears some music with tough energy coming from French's wine bar, so he steps inside to check out a new band. They're called Midnight Oil. Their drummer guesses what Charlie's carrying, so next thing he's been asked to join in. He keeps meeting up with them for gigs and develops a new style, holding the didj up to the standing microphone, then out to the crowd. Hey, this feels different, he thinks. He's rocking it on stage now.

THEN SUDDENLY THE man is swept to the interior, off on a flight landing in Alice Springs. It looks to him like a desert town version of Canberra. Charlie's new role is supposed to be a bureaucrat reporting on Aboriginal communities taking on self-determination.

Out at Yuendumu the sky rumbles over the red land. Then the dust rises. Charlie has never seen anything like it. This beautiful great big dark black thunderhead brewing. Almost unconsciously he wanders out from the shelter, is engulfed by it. Next thing he's got a strange fear and starts running back. He's knocked down as a lighting bolt strikes the ground right next to him. Oh my god, I've just been let off again, he thinks.

'Oh Charlie, you been out in the wet,' an Aboriginal Affairs officer says when he walks back in, as they're all working their way through a slab of beer.

There are people who are close to Aboriginal people, who socialise with them and then there are those who don't, Charlie finds out. But then there are those who hate, too. Back in Alice one day Charlie's walking out from

his house when he gets attacked by a mad bluey-bull terrier cross. It rips into Charlie's leg, puncturing his calf muscle.

'Oh shit, I'm sorry mate, he's only supposed to go for Coons,' the dog's owner across the road says. What? This is terrible, Charlie thinks.

At Jay Creek, an Aboriginal fella, Geoff, gives Charlie a shovel-nose stabbing spear after hearing the story. 'Hey, dat cheeky whitefella dog, but he shouldn't go for you.' Then he looks at Charlie again, 'you sure you proper full white-fella,' and pulls his head back questioningly.

'Now when you leave dat house,' Geoff goes on, 'when you walk out dat back lane you pick up dat spear and if dat dog come at you, you stab 'im. Then hide 'im in the bush, that spear for dat cheeky dog.' Later at the Alice folk club, Charlie sings a song about the 'dog in the bag', after he was told how some whitefellas put their dog in a bag, throw in the clothes of Aboriginal people and beat it until it comes out mad as hell. Charlie begins to feel safer again when his great big dog, Danger, arrives.

Out to Papunya settlement. Well west of Alice. One of the centres where the desert Aboriginal people have been sent. A thousand Aboriginal people living here. Many clans were thrown together and expected to live the same, in a new 'white' way, without thought to their kinship ties or traditional lands. The Pintupi people wish to get back to their own land, out towards the Gibson Desert, get out of the chaos, away from the alcohol and fighting. They along with other clans are living on someone else's land. Their Outstations Co-ordinator had a nervous breakdown and so Charlie's asked if he's up for the job. The Outstations Movement is about setting up small family groups with the facilities they need to relocate to their lands. Yes, Charlie is up for it, so he ends up working directly for the people. He goes on reconnaissance missions hundreds of kilometres away from the settlement, even over the West Australian border. On these journeys the Old Men he's taking out break into song as they reach their spiritual lands.

Charlie nominates sites for drilling underground bores to reach potable water. To set up the places where the Pintupi want to live, so they can survive properly back out in their desert lands. He sweats it out running stores and water to the outstations while working on the bores and often sleeping in his swag. The work is non-stop and the conditions extreme and a doctor

eventually gives Charlie something special to get him through, but he's so worn out and pissed off after helping with a Christmas party and a fight that erupted there too, that he takes off and sets up his camp alone in the dark. Slipping out of his swag to get a drink, Charlie steps on what feels like a soft hose and it's then he comes close to the edge again. With the lingering effect of the hallucinogen and no sleep for days, he drifts, while, a strange soaring snake dream takes him to another reality. When he wakes , groggy as hell, he somehow manages to drive to Alice to see the doctor, where they treat him for septicaemia. He's feverish and semi-conscious for days.

AND IT IS from this life that the man travels far on working musical holidays. Surviving as a muso on the west coast of the United States for a few months. Charlie plays with his band, the Yidaki Brothers, tells stories and meets Timothy Leary. Then, back in Oz, the old Aquarius meeting with Peter Carolan comes good. They release an album, *Terra Incognita* (1984), and it's something else, something new. It climbs into a remarkable new territory of what an album can be, with Pete's otherworldly synthesiser and Charlie's original rhythms transporting with his 'double breath morning didj riff' setting the standard for contemporary playing. So listen well and you could just hear this riff playing on ABC Radio National's *Awaye* program, today. And Charlie invents a shifting pitch didgeridoo, that can tune into orchestral settings. He refines it, into the future, from the metal dbone to to the plasticd-bone to the dijeribone.

Back in the desert, Charlie knows the people well now. It's taken a few years but the bores have been drilled and he's erecting a huge old Comet Windmill for an outstation when Henry Tjapaltarri arrives with unbelievable news.

'That Pinta Pinta came back from Wimparrku. He reckon he met two debils!' he tells Charlie. Real myall Aboriginals, not wearing clothes or shoes, approached Pinta Pinta. At first he thought they must be 'debils', kadaitcha who are punishment men spirits, his belief was that strong, but everyone's just as stunned when they work out the devils are real people. So Charlie and some of the Pintupi set off deep into the desert, over flats and sand hills to find them. That night after his 4WD crawls up a huge sand hill Charlie surveys

the scene below. He can see the fire of his tracking party and then the fire of the others ahead. He takes a deep breath. The next day the tracking party make 'first contact' in a family reunion of amazement for the Pintupi. They meet the group of nine Aboriginal men, women and teenagers, who had never come into the settlement, who had stayed out hunting and living in purely traditional ways. They speak the same language, of course, and quickly work out their relations. And this is 1984.

Charlie hears the call and lets the music truly take him. With Pete, the band Gondwanaland continues. They play at the Bicentenary, release more records and tour remote Aboriginal communities. Blazing the trail in performing music in places white bands haven't been before. Charlie goes solo and records with Aboriginal singers and travels on tour with the Oils through the desert communities.

And Charlie's out there still, Japan or Russia, his music morphing from an atmospheric world to live samples in a tribal trance. He's even engineered a special seismic microphone. It picks up the sound inside the body and the vibration from his didj now creates a thunderous sound.

This man, who's carried through, who has discovered, seen, who has worked and played, who has vibrated a backbone between the music of different cultures, has formed his own mythology. So look beneath the surface for what culturally binds and to those who have made it. To this innovator following an experimental bent, through the complexities and follies of true Australian journeying. And listen, when you come across an adventurer ready to tell, just as I did with Charlie, as he spoke his tale to me.

I can see Charlie popping his head up in Wim Wenders' film, *Until the End of the World* (1991), where he's driving the travellers through the desert to the safety of an Aboriginal community.

He holds the knowledge and has become our guide.

Dusk Dundler has produced documentaries for ABC Radio National, including *Mirrar Ground,* an Aboriginal journey of resilience, and has reported for the *Koori Mail* on nuclear and cultural issues from Kakadu, Northern Territory. He studied creative non-fiction under Mark Mordue at UTS. He also fulfilled a mentorship with Top End writer Andrew McMillan and is published in *The Prague Revue*.

ESSAY

Told in the bush

Sister Agnes and her tales

Lucy Sussex

'THAT'S a genuinely rare book you have there,' said the second-hand book dealer. 'I've never seen it before.'

'It came from my mother's side of the family,' I replied. 'She kept her children's books.'

The object in question is genuinely unprepossessing. The cover is red board and would have once been startlingly bright, before it became faded and soiled. The title is printed in Prussian blue: *Fairy Tales Told in the Bush*. Underneath is an illustration, in blue and grass green, of a little girl in a frock and pinafore. Her feet are bare, and she stands on the bank of a river, beside trees that despite the title seem not particularly Australian. Because this illustration is printed directly on the red board, the child's skin and hair, even the trunks of the trees, are red.

The spine, which with time and repeated readings has become semi-detached from the book, gives the author's name: Sister Agnes. No bibliographies of Australian literature offer more on the author's identity. A pseudonym surely, but I relished the challenge to learn more.

ON THE FLYLEAF *No 60* is written and underlined. The publisher is English: London: Elliot Stock, Paternoster Row, EC. But the book is

Australian, the short preface notes: 'These tales, as told here, charmed the writer in the "Sixties" when Melbourne was a place of bush and swamp. They now charm little slum children in the so-called 'slum parts' of the city of Melbourne…'

The cover does not depict the author; the clothing is from the early 1900s. It is a prettied-up version of one of the interior illustrations, to a story called 'Forget-me-Not', the only tale with a heroine, Marie. Omitted is what she is gazing at, something quite disturbing: a man tied to a tree and left to die of thirst.

The book may appear to be a conventional Edwardian children's story-book, but it has a very dark, violent side, signalled by the illustrations, quirky, stylish and vivid line drawings or engravings. Scenes range from the grotesque, of people pulling fruit from a tree, their noses grown as long and curled as tentacles, to the fantastic didactic, of toys running away from naughty boys, to the realistic, of rural scenes, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Despite its associations with the Melbourne slums, this is not a cheap book: its production values are high, even imaginative. Each of the six stories starts with an illuminated letter, like a medieval bible. The paper might now be foxed, but it is not pulp, and the cover is stitched, rather than the staples or glue of contemporary 'shilling shockers'.

There is a mystery here. A well-produced book, but by an unknown author, the paradox of Australian content but a British publisher, and unusual given the prevailing snobbery of the era, that the stories had been told to slum-dwellers. Of the six tales, three are in the mode of the Brothers Grimm and two are said to be 'original', stories of the fantastic set in Australia. One is a Wurundjeri tale of the origin of the Yarra River, from 'King Barak, the last King of the Yarra tribe, a few days before his death' in 1903. He appears as a character and storyteller in another story, 'The Magic Gun'. *Fairy Tales Told in the Bush* is a hybrid, mixing indigenous, imported, and colonial sensibilities.

It nods to the oral tradition of storytelling, in the Barak story, and the Grimm-style tales, which the preface claims as being brought to Australia in the remembrance of an immigrant, 'a lover of fairies and children'. That slum children were the audience suggests organised storytelling, from the memory

or being read aloud. Two stories, 'The Palace of Truth' and 'The Magic Gun' were repeatedly requested 'when stories are to be told'. Here the book refers to the beginnings of written fairytales, or the collection of oral narratives in the early 1800s by the Brothers Grimm.

By including William Barak, the important Wurundjeri elder, both as storyteller and character, Sister Agnes shows she regards him as a similarly important folktale informant – despite being of a conquered race considered inferior in terms of contemporary eugenics. That both folktales appear in the same book suggests the author rates them equally. There are Christian elements in the Yarra story, Barak was a convert, expressive in the faith. More amusing is the illustrator's response to the Australian bear, here rendered as an Ursus, the European variety, something over which the author, who knew the bush, clearly had little control.

The depiction of Barak is sympathetic, showing him at the reserve in Corranderrk, surrounded by white people, a tourist attraction. He complains his visitors are too greedy, for after he has performed for them, his reward is pennies, rather than 'baccy'. A boy offers him a shilling for a story, and so 'the old man told the small white boy the story of the Magic Gun in quavering voice, sometimes scarcely to be heard, for he was very frail'. The story is a true hybrid. The gun of the title is Barak's, but it belonged to the convict William Buckley, a liminal figure between black and white cultures. It has magical properties and when the boy returns later at night and steals it – he tries to use it on a bunyip.

SO SISTER AGNES was clearly a woman of imagination and storytelling ability. Hers was not, strictly speaking, a pseudonym, a false name. Nor was the author concealing her identity, for Sister Agnes was a very well-known figure to two rather contradictory though coinciding groups in Melbourne: the Anglican Church and the inner-city poor. Their 1886 milieu was vividly described in Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, the foul slums of Lily Lon, Little Lonsdale and beyond, narrow lanes rife with opium, prostitution and misery. A character in Hume's novel wonders how human beings could live there. Yet this milieu was where Sister Agnes worked and slept, one of a small but formidable group. She belonged to an Anglican order of women,

the Community of the Holy Name (CHN), who actively ministered to the slum-dwellers: providing medical care, refuges for women, education and Christianity.

Sister Agnes's book received at least one notice, in the *Fitzroy City Press* in 1911. It reveals she had major responsibilities, as Superintendent of the Diocesan Mission to the Streets and Lanes of Melbourne. She was also, more conventionally for a churchwoman, Superintendent of St Mark's Mothers' Union, Fitzroy. The paper notes that the author is 'The Sister Agnes' who when 'ordained for her mission career parted with her surname forever.'

The ordination of woman in the Anglican Church was decades away, and Sister Agnes was more correctly 'admitted' to the order. In the census records for Melbourne until her death in 1930, she lists her profession as a deaconess, which for an Anglican male was preparatory for the priesthood. Sister Agnes was as close to being a minister as any woman could have been in her church and time.

The Community of the Holy Name still exists, active in social and mission work, with a nunnery and retreat in Cheltenham. It was the first Anglican religious community in Australia. Its origins date to early 1885, the aim being to form a 'women's agency', for work among the Melbourne poor – including prostitutes. An appeal for funds was made, and an ex-bakery in Lily Lon was acquired. The women of the mission would live in the worst addresses in Melbourne. *Esther, Mother Foundress* (JS McClelland, 1946), the first history of the order, recalls the sisters had little privacy, rats, and their immediate neighbours included a brothel whose inhabitants screamed 'and threw kerosene lanterns at each other, seemingly all night'. It would be a full-time position, a vocation of charity. There was a need for women who could devote themselves to tough good works in the name of Christ. The success of the Salvation Army and its lasses would have been influential: here was a way for the established church to reach outside the moneyed classes and make itself relevant to the urban poor, who cared little for cathedrals.

Mary McKillop is the most famous founder of a religious order in Australia, for the Catholics. Less known, but significant is Emma Silcock (1858–1931) who as Sister Esther became 'Mother Foundress' of CHN. In 1888 she moved to the Lily Lon property, living among the heathen (the

Chinese) and the wanton, where she was joined by two other young women, Sisters Ellen and Christina. 'We were very happy', one of them recalled. They were described as deaconesses, a title dating from the early Christian church, and predating the establishment of the religious orders. It referred to women who ministered to women.

In 1894 Agnes Row (b. 1866) joined the community as a probationer, the first Australian-born member of CHN. She had been born in Campbell's Creek, Victoria, the second-youngest of the surviving five children of Richard Row and Frances Perry, nee Anset, who died in 1872 at thirty-nine. The Row's eldest, Frances, was of an age to take on the responsibility of her younger siblings, but she too died, in 1888. Of the children, only son Arthur married, in 1885.

The early 1890s, when Agnes Row joined the community, was a period of great suffering, the end of Marvellous Melbourne. The city experienced its own crisis, the collapse of the land boom and depression. It could have engaged her sympathies, leading to the religious vocation. In Anglican families of the 'low' or Evangelical persuasion, a daughter's yen for sisterhood was regarded with dismay, if not outright prohibition. Some sisters had to flee their family homes, or else wait until their parents died. Agnes Row, with one or both of her parents dead, her brother married and living in the country, may have had more freedom.

In 1896 she became a deaconess, Sister Agnes. She would be put in charge of St George's Mission Hall, as the Order expanded its activities. Here she found her metier, ministering to boys. Sister Eleanor described her in an obituary: 'A born teacher, with a wonderful flair for managing boys…the ease with which she could interest and keep in order a hall full of usually unruly youths was a joy to see, and something never to be forgotten.'

Much of the information about early CHN members comes from *Esther, Mother Foundress*, which is a hagiography (in the original sense) of Mother Esther, and the *Book of the Dead*, its collection of obituaries, written by and for members of the community. Both sources emphasise godliness rather than personality. Even in the history of the order by Lynne Strahan, Sister Agnes can be only retrieved in glimpses. Sister Eleanor calls her 'an unusual type, forceful, and possessed of a striking personality', but with a sense of fun. She

organised football for the boys, ending up with a twelve-team competition, took them bushwalking, and most importantly for *Fairy Tales Told in the Bush*, read to them.

Wag, a boy the Sisters rescued from the streets (thus also ridding themselves of his habit of ringing their doorbell and running away) recalled in *Mother Foundress* fireside readings after choir practice: 'Sister Agnes read to us. I can remember those stories now… 'Mr Midshipman Easy' and other good yarns. We were so interested in them we could hardly wait for the next Sunday. Sister Agnes had all those boys eating out of her hand. She could manage them, and we always felt that nothing could go wrong when she was there, and that whatever she said was right and fair.'

PERHAPS ONE DAY she ran out of story and improvised her own, drawing on her memory of Grimm stories, the Barak tale, and her own background. Since 1858 European fairy stories had been written in Australia, often the work of women, with titles such as *Australian Fairy Stories* (1897) by Atha Westbury, or JM Whitfield's *The Spirit of the Bushfire* (1898). The fairies might be European, but the settings were Australian. Sister Agnes' book might seem in title to derive from Olga Ernst's 1904 *Fairy Tales from the Land of the Wattle*, but there were other writers and illustrators active, such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. It is an intriguing coincidence between the two women that four memorial windows for Outhwaite were installed at St Marks, Fitzroy, where Sister Agnes headed the Mother's Union.

Other influences came from a different direction: Alfred William Howitt's 1904 *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, of which William Barak was a major informant and Katherine Langloh Parker's 1896 *Australian Legendary Tales: Folk-lore of the Noongahburrahs as told to the Piccaninnies*, with an introduction by Andrew Lang. This book was probably the most significant for Sister Agnes.

What stands out in *Fairy Tales Told in the Bush* is a keen appreciation of the Australian natural world and the skill of the storyteller, honed by a restive, demanding audience. Although the tales are didactic, with morals, they do not talk down to their young readers. The language is easy, assured, direct. Sister Agnes also has the knack of creating some truly unnerving imaginative

images: of Buckley's gun, which magically shoots nails; of boys miniaturised by magic pincers, and locked in golden balls.

The review in *Fitzroy City Press* noted: 'It is a marvel how a lady so continuously employed could find time to write even a line'. CHN worked its sisters to the bone, Sister Esther commented that 'we live tired', expected to pursue good work(s), holy subjection to the will of God, the invisible life rather than artistic egotism and publicity. In the history of the community Strahan writes: 'Many talents, though, never developed beyond amateurism because of the edict that special abilities were to be left in the umbrella stand at the convent door, and a regime of hard work that disallowed the leisure needed for potentialities to flower.'

Fairy Tales was not amateurish, though several of the stories could have benefited from re-drafting. It was professionally published in England, with the profits going to charity. Sister Agnes had the ability to write more for children, even at novel length. It is, however, probably not accidental that the following year she was moved from the laneways mission, and its young, keen readers, to another CHN project, heading St George's Hospital, Kew. Sister Eleanor notes she: 'began the difficult task of adjusting herself to surroundings and work completely foreign to her experience and [probably] her tastes.' She did not return to the Mission Hall for eleven years, by which time she felt 'I am out of touch with the boy and child mind'. She never wrote another book. In March 1930 she died, and Mother Esther died the following year.

MELBOURNE IS A small place, new but with a history that defies the wrecking ball. The second Mission House of the CHN stands, at the top of Spring Street, still religious in purpose, but used by another denomination. Not only places, but people and objects interconnect. A descendant of Canon Handfield, first Chaplain of CHN, comes to play poker at my house, and we laugh at how research can link people. If DNA carried memories, he would remember Sister Agnes, and so would I, for my grandfather, Alfred Roscoe Wilson, was a young Anglican clergyman when *Fairy Tales Told in the Bush* was published. Perhaps Sister Agnes gave it to him, when he became a father, or to my grandmother, Florence, who also did mission work among the Chinese in Little Bourke Street.

I think then, of the 1890s depression, of my grandfather as a small boy in Geelong, one of three sons of a widow, and desperately poor. He was a bright child, a choirboy, like Wag, though never a troublemaker. His parish priest learnt he was leaving school at the age of ten, to help support the family. He offered lessons three nights a week at the vicarage, taught by the assistant curates. The informal classes included Latin and Greek, and despite my grandfather's working-class background, the languages of religion were crucial to him being allowed to study for the ministry. The impulse behind the CHN Mission, to reach the poor and change lives, had effect here – many years later, he became Dean of St Paul's Cathedral.

I think also, of when Sister Agnes died, her body lay at Holy Trinity, Kew, with a vigil from the boys, now men, to whom she had ministered. That would become my grandfather's church, where he was the celebrant at my parents' wedding. My mother Marian, an artist, designed a window for Holy Trinity – and her ashes now lie in the church's garden.

The ghosts of the past have influence, and remain with us still. I close the battered book, and the long, strange journey of research that it took me on, and that finally resonated, so close to home.

With thanks to Sister Elizabeth Gwen, CHN, who also remembered Alfred Roscoe Wilson.

References at www.griffithreview.com

Lucy Sussex was born in New Zealand. She works across genres, with particular interests in women's lives, crime and Victoriana. Her award-winning fiction includes the novel, *The Scarlet Rider* (Forge, 1996, to be reprinted 2014). Her latest project is 'Victorian Blockbuster: Fergus Hume and The Mystery of a Hansom Cab' (forthcoming). She lectures in English at La Trobe University, Bundoora.

FICTION

THE GHOST RIVER

TONY BIRCH

THE river boys camped along the low bank when the weather was on their side. On summer nights they sat by the fire, passed the bottle and cooked a feed, a couple of tins of baked beans or bacon bones in steaming water and bread toasted on an old stove rack. If one of them got lucky with the throwing arm and landed a kill with a fistful of rock, they shared a rabbit on the coals.

Most nights there'd be four or five boys round the campfire, Big Tiny Watkins, Cold Can, the Doctor, Tallboy and Moses, the undisputed boss. They once had regular names, like you and me, but ditched them and took up with identities that appeared in no public record. The river kept them off the streets and brought them some peace, away from the eyes of the police, who also loved the drink and were notorious for kicking the winos round the streets.

The river boys would end a night's drinking with a tune. They sang to the stars, the moon and, naturally, the river. On warm nights the wind travelled from the north. It swept through the valley, off the water and ran up the hill and carried the river with it. I'd pick up their drunken choir from my open window, where I perched of a night smoking cigarettes and looking up at the same stretch of sky.

The scent of the water, sweet and damp, floated on the warm air. It circled the room, teasing me. I'd take a good sniff and wish I were down on the water with them.

Each of the river boys carried the story of his life; where he'd come from, how he'd sunk low and how he was going to fight his way back to the top, which was nothing more than the drink talking. They spoke one part truth, two parts trickster and, as my father liked to say, 'a truckload of bullshit.'

Moses was in charge of the campfire, and made the rules on when to light up and when to dampen the coals. He also led the cook-up and the singing. He could play the spoons and the gum-leaf and sang Country and Western as good as a singer on a record album. He was a man from another time, marching round in his cowboy boots, woollen pants and jacket, and a hat cocked back on his head with a blackbird feather sticking out of the band.

I headed for the river whenever I could, sometimes on my own, but mostly with my closest friend, Sonny, who lived next door, and like me expected to grow up to be an outlaw. We knew the best spots to swim and the death holes to steer away from, where the skeleton tree snags lurked beneath the water, waiting to snatch hold of a foot and never let go. We knew the bridges and trees that were safe to jump from without hitting a submerged rock or a stolen car wreck dumped in the water.

The river had been poisoned over the years, because of all the rubbish and shit dumped in it. Signs had been put up round the water-holes warning swimmers off with skull-and-crossbones markers, frightening off most kids, but not us. Neither of us ever got sick taking in river water and we only ended up with sores full of pus if I went into the water with an open cut.

Any time we heard an animal running through the bush we went chasing after it, whether it was a rabbit, a snake or a wild cat. I never caught one of them cats, and maybe I was lucky I didn't. Tallboy had once worked as a rabbit-trapper along the river and told us that a river cat could wipe out a team of ferrets in a morning and take down a hunting dog if there was a pair of them working together.

'We trapped one of them fellas one night, in a crate we kept to

grab the rabbits when they came running out of the burrow with a ferret up the arse. We had this big old Tom in the cage, fangs like a tiger and nuts like bowling balls. The old trapper I worked with back then roped a snare round the cat's neck. Growling and spitting at us, it was. Would have gone us on the spot if we'd freed him. We dropped the cat in a hessian sack along with a rock and tied it up with wire. "Watch this," my old mate said and flung the sack in the water. There was a mighty splash and the sack sunk. We waited a bit. And then, bugger me, a couple of minutes went by and I spotted bubbles on the surface of the water. And then the cat, he comes to the top. He swam to the bank and snuck off into the scrub, giving us an all mighty growl.'

Eventually we knew the river as well as anyone. I could lie on my bed at night with pencil and paper and draw maps of the river, marking every bend and water hole, the bridges and jumping trees, the empty factories and car wrecks, and the old pontoon floating on forty-fours roped to a wooden landing down river from the campsite.

Moses knew the river better than anybody, and he didn't need no map. He carried every inch of the river in his head. He was also a champion storyteller and we loved listening to him weave a tale. The only story I never got was the one he told over and over again about the river. The more times I heard it the less I understood it.

When he was about to begin the river story Moses would stamp at the ground with the heel of his boot and call out to the birds in the trees, 'listen hard now.' He'd clap his hands together a couple of times, make a clicking noise with his tongue and the birds would lift off from the trees in the distance and move a little closer, to the wattles lining the riverbank.

'Back in the old time, before the humans,' he would begin, 'this girl, the river, she didn't stop her life where she does now, at the mouth at bay there. There is no bay in the time I'm talking with.'

He'd stop and turn in a circle, flapping his arm about like a bird, and click his tongue again. The birds in the trees would whistle as if he was talking to them.

'All the land was full up.' He stuck his stomach out like he was a pregnant woman. 'The river, she went on. She went on and she didn't stop 'til she touched the ocean.'

He'd pick a stick up from the ground, snap it in two and draw a map in the sand, of a secret river he was sure lived beneath the sea. He'd stamp his foot again and stare everyone around the campfire in the eye. Moses didn't look like any helpless wino when he did that. He was fearsome. He'd slap his thigh as he went on.

'Here's the first lesson. You find yourself out on the bay there, you get yourself in trouble,' he'd slap his leg again, 'you must be thinking with a sharp eye, search for the quiet water. The still water. Your mother.'

He'd draw another swirl in the sand and spear it with the stick.

'She is calm right there. In her heart. The Ghost River, she's there waiting for you. You find yourself in trouble, you look out for her.'

The first time I heard the story a shiver went through my body and I was forced to swallow spit before I could talk.

'A ghost river?'

'*The* Ghost River,' he nodded. 'All she is. You believe in her, she's there to take care of you. If you're no believer that girl will take you down and teach you a rock-hard lesson. Don't expect her be spitting you back neither. You fuck up on her, you never be coming back.'

With the story over Moses would be sweating and shaking. He'd go quiet, sit by the fire and wait for the old Moses to return. I never understood the story the first time he told it, and over the years it only got spookier. I put it down to the drink digging holes in his brain and crippling his body. He slowed down round the fire, could hardly sing a note and ended up blind in one eye.

THE NEXT WINTER was the wettest in years and Moses and the boys were forced to take shelter in the old pumping station downriver. The building was over a hundred years old. In the old days it took water from the river and pumped it up the hill through a pipe for the machines in a woollen mill. The station had shut down long ago along with the mill. The pumps had stopped running and rusted up. The wooden floor and foundations of the building had rotted away and it had sunk into the riverbed. From the far bank the station looked like a red brick boat somehow floating on the water. The cellar was

flooded out and home to river rats and snakes. They went at each other for a feed, day and night, thrashing about in the oily water. The iron roof had blown off in the wind and the upstairs floor was covered in bird shit half a foot deep. Bats flew into the station on sundown and wrapped themselves in their leather wings and hung from the ceiling rafters until the morning.

The only spot dry enough for the boys to bed down was in the storehouse on the ground floor. They bunked on tables and shelves, under blankets stinking of piss and the grog. They came to of a morning, around the same time as the bats, with their blankets hugging their stooped shoulders, reciting a graveyard cough to get the lungs going.

Over the months of that dark winter the river boys turned grey and mouldy. Eventually the cold and rain and the flooded river got the better of them. Big Tiny was the first of the boys to go. He slipped over and rolled down the muddy bank one night, whacked his head on a rock and split it open. He tried getting to his feet, fell a second time and rolled into the river.

Tiny's bloated body was found a little over a week later. It was wedged in the branches of a big old tree that had toppled over earlier in the winter and been left to rest half-in-half-out of the water. With his arms outstretched he looked like a man who'd been crucified. The yabbies had eaten his stomach away, the hawks had swooped down and taken off with his eyes, and his skin hung in shreds from his bones.

Moses was quick to pick up how bad his death had upset the rest of the mob. He put his hands together for Tiny and declared that we had to understand that there was good in Tiny's death. In explaining himself he added something more to his Ghost River story.

'When a fella has a clean soul the river takes hold of his body before it's lost, lifts it up and tells it to float along there until it finds a home. Tiny found a home in that old tree. That's why it fell over in the first place, back then, in the wet. That tree was waiting for him to come by.'

He gave us the stare and slapped his thigh before going on.

'Now, if a man's soul is dark and dirty, the ghost river drags that body to the bottom and buries it in the mud. The body is trapped there,

like in old Purgatory there, for Mr Lucifer to come up through the earth and claim that fella for his own self.'

He walked round and touched everyone on the forehead, even Sonny and me.

'So don't any of you be sad for old Tiny. He had a pure soul, that old boy. All them other fellas feeding on his body after he's gone, the crabs and the birds flying off with his eyes, he'll be seeing us through them. This don't do no harm at all. Not for Tiny.'

Cold Can was the next to leave us. He'd never spoken a word any time we'd been down the camp. He always sat close to Moses and nodded in agreement at anything Moses said, even when he was drunk and cursing the world. Cold Can was crossing the street from the wine shop one night and was knocked down by a truck. He died on the spot. He had no family and no money and was given a pauper's burial. Moses had a shave and a wash for the funeral. Later that night, when they were sitting round the fire drinking he told the rest of the mob that at the gravesite he'd clammed his eyes shut and willed Cold Can's body out of that coffin and set him free before they could bury him in the ground.

'Where's he now?' Tallboy asked as Moses passed him the flagon. 'If he's not in the ground, where the fuck is he?'

'Where would you reckon,' Moses shouted, as if the answer was obvious to all of them. 'He's gone with Big Tiny, on the ghost river. I put him there. Myself. Be there too, one day. All of us mob.'

'Hope so,' the Doctor mumbled. 'Don't want the Devil getting hold of me. I'm gonna fly with that river,' he cackled.

'Damn sure you will, Doc,' Moses assured him.

Tallboy inspected the flagon, checking how much they'd drunk, in no doubt that the grog had got them for good.

The Doctor disappeared a week later and was never seen again. Moses had no doubt where he'd gone and said the time had come for the ghost river to call each of them home. Poor old Tallboy fell apart, hearing those words. He felt the river turning against him and wasn't ready to die. The next morning he hiked the track to the streets above, picked up a decent house brick, lobbed it through the front window of

an electrical store and waited for the police to come and arrest him. It was Tallboy's lucky day. The judge gave him four months inside with a clean blanket and three meals a day.

IN THE END, Moses was left alone, by his fire. He got lonely and sad and angry. He said we weren't to hang round the river any longer.

'How long you been sitting by the fire here, boys?'

'A couple of years,' I answered as Sonny tried adding up on his fingers.

'You spent two years wasting your time with a bunch of no-good drunks? It's time for you to piss off and grow up.'

I'd never heard Moses sound so mean. And we didn't want to go anywhere. We were happy on the river.

'I like the fire,' Sonny protested. And your stories. Even the ones that aren't clear. You still tell them good.'

Moses huffed and puffed and took a swig from his bottle.

'Listening days is over. I'm telling the two of you to piss off. Anyhow, I'm going and won't be back. There won't be any stories to listen to.'

'Where you going to?' I asked, not really believing what Moses was saying. 'We want to be here with you, and be outlaws like you, and Big Tiny and Cold Can.'

'No outlaws,' he laughed. 'You don't need to be like us. We're gone.'

I couldn't work out why he was laughing now. I was angry with him, and screaming.

'We come to this campfire every chance we get, don't we Sonny?'

He was holding his chin in his hands and had tears in his eyes. He tried saying something but couldn't talk.

Moses struggled to his feet, shuffled through the dirt to where I was sitting, in an old car seat. He waved at me to stand up. When I refused to move he grabbed hold of me under the arms and hugged me tight against his bag-of-bones body. He stunk of the grog and dirt and sweat. But I didn't care. I didn't want him to let go of me. Not ever.

He rocked me from side to side as he spoke.

'It's time for old Moses to go with the water, back with my people. Before this river is killed off proper.'

'What people?' Sonny called out. 'You said you had no people but the river boys.'

He kept hold of me.

'Oh, I have them, all right. From way back. The Doc and Cold can too. Even Tallboy. He'll find his way back.'

With his palms resting on my chest, he pushed me away.

'But not you. Not yet. You got to leave the river. Go away. Time for you to grow. Come back when you men. She'll need you then.'

I cannot remember exactly what I said to Moses after that, but I know I told him I hated him, and that he knew nothing and that he was crazy with grog.

I couldn't sleep on account of what I'd said to him and headed for the river the next morning to tell him I was sorry. Moses was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't at his campsite the next day, or the following night after school. It was months before Sonny and me accepted that Moses was not coming back.

On the first warm day of the summer we went for a swim at one of our waterholes and made our way across the public golf course to Phoenix Bridge, our favourite jumping spot. I always liked to jump first. The drop never frightened me, until I'd leapt from one of the wooden pylons supporting the bridge. As I fell through the air I'd suddenly be gripped by the craziness that I would never find the river and would fall through the sky forever.

But I did hit the water. But not like I always had. Soon as I went in and plunged beneath the surface a shock of cold clawed at my lungs. I knew there was something wrong. I couldn't breathe, in or out. I was sinking into darkness and swallowing poison water. I was afraid and knew I didn't want to be with the river boys and I didn't want to be an outlaw. But I couldn't help myself. My body was stiff with cold. And then I heard him, Moses, clicking his tongue, stamping his foot and calling to the Ghost River, not to take me but set me free.

Sonny said he'd never seen nothing like it.

'I'm looking down from the bridge for you, thinking you'd done your last jump, and then, fuck me, you bob up on the side of the bank like one of them wild cats Tallboy used to speak about. The water lifted you on the bank. How crazy's that?'

I coughed up water all the way home. I felt sick the next morning and told Sonny I wouldn't be going for a swim. I was lying on the couch watching daytime television.

'What about tomorrow?'

'Dunno. I'll see how I'm feeling.'

'That'll be two days away from the river. And it's holidays. We haven't done that before. So when we going again?'

'Like Moses said, when it's our time.'

Tony Birch writes short fiction and novels. His books include *Shadowboxing* (Scribe, 2006), *Father's Day* (Hunter Publishers, 2009), and the novel *Blood* (UQP, 2011), which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin award. He teaches at the University of Melbourne. His story 'The Lovers' appeared in *Griffith REVIEW 34*.

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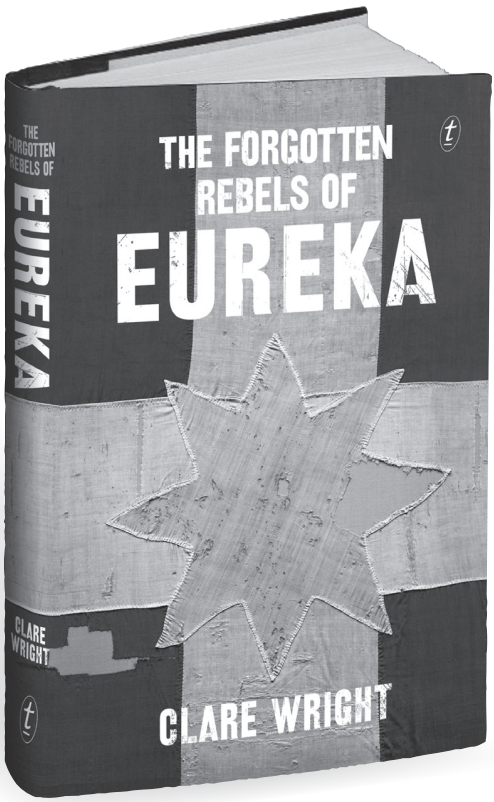

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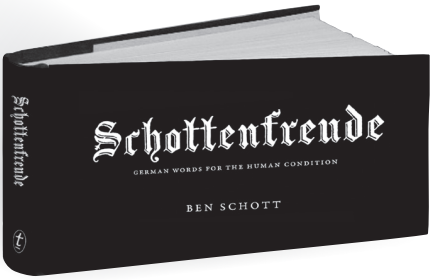

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