

Landfall:  
Reading and writing Australia  
through climate change

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Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Creative Arts)

School of Culture, Communication and the Arts

Faculty of Arts Education and Human Development

Victoria University

November 2012

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# Abstract

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This creative writing thesis begins with the premise that climate change poses critical outcomes for the Australian continent, and asks what the consequences of this are as the precariousness of Australia's future in relation to climate change continues to gather pace.

Comprising a novel (70%) and exegesis (30%), the thesis as a whole seeks to explore the connections between climate change, land and culture in Australia, and to investigate settler Australian understandings regarding 'place', 'belonging' and 'home' in relation to both settlement and unsettledness in contemporary times.

The novel, *Landfall*, explores these questions through the lives of sisters Laura and Vik. When their mother, Kath, disappears, Laura finds and impulsively destroys the goodbye note left behind. Bruce, their father, believes that Kath is lost in the bush, or worse. He embarks on the task of clearing his hundred wild acres to carve out a farm. He brings in sheep, changing the land and their lives forever. As an adult, Laura bends herself to the task of restoring the property. But Bruce's health deteriorates, and the impact of long-term drought renders Laura's restoration a futile task. As catastrophic bushfire sweeps towards Melbourne, the sisters are forced to confront their memories, histories and sense of place in order to survive.

Using an interdisciplinary lens to examine settler cultural understandings of Australian lands from first contact to contemporary times, the exegesis explores the literal manifestation of Australian cultural *unsettlement* as this has shaped responses and approaches to fire and urban development in Australia, as well as how three contemporary novels have used fiction to explore recent themes in Australian cultural responses to land and belonging. The exegesis argues that until Indigenous sovereignty is meaningfully acknowledged, settler cultures will remain unsettled, with profound implications not only for social relations but for climate change itself.

# Declaration

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I, Alice Robinson, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Landfall: reading and writing Australia, through climate change* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:



Date: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2012

# Acknowledgements

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Undertaking this PhD has been the defining experience of my recent life, and it is with great thanks that I acknowledge the precious supervision I have been afforded along the way. I was expertly guided throughout both academically and creatively, and for that I am indebted to the generous wisdom, insight and advocacy of my three wonderful supervisors, Associate Professor Michele Grossman, Emeritus Professor John McLaren and Dr. Fiona Capp. Each provided astute, quality feedback; their respectful treatment of my work inspired great trust in me. I give my heartfelt thanks to John for his thorough reading, particularly of the exegesis, and for his careful guidance of the developing concepts and ideas therein; to Fiona for her mentorship as I wrote and rewrote the novel, and without which I may never have found a way through; and particularly to Michele, whose belief in the project and thoughtful supervision have never wavered from the moment of our first meeting, under whose care I have been able to develop so pervasively, and whose penetrating insight has continuously steered this project toward a standard worthy of the hours spent. I would also like to thank Dr. Enza Gandolfo for the enduring support provided by herself and the Postgraduate Creative Writing Group, Wurundjeri elder and archaeologist Annette Xiberras for consulting with me regarding climate change and the surfacing of Indigenous remains, and Sophie Cunningham for the provision of generous feedback on the novel.

As I have discovered in writing this novel and exegesis, the past is indelibly linked to the present, and future. I very much doubt, therefore, that I would have possessed the gumption, drive or passion to pursue this task without the lifelong support and encouragement of my mother Geri, who has always believed in the power of ideas to make

change, and whose unshakeable faith in the quality and importance of my writing formed the bedrock from which this project eventually evolved. Building firm foundations, both actual and ideological, my father Paul's lived demonstration of how one might love and care for a piece of land has constituted an unparalleled inspiration. His eternal encouragement of my endeavors, generosity of knowledge and quiet, thoughtful teachings have enabled the experience of making of this work to hold far more than mere academic meaning for me. I gratefully thank my other parents as well: Dominie, who has cheered me on with kindness and compassion and made what I am doing feel impressive even in the most self-doubting of times, and Rob, whose patient counsel has always spurred me along the paths I most wanted to take and whose own academic credentials have remained a high-water mark for scholarly work. Thanks given also to Dave, Jan, Tig and Amanda for tirelessly listening to and encouraging me throughout.

Most fundamentally, I acknowledge the unwavering, stoic support I was gifted by my husband, Dan. There is no doubt that he has borne the brunt of the often hidden, sometimes mundane difficulties and tensions associated with undertaking such a challenging and lengthy project. At times Dan applied himself as scaffold when it seemed I would be overwhelmed and crumble, affording me a strength I could not produce alone. His stamina, more so than mine, enabled the completion of this work, as did his love, kindness, sure belief in me, and the daily example of his own intellectual prowess, which I experience as an ongoing inspiration. I cannot repay Dan for all he has given to help get me through. I hope only that I may rise as gracefully to the challenge of providing support as he builds his own research project.

This PhD was supported by a Victoria University Postgraduate Scholarship. I thank the university for its generosity in facilitating the work undertaken herein. The financial breathing space the scholarship afforded allowed me to find my way into being the writer I had long hoped I might become.

## A note to the reader

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In presenting the two parts of this work – novel and exegesis – together, I struggled to establish which should be read first. The exegesis was never intended to be a direct exposition or exploration of the novel. Likewise, the novel is not and could never be a direct creative translation or iteration of the academic work done in the exegesis; creating artwork in any medium simply does not work like that. An idea, topic or area of exploration might exist from which the creative work begins to germinate and grow, but how that idea manifests within the finished artifact can at times appear distorted, abstract or largely metaphorical when reworked creatively, if indeed it can be seen clearly at all. Instead of crafting the exegesis as pure commentary on the novel, or manipulating the novel to mirror literally the concerns of the exegesis then – each of which would have necessitated a linear process of construction with one component completed before the other was begun – I wrote the two components of this work in tandem with one another over a period of four years. Though each necessarily serves to illuminate aspects of the other and vice versa, they are mutually constitutive yet distinctive explorations of a single set of questions and concerns. The most accurate way to represent their relationship, and therefore to experience each component, would be for them to be looped; to repeat one after another infinitely, so that neither may be read first nor second, but would exist in perpetual symbiosis. Of course, such a presentation is not practical or even possible in this context, and so I have simply chosen to place the novel first.

# Landfall: Novel

## Part One

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### 1.

Outside in the valley, magpies cried like water running over rocks. The hills were green and silver. Trees whispered together.

Why don't you go to church, Dad? Vik said cheerfully, sitting in the kitchen, churning ashen porridge in her bowl.

Behind her, Kath stood at the flyspecked hall-mirror, fastening a strand of dull pearls at her throat. The hole in Kath's dress at the armpit exposed summer-grass coloured hair. Laura watched her mother frown at her reflection. Narrowing her eyes, Kath's gaze flicked toward Vik. Their old man cleared his throat.

Church is your mother's thing, love. Part of her, you know, culture and what-have-you. Bruce glanced away, sipping tea, weak with recycled leaves. He absorbed the grey hills beyond the house. Vik squirmed.

Yeah, but...

Laura's face warned Vik off. The little girl shut her mouth, cheeks pink. Wincing, she held her breath. Laura focussed on her porridge, head down. There was a pile of sketches by the stove – their mother's work. The porridge tasted faintly of charcoal. Laura watched Kath come into the room, hands on hips. She walked slowly, something feline in the sway of her gait. She stopped behind Vik's place. Laura felt the oatmeal go concrete in her throat. Kath laid her hands very carefully, delicately along the back of Vik's chair, either side of her daughter's head. Vik's eyes were wide. Kath lifted a palm, stroked Vik's head, once, twice. Her hand came to rest around the base of Vik's ponytail. She tightened her grip. Bruce shoved back his chair and stood.



Don't want to be late, Kath love. Service starts in what love, forty-five?

He smiled raggedly. Kath hesitated, turned away. Sighing, she collected her purse, her well-patched winter coat. She said something under her breath, a sound like spitting.

*Mother tongue*, Laura's teacher had called it, though Laura knew for a fact no one else's mum said such foreign things. Vik remained bug-eyed, breath held, even as the screen door whined and slapped, as the crunch of Kath's walking boots on the dirt drive grew faint. Laura thought she could just about hear the sound of Vik's fluttering heart as she shovelled the porridge in. The old man called in from outside.

C'mon girls! Another beautiful day in paradise and no time to waste!

Laura watched him through the window, brandishing an axe. She rubbed a thumb across a calloused palm. The old man's weekend workers had already started for the day. Heavy thunk of blades in trunks reverberated across the valley. The old man complained about the workers' English. *Like herding bloody cats*, he liked to say, *keepin' these blokes in line*. They were not real loggers, Bruce said, but came from the factory where he worked during the week to "make ends meat", which Laura guessed was sausage. The men came cheap. The old man said that this was all anyone could ask when there was land needed clearing, and only so much money set aside to get the job done.

A line of ants crossed the silver bark. Chin on hand Laura stretched the length of the branch on her stomach. She watched the insects' progress along the limb, noticing how they communicated with one another as they worked their way along. She blew a little burst of hot breath. The ants hunkered down, weathering her gale. One or two were picked up, blown off course; one dropped and fell. Laura shivered in her nylon parka. It wasn't raining, but drops of rainwater had gathered on leaves and twigs; were dripping down her neck. The midday sun fell through the leaves, bright, cold stalactites of light. Laura could hear Vik talking – just faintly – on the front verandah, ordering the collection of small plastic animals that were her favourite toys. Kath said they were to play outside on Sundays

so as not to *messy things up*. Laura wasn't sure what their mother meant. There wasn't much that was clean enough to wreck.

Go on, Kanga, Vik said conversationally, to herself.

Get on the ark – there you go. You too, Koalie.

Laura rolled her eyes. The cheap plastic toys had come in a packet with *African Safari* typed on the front. Vik refused to believe that the Hyena was not a Dingo; the Antelope not a Kangaroo.

Do you want to get saved? Vik said, scolding. Do you, wombat? We'll leave you behind if you're not careful.

Laura called out in falsetto, her best wombat voice, I don't want to get on the ark! I'm staying here!

There was a beat of silence. Laura sat up on the branch, straddling it like a horse, craning for Vik's reaction. The front of her parka was damp. She knew Vik wouldn't be able to see her easily. Up in the branches of the silver gum, in among the dense trees that encircled their small farmhouse, she was hidden. Vik came down the verandah steps on her bottom. Laura heard the thud of weight on wood. She tried to hold her breath to keep from laughing. Vik stomped around the side of the house, hands on hips. She appraised the mess of trees. Laura could see the small white scrap of Vik's annoyed face between leaves.

*Lor*, I know you're there. *Lor*?

Vik stamped her foot.

*I know you're there.*

Laura let out a snort of laughter. Vik's face was pinched with irritation.

*Stop it*, Vik whined helplessly.

*Stop it*, Laura said – mincing – in imitation.

I'm telling *mum*, Vik hissed into the foliage.

Laura swallowed, gauging. Vik clenched small white fists; scanned the trees blindly.

I don't care, Laura called breezily, tossing her hair – I don't care what you do. Mum's not even here, is she?

Vik scowled. She stamped her foot again, face waratah red.

She said, When Mum gets back from church, then I will.

Both knew that Vik wouldn't. Some things were off bounds between them; no disagreement was worth involving Kath. They colluded silently, instinctually, in ways that Vik was not wholly conscious of, in order to maintain peace. They did not acknowledge their unspoken rules. It was easier to play their parts: the big sister, the little sister, and to use Kath's wrath as leverage between them privately, as siblings did. Only, in their case the leverage had real weight – or would have, had their threats been carried out.

Laura looked down at Vik's livid mouth, smeared with vegemite. Weak sunlight caught the halo of fuzz around her head, coming free of yesterday's plait.

You're gonna get in big trouble, Lor, Vik wailed.

Not if I dob on you first, Laura called, smiling.

The old man was coming through the trees along the kangaroo path in the bush behind the house, trundling the wheelbarrow loaded up with wood. Bruce said that them in town, and away in the *shitty*, would pay a pretty penny for wood, though out here you could get it for free. The big logs were loaded onto trucks and taken away. It was Laura's job to stack the small logs in the woodshed; those that would fit, at least. The rest had to be made into bundles with coarse black string that looked like horsehair and felt like straw. Vik was meant to help with stacking, but she complained it made her hands all rough. Laura did most of the work.

There you are, darlin', the old man called to Vik.

Laura shimmied backwards down the branch and jumped down into leaf litter, snapping twigs. Blackie came bounding out of the scrub, panting, bone between teeth. Laura caught sight of the grey-brown tuft of fur at one splintered end.

Where's your sister, Viko? the old man said. Got another load for youse.

Laura stepped out of the tree line, onto dirt. She slung an arm around Vik's shoulders, smiling widely. Vik struggled, but Laura held on. She dug her nails into the soft skin between Vik's neck and shoulder. Vik squealed.

Lemme go! Lau-ra!

The old man's eyebrows went up, he wiggled them at Laura. His face glowed with the effort of working the wheelbarrow across uneven ground.

C'mon Lor, Bruce said wearily. Give us a break.

The particular slope of his broad shoulders, so familiar, trapped the breath in Laura's chest. His woollen jumper was unravelling at the elbow, an exposed scab of flannel shirt poked through.

Bruce said, Unstack this lot for me, would you love?

Laura sighed; she released her sister. The old man pushed the barrow up to the woodshed, tipped the logs out. They thudded to the ground, rolling. Bruce stretched, hands kneading his lower back. Following, Laura heard a run of sickening clicks. His spine. She bent down, picked up the first damp log with both hands. The old man turned, made his way back across the yard.

*How many more loads?* Laura thought.

Lift with your legs love, like I showed you, the old man said over his shoulder.

Vik had her tongue out. Laura scowled, hefting wood. The old man paused, glancing from one to the other.

Viko pet, why don't you come with me? he said mildly.

He patted the tray of the barrow. Caught Vik in mid air, swung her high, dropped her in. Laura watched them go. Vik rode the barrow like a queen.

Dusk fell in the swift, brutal way of the bush. The sky, lit up momentarily in full sunset technicolour, was already dimming and turning grey, plummeting into night. Laura staggered to the fringe of the vegetable garden, the undefined place where native grasses met the uneven hand-dug furrows behind the house. It was over by the chook shed, itself uneven. Built of the scrap lumber from one of Bruce's cash-in-hand jobs: putting up the frame for Mr Peterson's grand homestead across the valley. Peterson was the district's richest cattle farmer. Their old man said the cut-off wood was too good to waste, and every penny counted for their clearing work.

Dad? Laura tasted the dirt of her own blood.

Yeah? That you, Viko?

He was in amongst the corn. It was only waist height to him – not like the corn his Dad grew during the Depression, he said, in the garden on the farm Cairnlea. That garden kept them alive while other people went hungry. Bruce said it was good to have your own source of food, like that. He said that the Cairnlea corn was so tall it was like diving into stalks, swimming underwater on dry land in golden waves. Laura knew her Dad was only a tiny baby then, so how he remembered the corn was anyone's guess. All that was before Grandad lost his farm, before they moved to a city flat without so much as a balcony, a home that wasn't flat at all from what Laura could work out, but taller even than Mountain Ash.

It's me, Laura said.

She couldn't keep the choke from her voice. The old man levered up, weight of the day's work in his knees.

You right, Lor?

He saw her face then, though it was gloomy, the place where Kath's wedding ring had caught the bone in Laura's eye socket, tearing the skin. Already, the eye was closing over.

I didn't do anything, Laura said. Dad? I didn't.

The old man took Laura's chin in his hands, turning her face to look at the bruise.

*My mum is a sculptor*, Laura told the kids at school.

She liked the shape of the word in her mouth: sculptor. It sounded important. Better than saying, *she makes stuff with clay*, which was the truth.

Laura had wanted to look at the pots her mother made. To see the painted images adorning them, so delicate. The tiny cottage among snow-capped mountains, the Christmas tree forests and sparkling blue streams, so unlike the grey-green bush, the copper-coloured dam on their place. Once, Laura had gone with Kath to dig the clay out of the bank in the gully and had marveled that such rough, dark matter could be spun into something so carefully wrought, so whole and shapely as the urn painted with the tiny white castle, glittering through red and orange trees. It was the urn that had tottered and fell when Kath caught Laura in the studio: the sickening clunk of elbow on clay. They watched in horror as the urn arced towards the ground. There was a second in which Laura thought that she might catch it, before it smashed. Laura didn't tell the old man about the urn, or Kath's screaming. Or the blow that knocked her off her feet.

Ah, pet, the old man said, regardless.

He squatted down; wrapped her in his arms.

Best get some ice on that, eh? he said, gently kissing her bruised cheek. First things first though, give us a hand with the dinner. Whaddoya feel like eating, love?

She never does it to Vik.

Bruce winced, so forlorn that Laura took his hand.

She whispered, It isn't fair, Dad. It's not *fair*.

Yeah, love. You're right.

Bruce sighed, unsnagging his secateurs. The blades sprung open.

Know what though? *Life's* not fair.

He groaned upright.

It's my job to teach you that.

In bed, Laura touched gingerly the pincushion of her swollen eye.

Dad doesn't need to go to Church, dodo, she said to Vik, their breath like cobwebs in the cold.

What?

Vik's voice, milky with sleep.

Listen. Dad doesn't go to Church – he doesn't need to. His Church is outside.

Vik yawned.

Outside what, but?

Laura rolled over, and closed her eye.

## 2.

You don't need to do that Mum, Vik said tentatively.

Cringing, she shifted restlessly from foot to foot.

I mean *Mutti*, Blackie won't run away, you know.

Kangaroos ertrinken Viktoria, Kath said. They drown dogs. In dams.

Vik wiped her nose on her sleeve, swallowed words. Kath clipped one end of the lead to Blackie's collar, firmly. Took up Laura's wrist, looped the other end around, like pushing on a handcuff. Laura held the bucket of yabbie bait, their lines in her free hand. Blackie gagged at the collar, straining. His tongue was purple at its edge. Kath dropped Laura's arm. A look went between Vik and Laura, quick as breath. Vik tried not to see the purple-yellow bruise, like the soft, dank frills of poisonous fungi, around her sister's eye. Laura smiled at Kath, no teeth. On the leash, her knuckles were white as sun-bleached bone.

Remind your father there's stew.

Something was stuck in her mother's throat, Vik saw. The way Kath kept swallowing.

*Why do we have to remind Dad about dinner?* Vik wanted to say, but didn't.

Their mother was most happy when they did as they were told. She liked them then, would sometimes kiss a cheek, braid their hair, offer a sliver of apple on the sharp blade of her palette knife from the studio door.

Kath called it *keeping piss and quiet*.

They went through the rough gate that dammed the yard against a tide of trees. Kath picked up Vik's cold fingers; they fit perfectly in her hand, melting. Blackie pulled Laura, the leash taut between them. The bush was silver against a white-cold sky. Later, Vik would remember her mother's hands even as other aspects faded – Kath's skin was cool, but rough as bark. Vik would splay her palm on the trunk of a ghost gum in the gully, trying to feel her mother's pulse.



Six gumboots sucked at six calves as they plodded up the scrubby slope. Kath carried Bruce's knapsack. It was lumpy, and strained at the straps. All over, the ground was littered with sticks and leaves; each step a muffled crunch. Kath used a long stem of Kangaroo-paw to flick flies – persistent despite the cold – from her lips. Everything smelled of damp bark, cool, earthy. From the bright, empty sky, cold light fell like rain. At the apex of the hill, Kath paused, turned, and faced the view. Laura allowed Blackie to roll in wombat dung, four coal paws twitching gleefully in the air. Kath brought a hand to her brow, shading eyes against the light. Her long blonde plait hung like a chord down her back. Vik wanted to stroke the fronds below the elastic band, but didn't. They looked down through a mesh of branches. Squares of toil made patchwork of the land. A bare, khaki paddock encircled the house, beyond was Kath's *lawn*.

*How I live like this? You expect me to live? Like this?*

Laura had slid swiftly under the kitchen table. Vik followed. Kath's words came from back of throat, like phlegm; the tone was clear. Laura rocked back and forth. Dinner plates shattered. Bruce flinched; that quick intake of breath. Vik watched her father's hands beneath the tabletop. They squirmed together like snuffling newborn pups over his bony knees. Kath's English bled out.

*Why doesn't he do something? Vik thought. To make her happy?*

Vik stared at her mother's bare blue toes, splayed on kitchen floor. A piece of mutton hit the wall, slid down, leaving a muddy skid-mark by the door. Their mother's cries, dredged up from down deep, like the truck winched out of the Kyree reservoir, chain groaning, link by creaking link.

*Listen love. What can I do?*

Their father's hands, searching blindly, found their heads. Vic felt her mother's retreat vibrating through the floor, heard the dull thud of the studio door, sealing Kath away from them. Twitching out from underneath her father's fingers, Vic crossed her arms over her

chest and bore down on her tears. Laura lay beneath his touch. Next morning, Bruce went out early to sow lawn seed. His amends practical, earthy, done with hands. The grass required constant watering. Laura took their bathwater out in buckets, but it was not enough.

In amongst the trees on the hill, Kath put a hand on each of her daughter's shoulders. Vik kept silent, still. Kath's hand was warm. Laura caught Vik's eye. She shrugged, imperceptibly. Vik inclined her head, just a fraction, to the left. They hesitated. Oblivious, Blackie rolled noisily in wiry grass. Overhead, a flock of white cockatoos wheeled through the air and circled back towards the bush. Behind the house, Posey's champagne paddock rolled like water in the wind. The horse rode the grass as though floating. Over the road, Peterson's farm constituted an expanse of hessian squares. The road – a dirt crack in the landscape – separated his land from their own. Even so, it was clear which land was which. The cattle-farm was brown, worn like old suede, bare but for the crosshatch of fence-line and the cattle, flecked with piles of dung. Their land was still mostly silver-green and mauve. A living tapestry of leaves.

*A bloody nightmare*, the old man sometimes called it, after a long day pulling stumps.

Girls?

Kath's voice, soft as night-wind. Like wind, it whispered away. All was still. Vik turned from Laura. She waited, smiling, for her mother to go on. Kath cleared her throat. She looked down and touched Vik's face, a very light stroke, birdwing brushing past mid-flight. Vik surrendered. She leaned into her mother's hip, smelling clay long worked into pores, cheap lavender soap, the wet-wool scent of her clothes. Kath inhaled carefully and put a palm on each of her daughter's shoulders. She stared into the valley, worked her chapped bottom lip between teeth. Vik dared allow her fingers to trail about her mother's thigh. When there came no reprimand, she wrapped her arm wholly around the solid corduroy leg, eyelids drooping with pleasure. If only time would stop. Kath ran her hand up the back of Vik's neck, stroked her hair once, twice. A magpie called out. Vik was gripped with

giddiness. At the same time, terrified she might do something to trample the moment, to make her mother move away. There was bitterness too, that the touch was shared, divided. That Laura got half.

*She loves me more but*, Vik thought, nestling into Kath's leg, forgetting there was ever anything Kath had wanted to say.

It only lasted a second. Kath was already shrugging them off.

Come, she said. No time for dill-dally. I go for clay. You catch good yabbies.

Vik pulled back, lips pinched. She glared at Laura, slit-eyed. But Laura was watching their mother. The sun poured down around her through the trees. With her back to them, Kath lifted a hand to her face and wiped her fingers on her leg.

She said over her shoulder, Be good.

Gonna catch some big ones for you, Mutti, Vik called.

Should we wait at the dam? Laura ventured. Or meet you at home?

Kath was already striding away.

Night was closing in as Vik and Laura walked together down the hill. Vik looked into the valley and made out the smudge of house, windows dark. She imagined how lovely and warm it must be in the kitchen; saw Kath turning from the stove, stepping towards her, gathering her up. Saw the old man, returned from the factory, crackling the newspaper to fold it back.

*Home again, home again jiggity-jig!* he might laugh and say as they came through the front door, just like in that rhyme.

Blackie ran ahead of them off the lead, pink tongue streaming. Vik struggled with the heavy bucket, water sloshing. Coral yabbies with ink-dipped claws tapped together against

the plastic, submerged in muddy water. Vik shivered. Her feet were cold. The dam water lapped over the lip of the bucket, into her boots. Her slippers were waiting.

Keep up, Laura snapped, striding. *C'mon*. There's still the chooks to put away.

I was going to tell you something nice, but I'm not now, Vik said.

Laura rolled her eyes.

Who cares?

Vik shifted the bucket grimly to her free hand, admiring the bright red welt bisecting her palm. A family of roos were grazing on the ridge. They scattered like seeds in wind at the dog's approach and darted away. The dog took off.

Blackie! Laura screamed. Blackie!

Turning back, the dog appraised Laura, front paw raised. The roos disappeared, melting into bush.

C'mon Blackie, c'mon boy, Vik called in her high voice, clapping. Nearly home now!

He put the paw slowly down and took one small step away from them.

Laura snapped, You've got to *disciple* him, der brain.

She dropped her voice to a growl, imitating Bruce.

Blackie.

The word was all menace. The old kelpie turned and crawled reluctantly toward them, shamefaced. It was a rule: no chasing. The old man said once dogs got a taste for blood, that was it.

### 3.

Laura took care to lay the fire perfectly, just how she had been shown. First, scraping yesterday's ashes from beneath blackened grate, then scooping them up with balding brush and pan. The ash was soft and grey as dove feather. Laura stuck her finger into the heart of the powdery mound. Like dipping into birthday cake batter – she had done that once at Sharon's – but hardly solid, or wet; more like dipping into dry, drought-air. The ash was cool. It smelt of smoke. Her finger came away coated white.

There was something acidic at the back of Laura's throat. She swallowed and wiped her face in the crook of her arm, enjoying the scratch of wool on cheek. Vik sat at the kitchen table, snot bubbling. Her cries wet and phlegm-soaked. Each broke off with a rattle, Vik's inhale, followed by a nasal, painful-sounding wail. Laura sighed. Her shoulders felt strung and pegged too tight. Vik buried her face in the lap of her folded arms. She swung her feet into the leg of her chair, thumping, metronome of heel on wood. There was a black mark on one leg from Vik's rubber boots.

Shut up, Laura hissed.

Vik's feet hovered mid-air then came down, hard. The chair shivered. Laura felt there was something yawning inside her. The night seemed to press in around the house. Outside, she could hear the old man's voice, calling, faintly, *Kath, Kath, Kath*. It was ghostly. The sound seemed to leak from the bush itself, croaking, creeping, no longer a word, but a crow-like caw. Laura saw through the window the old man's torchlight, flickering dimly up on the hill. Its circle of light was a pale grain of sand in the oceanic blackness of night. The torch could do nothing to show Bruce what was there. It served only to make his location highly visible to what might be hiding – or hunting – under cover of dark. Laura resisted the urge to get up, climb onto a chair, and draw the bolt across the door.

Kneeling on the brick hearth at the wood-stove, she steadied herself. It was cold. Vik's sobs were beginning to subside, ricocheting, mixed in with hiccups.

Shut *up*, Vik.

Laura rounded, brush in hand, glaring. Her small arms shook with the effort of control.

Just *shut up*, okay?

Vik looked up but kept her arms folded. She was still wearing her damp winter coat. Her face was raw, eyes swollen.

*Where* – wracking intake of breath – *is* – the gurgling noise – *she*?

Vik screwed her eyes shut, gearing up.

Kath? Kath? Kath? the old man distantly cried.

Laura turned resolutely back to the fire, teeth meshed. She tipped the ash into bags for the garden beds, tying ends firmly off. *Ash makes things grow*, the old man told them - all the most-dead things did. The first match fizzed; the second snapped. Laura tasted sulphur on her fingers. She bit down, and tasted rust.

Vik was head-down at the table, sucking her thumb. The kitchen smelled of mice. Laura shut the door of the stove, listening to the crack and pop of burning seedpods, and wood. Overhead, a single bulb swung gently from a chord, casting Vik in a shifting pool of tepid light. Laura's knees were numb from kneeling so long on the bricks. Her body ached, the ghost of adult pains to come. The windows were blind. Laura saw her own pinched, distorted face reflected in the dark glass.

Vik, Laura said.

She stepped forward. Her sister went on sucking, mouth clamped down. Laura felt a rush of blood to her face. How much she wished she could lie down and shut her eyes, but there was the old man's voice, growing hoarse, outside.

Laura stood, letting the heat from the stove warm the backs of her legs. She was hungry. On the kitchen sink, their breakfast dishes congealed. The yabbies were still alive and shifting aimlessly in the plastic bucket set down on the table at their old man's place. Laura stared at her little sister; felt the rattle of her empty gut. Listened to the scratch of yabby-claw, growing ever more and more faint. Outside, the old man, voice breaking over the same, worn word: *Kath, Kath*. Blackie's barks were syncopated with the distant cries. The house shifted as a gust of wind rose up. Laura stepped away from the stove. She went to Vik. It was clear, then. There was no one else.

Come on.

Laura pulled Vik's arm by the elbow. The thumb popped out like a cork from a bottle. Vik didn't resist. She slid down from the chair, allowed herself to be led. Laura put her arm around Vik's slippery waterproof shoulder. Vik leaned in. Around her mouth, snot had dried like salt. There was something that looked like it down behind the school, where trees had been cut to make the oval, salt bled out of soil and turned the earth white.

Come on sweetheart, time for bed.

Laura spoke like a mother. Not theirs; like a real one, from a book. Vik smelled of milk and grass. They crossed the red braided rug to Vik's bed.

Laura said, Sit down.

She took hold of Vik's gumboots. Each one held on, sucking, then all of a sudden let go. Laura fell back, boot in hand. She laughed once, a bark. Vik kept working the thumb between lips like she wanted to suck it down to bone. Her jeans were soaked through, the once white socks stained brown as dry blood with dam water. Beneath, Vik's feet were bloodless, green with cold. Laura touched Vik's toes, icy dawn-chilled stones.

Your feet are all wet, Laura said. Are you cold?

They're *not*, Vik wailed.

Her thumb-pad was a raisin of flesh.

I'm *not*. I'm not *cold*.

Vik's voice was all high and tight, as though the years had wound back and she was a baby again. Laura hurried with Vik's coat, fumbling, as if by working faster she could peel away the despair in Vik's face.

Vik whined through the wad of finger in her mouth, I don't want *you* to do it. She struggled against Laura's efforts to manoeuvre. Laura screwed her nails into the flesh either side of Vik's achilles. She hissed.

You...you *duffer*.

The coat came slithering from Vik's back. It made a synthetic puddle on the floor. Vik was crying again. She turned away, crawled bleakly beneath her doona, like a sick dog crawling underneath the house to die. Laura leaned down and kissed Vik's cheek. Not because she wanted to, but because that's what should happen next. Only, she was the wrong actor for the part. Vik didn't respond. Laura felt a draught brush her cheek.

He'll find her, Viko, she said. Alright? Okay?

The only sound in the room was Vik's mucus-heavy breath.

Alright?

The old man was still out there, calling. Laura hesitated in the hall. She crossed over to the old man's room, their mother's. The doorknob was made of tin. It was cold. It burned Laura's palm. She eased the door open with her shoulder, unsuspecting that the weak wave of scent spilling out – Kath's Sunday perfume, her hair - once released, would be forever lost.

Inside, the light was soft, violet, coming weakly through a purple tasselled shade.

Mum?



Laura looked around, holding her breath. Something felt knotted inside her throat. Everything looked the same as usual, but felt sinister as a result. There was the unmade bed, the squat wooden dresser spotted with dead flies. On the floor, the familiar brown wool rug, familiarly askew. Laura went to the flabby armchair beneath the window, draped in Kath's unhung clothes. She touched the bodice of a faded, cotton rose-print dress.

*I'm busting a bloody gut out there,* the old man had said just that morning – or had it been another life?

He had not raised his voice, but sat wearily on the arm of the old chair. Factory coveralls unrolled to the waist, Bruce seemed in the process of shedding skin. His hands were folded in his lap. Kath's clothes lay spreadeagled on the floor. He had thrown them, a small burst of fury and she, watching, snorted once in disbelief.

*I'm out there, yeah? Sweating blood for you, love. For the kids. You know? All I ask is that you do some cleaning up, love. That's all I ask.*

He sighed.

*That's all.*

Bruce didn't meet her eye. Laura and Vik, watching from the door, saw the straightening of their mother's spine. The way she loomed.

*I work. I work, you...*

Laura heard only sounds. Foreign words, formed in the gut. Kath clenched and unclenched her angry fists.

*She said, I work, harder than you can dream. You. You understand nothing.*

Kath turned her back to Bruce. Peering in, Laura saw something in her mother's expression; not anger, pain. Kath's eyes found Laura's face. The bedroom door hit its frame so hard that Laura felt it slam in her jawbone, and teeth.

Laura took her hand from Kath's frock and wiped it on her jeans. She went around the bed, trailing her fingers across the bed-end's brass spokes.

Kath? Can you hear me? the old man called, voice watery with distance.

That was when she saw it, the note. Just like that. There on Bruce's bedside table, near a glass of water filmed with dust. Laura tiptoed, barely breathing, as though her parents were asleep in the room. The note was neatly creased, a small white square. On the front in Kath's script, the word: *Bruce*. Laura's stomach contracted. She touched the scab at her eyebrow, picking. She hesitated; thought about running, about climbing into bed, covers up around her chin. She could shut her eyes and wait for tomorrow she thought, a day sure to replace itself with something fresh and clean.

Bruce cried, Coo-eee!

Laura picked up the note. She read.

*Liebe, Bruce. Please forgive me. This is no easy thing.*

Laura's mouth formed silently each word, sounding out.

*I cannot do it anymore – I am not at home here. I will contact you when I have a new place to live. I know you are good man, and will be good to our girls – better than me. Take care of yourself, and them. I miss you. I try to send address when I know where I will go.*

Kath had marked her love with an uneven cross, the deflated balloon of a badly drawn zero.

In the kitchen, the yabbies were dead, floating. Already they smelled bad. Laura saw the old man's scrap of torchlight coming down the hill. He was no longer calling out. Laura held the note. Such a tiny square. She heard the garden gate squeal back, the clang of chain on post. Bruce commanding Blackie through. Laura knew the routine so well she did not need to be there but could see it anyway: the old man carefully latching of the gate behind him, the hesitation of the dog, watching. They would cross Kath's scabby lawn together. Laura listened for click of Blackie's toenails on the verandah boards and the thud of the old

man's boots dropping by the door. She heard that he took no time to set the boots on their soles – as he instructed them to do, lest snakes and spiders crawl in to lie in wait. This small carelessness rocked Laura. Moaning, the fly-screen door opened. Bruce's hand was on the doorknob, steadying, while he stepped into his slippers one by one. A line of sweat rolled down Laura's back. She caught a flash of her mother's purple face. The graceful arc of the urn as it lurched toward the ground. She herself had followed the same trajectory moments later. She felt again the angry burn of palm on skin.

Just as the front door was opening, as Bruce was stepping through, Laura sprang forward and yanked open the stove. She didn't look at the note before dropping it into the fire. It went naturally from fist to flame. Once in, the square of paper seemed to sit, whole and perfect, in a bed of white-hot coals. Laura tried to grab it out but it burst into flame. She snatched back her hand. It took two attempts to shut and latch the door of the stove. Tucking her hands inside her armpits, Laura hid them away, like folded wings.

Love?

The old man was in the doorway. His eyes flickered shut.

Oh, Lor. I thought, maybe...

He turned slowly, and closed the door.

It's just me, Laura whispered.

She had never felt so sorry for the fact. Bruce's arms hung by his sides as though dislocated. There were two muddy lesions on his knees. He inclined his head toward the fire, forced the brittle imitation of a smile.

I reckon we'd best phone the police now love, he said gently.

Laura opened her mouth.

Do us a favour and put the kettle on? Bruce said.

He sank into a kitchen chair, wiped a hand across his face, peeled away his damp knitted hat. The way he sat hunched over, legs loosely splayed, a frightening curve to his neck where his chin fell down against his chest – it made him look boneless. There was a choking sound. Laura went to the old man and put a timid hand on his cold, weatherworn cheek. There would be no oats like milky ashes in the morning. They leaned into each other. She absorbed the night cold leaking from his clothes and skin.

#### 4.

The old man floated past the kitchen window; a dandelion seed. Inside at the table, Vik tugged the hem of her good black dress. There was a rust-coloured burn on the back: the place where Laura had left the iron on too long.

Poor darls, said the post-office lady to the mobile librarian, nodding from Vik to Laura and sighing.

Poor loves.

Mobile library gravely selected a hunk of carrot cake from one borrowed plate.

Lovely service, don't you reckon?

Strange though, without a casket.

Mobile library coughed.

I mean – Post-office smiled brightly – it certainly was *nice*.

The women were installed at their posts at Kath's kitchen table, drinking tea. To Vik it seemed they were permanent fixtures like the kettle and, like the kettle, their voices were hot and shrill with steam. Post-office dabbled the top of Vik's head with her spidery fingers, smelling of stamp glue.

It'll be *okay* ducky, won't it? Hey? Who's a good girl, then. Another slice of cakey for you sweetheart?

Vik said, Mum doesn't let us eat cake. She says what's sweet for the mouth is sour for the stomach.

The woman's eyes went all glossy and round. Vik stared into her lap, willing the woman to look away – or better yet, go home. She was miserable, and confused. The black dress was garrotting. Bruce was a cardboard cut out of himself. No amount of patting, no Boston buns or fresh-cut flowers, no number of sweet hot teas could do anything to make it better, until

Kath came back. Laura grabbed with both hands an egg and cress sandwich on the soft, white bread they weren't allowed.

She said, Mum's not here but, is she? She's *dead*.

And crammed the whole thing in her mouth.

Who knew how long it had been between that already distant moment on the hill – *the last known sighting*, the police called it – and the present? To Vik it seemed one life-long day. Everything blurred together: her continuously patted skin, the tears and endless rounds of tea. All the while, somewhere outside, rushing though and banging doors and gulping water from the tap, the old man was a spectre of sweat. He left the house every morning at sunrise clutching maps and ropes and torch. At first the cops went too, then volunteers. A man with skin like tar came in from the outskirts of town to help. He caused more whispers than Kath. His name was Donald. Vik overheard Post-office say he was a tractor. A person who finds lost things in the bush just by looking at the grass. Vik observed the way he looked up at the hills, the way the old man looked at her mother sometimes, when things were good.

She's not out there, Donald said firmly on the third day, hat in hand.

Off-duty police, volunteers formed a circle on the porch, demarcated by tobacco smoke. Donald stood in the grass beyond the pool of light cast by the house. Vik saw the whites of his eyes flash as he blinked. No one offered him a beer. The constable flapped his maps, rolled his eyes. Someone snickered. Donald turned away. Led by a stranger, Vik was hustled into bed.

The search went on. All the while Vik's hair was stroked like she was a town pet. Eventually, the search party dwindled. Vik could hear just one small, hoarse voice calling for Kath. At night, the old man fell onto his bed, floppy as peeled rabbit-skin, without pulling back the spread. His boot prints showed the route he took from door to bedroom – until one afternoon the Mayor's wife got down on hands and knees and scrubbed them

away. When Bruce's voice gave out from shouting, he found a silver whistle, the kind they used at Laura's school in sports. Vik could hear it crying shrilly in the hills, a demented, desperate bird. She tried not to be afraid, but no one told her what was happening, or what to think. Whispered on the verandah, in corners, not meant for little pitchers or big ears; the idea that the longer it went on, the less likely Bruce was to find anything *good*, whatever that meant. Vik became used to conversation rushing away from her like sheep before a dog. She was always stepping into silence, adult words smothered quickly in her wake. Eventually, someone planned a memorial service. Vik had been to a funeral once before, when Pa McKenzie died. She knew then, for certain, that they all thought Kath was dead. Vik never saw a body. In her mind, her mother was still out there, swallowed up by trees, and waiting to be found.

The afternoon of the service, Vik walked down to Posey's paddock, a roughly cleared patch of land down by the road, pulling tufts of grass up in wet handfuls on the way. Anything to escape from the zoo up at the house. She didn't care that her good shoes were getting muddy. They had been Laura's first, and pinched, just like she did. Grass crunched underfoot. Silver with rainclouds, the sky glittered, low and bright. Vik climbed the wooden slats and leaned over Posey's fence, waving the feed. She was close enough to the road to make out the patter of scattered shale as a farm dirt-bike roared past, hidden by the wedge of old trees between the paddock and the road. The grey horse, stamping her hooves in the cold, observed Vik coolly from a distance, but would not approach.

Vik called, Posey! C'mon girl.

She heard voices, and broke off; stepped down, listening.

German, yeah? That explains a few things.

They snickered. Vik didn't recognise the speaker. She could hear the percussive crunch of feet along the road; a small group were walking up to the house. The voices rose and lapped

at one another. Vik couldn't follow a conversation, if there was one. But she caught whole individual sentences, like hooking small fish from a larger, swimming shoal.

What's a Hun doing out here?

Heard she was strange. Made things out of *dirt*.

Looker, but.

Lucky prick.

Concentration camp? How'd you know?

...blames himself?

The voices receded as the people moved away. Vik was shivering. She eased up from the frosty ground, stretching the crouch from her legs. She called quietly to the horse, waving grass.

Posey?

She longed to feel the hot, muscular neck beneath her hand. The old mare looked away, chewing. The paddock was groaning with feed; she had no need of Vik.

I *hate* you.

Vik flung her offering away. Her stomach felt full of rocks. She turned back.

Posey? Posey girl? Posey? C'mon girl. I don't hate you girl. I *don't*.

The horse switched her tail, minimally. Vik began to cry ferociously then, burning her throat with salt. She dragged herself to the fringe of trees encroaching on the paddock and sat on a wet stump. Mist-rain rolled into the valley. She sobbed into the frigid dusk, growing wet, hearing the mystifying litany, *blames himself, dirt, looker*, until all she could see was a horse-shaped shadow behind a low, cold curtain of rain, and she could no longer feel her hands.

Vik woke in the night. For a split second, she was unaware of her own real life. She heard a noise and opened her eyes; sensed the warm weight of the blankets, the comfort of old



flannel sheets soft with sleep and laundry soap. Vik lay there for a beat, blissfully happy, warm and safe. But it only took a second. Then everything rushed in, winding, as it always did when she remembered. Tears leaked. She wasn't conscious of crying, only of having wet cheeks. The sound came again, something moving across the yard.

He's packing them away.

Laura was kneeling by the window. It was dark, but Vik could make out the smudge of her sister's winter gown across the room.

Vik said, Packing? Whaddoya mean?

She pushed back the covers. The floor was ice. She padded on tiptoes, feeling her way around Laura's bed. Laura shifted, holding back the drape. Vik squeezed in, shivering. She could smell Laura's long loose hair, like old flowers, and oil. It seemed alive, breathing down Laura's back. Overnight the fog had cleared and the moon was out. Laura choked the dusty curtain with one hand; the other gripped the window-ledge. Vik put her fingers up to the sill, stood on toes. Even without moonlight, they would have seen the old man's shape on the other side of the lawn. The light was on in Kath's studio. It came spilling out the door like yellow water, bathing Bruce. To one side of the door, a pile of boxes sat stacked against the wall. Inside, Kath's shelves were nearly bare. The old man put down the vase he was carrying, drew one arm across his forehead, wiping sweat. His elbow made a dark triangle against the bare, glowing square of the studio window. In the night garden everything was a geometry of shades.

The old man stumbled back into Kath's shed. Immersed in light, his face came violently into focus. Vik glanced at her sister, white knuckled, strangling the drape. It was a relief when the old man came back outside and his face was masked again by gloom. A mess of flattened cardboard boxes lay strewn across the yard. Bruce set down the pot he held. Newspaper, grey wing, flapped open. The old man wrapped the vase, shoulders shaking. Vik saw his tears in the sheen of his skin, the play of light across the slick surface of his

face. He handled the ceramic piece with care, like swaddling a child. He laid it in a box. *A job worth doing's a job worth doing right*, Bruce always said. The shriek of masking tape set Vik's teeth on edge. Her calves screamed. She strained up on toenails to see over the high windowsill. Bruce turned to take up another piece. Laura let the curtain fall across the glass.

What's he doing? Vik said. They're Mutti's things.

Go back to sleep.

Vik's toes were numb. She watched Laura grimly climbing into bed.

But, Vik said. We have to *do* something. He's taking them away.

Laura rolled over. Vik went to the edge of the bed, took two handfuls of quilt and yanked.

Laura barked, *Don't*.

She pulled the blankets back up to her chin. The word and her action felt so heavy and bleak, so final, that Vik let go of the blankets and took a step back. Everything was so much bigger than she was. Outside, another clay object was being sealed away in the dark.

## 5.

*We are sorry for your loss*, Laura's teacher Miss Gray wrote in a flimsy shop-bought card. All the students of 3B had signed their names. The card, addressed to Bruce, sat for weeks unopened on the sideboard by the door. Daily, it seemed to multiply. So many envelopes, stuffed with sympathy. Bruce could not see that part of the room. Laura watched him. His eyes slid over the place by the door where the sorry-mail piled up, as though there was pure blank space.

Laura busied herself. How quickly the hole in their lives left by Kath had filmed over. Laura plugged the hole up with her own body, and was relieved when the absence seemed diminished.

*Here y'are, Mutti*, Vik said one afternoon some months after the funeral, addressing Laura distractedly.

She came into the kitchen with a skinned rabbit held aloft by the ears. Laura gasped involuntarily, turning from the stove. She saw the realisation dawn on her sister's face, the horror. The air congealed, thick with feeling.

*Viko...*

Laura started forward, wiping her hands on her skirt. The rabbit was no longer an animal, but bloody lump of meat. It dropped with a thud to the floor. The screen door slammed.

Laura took over the making of the family's breakfast, lunch and tea. When she finally went back to school, the apricot trees were flowering though the early mornings remained winter-dim. She made sandwiches for Bruce and Vik by feel and left them on the bench so that they would have lunch to eat while she was gone. In the evenings, she ladled soup and lit the fire and arranged her face in shapes that felt pleasant and encouraging; bending herself to the task of *making things better*. And they were better – though Laura could not

articulate that belief out loud without appearing strange or cruel to the doe-eyed women in town who still stopped her now and then, petting her, clicking their tongues.

An almost imperceptible change had come over her family, Laura thought. On the surface, things were back to normal – or near enough. Better than normal, in fact, since there was no more shouting, and she felt reasonably safe. Yet somehow there seemed less for the three of them to say to one another over their dinners at night. It was as though they had been gutted, were living as empty skins. As Laura cut bread into neat triangles, standing in early morning shadow, she wished that Vik and Bruce would see and understand how much better off they all were. Underneath, it made Laura angry that they would not. And underneath that – another, deeper strata of un-mined feeling – Laura felt bone-weary. She carried, like a vein of coal, the knowledge that somehow she was responsible for her family's suffering. Neither Bruce nor Vik could quite believe in Kath's death. The old man's determination made him appear unhinged to those in town. Laura saw how people whispered together, casting their furtive looks. He still believed that he would uncover Kath, or her body; that the bush had swallowed her, but would one day spit her back. Vik hung on ferociously to hope. Whole weeks went by in which she prefaced every sentence with *when we find mum*. Yet for Laura, the further they travelled away from the night of Kath's disappearance, the more wholly she believed in her own deception: that Kath really was gone from their lives, without a trace.

The school year was well underway – more than half gone – by the time Laura went back. She had fallen behind, was told repeatedly by her teacher that it was *absolutely understandable*, and *not a problem, under the circumstances*. Laura would *catch up* and should *take things at her own pace*, Miss Gray said. The skin on the back of Laura's hand was raw with kind strokes. The hills behind their house were coloured mauve by her distance from the school. They looked from Laura's desk like they were made of purple smoke.

*I wonder if he's out there right now?* Laura thought.

She understood in her gut but would not say out loud the idea that Kath's service had been more for her and Vik, for the town, than it was to provide Bruce with an ending. If anything, the service gave him a cover: the opportunity to continue searching without anyone keeping watch.

So what does x equal?

Miss Gray looked out over the class, wide eyed with encouragement. The Aborigine Louis had his hand up, again. Laura knew his Dad a bit from the search, but she never spoke to the boy. She didn't care that he was poor, or black. But his Dad had told everyone Kath was gone; they were the only people in town who knew the truth. Sometimes Laura caught Louis looking at her. Then she made sure to pummel him harder in the playground than the others did. That he might learn his lesson quickly, and keep his trap shut.

Anyone? Miss Gray said brightly. Laura?

Laura took the pencil from her mouth. Louis was half out of his chair, straining with arm waving in the air. Miss Gray cleared her throat.

The x, Laura? Any ideas?

Laura looked at the board. The numbers were meaningless, just a pattern of shapes. She shrugged, blushing. The hangnail on her index finger came off in one piece. A bead of blood bloomed, burst and flooded the nail.

Dunno, she said.

Miss Gray didn't get angry, as Laura expected – even hoped – that she might. Instead, the teacher smiled. It was a sad, patient, tender smile. Encouraging. Like there were things beyond Laura's comprehension now, that one day, if she were lucky, she would finally understand. Ms Gray turned to Louis.

Can you help Laura out, Louis? she said.

Thirty! Louis grinned. X is thirty, Miss.

In the back row, someone said *suck up*. Someone snickered. Ms Gray's smile shifted. It was a smile reserved for Louis. Laura realised she was proud.

After she got home from school, Laura took Vik to the end of the drive, through the gate, down to Carthorse Road to collect the mail. It had always been her job. The road ran along the front of the farm and divided their land from Peterson's. Cows gazed at Vik and Laura over Peterson's top-notch electric fence. *Cost an arm and a leg, that fence*, Bruce used to say each time they went along the road, but now no longer did. At the end of their drive, Laura and Vik turned left into Carthorse, and walked along the shoulder in high, sweet Spring grass, even though Bruce said they should avoid it, because of snakes. Blackie chased magpies, or sticks. Sometimes his own tail. In the gravel between the grass and the road were proper dead things. Snakes, or birds. Kangaroos. Laura held her breath as they passed the flyblown bodies. Eventually, the carcass would wear away, under pressure from the weather and the flies. Each afternoon when they went to get the mail, a little more decay. Sometimes, they passed the dislocated, headless body of a snake, killed by Bruce for being up too close to the house, the limp carcass draped over the flabby wire of their boundary fence.

*Why do you put them on the wire when you kill them?* Laura had asked the old man, once.

He shrugged.

*Sends a message*, he said.

At the intersection of Carthorse and Kyree Heights was the row of letterboxes: one for each nearby property. Laura allowed Vik to stretch up and pull the letters from the rusty old tin that was their box. It seemed to bring the little girl some kind of happiness, to be the one to do it. Kyree Heights Road rolled away, flatly, in both directions. What gave the road its name was unclear; the hills lay in a semi-circle up beyond the house, and there was nothing

at all high about the flat, green valley the road traversed. While Vik was busy with the letterbox, Laura would stand, shading her eyes, looking up and down the road. It was quiet. The valley was just rippling grass, wisps of cloud, the sound of wind flowing uninterrupted across the land. Her ritual was to look back down the length of the road, hand at eye. In the distance, the dirt shimmered, blurring, eventually narrowing to a point where it disappeared into the horizon altogether. There was something naked about the straight, bare, brown road, and the valley, in comparison to the mess of trees around their house. Once, Laura thought she saw someone coming towards them, a tiny speck. She choked on her breath; almost called out, ducked. For a split-second it was all over, and she felt relief and fear and giddiness that it was, such a strong surge of emotion that she squatted down in the gravel on her heels, overcome. But it was nothing, she quickly realized, straining to see. There was no one there. It was just a trick of the land, and of light.

It was Friday afternoon and Laura's first week back at school was over. Her bag, dropped on the bedroom floor, was swollen with homework; the things she had missed.

That you, Lor? the old man called, hearing the school bus rumbling away down Carthorse.

He stood at the back door, calling down the hall so that he wouldn't have to remove his boots.

Lor? Got some seedlings here – veggies and that to put in if you've got a tick. Mr Burton down in town gave 'em to me for that chook shed I did for him.

Laura padded through the house in her uniform. She intended to mention the work she had from school, how the dinner still needed to be picked and cooked, the chooks locked up, the fires laid. But when she came to the screen and looked out, she found the old man sitting, hunched on the back step. He looked up at her as she came to the door, face dappled in the shadow of the big Red gum by the line. Laura was struck by his expression. His hands were clasped over knees to minimise their shake. His eyes were watery and wide. The expression

he wore was that of a man who has just woken up from dream, or a coma, and does not know where he is. He seemed bewildered to find himself seated. His posture, splayed and unsteady.

Dad?

He gestured feebly in her direction, eyes downcast. She looked where he pointed; he stared up into the branches of the tree, swallowing noisily. Propped by the doormat were Kath's old gumboots, like disembodied feet. The old man crossed his arms over his chest.

I'll just get changed, Laura said evenly, going back into the house.

She did the planting as quickly as she could. It was getting dark by the time she took Vik down to collect the mail, the little girl chattering the whole way there and back, starved for speech. All Laura wanted was quiet. The road was, as usual, absent of life; just a long strip of featureless dirt, softened by the gauze-light of dusk. Back at the house, Vik deposited the letters on the sideboard, adding them to a teetering pile. But there was too much unread mail. The pile fell, a waterfall of coloured paper. The envelopes scattered like dropped leaves across the floor. Laura sighed and brought her hands to her hips.

Vik! Look what you did!

She knelt on the gritty boards, huffing.

Turn the bloody light on would you? Help me get these up at least, come on.

Vik scowled and stuck out her lower lip, but Laura didn't notice, she was looking about her at the cards. The scope of what had happened had suddenly come into focus in a freshly painful way. Laura sensed that until now, she had observed the event of Kath's disappearance through a magnifying glass, each twitch of pain, each microscopic detail of their tragedy, seen and felt in graphic, intolerable intimacy, right up close. Seeing the cards spread out on the floor, Laura felt she was all of a sudden looking at the event through a telescope; seeing and fully understanding how wide-ranging it was, had become. Not contained within their little family at all, but known and understood by a vast array of



people in all kinds of places, even Melbourne. What had happened to them, she saw, had somehow gotten loose in the world. It was bigger than their house or their land. It was real.

Laura put her hand on the nearest envelope, pale pearly pink, addressed to their old man. She hesitated. Vik knelt down beside her, each girl on hands and knees. They were sitting on an island of light; the extremities of the room ran with currents of shadow. Fanned out, envelopes of understanding and best wishes lay where they fell, in brightly coloured pools. Laura watched Vik pick up a small green envelope, not much bigger than her hand. She turned it over, then back. They looked at one another.

Better tidy up, Laura said.

She didn't move. Vik nodded. She shifted on the bones in her knees. Laura held the envelope in front of her face. She crossed her legs, settling. Vik put a nail beneath the green flap.

We better pick these up and put them away, she said. Don't you think Lor?

Yeah.

Dad told me to say that Posey needs a good brush and fresh water.

I know.

Laura put down the card she was holding and picked up an envelope of paper so creamy and thick it might have been cloth.

She said, You collected kindling today? Just big logs in the shed.

Vik shook her head. Laura flipped the envelope over, read the return address on the back. There was a slight tear in the seam. She worked her finger into the tiny hole.

Vik, I wish you'd listen when I say there's jobs to do, you know? I have to do everything round here, least you could do is help. Alright?

Vik was staring at the envelope in Laura's hands. She nodded mutely, eyes round.

We'd better clean these up, Laura said briskly.

She could see her own face, distorted in the blue sphere of Vik's iris. She watched herself tear the envelope open. Vik giggled. The sound was close to tears.

They began to open, unseal. They let the cards spill out. With pictures of doves and flowers and green landscapes – not like the real world, Laura thought, but like the gardens in books. Vik lined the cards up on the floor in front of her. *Who's this one from?* she asked, continually. *Who wrote this?* Laura took each one Vik proffered, tracing the name, spelling out. Some of them were hard to read, the letters curled around one another, or else looped back. Sometimes the words looked scratchy. In others, the messages read like tangled balls of string. When Laura couldn't read the messages, she made them up. Sometimes she made up the ones she could.

It says: Kath was *mean*.

Vik's face went the colour of wool. Laura's chest tightened.

I mean – sorry, I made a mistake – see here? This word? That says *nice*. The whole card says: *we always thought your mum Kath was a real nice lady, yeah nice lady is what it says. She was also a good mum and always made nice things for dinner, the end.*

Vik smiled. She selected another card from the pile. On the front were two red-breasted robins.

Look at these funny birds, Vik said. What does this one say about her?

It says that she loved everyone in the family heaps. Especially you.

She loved you a bit too, Vik said indulgently.

Laura put the robin card next to the one from Miss Gray. Vik had liked that one a lot, had made Laura read it twice.

I *like* school, Vik said suddenly.

Idiot, Laura said, scoffing. You don't even know what it's like. If you did you'd hate it. You'll see, when you're as old as me.

Vik shrugged. She picked up Miss Gray's card.

*Sorry for your loss*, she said, repeating Laura's reported message – it was real, this note, exactly what Miss Gray had written down.

She *is* lost, isn't she? A lost thing. But we might find her again, right Lor? People find lost things again Lor, don't they? They do, don't they?

Laura found herself ripping a silver envelope to shreds. She stilled her hands.

Maybe, she said, brushing flakes of paper to the floor.

Actually, I don't know – Laura's fingers worked faster – I don't think they do.

Vik recoiled. She turned her body away. Laura felt the need to lie down. She looked out through the kitchen window, soothing her eyes on the sleet-coloured sky; it looked like rain. There was washing on the line.

Do another one, Vik said quietly.

Laura thought that she might scream. But she scabbled dutifully around in the mess of cards, and plucked one out: a peach envelope, gold rose embossed on the back. She tore it open.

It says –

Laura pretended to read the illegible, cursive script, furrowing her brow and looking stern.

It says: *Dear Bruce, Viktoria, Laura, Blackie and Posey, We're sorry that Kath is gone* – Laura leaned heavily on the word – *how sad for you.*

She glanced at Vik over the top of the card. The slope of Vik's shoulders, the way her finger was twisting in her hair – Vik was just a baby. Laura sighed, clenching her jaw. She went on, quickly, running the words together.

*Kath was a very nice lady. Real nice. She loved Laura and Viktoria very much. That's all. From Mr and Mrs Peterson and the cows.*

Laura slapped the card to the floor. Crossed her arms, holding onto her own elbows. Vik was leaning in, smiling behind her thumb. The old man said thumb sucking led to buck teeth, but Vik didn't seem to care. Her face was rosy now. She had gained that milk-fed look about her skin, so rare of late. Her eyes were drooping with contentment. Laura felt she were hauling her sister up from the bottom of a well, hand over hand.

More, Vik said.

Nah, that's enough.

Laura began to shuffle the cards together.

*Lor – the thumb came out – please do another one, please. Please.*

The anxiety in Vik's voice was unnerving. Her face was growing red. She had learned a few things from Kath, Laura saw, observing her sister's mottled cheeks, the constricted throat. Laura found an envelope by feel and ripped it open.

Read it.

Vik's voice was high and tight.

Hold your horses, Laura said.

She tore the envelope away. Inside, not a card, but a piece of paper. Laura looked down, and was almost sick.

What? Vik said.

She was poised for wailing, but something in Laura's face made her pause. Laura was struggling to draw breath. Vik levered up to hands and knees, crawled over. Her thumb left a string of damp ovals on the floor. Laura struggled to focus on Kath's words. Though Bruce had never once looked at the cards, he might have. The postmark revealed it had been there a month. So many variables; Laura felt each one, a little shard of glass. It wasn't

over, she realised suddenly. The first letter was just that, the first. It would go on forever. Laura brought a hand to throat.

It's nothing, she rasped.

Vik's breath on her cheek, like fever.

Laura said, *Get off*, will you? It's just a *bill*, okay?

There had been plenty of bills lately. *Bleedin' me dry*, Bruce said, when Laura pinned them to the fridge. Laura's palm connected with Vik's shoulder; it felt good to shove. Vik fell back, loosely splayed. She gasped. Laura crumpled the note. She scrunched it into the heart of a torn envelope, the way she might wrap newspaper around something rotten before chucking it in the bin. She raked the scattered cards towards her with both hands. Leaves of misery.

Laura said, Don't just sit there. You gonna help me clean up, or what?

She tried to make her voice sound adult. Kath's note was a blood-blister that Vik was pressing down to burst.

Laura said, Stop being *so lazy* and *help* me.

Vik struck out with one bare foot, leaning back on her palms to get leverage.

Pig, she hissed.

Her voice was strangled by rage. The foot connected with Laura's waist. Laura turned, engulfed by the flood and rush of blood in her veins. She grabbed the small white foot and screwed her nails in.

*I hate* you, she said.

Vik screamed, flailing, and tried to shake Laura off. She grabbed Laura's hair, unearthing by the roots. The pain was unbearable. Laura's long brown neck, exposed. Her hands fluttered around her head, tears rolled. She mouthed silent words. Lashing out, Laura's fist connected with Vik's face. Immediately, Laura's scalp stopped throbbing. She rubbed the crown of her head. A purple welt was forming near Vik's eye. Vik didn't blink. She

touched her face gingerly, impersonally, like it belonged to someone else. Laura licked her lip. There was a beat of silence in the room.

Laura said, Vik?

Vik drew her knees up to her chest and plugged in her thumb. Laura tried to stroke her sister's back, but the little girl flinched. The note was balled up, in amongst the rubbish. They would burn it all Laura decided. Just in case.

It had started to spit. Grey clouds hung over the valley like smoke. Laura felt the dampness rising up through the floor of the house. There was an idea at the back of her mind: that she could just walk out, and keep on walking. But then, the mail would keep coming, five days a week. She sensed – even as she shrugged the thought away – that she had entered into some kind of contract, without ever meaning to. It was growing dim. Having made a cradle of herself, Vik rocked back and forth. Laura sighed. She shuffled closer to her sister and put an arm around the bony shoulders. Vik allowed it.

I'm sorry okay, Viko?

Laura swallowed.

I didn't mean it, alright?

Vik hesitated, scowled, then leaned into Laura's side, snuffling. They stayed like that for a while, listening to the soft snare of rain on roof. Laura felt she was holding Vik's head above the surface of the dam. Felt for the first time something difficult to put into words. It was just a feeling, there in the way Vik allowed Laura's hand to draw warm circles on her back as though doing her a favour. That eventually, Vik might learn to swim on her own, and in doing so, cause Laura to drown.

Gonna have a nasty bruise there, Laura said, squeezing the small, familiar body. She kissed her sister's cheek.

's okay, Vik said kindly, accepting the kiss.

Least then we'll be the same!

## 6.

Vik took the old man's hands. Bruce hauled her up over the gutter, set her down on the roof. The tin was corrugated, like desert sand shaped by wind. Bruce stepped from ridge to ridge, working across the verandah to the downpipe at one lip. Vik held the old man's sandpaper palm and tried to keep up.

Step on the ridges, right love? Strongest part of the roof, see? the old man was saying. Vik imagined falling through, landing seated in a kitchen chair. They came to the edge of the roof, stopped. The old man let go Vik's hand. She looked out at the crisp, khaki view. Wisps of mist clung to the trees, draped over boughs. Dissecting the valley, the twist of dirt drive wound down towards the road, where the battered school bus – just a fleck of colour – moved off, trailing a dust tail. In the paddock, Posey was a white stitch in grassy fabric. Vik could faintly hear the clucking of the chooks. Half way up the hill, in the cleft between slopes, she observed amber dam water glittering between trees. Bruce was staring hard at the landscape, as though calculating a sum. Staring at the place in the distance, felt rather than known, where Kath had gone in, and disappeared.

Dad?

His arms dangled by his sides.

Daddy?

Vik worked her hand into the loose curl of fingers. The old man leaned forward, tasting the breeze. Like a rabbit sniffing air. His fingers tightened around her palm, a reflex. He had forgotten she was there.

From high up on the roof, Vik noticed for the first time how the garden had sprouted in new ways. Kath's lawn was long dead, a memory. Native grasses had crept in through the shabby palings that separated the bush from the yard; it was harder to tell now which was which. Vik sensed that it was only a matter of time before their house itself was engulfed. These things happened, she knew. All around Kyree, there were abandoned, crumbling



homes, identifiable in the scattered bluestone blocks and roughly traceable foundations strewn about by the periscope of chimney, the last thing to fall down, blindly peering up through uncut camel-coloured grass. These were the domestic bones of long dead families, picked over by time. One such wreck lay partially hidden by regrowth, in a corner of Posey's paddock. Fewer trees grew there now, the old man said, because whoever had built the house all those years ago – a miner, a convict – had cleared enough of the nearby gums. All that was left of the home was one jagged wall. A black wattle was growing from the place where the hearth used to be. A few wet winters, and the whole place would be covered over, submerged by new growth.

*Long gone, them,* Bruce had said, once. *When the going gets tough...*

*What?* Vik had said.

But the old man had just laughed.

The ruins said something to Vik that she could not express, could only vaguely sense before it rolled away, a bead of water, when she tried to grasp it with both hands. The ruins told her that nothing was enduring, that solid-seeming things sometimes fell down and were swallowed by the earth, piece by piece. But at the same time – and this was the uncanny thing, an idea that rendered time a concertina, her own life an inconsequential part of something yawningly huge and continuously unfolding – the ruins indicated that there were layers. One time grew upon the other like a scab on a wound. When the wound healed over, there remained an earthen scar. Visible if one knew how and where to look.

On the roof, Bruce seemed then to shake himself awake. He glanced down at Vik with an expression that was part surprise, part something Vik couldn't name. He swallowed, gazed uncomprehending at the knot of hands between them, her small white fingers entangled with his, big-knuckled and brown. He smiled cautiously, and for a second, some outer layer of his face, a mask that had long been deforming his features, cracked away. Vik caught a

glimpse of her real father, before his smile leached and the haunted weariness fell back down around his eyes. Bruce eased himself down onto his stomach. He had to reach out over the precipice of the verandah to clean the leaves out of the gutters; an important job he said, so that rain would run cleanly down the pipes into their tank. Vik squatted down and let the spring-cool breeze bring up the sugared scent of growing things.

Ah, bugger, the old man said, clicking his tongue with displeasure.

He strained forward over the rim of the roof. Vik twisted her hands together. The way he leaned over. Her mouth was dry.

Bugger it.

Vik gripped Bruce's leg, feeling the hard ball of muscle in his calf, tensed through his jeans. She rocked on the balls of her feet, peering.

What, Dad? What's there?

He shifted back, wriggling, and levered up. The layers of wool beneath his coveralls made a barrel of his chest.

It's birds, love. In the eaves.

The old man sucked his bottom lip. He brought his hands to his hips, squinting. Vik waited. Down on the ground, Blackie lay in a pool of cold sunlight, looking up.

They climbed down. On the ground, Vik trailed behind the old man as he hefted the homemade ladder around to the other side of the house, carefully positioning it to lean up against the roof. He bore down on it, rocking, testing weight.

See that? Bruce said.

Vik fought the sky, its blinding glare forcing her lids together. Squinting, she followed the line of the old man's finger. She saw it then, below the guttering: a nest, made of clay and grass and shaped like a bottle, a small hole at one end – the door. She tuned in to the faint sound of cheeping, like mouse-squeak, and was surprised she hadn't noticed it before.

Swallows, the old man said. Can tell by the nest, 'cause its made of cl-  
He coughed.

Made of *mud*.

He put the pad of his thumb to his mouth, wiping.

Like to build under eaves, swallows. On something vertical, like a wall and that.  
The old man put one scuffed boot on the lowest rung of the ladder, leaned down and picked her up. She could feel the vibration of his biceps straining through his hands. He waited until she was secure on the ladder, before stepping up himself.

They climbed. Vik felt the old man's heat at her back. Their hands moved in synchronicity on the wood. The spaces between rungs showed their distance from the ground. The old man moved more quickly. Vik felt him pause between each step to stay in time with her ascent. Eventually, she came face to face with the clay-bottle nest. Close enough to catch the sharp animal musk, to notice soft brown feathers, worked into the nest's design. The nest itself was made up of tiny balls of clay. Each one a beakful. The old man stood with his chin at her shoulder. She braced herself against his chest.

Why is it a bugger, Dad? About the birds?

The chirps were louder now, and betrayed slight variations in pitch. There was more than one bird inside the nest.

Vik thought, *So birds have their own voices too.*

Swallows come back, the old man said.

Vik's nails were white on the rung.

Year after year, they'll just keep returning.

Vik wanted to hold her breath; that they might just remain talking, back against front.

Problem is, birds don't come back if they smell people. It's a safety thing, I guess.

Vik was only half listening. She traced the thick thread of veins running just below the surface of the old man's hand.

It wouldn't have mattered you see. Except for now I've gone and put my smell up there. Accident of course, but the mother bird will sense it. She might not come back once she gets a whiff of me.

Vik's knees turned rubber. She had to hook her arm around the rung, and hug it in.

We should get down, she said. Dad, we've got to get down.

But the old man's body blocked the way.

No point worrying now, love, he said gently, touching her hair. Was when we was up on the roof. Damage done.

Vik swallowed. Bruce spoke carefully, in a low voice.

If we leave these birds here, chances are the mother'll abandon them. She might not, but there's a risk.

Vik heard the scratch of hand at chin in beard.

'Course, swallows aren't native, the old man said more brightly. No point worrying ourselves too much, I suppose.

That night, Vik lay in the dark listening to the cheep of four blind swallow-chicks. They looked like pink plucked chickens, in miniature. Their skin so thin and translucent she could just about make out the shape of their hearts through their chests. Vik had carefully put together the straw-lined shoebox in which they now floundered, beaks upturned, gaping. The old man said to feed them breadcrumbs soaked in milk. But no matter how much soggy bread Vik dropped into their open mouths, it never seemed to be enough.

Vik called across the darkened room.

Are you awake?

No.

But, Lor, what was that song Mutti used to sing us?

Vik hummed the first few lines.

I'm tired Vik.

Vik tried to keep the panic from her voice.

Laura snapped, *Leave it, alright? God. You're so annoying.*

She spoke thickly, breathing through her mouth. Vik put a hand to the corner of her pillow, squeezing. The birds cried out.

Are you, are you *crying* Lor? What's wrong?

Shut up. I said leave it, okay?

Laura rolled away in the dark.

Like a prayer, Vik said silently the things that she remembered clearly about her mother, and knew for certain were fact: *Europe. Pottery. Blonde. Europe. Pottery. Blonde.* The mantra served to firm only those words in her mind.

She was beautiful Lor, wasn't she? She was beautiful, wasn't she Lor? Wouldn't you say?

Laura tossed like a fish in her bed.

She said, Those birds are driving me *crazy*.

I'm looking after them. But listen, Lor. What was that song Mum used to sing?

I'm *asleep*, I said, Laura hissed. Alright? Anyway, you remember everything *wrong*.

Vik scrunched up her eyes, curled up around herself. The birds rustled in their box. Their eyes were yet sealed closed. They had no way of knowing where they were, Vik realised, hoping that they believed themselves to be at home. Vik tried hard to conjure her mother's face, to see Kath standing in the room. But all she could see was the outline of a woman.

And the harder Vik tried to bring Kath's features into focus, the darker became the shadows obscuring her mother's face.

## 7.

The old man finally pushed back his chair. He glanced from one girl to the other, fingering again the sheaf of papers by his egg-smearred plate. The sweet scent of wattle-blossom flowed in through fly screen. Outside, the hills were lavishly embroidered with yellow and white flowers. Laura felt the sun warm her hair through the window. She watched Vik move a piece of bacon fat around her plate. It was quiet in the room; the hands of the kitchen clock audibly ticked. They were waiting, but knew better than to ask.

Listen, girls.

Bruce rubbed palms along his sinewed thighs, having trouble going on. Laura met Vik's gaze. Vik frowned, glancing over at the old man's searching things, the jumbled tools piled by the front door, the thick ropes and knives. Not used in months, but not yet put away.

Laura said kindly, Another cuppa Dad?

He waved her away. A pair of waders, wadded in a ball, stiff with mud, lay discarded on the floor. The three of them, barely drawing breath. Whatever it was, Laura understood it was important. She could see as much in the earnest blush in Bruce's cheeks, in the way his mouth formed words, practicing, before he said them out loud. Vik sucked voraciously on her own hand.

You'll bloody bite it off in a second, Laura snapped.

Scowling, Vik removed her fingers from her mouth. A ribbon of spit unfurled between lip and hand, then broke. Laura turned impatiently to Bruce, forcing a wide smile.

Come here, Lor, he said gently.

He patted his knee. Laura slipped the noose off Kath's apron over her head. She went to Bruce. He drew her in and kissed her below the jaw. She laughed, breathing the warm dirt scent of him, soaked into the thread of his clothes.

Bruce said, You're a good girl, Lor. Know that? You too Viko. Come and give your old man a hug, there's a good girl.

He pulled Vik onto his lap. She plugged her mouth with her thumb. Laura drew an arm around the old man's shoulder, clasping his soft, wrinkled nape. Below the collar, his brown and freckled neck was divided from a blue-white torso, as though his head and body belonged to two different men. In the line between the dark and light were decades of outdoor summers, mapped.

Girls, Bruce began.

He squeezed each of them in turn.

We've got to get on I reckon. It's time now.

He spoke so carefully, sadly, quietly. The way he spoke to the horse when she was spooked.

Listen, been doing some thinking. Been talking to some of the blokes from town.

Laura stiffened in surprise. Bruce went on.

Price of wool's up. And we get plenty of rain here, see. Everyone wants a piece of the place they tell me, now things are looking up. I reckon there's money to be made. I've decided. I'm not going back to the factory.

He gestured to the papers on the table.

Have a look at this, will you.

Laura and Vik both lunged; Laura got there first.

It's our place, she said, turning the hand-drawn map around so that it faced her.

Yep. Good one.

Let me look, Vik whined.

Here's the thing. All this – Bruce leaned over Laura's shoulder, pointing at the vast expanse of crayon green – all this is just wild scrub. This here – he moved his finger across the few red squares blotting green – this is the clear land we have now.

Posey's paddock, Vik said.



She was staring hard at the map.

Yep. And the areas up the hill I got the men to clear.

Laura saw with a shock how small they were; how little all those men in all those days had done. She touched the pinprick of black ink, which was their house. Bruce was leaning forward excitedly now. He surveyed the map as though looking at a living view.

He said, So here's what. All this green here, it's all got to go.

Go? Laura said, swallowing.

Exactly. Been the plan all along, 'course. We just gotta make it happen; now's our chance. We're gonna clear it. Two hundred acres. Get the men back in to help us.

We're gonna clear the lot.

Bruce sat contentedly back. Vik leaned forward. Laura traced the line of tension down her sister's back.

Bruce said, You know what we'll have then?

Laura shook her head.

We can find mum, Vik broke in.

She wriggled around to meet the old man's eye.

Uh, Bruce whispered.

His eyes rolled.

We can't find her in the trees, can we Dad? Now we can't. But if we cut them down...

Bruce brought a hand to his temple. It hovered there; he dropped it.

...we'll find her then, won't we Dad? We'll have to then, won't we? If we cut them?

One by one? We'll find her easily then. Right Dad? We'll find her. By cutting down the trees?

The old man was sweating. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling. He blinked. It wasn't so much that the blood drained away from his face. It was as if white paint was injected in below the skin. Bruce bit his lip. Laura felt like hitting something.

She hissed, You're so...so bloody *immature*.

A fleck of spit hit Vik's cheek below the eye. She froze.

It's not *for* her, Laura finished. Okay Vik?

Bruce briefly closed his eyes. Vik's face avalanched, crumbling down.

I *hate* you, she screamed. I hate you I hate you I hate you.

She was on the floor, on hands and knees, under the table and out the other side before the old man even flinched. Laura felt cold. The bedroom door slammed, making the walls shiver. The kitchen clock gently rocked. Laura forced herself to laugh; it was too loud but thin, a substance weak as tin. Bruce was staring down the hall, skin like bone. Laura laughed again, inviting. The sound drowned in the gulf between them. Laura swallowed.

Don't worry alright, Dad. Please?

The longer she stared at the old man's painful face, the more acutely she felt it: panic.

Dad?

He turned toward her slowly, a weathervane moving in wind. Something was gone from behind his eyes, ripped away. Laura made her mouth wide. If she could just get her face to be happy, if it could just fill up the room, she thought that she could save them from whatever happened next. She smiled, smiled, smiled; like staring down the barrel of a gun. Searching, she glanced around...for what? The old man's map was on the table, she took it up, smoothed it out.

So, Dad?

Her voice was bright. They were starting anew. She tapped the map enthusiastically with the flat of her hand. Underneath, among the other papers, she caught sight of a more official-looking title, a printed survey for a property she didn't recognise. It wasn't their

farm. The papers looked old, but were annotated in the old man's hand. *Cairnlea*, he had scrawled in the margin. *12 paddocks, 2 shearing sheds*.

Laura said, What were you saying again Dad? What's our plan?

Her cheeks ached. The old man stared blankly at his drawing. He cleared his throat.

Sheep farm.

Laura smiled and smiled.

She said, That's great!

## 8.

After the school bus had come and gone taking Laura with it, Vik hung over the verandah rail, listless with boredom, enduring the interminable slowness of adults doing jobs. She watched Bruce and Donald unchain an old truck from the back of Trent Skinner's ute. Neither man spoke while they worked. Skinner stood by, rocking back and forth on his heels.

Waddaya reckon girlie? Skinner called to Vik.

Covered in eczema, Skinner's hands looked long dead. He squinted into the shade of the house. His posture, the ramrod spine and widely bowed legs, made him look like he was sitting on a horse when he wasn't. He spat. A cigarette dangled from fingers that were stained the colour of urine where they weren't flaking, raw and pink.

Good truck or what? he said.

He patted the piebald bonnet twice, smiling, the inside of his mouth like mud. Vik nodded uncertainly. Skinner seemed to find this funny and cackled, a damp throaty laugh soon smothered by gasps. Vik watched the grey tongue, vibrating dankly. His face darkened to plum; his eyes bulged. Finally, he gagged, hocked and spat a glob of mustard jelly. Grinning, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Bit've harmless lung-butter there, he observed, lighting a fresh cigarette from the butt. Donald went about, neatly rolling up the chain that had connected the two trucks.

Make sure and wind it nice and tight there, Skinner instructed.

He slouched, inhaling deeply, eyes roaming around the yard. One hill was balding, a patch the shape of Australia shorn of trees. Behind the house was a big pile of wood, just starting to dry out.

Well, Bruce said. Thanks again mate.

He thrust a hand at Skinner's chest. They shook. Bruce pulled an envelope from his pocket. Donald hung back. He was not openly watching; his eyes were on the trees.

'S all there, Bruce said to Skinner. What we agreed.

No wukkas.

Vik heard the throaty screech of cockatoo passing overhead. Donald turned his eyes up to watch. Skinner worked a finger through a hole in his beanie, scratched his scalp, asked the old man if there was anything else he could have Donald do.

Nah mate, thanks. We'll manage, won't we love.

The old man smiled at Vik. She came down off the porch.

Can you teach me some of them tractor skills? Vik said to Donald.

She felt the shift in tone between the men, a current sent through air. Skinner snorted. The old man laid a heavy hand along her back. Almost imperceptibly, Donald winked.

Vik watched Skinner's ute fly back down the drive. He took the corners fast. Crouched in the tray, Donald rode the speeding ute as though sailing in rough water.

Come on then, the old man said wearily, turning away.

He went around the tray to the driver's door and peeled it back; it whined. Bruce's palm came away scabbed with rust. In the distance, the fading burr of Skinner's engine, echoed across the valley, between hills. Suddenly, the old man gave a flash flood of a smile.

Whaddoya reckon, love? I'll steer, you push?

A lifetime later it was lunch, and then they went back to bleeding the brakes. Vik resumed her place in the cab, working the pedal up and down. Hard to know how long they had been at it; how long before they would be done. She gritted her teeth. She worked. She waited. She watched flecks of golden dust circulate in streams of light, pouring in through the holes in the shed's walls where the bolts had fallen out, like water streaming into a punctured rubber boat. Whatever the old man was doing, it was mysterious. Time dragged, wearing down. The clink of tool on metal; the clunk of a spanner dropping to the concrete floor. Vik

heard the old man grunt, the scuffling of his heels as he worked himself in deeper on his back beneath the truck. Vik yawned. Years later, as a woman, she would look back on her days as a little girl with the old man; that time after Kath died, but before school. She would remember them as a long held breath.

Is it fixed yet? Vic ventured.

She had watched a beam of light work its way across the floor, seen shadows lengthen and distort. She leaned out of the window and looked over the side of the winched truck. The old man's ankles were white as paper. Long black hairs curled above his socks. He lay on a scrap of old carpet, his voice came up muffled through the body of the car.

Dad?

Nearly.

But Vik was no longer listening. She was scrambling on the seat, turning feverishly to look out of the truck's rear window. Though the idea was not yet fully formed, she got that feeling – when nausea turns to the certainty of spew. Outside, it came again, the distinctive clop of hooves, on grass. It was not the casual syncopation of a free animal, the gait of a horse gotten loose from its pen. Vik could tell. It was the clipped pace of a horse urged on from above by the sharp jab of heel in rib. She scrabbled with the handle of the door. The old man shimmied on the carpet, trying to work his way out.

Viko, wait, he called. Hang on, love. Just a tick.

Tools clattered to the floor, hailing down. Vik slipped down from the cab. It was a drop. She landed on the old man's shin.

Shoot! he said.

Vik kept going. Behind her, the door of the truck groaned back into place. It sealed close with a thud, then a click.

Outside, Vik made out the sight of her old horse being ridden away, against the glare. She knew the shape and sway of Posey's rump, the stutter in her gait, the ghost of an old knee injury. *Make her pick her feet up*, the old man always said. *She's walking like a donkey, Viko. She's takin' you for a ride.* But Vik didn't like to dig her heels in, the way Bruce said she should. Posey proceeded down the drive, ears rotating against flies. For a second, Vik thought that it was Laura on the horse. But the rider was too thin and had bare feet.

Posey! Posey girl!

The horse didn't flinch, kept walking. Was she deaf? Vik drew a fist across her face, smearing snot. Vik's world had broken down to strobes of colour, and lurching blurts of sound: the glossy caramel of the rider's bare legs; hot snort of horse breath; a whiney. A brilliant wedge of sun came streaming down between clouds. It fell, a spotlight, squarely across the drive. The rider and the horse rode through it.

Stop! Vik called.

The rider turned on the horse's bare back. They locked eyes, Vik and Donald's son Louis. There was something in Louis's face. He smiled, sad and apologetic. He raised a hand in a greeting even as the horse walked him away. There was something in his posture, his eyes, which showed discomfort. He was hurting her, but was being made. In that moment Vik understood for the very first time the range of lives that might be led in the world. The understanding manifested there in front of her: Louis riding Posey off their land.

Louis, Vik howled. *Wait!*

She threw herself along the drive, stumbling. Rain had worn rivulets in the dirt to trip her up. Vik felt the bush of air on the back of her coat, the old man swiping for her shoulder and missing. Gravel crunched. He caught her; held her arm above the elbow like a cuff.

*Get off*, she cried.

Vik struck out. Spit flew. Bruce loomed down, fingers firm. The bib of his coveralls was splattered with engine oil. Vik looked after Louis and the horse, growing smaller all the while. She tried to drag the deadweight of the old man along the drive. He stood firm. A

sound tore out of her. She strained for the horse but the horse kept walking, rhythmically bobbing its head, as if nothing was going on. Vik's shoulder burned. The weight of her body, pitched against the weight of the old man's. Louis glanced back, watching.

S'alright son, Bruce said. You're right.

Louis clicked his tongue.

Gee up, he said.

His heels went into Posey's flesh.

Vik felt punched, and gasped for breath. The old man squatted down; they were the same height. He worked his arms around her, pulling her in hand over hand, like reeling in a fish.

It's o-kay, he whispered in the lilting voice he used to get the bridle on the horse.

It's al-right. There's a good girl Viko. It's o-kay. It's al-right.

He stroked her hair. She surrendered to his chest. His lips whispered her hairline. They swayed together, rocking.

Where's he taking her? Vik sobbed.

The words came out all mangled. The old man smiled sadly, and kept on rocking. He looked out over their place. Took in the house, the shed, the trees, the huge teal sky. A muscle tightened in his jaw. He sighed.

How else we gonna get ourselves a truck?



## 9.

Up on the hill above the dam, Bruce leaned into the tray of the truck and hefted the huge spool of fencing wire onto its side. He squinted, appraising the lie of the land. Laura eyed the huge pile of arsenic-dipped posts in the tray, too-big worker's gloves dangling from skinny wrists. Her fingers pressed the void of the old man's hand-span. The gloves smelled of engine oil and soil. They made her clumsy, though they were almost second skin. Already, they fit better than they had at the beginning. The earth around the house was mercifully bare of trees at last. Laura's arms, like rammed earth from lugging logs. She had enjoyed some parts of the clearing, as the farm in Bruce's head began to grow in place of the bush. Chopping down, uprooting: it made the place look clean. She liked the smokos, the way the blokes leaned up against the fallen trunks, or squatted on their haunches like rabbits, sipping thermos tea and telling jokes. Laura laughed when the men did, though she couldn't understand what they said.

At night, she sat slumped at the kitchen table with the old man and Vik. They were each too tired to talk, barely lifting their forks, muffled by ever-present sadness. But during the day, the old man's workers kept silence at bay with their rapid-fire banter, liquid and rolling. As they cleared each acre, Laura sensed the land growing quiet. There were fewer birds, and then none. The cockies passed overhead and kept going, heading for the far hills, mauve with distance.

Good to go, I reckon, the old man had eventually said, when a sizable patch of the valley was bare.

But the work had not ended there – would not end, in any case, until all the hills were clear, and paddocks built, the sheep brought in. And then, they would have a farm to run.

You know how it is, the old man said. Always another bloomin' job to do!

They had been at it day upon day. The men went home on Fridays but Bruce worked all weekend. Their lives, framed by the act of cordoning off, segmenting. Laura endured dreams of tools, Vik nightmares. She got it into her head that the fencing would go on forever and Laura did not try to change her sister's mind. It was, after all, a small mercy to be free of sap and splitting logs, though their lives were now reduced to the taught wires, the big spool and endless evenly spaced posts. Vik's suffering helped Laura to endure the task.

Bruce's white shirt was dark beneath the arms: two translucent crescents. He pressed his head into his forearm, blotting sweat.

Right yous, he said. Come on then.

A cloud of pink galahs soared overhead. Sneezing, Vik came to stand by Laura. Not touching, but close enough that the hairs rose Laura's arm. The little girl moaned involuntarily, face raw with hay fever. Her eyes, red, wet and rheumy, were those of an albino rabbit. Twin slugs of snot lay on her upper lip.

Ready Dad, Laura said.

She forced a bright smile. Vik sighed; the old man glanced over.

Dokay den, Vik said.

The cuff of her shirt was damp, streaked with yellow crust.

Wattle-blossom made sunburst of the bush. The air was sweet with sun-warmed grass and pollen. Bruce unfolded a grey wrinkled page from his pocket, smoothed it on the bonnet of the truck. Laura looked again at the old man's map. It showed in broken lines where the fences should be built. The design was based, Bruce said, on the sheep farm his father had once owned and lost.

Never lived there myself, Bruce told Laura. Was born just after they moved up to the shitty. There was still bits of factory work going, you see. Bloody rough times. My old man talked about Cairnlea though. Told me all about it from when I was a young tacker. Talked about it so much I reckon I could draw the place if I wanted to, clear as anything.

And he had.

Here's what we're gonna do, Bruce said on the hill.

He pointed to the image of the farm divided into squares by a neat grey lead grid, he pointed down the slope.

This paddock'll run from here to that stump over there. See it?

Laura nodded, squinting at the dead tree, a dot on the opposite ridge. Vik kneaded her eyes ferociously with the ball of her fist.

Right, Bruce said. So from there, we fence down to the road and along to the drive.

That's a fair way, Laura said mildly.

Bruce grinned, chewing on a stalk of grass. Vik tugged at the leg of his faded jeans.

Dand. Dand, my eyes *hurd*.

It was hard to tell if tears were forming of frustration, or if it was the grass.

Buck up love. You'll be right. Gotta just get used to the air and that, you'll see.

Vik's face crumpled. Laura turned, and went to get the first post.

Warm air whistled across the ridge. Laura thought she heard something, a sound resonating just below the regular range of speech, like a voice carried a great distance, words whipped into tones by wind. She turned suddenly, stared down at the house, out along the delicate twine of road, straining to make it out again. All was quiet. Laura remembered then, clear as if her mother had been with them on the hill, Kath singing a German lullabye. Vik was a

pink-faced baby, nestled at her breast. Laura felt acutely the steam of drying nappies hanging by the stove, on her skin. This happened a lot lately: Laura having visions. A memory would punch through, so sudden and unexpected that spit would fill her mouth. While standing in the shed, Laura saw Kath as she had been for the most part, hunched over her wheel, clearly framed in the studio window, obscured by dust, hem hiked and knotted above the knee. On the school bus, Laura caught a flicker of rosewater, an eddy of scent. She saw her mother's mouth: the creases that formed when Kath smiled, quotation marks in her flesh, and the crooked eyeteeth crossed like fingers. She could almost smell her mother's breath. Down in the gully, floating her bark boat and trying to sink Vik's, Laura recoiled from the water and fell gasping on the bank. Her boat, carried into the stream on the ripples of her shock quickly drowned. Laura had caught sight of her reflection; her heart had almost stopped.

So, you remember what to do? Bruce said, rubbing his hands together.

Laura ground her teeth.

Yes Dad, she said. 'Course.

Bruce took the grass stalk out of his mouth, spat pith, and went on to explain the task again. Everyone had a special role. The old man stood by the corner post, directing. Vik's post was the sighter; it had a piece of white paper stuck to one end. On windy days the paper blew away. Laura spent as much time chasing the paper down the hill as chipping into the soil to mark each post's place. Years later, Laura would read that it was common practice to paint the top of fence posts white. She would take her phone off the hook. She would fold away her face, in her hands.

Once the position of the fence had been marked, the old man drove along the line while Laura stood in the tray and dropped posts off the back of the ute, one for each fresh scuff. Then there were holes to dig, posts to plant, wires to string and strain. Each paddock they

completed was a record of their days: hundreds of acres, hundreds of wires, hundreds of hours of work. The months broke across the year in alternating tasks: clearing, fencing, cutting wood. When the bully Blake Davies challenged Laura to a lunchtime arm-wrestling duel, he got what he deserved. His fist hit the table hard enough to bruise. Except, everyone laughed. Blake's face went dark. Next day, Louis was not at school. Though Laura was strong and capable, good with crowbar as with axe; though Bruce was bent to his dream, driven as a man converted, recently, to God; though they rose at five and stopped working after dark; though they made small progresses, day by day, Laura feared that the task was simply bigger than they were. She tried to voice her doubt, just once, up on the hill behind the house. The fallen bodies of three big gums, crashed down through growth, had cleared a view of the sky. A day's work in felling, more in the cutting and carting of the wood, still more in burning back the stumps, whose roots burned for days below the surface of the ground. She looked around. She expressed fear that this was to be their lives. This year, and every one after, they would do the work, and still there would be more trees to ring and fell; it would go on forever. The slap came quick and fast. It wasn't hard, but she yelped. Bruce had never hit before and never did again. Laura held the sting in place with hand on cheek, as though to cover up what he had done.

Vik got to her knees in the tray. She levered up like an old woman resigned to certain death. She didn't look at Laura, whose chest was tight as tape. Laura chucked a post. She remembered the speed with which Kath's note reduced to ash. Vik sneezed pink mist into her hand.

I'll see if you can stop, Laura said. I'll ask him.

No.

Laura banged on the roof of the ute: their signal. The old man got out.

Vik's not well, Dad. Her hay fever's real bad.

The old man looked at Vik. Laura watched him weighing up.

Not well, eh love? Not fit for work? Best get yourself back to the house.

He lifted Vik down as if she were a doll. He set her in the grass and climbed back into the cab. The engine coughed. Vik's eyes, pinched close with tears, found Laura's face, and narrowed.

Laura looked out across the open country. It looked vastly different from the place Kath had left behind, though its essential shape – slopes and valleys – remained the same. Their work had revealed something: how possible it was to carve up the land and change its face. When Laura went through town on the way to school, she looked down at the neat dirt streets and quarter-acre blocks; mostly she looked at the fences, picket, barbed, made of wire. Before, she had thought of them as nothing but intrinsic, even natural. Now she saw them for what they were: the consequence of human will. Of gruelling hard work.

## 10.

If a lamb dies, the old man said, its mother will keep looking for it. She'll just wander around and around and around, calling its name.

They were walking the back paddock, newly populated with sheep. Vik admired her red gumboots, shiny as waxed apples in the grass.

Viko? You listening to me, love?

She sighed. It was dusk. She held the old man's hand, shivering. Back at the house, Laura was cooking rabbit stew. Vik could taste the gravy, thick with onion and parsley; the creamy mash. Their kitchen, fragrant with steam.

Vik?

Yes, Dad, she said.

Yes what?

I'm listening.

He gave her a long stare.

I can't do everything 'round here.

*I know.*

Lambs are your job. I'm trusting you, alright?

Why can't Lor –

C'mon love, the old man said mildly. Your sister's got enough on her plate.

Bruce grinned.

Bloody nice fence that there, he said. Don't you reckon?

Vik could feel the cold coming up through the soles of her boots, chilling her toes.

Bruce was saying, So the mother sheep won't always know her lamb is dead. Her teats don't know it's dead either. They'll just keep filling up with milk, fat as bagpipes. The death of a lamb see, brings a lot of pain to a mother sheep. It'll eventually kill her.

Overhead, storm clouds were blooming. The air was alive with moisture and promise.

Bruce said, On the other hand, if a mother sheep dies, her lamb is going to starve to death. You could say, either way, one of them dies: its bad news.

Vik felt a pain, like a stitch in her chest. The old man didn't seem to notice her sharp intake of breath.

We've gotta be careful, basically. It's lambing season. We want fat lambs, we've got to check the sheep every day, make sure they're safe and well.

Vik tried to interject, to explain that it was all too much, too frightening, too big.

Pay attention, and you'll be right, the old man said.

She bit her lip. Bruce hesitated. He dropped to his heels, stroked a cobweb of hair from her face.

You got this farming blood in you, Viko, same as me and Lor.

Vik looked into the old man's eyes. They were yellow at the iris, just like hers, but their shape was his alone, without her deep hooding, her almond slant. Likewise, they shared the same plump upper lip, but his teeth were straight and neat and singular in size. Her canine teeth were long. They leaned into their neighbour, slightly crossed. Her chin was cleft, his smooth. They stared at one another for a moment, variations on a common theme. Bruce touched her cheek, something between a stroke and a pinch. Vik had the sense, for the first time in her life, that they were two different humans, quite separate from each other.

You'll be fine love – he clapped her on the shoulder and stood up - you'll see.

Most of the sheep were up on the bare hillside, grazing in groups. There were a few lone animals, standing grey and solitary against the green of the downhill slope. The old man



carried the rifle slung across his back. Vik could hear bullets clinking like marbles in the pocket of his coat.

Bruce said, Inside a sheep, the lamb grows in a thin sack of warm water. The sack should tear open when the lamb is ready to be born, all going well. Sometimes that doesn't happen but. Then, it's our job to break it. Worst thing can happen love, is the lamb comes out of the mother but stays inside that sack. Poor lamb'll take one breath, and drown.

Vik brought her thumb to her mouth, forgetting it was encased in wool.

Other things to look out for: the lamb should be born face and legs first. You see a tail coming out? Or just a head? You have to do something.

Do something?

You gotta make a quick decision.

Okay.

Listen to me love, you see a lamb in trouble, one leg coming out on its own say, you can push it back in, rearrange it. Or you can try pulling that lamb out. But that's risky.

You don't wanna hurt the lamb, or mother. Not if you can help it. Understand?

Vik nodded. Bruce worked his fingers under the collar of his coat.

Thing is, its better to save one, than have them both, you know. Die.

He brought his hand to his face, as though to check that it was still there.

The first fat drops of rain fell as they crested the hill.

Uh oh. Here's another problem, the old man said.

He knelt down, pulled Vik's hood over her hair. His eyes were full of rain.

Rain's a big problem for sheep when they're lambing. A sheep'll lie down to have her lamb. But remember, she's also wearing great big woollen coat to keep her warm. She

lies down and it rains, that rain's gonna soak into her wool. It'll get heavy. So heavy love, she might not be able to get back up.

We could stand her up?

Maybe, the old man said carefully. If we're around. But usually, a sheep goes down, she stays down. Crows'll peck out her eyes, and tongue.

Vik flinched; Bruce sighed.

While she's still alive.

Bruce dropped Vik's hand. The sky was cobalt, and deepening. The gully ran between steep hills. Eucalypts clung to the slope that rushed down to the creek. Tree ferns unfurled their lacy fingers. Beneath the ferns, the umbrellas of a thousand mushrooms grew in the rich, damp soil. The old man bolted, sliding in mud.

Shit, he said.

Vik tried to keep up, fell over. Her knees went into the wet earth. She pulled off her soaking gloves and shoved them in her pocket, fingers raw and pink as prawns. At water's edge the old man knelt down by something crawling from the creek. Vik skidded down the embankment, knees muddy lesions. Rain fell. Vik felt the thunder reverberate up from the ground through her legs.

It was a sheep. The old man knelt at one end of her, where there were too many legs.

Hold this.

He took the rifle from his back, passed it to Vik. She took it in her arms. His hand went into the animal easily. He bared his teeth. Water gushed over icy stones. Vik felt the cold soaking through her coat. Her teeth knocked together. The sheep was entirely motionless but for its breath, coming hard and fast. Vik could see the sheep wheezing underneath all that wool.

She's exhausted, the old man said.

A group of kangaroos thumped through the trees, grey apparitions in a fine grey mist.

There's a torch in my pocket, the old man said. Get it out. Shine it here.

Vik did as she was told.

Steam was rising from the place where the lamb's head emerged. Lightning spat across the valley. The old man's hair looked painted on. He squinted against the wash of water on his face. At last, the lamb slipped out into Bruce's hands, trailing a purple rope. He wiped a hand across its nose. The sheep was still, head pressed into the sodden ground. Rivulets of water ran across her face. Without the body of the lamb inside, the sheep looked hollowed out. In contrast, the lamb was very much alive. It struggled, bleating.

Bruce said, Hold him.

Vik tasted eucalypt in the rain that rolled into her mouth.

Vik, I need you to hold him.

She put the rifle, the maglite, on the ground and took the warm body, slippery with blood and mustard mucus. The lamb was heavier than expected. It let out a cry, a small declaration of its presence in the world.

It's okay Lambie, Vik whispered.

The old man cut the purple chord with the knife he used on pumpkins. He removed his coat. The black woollen jumper he wore made the edges of his body indistinguishable from the night. He used the coat to wrap the lamb, cradling. Vik felt strangely incomplete without the animal in her arms. They trudged back up the hill. Bruce made Vik go first, his legs a safety railing in case she tripped and fell. They felt their way to the top, the beam of the torch inconsequential against the black storm at night. Vik saw how large a landscape looks, when pitted against the small wedge of light from a torch.

By the time they got back to the house, they had three lambs. Vik carried the smallest lamb pressed against her heart.

Leave it, the old man barked, when she too tried to remove her coat. Don't want you getting sick, love. Its cold.

Her lamb was wet, shivering. Between the legs of its dead mother, glistened something pink.

Her uterus. Happens sometimes, the old man said.

Vik could not bear the cracks in his voice, the dripping rain, the painful mewing of the orphan she held. She didn't know what the old man meant by 'uterus', and was glad.

The third lamb was not long dead. Bruce carried it draped about his shoulders for lack of free hands.

Where's his mother? Vik said.

She was a fish, swimming in ice. The baby crying on her chest brought on her tears.

Dad? Where is the mother sheep?

A wave of ugliness ripped across the old man's face.

Where is she? Where is the mother sheep? Where Dad? Where'd she go? Dad?

Vik shook. She did not drop her lamb. The ground rose up to catch her. It was too far to the house; her load was too heavy. The old man stalked over.

Get up, Vik.

He would have pulled her, except he couldn't. Vik cowered against his yanking words. His eyelids fluttered. He exhaled.

Love, I know you're tired. You're wet and cold. I know you're...sad.

He adjusted the lamb in his arms. Vik felt the mud entering her bones, and turning them to rock.

But if we don't get these lambs home, they'll die. And that love, is worse than anything you feel now.

When she didn't move, he started shouting.

For godsake, get up will you?

Vik struggled to her feet. What else was there but put one foot in front of the other, to put more space between them and the dead mothers, the big, rain soaked paddocks. By the time they reached the house, Vik's thighs were chafed raw, and her little lamb was quiet.

Vik sat between Laura's legs in the bath. They did not usually bathe together in this way, in the position of racing canoeists, front against back. But tonight, Vik enjoyed the warmth of her sister's skin, the safety provided by boundary of Laura's skinny brown legs.

Lor? Vik said.

Yeah?

Vik allowed Laura to soap her spine, to wash the conditioner from her hair. A rubber bird listed in their suds. Vik scooped water, let it run between her hands

Why'd we bring the dead one?

Laura pushed Vik's head forward, ran the comb through.

I dunno.

You *do*.

You hungry?

Lor!

The tears, dammed by nothing more than exhaustion, welled and rolled fresh.

Laura said, You don't wanna know.

I *do*. And Dad said lambs are *my* job. He *said*.

Laura shifted Vik's hair over one shoulder so she could scrub the narrow back.

Well, we'll skin him.

What?

Dad said sheep will only feed their own babies, but if the baby dies, then they don't have any lamb to feed, do they. But we've got two babies who have no mums. Get it?

Yes. I really do.

We put the dead lamb's skin on one of our lambs.

Why?

'Cause then our lamb will smell like the dead lamb, and the dead lamb's mother will think it's her baby, and she'll feed it, and everyone'll be happy.

Vik pushed the rubber ducky under.

But, it's a lie! she said.

The water lapped in response to Laura's shrug. When they emerged from the bathroom, wearing their thick winter pyjamas, Vik found that a corner of the kitchen had been penned off. Fresh hay, strewn on newspaper. The two lambs lay together, curled in the straw. The old man sat drinking a cup of tea, Trading Post spread. He looked up as they came into the room, and smiled.

Lots of trees down in the gully tonight, he said. Should save us a bit've work.

He rattled the paper, smoothing down the page.

We'll get a bloody good bonfire out of this if nothing else.

## Part Two

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### 11.

Vik lounged against the bus-shelter, smoking a stolen fag. Bushfire was spreading south toward Kyree thanks to a man, a car, a cigarette. On Main Street, the air smelled of burning rubber, asphalt melting in heat. A hundred kilometres south in Melbourne, fire trucks were on alert.

Trace said, What actually happened, you know. To your mum? Like, how'd she die?

Vik shrugged. She took a long drag, wincing against the smoke, watching the boys practice burnouts on their bikes, gauze of dust softening the details of their shape.

Dunno. I was little. Some accident, I think.

Sorry, Trace said.

Vik passed the smoke, riding nausea.

Nah, it's fine. It was ages ago. There was a police search and that, but they didn't find her. My sister reckons she fell somewhere up in the hills. I'm over it.

Trace inspected the smoking butt, closely.

Well, what? Vik said. Why are you making that face?

Trace ground the cigarette into the dirt.

You *hate it* here, Vee.

Vik said, Lots of people do.

Yeah, but you *really* fucking hate it. Coincidence?

The bus collected them and rolled out of town. Some joker, as Bruce liked to say, had come out in the night and sprayed the Kyree fire-ban sign completely red.

It was dim outside, the sky silt-brown, thick with dust and smoke. Heat rose from the earth in waves.

We've gotta get ready, the old man said.

He appraised them over the rim of his morning brew. Vik turned the page in her maths book, tucked back her waist-length hair. Geometry, her teacher said, was a Greek word that meant *earth measure*.

Bruce said, Fire's through Braymead.

Vik made a neat annotation in the margin of the text. A triangle made of sums.

You'd better call the school this time Dad, she said. Or write me a note or something at least.

Laura snorted.

Whole bloody district's on high alert, dickhead. *Teachers* won't even be there today.

Vik straightened. She suppressed a weary sigh, rolling elegant shoulders.

Don't be crude, Lor. It's unbecoming.

Laura pushed back from the table, rattling plates.

She muttered, How is *Green Gables* by the way?

Girls! Bruce said. Lay off, for pete's sake. Give it a rest. Alright?

He turned to peer out of the window. Grey clouds amassed, dark as wet concrete: smoke made of trees and homes. The old man's face was ashen. He drummed his fingernails. In the top paddock, a group of flyblown sheep clustered together near the crater, the dam, huddled in the shade of a lone sugar-gum. Vik fought the sudden impulse to touch the old man's forearm; to take away the heavy things he carried on his back. Laura fitted the bucket in the sink and dropped the breakfast dishes in. Her back muscles rose and flowed. Vik stood up, experiencing again just how tiny her big sister was, like a boxer: small, neat, square.

I'll do them Lor, she said. If you like.



Vik carried the dishwater outside. It was *hot as buggery*, as the old man liked to say. He came around the side of the house with the hose. He frowned.

You dressed? he said.

Vik glanced down at her midriff top, the cut-off jeans.

What's it look like? she said.

Bruce swallowed. He fingered the hose.

Three hundred houses love, gone.

Vik stepped into her thongs.

Fine.

The goggles are –

*I know* Dad. We've only been over it ten thousand times.

Wear your boots.

She couldn't look at him as she stalked down the steps, trying not to spill a drop of the oily grey water. It hurt to look at his lined face. For a moment, Vik believed that it was finally raining, then she realised that it was raining ash.

Vik had a little cry in her room while she was getting dressed in her fire clothes: woolen beanie, woolen jumper, jeans and gloves. Her bed was a nest, woven with tangled sheets. On the other side of the room beneath the window was Laura's bed, hospital-taut. Years ago, they had stretched a line of masking tape across the floor. It bothered Vik that the line was not wholly straight, and therefore, nor were the two halves even. Sweating, she rolled on the hand-knitted hat, a Christmas present from Bruce, bought at the Kyree market. She hated the hat. She hated the shabby room. She hated the line on the floor made of dust and grime where the tape had peeled away. She hated the heat. She hated Laura's bedside table,

overflowing with paperbacks, with jars of brown water and blooming avocado pips. Worse, she hated her self for hating. The old man did the best he could.

The sky continued to advance toward the house. Soot-black, broiling. Silence fell over crisp paddocks. Vik watered the verandah, cursing the meagre flow from the gravity-fed tank. Blackie was barking, wild and hoarse, clawing at the inside of the bathroom door. Vik looked up and saw the 'roos; her heart, a piston. It was strange, rare, to see so many roos at once, and in the day at that. They appeared, foreboding, on west paddock hill; thumping, kicking up dust, gathered like a storm. Bursting through the perimeter pines, they flowed down toward the house, leaping fences like pavement cracks. Silent, their fear was writ in speed. Vik saw their open mouths. Their eyes rolled, wild as brumbies. Careening around the house, they thundered past, one frenetic form: a shoal. Seconds later they were across the road.

Fuck! Laura screamed.

She stood on the roof, pointing. Vik turned. She looked back the way the roos had come.

A line of crimson flame rose over the horizon, over the crest of a distant hill. Burning stories high, licking the sky, starving. Flame poured along the ground. It gushed into the smoke-smothered valley, a muffling charcoal flood. Vik recoiled against the ferocious noise. The roaring gathered, and grew. Bruce ran around the house.

Get ready!

Vik picked up a sopping sack. Her eyes were streaming despite the goggles. She looked wildly from Laura – red-faced, wrapped in wool, holding a small plastic bucket – to the old man, legs spread, grimly squared-up to the stampeding flame. They were so small, the three of them. The burning tsunami bore down across the valley plain. It would engulf everything; there was nowhere to hide. Vik took a small step back.

Hours passed. Vik bought the sack down again on the blazing tussock, coughing. Hot coals rained down. The front had crossed the Randall place, just two properties along. The district fire truck howled past. Behind her, another dry patch exploded. Vik threw the sack down, hefted it up; smoldering, it had burned to half its size. The heat rolled through in waves, making it hard to breathe, to see, the air thick as sponge, suffocating. Vik lost sight of the house in the haze, the smoke, the single-minded repetition of beating at burning earth. Somewhere nearby, the chooks were screeching in dumb fear. Laura rushed past, face smeared with dirt and ash. Bowed under the weight of her bucket, she staggered, spilling precious drops. Vik saw the shearing shed go up. Five years' work, all those weekends. Vik called out to Laura, but her throat was too dry. She watched her sister disappear into the churning, burning fray.

Nearing dusk, it became clear: they were going to be okay. They wound down. Each continued to move around the yard, compulsively checking the place over, clutching their scorched buckets, their smoking rags. Vik found herself motionless – for the first time in her life, it seemed. Standing beside Bruce, she stared down into the valley, that bed of hot coals. The charred sky made what was still burning all the more bright. What wasn't burning, smoked. As they watched, flame flared, flickered, and went out. The old man coughed dryly, spat. Nothing came up. Laura sagged against the side of the house pouring water into her eyes. Vik's arms, boneless with fatigue, struggled to work the sodden jumper up over her head. Her bare skin was pale, clean. Her hands were gloved in soot. Bruce sat down, heavily, on a step. His mask of grime was darker in the wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes.

Wind's changed, he rasped. Thank buggery.

Vik surprised herself by taking Laura's hand. Laura rolled her bloodshot eyes around. She winked. It was more than either one could manage to turn up the corners of their lips. Their fingers, a zipper, intermeshed. The old man sighed.

Bloody lucky us lot, he said.

He levered himself up with hands on knees, a man twice his age. He worked over the smoking ruins with his eyes: the chook house, blackened shearing shed, the seared and smoking hills. The sheep were unharmed. Vik listened to their soft, familiar bleating. Heartrending, innocent, wholesome. The old man wiped an eye with the heel of his hand. He turned, faced them.

He said, You two did good.

## 12.

Squatting in the shade of the new shearing shed, Laura heard Vik get the news. A great joyous woop ricocheted across the paddock, confirming what Laura had guessed. Easing up, she balanced the paintbrush carefully atop the white tin of paint and turned to look down at the house, shading her eyes against the glare. In the valley, a dirty speck of school bus was heading along the highway back to town. Laura worked her knuckles into her lower spine. The screen door slammed. Vik shot over the verandah rail; the old man opened his arms. He swung her round, a barelegged whirr. Pulling back, he kissed her cheek and slapped her back, stood rubbing his hands together. Vik was dancing on the spot, stirring up dust, waving the letter in the air. It was growing grey and limp. Vik kissed it flamboyantly, smacking her lips. Bashful, the old man followed suit. Laura pulled the bill of her cap lower down over her eyes. They were too far away for her to hear what was being said. But she had collected the mail that afternoon as she did every day; had held the letter in her hands. The university crest on the envelope, the return address – *Scholarship Office* – was enough. The new shearing shed was half primed, a week's work done. Another two, maybe three, to go. Vik barreled down the drive on her BMX, dragging a veil of dust; off to celebrate with Trace, no doubt. The old man stood watching, hands on hips, shaking his head like he couldn't believe his luck. Laura watched him and felt the trajectory of her life in the million neat little brush-strokes she had yet to make. Vik would go up to the city. And once the shearing shed was painted, Laura would move on to the next job that Bruce had lined up, ready for her to do.

In the valley, yellow shoots were already probing through the blackened earth. It had rained once, briefly, in the week after the fires finally went out. Next day, Laura worked the veggie garden, a restorative, restful job: almost a day off.

You deserve it love, Bruce said. All the work you done.

The soil was damp at the surface, dry as broom-straw underneath. Yet, like salve, the rain brought some measure of healing. If nothing else, it briefly cooled things down.

Bruce called it the *burn-tide mark*: the place at which the fire had flooded the valley, then rolled back with change of wind. Laura had found him squatting there a couple of weeks later. She carried the rifle; walked up swearing. Having missed the head of a rabbit, she'd lost their dinner. It ran off to die in a burrow, spewing blood from its leg.

Buggers're growing back, the old man said.

For a second, she thought he meant the rabbit. He yanked up the tiny sapling and held up for her to see. Thin roots like grey hairs, threaded with dirt. Leaves the colour of summer moss. Laura took in the land; saw the tiny, fragile forest, pushing up into their neat, clean paddock through the charred earth. Her biceps ached suddenly, remembering that childhood work. She still dreamed of stacking wood. Bruce tutted. Laura thought she must have spoken out loud, so precisely did the old man's horrified expression mirror what she felt. He shook his head slowly, whistled through teeth. He sat back on his haunches. They stared at each other.

Oh, fucking hell, Laura said finally. I dunno if I can do all that again.

The old man rolled his shoulders, wincing.

She said, It's not bloody progress is it, if we go back to square one!

Too right.

Bruce looked at the sapling clenched in his hand. And suddenly, he chuckled.

Let's not stress out just yet love. Reckon the sheep'll take care of them soon enough.

A dead truck was parked on bricks over at the far side of the new shearing shed. Dry needles littered the roof and bonnet. Guttled, the truck was a shell, its engine long pilfered for parts. Laura wrenched open the driver door, climbed up. The upholstery, cracked and

flacking, smelled earthen, dry as soil. There was a faint tobacco scent in the cab, the trace of her loneliness. In the ashtray, long decomposed, the ashes of her own high-school results. Laura thought of the ute as her own, her special spot. When she was in it she could think clearly. She sat in the decrepit cab, and it was easy to believe that she was going places. Sometimes Laura held the wheel. She stared out at the horizon, just about feeling the breeze of the open road on her cheek. Once, she pressed the horn. But the old man said it scared the sheep, and told her off. Dazedly, Laura picked at the flecks of white paint on her hands. A crow flapped down, green-black and glossy. By the road, sheep nosed threadbare pasture. The old man said that unless they left the sheep in one place for ages, the animals wouldn't eat The Curse that spread like bushfire across their land.

Laura flicked open the glove box and pulled out her smokes. She lit one, drew the acrid smoke into her lungs. Dangling the cigarette out of the driver's window, she practiced the posture of truck-drivers, and women smokers with kids. There was a dip in the back of the driver's seat, worn by the weight of the old man. It fitted Laura perfectly.

Fuck, she said.

She threw her head back against the seat, brought her clenched fist down hard on the split foam seat. It felt good to pummel something. Her fist went in deep. She took a long, meaty drag.

Ease up love.

She almost dropped the smoke in the grass. Bruce stepped up to the window, leaned in. He touched Laura's forearm with his thumb. He stroked her skin lightly, like polishing away a spot.

Got another one of those?

Laura flinched, despite herself. The old man's gaze was steady, eyes smiling. Laura's fingers were made of loose, uncontrollable springs. Bruce gave the driver door two firm

pats and went around the ute. He had to lean back to get the passenger side open, it was that rusted shut.

Blimey, he said, climbing in. What a bloody rust bucket.

They stared down at the scorched land. Laura passed the pack. She didn't know whether to watch the old man or look away. She dealt with it by perfecting the arc of cigarette to lips. The cab smelt sharply of wet paint, sweat and smoke. Flowing in from outside, bone air, hot as breath.

So your sister –

Bruce broke off, tapped a long grub of ash to the floor.

Yeah, Laura said. I know.

Seems like these university blokes reckon she's a goer.

The old man flicked his eyes at Laura, took in her red and blotchy face. He returned his gaze to the view. Laura licked her lips. The old man inhaled, like he wanted to speak. Laura tried not to sigh. She touched the handle of the door.

Back wall's still not done, she said. Brushes'll dry.

Smart cookie, that Vik.

Laura blinked to keep from rolling her eyes. If there were soundtrack playing against her life the lyrics would be, "your sister's real smart!" She couldn't keep the edge from her voice.

Lucky her.

He pinched his smoke out between forefinger and thumb.

Know what? *You're* a clever one. Always thought that. You're both real smart, I reckon.

Her grim smile, clamped in place to hold back tears. Her hand lay between them on the seat. Bruce took it, and gave a gentle squeeze.

Listen love. Been thinking and that.



She trained her eyes on the sheep. He cleared his throat.

This city thing is something you should think about.

Think about?

Yeah. Might've been a wrong kind of, you know. A wrong thing I didn't say this sooner.

Dad. Really. It's fine. I like it here.

He nodded. Laura looked at his weatherworn face, that familiar terrain. She saw his nose, discoloured by a lifetime of outdoor work. Like small red threads, broken capillaries seemed stitched across his cheeks. His beard was greying. It was far greyer in reality, she realised, than it was in her mind. Squinting, he rolled his tongue in his mouth.

You're not a kid no more, Lor, Bruce said.

He pressed his eyes with his fingertips, dropped his hand to his lap. Laura searched for something to say that would relieve the look on his face.

'Roos, she said, pointing.

The animals, standing silver against the blackened paddocks, bounded across the bare ridge, skin-covered bone.

You're a real good kid. Thing is, but. People've gotta *want* to be out here.

It was stifling. Laura longed for air.

He said, Been giving it some thought. Reckon you should go up to the city.

You can't do everything here on your own, Dad!

Bruce tightened his grip on her hand. He brushed at a fly.

Nah, listen. Gotta be a few young blokes round here looking for work, this time of year.

But what would I *do*?

Laura felt again the vertigo she had experienced playing in the Kyree quarry as a kid. Her voice came out high and naked. She couldn't bear to look at his earnest kindness. She pressed her face into her hands.

Bruce said, I mean, 'course, you don't *have* to leave. Just want you to have options and that.

Tears ran down Laura's wrist. She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

It's just –

She shrugged, gesturing at the paddocks, at the huge, blinding sky. The old man nodded sagely. His arm wrapped her shoulders. The ancient upholstery crackled. Laura lay her head against the old man's neck. He stroked her hair the way he once brushed Posey's coat. It would be light a few more hours. Laura wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. The old man settled back against the seat, and sighed.

### 13.

Right there love? Bruce said. Want a piece of fruit or something?

Would it have killed you to pay for a ute with air-con?

The old man removed his hand from Vik's shoulder. She used the glossy college brochure to fan herself. Dry paddocks unfurled beyond the vast plough of freeway, a terracotta blur. In the distance, the city was a faint grey smudge, a blemish on the wide continuum of land and sky. The old man chocked the steering wheel with his knee. Sharp scent of citrus filled the cab. Orange peel scattered like autumn leaves behind them on the road. Bruce tore away a segment of sweet fruit and passed it to Vik.

In the bedroom that last night, Vik sat in the rubble of half-packed boxes. The last night: on the farm, as a child. She was tempted to include, "of my life" but that sounded so extreme, like she wanted to kill herself. Truth was, it did feel like a part of her was dying. But this was cause for celebration, she kept reminding herself. It was what she wanted, had worked for. To reinvent Viktoria: a girl without history, someone entirely else. The bedroom seemed big and bare without her books. In her half of the closet, naked hangers shifted together.

Excited? Laura said.

She came through the door in her socks, carrying a swaddle of clean sheets. Vik held her breath against the tobacco soaked into her sister's skin.

Absolutely! she said. Yeah, definitely!

Laura sat down on Vik's bed, holding the laundry in her lap. Vik felt swollen. She plucked at the cover of her little-girl quilt. The air was cloying, like sweat. 3AW blared, broadcast through the wall. Drought. Fire. Flood. Somewhere in the world, a river had burst its banks, drowning a Bangladeshi town. Vik listened to the muffled litany of tragic, distant crises. She cast about for something to pack away in her case, but nothing looked useful, or likely to fit.

For the first time in her life, that last January, Vik had walked down to the end of the drive on her own. She stood waiting for the bus in the violet light that chases dawn, before the sun has fully asserted itself. It was very quiet. Quieter still for Laura's absence. As she waited, Vik heard, distantly, the screen door slam and the far away sound of her sister's voice calling the dog to heel. Vik stared down the empty dirt road. A flock of birds rose up in formation. Vik scuffed her toe in the grass.

They had never sat together on the way to school. Vik cultivated her own friends, congratulating herself on being smart enough to see that Laura's reputation for being strange would do her no public favours. Vik already carried one heavy load, her mother's disappearance, and was not about to take another, no matter how much it pinched when Laura boarded the bus to open snickers. Hellos were given freely to Vik. She took each one like it was jewelled. Remorse came later, but by then high school was long-passed; there was nothing that Vik could do.

Sometimes when Vik got home from class, before she sat down to do her homework or went out to start her chores, she took down their photo shoebox. There were few pictures of her and Laura. Most were photos taken annually by the school, two smiling children positioned like prize-ponies against a marbled background of blue. Their ages showed in the number of teeth versus gaps; in the length of crooked fringes cut by Laura with big kitchen shears. The passage of years was revealed in the degree of overt insincerity that bled into their smiles. In early primary school, Vik saw how palpable was her grief. Her mouth was a tight white bow; doll-face made gruesome in its overly adult misery. For several years the little girl stared out of each portrait with such poignant, quiet, bottomless sorrow that it was hard for Vik to look. She had not known how transparent her feelings were, had thought they were well buried, private things, not broadcast to the world. Both Bruce and Laura required, it had seemed, some normalcy and silence that Vik thought she

had achieved. Yet the strain of layering emotions – happy over sad – was clear. It was captured there on film. Children’s faces do not lie, and their feelings are magnified by the social requirements of the adult world. The photographer, each year a different man brought in from out of town, encouraged them to grin. *Closer together, ladies! That’s it, lovely! Smile now! Show mum your pearly-whites!* Vik did as she was told but her naked unhappiness was made only more painful for the upturned mouth. As the years wore on, little Vik seemed to attain some measure of healing. Slowly, the sorrow diluted. Her expression cleared. In her grade six picture, Vik’s smile was almost sunny. Only, if one looked closely, a smudge of something dark remained, visible in the tightly clenched hands, in the too-wide grin.

In the early pictures Laura’s face was equally as painful, but in an altogether different way. As a little girl her smile was fierce. She stared into the camera, as if daring it to strike. Her arm around Vik’s neck was tight and precisely placed. While Vik looked lost with sadness, the illustration of an orphan from a Dickens’ book, Laura thrummed with tension. In her bedroom, Vik studied both their faces, an archaeologist digging down for clues. Already, she had caught the first glimmer of an unsettling idea: that the ease at school she took for granted was gifted by her sister, not hers to own. Laura had copped a bullet, silently. She had kept watch, held ground, and made the way for Vik. Part of the reason she was so unpopular was that she would not mythologise their mother for anyone’s sport. Among high school girls especially, their lost mother held romance. But Laura refused to discuss the ‘tragedy’ in terms that satisfied.

Was she *very* beautiful? someone would say and sigh.

She was a *bitch*, Laura spat.

It got around the yard that Vik looked like that girl, Miranda, from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. They watched it one year in English during summer, too hot for a real class. Vik did

nothing to dispel the narrative's unspoken connection to Kath. Instead, she took to speaking dreamily at school, wearing her long hair half-up. Deep in her memory, images of mud and snot and honest adult grief matched in no way to the fictional equivalent, the white lace frocks and prettiness. But at Kyree high, where kids smoked bucket bongos at lunchtime and funerals were held each year for those dead of drink and cars and drowning in dams, for kids hurt by chainsaws, by tractors, by snakes and in fires, Vik's dishonesty, if she ever thought about it, seemed harmless enough. If anything, it made things easier to bear. In embodying the character of her mother as Miranda, Vik rewrote history, just enough.

By their teenaged years the school photos showed a shift. The rift between their smiles and their demeanours was not directed inward, but into the space between them. Vik and Laura sat strained, though side-by-side. They looked like strangers. They didn't touch. It made Vik sad to see so clearly in the photos what was wrong between them in real life, but it made her angry too. Why didn't Laura try harder? Why had she given up? Vik looked into her own eyes. They were hardened with determination – she had long planned to get away – and strangely offset by the coquettish angle of her head, the make-up and styled hair. In comparison, Laura seemed sunk inside herself. Her face was bare, her hair scraped back. Vik stared and saw something troubling, and then she could not stop seeing it: that it was they, not their mother, who were lost. She quickly packed the photos up.

On the outskirts of Melbourne, Bruce exited the freeway. As in a charcoal illustration, even the sky above the city was shaded grey.

Check the map for me would you love, Bruce said.

Vik held the Melways open. She traced again the thatch of printed lines. Coming in through her open window the air was chemical, metal-heavy, smelling of fuel, hot as exhaust. Metallic bodies snaked away, nose to tail down the block. They crawled forward.

That's the way in the shitty, the old man said. Hurry up and wait.

He drummed the steering wheel.

Laura had helped Vik pack the ute. They carried luggage across the baking yard. Laura was grim and quiet. She piled the boxes in the tray as though building a funeral pyre.

Dad says you're thinking of maybe going to Sydney, Vik said.

She felt the finality of the morning: the last breakfast in their kitchen, the last shower, the last feeding of the chooks, the last drinking-in of the known, heart-rending valley-view. The last chance to make things nice – or, at least, *all right*. Laura drew an elastic chord across the suitcases, snagging the hook on the lip of the tray. She tested it with her weight.

Nothing's been decided.

How, Vik thought, could they have lived together all these years, yet become so wholly themselves?

She almost dropped the parcel that Laura thrust toward her.

What's this?

Vik tore clumsily at the paper; held the compass in her hand. The tiny arrow turned. Vik wanted to tell Laura everything, but didn't know what that was.

By late afternoon they had arrived on campus. Eventually, they found a park by the Melbourne General Cemetery across the road. The old man whistled through his teeth.

Look at the size've it, he said, cracking his back. Acres of concrete, that. Couldn't get more dead if you tried!

Vik got out and stretched. Windblown, Blackie scabbled in the tray, meat breath firing her cheek. Vik swung a suitcase down. The old man clicked his tongue.

C'mon boy.

Dad, he can't *come*, Vik said, glancing around.

Take it easy love, Bruce said. Just gotta find him some shade.

He produced a piece of rope from his hip pocket. Vik took a few quick steps back from the ute. She appraised her damp reflection in the tinted window of a shiny black Merc, standing nonchalantly down the block. The old man secured the dog. A group of giggling students tripped past, long-limbed and tottering, newly born calves.

G'Day, the old man said.

He tipped his hat. There was a pulse of silence. Immolating, Vik's face throbbed. The girls passed. An eruption of snickers, and scathing backward looks. Oblivious, the old man hefted a box from the tray. Vik caught the crispness of his shirt, newly bought. His boots were polished to still-water shine. The effort he had made for her.

Right love? he said.

Vik nodded dumbly. He smiled. His eyes were two blue buttons, sewn into folds of brown suede flesh.

No need to be nervous love, he said, clapping Vik's back. You're gonna do *just fine*.  
You're gonna knock their socks right off.

The room was smaller than it had looked in the brochure. Framed in the single porthole, a crisp brown lawn baked beyond the college building. Vik peered out at students sunning themselves at the foot of a dry fountain in the yard.

Well, Bruce said, this's *real* nice.

He turned his hat by the brim, a wheel in his hands. From the room below, an electronic beat came vibrating through the floor. Muffled, Vik heard the clack of tram on tracks. Heard car horns crying. Heard the burr of engines idling at lights. Two cars came squealing to a stop, sounding like slaughtered pigs. Bruce went over to inspect the strength of the single shelf, bowing it with his weight.

Let's bring in the rest, Vik said briskly.



Though stained by the circle of light falling through the glass, the single mattress was new. A paper-doll desk and chair, so flimsy they seemed folded out of card, were pressed into a corner. There was no other furniture in the closet-sized space, except for a sagging bar, dangling coat hangers like hangnails. The walls, flecked with thumbtacks, were scarred with pinprick holes.

G'Day, howsit going? Bruce said, stopping short in the door.

A pretty girl reeled back into the hall. In the old man's wake, Vik caught a streamer of dark hair.

Apologies, the old man said. Didn't mean to give youse a scare.

An older woman, clearly the mother, dried apricot to the girl's fresh peach, took her daughter by the arm. Vik hung back. The girl frowned at the printed sheet in her hand. She addressed Vik.

This is your room? They said it was mine.

Vik's mumbled, hiding behind her hair. Bruce followed the woman's lead with introductions. He explained that they'd left Vik's placement letter at home.

"Up bush"? the mother repeated.

Her nails were perfectly formed, ten white-tipped buds.

Vik said, Well not so much *bush*, per se –

Yeah, Kyree, the old man interrupted. That's the sticks to youse down here, I'm guessing!

Vik and the girl appraised one another from beneath lowered lids. Vik scuffed the lino with her boot. She was following the mother's hand as it encircled her daughter's bare arm. The long fingers seemed to trace, without thinking, an intricate itch; like the girl's limb was a part of her mother's own self.

After the old man had left; after they had eaten pizza, overpriced; after Bruce had assured Vik again he was fine to drive in the dark, and not to worry; after he had tried to help her unpack and been put off; after Vik had stood on the curb by the grim expanse of graves, waving ferociously, watching ute tail-lights bleed into a whole spectrum of night-time illumination; after she walked back to the room, feeling her way to the bed, Vik finally, deliciously, allowed herself to cry. She curled into herself, listening to the roar of traffic and conversation out on the street. Though it was night, the sky was blank, grey and starless, an artificial ceiling constructed with smog. Likewise, it was not fully dark in the room. Vik sobbed into her pillow, washed and pressed by Laura, sun-dried on the line at home. The case smelled of sweet summer grass. Vik suddenly longed to be in the kitchen, to have a cup of Laura's tea in hand. There was just enough light spilling in to dilute the night. Vik could read the compass face.

Be good, right love? Bruce had said, standing on the curb. Vik chewed back tears. Dusk was falling. The city, so incredibly loud. A pearl of sweat rolled between Vik's breasts. The sun was sinking. But its heat had not melted back as it did with dusk at home, cooling down the land. She wanted to say something acute, to pass a message back to Laura. But the old man was already climbing into the ute. The engine fired.

## 14.

Funny year, Bruce said, surfacing through the din of knives on porcelain.

He put a piece of mutton in his mouth and chewed, precise as threading a needle. Laura fiddled with the potatoes on her plate. It was too hot for roast, but it was Sunday, and it was lunch.

Heard Peterson's shipping water in. He can afford it, but. They've started shooting stock.

The phone rang. Bruce lurched up. Laura observed him answering, the expectant, *Yes? Speaking!* The inevitable, strained, *Oh...no, no worries love. Not doing nuffin. How are you?* It was Vik. Laura could tell; Bruce did most of the listening. She watched his hot lunch cool. Other people, she understood, could answer the telephone mildly, distractedly, like they had better things to do. Not so here, where any call might be a lead, some information, the long-awaited granting of an *end*. Laura had lived with Bruce's hope for so long she almost believed in it herself. Except, she didn't. Buried deep inside, the knowledge that no one would discover her mother and call, unless it was – a terrible thought – Kath herself.

Bruce returned to the table. He picked up his knife, his fork. He resumed eating. It was strange, they agreed warily. Each skirted their discomfort. It came from being close, but not verbally so. Neither wanted to be in the conversation, neither wanted to let it go. Laura inspected her meal with the fastidiousness of a restaurant critic. Bruce rolled his shoulders; cracked his neck. Strange, Laura hazarded, that Vik was calling every day. Bruce was worried about her, he said. In fact, what he said was *she right, you reckon?* But Laura understood what he meant. She reassured him. When he worried, the folds deepened in his cheeks, around his eyes. Only that morning she had come upon him, leaning up against the shearing shed. He looked odd, but she couldn't work out why. Then she realised: she never saw him standing still. His arms were folded. He might have looked nonchalant from a

distance, a man on a work break – if he took them. She mistakenly came up close. Another sheep was badly flyblown, the third one that week. Bruce was crying. Laura pulled up short. She could hear his quiet sobs. Like a man shot, his arms seemed crossed to hold in spilling guts. He gazed out at the view. Worn paddocks rolled down into dusty valley, dirt waves washing into a big, brown pool. A twig cracked; he turned, running a sleeve across his face. Laura scuttled back and almost fell. She ran. And later shot the sheep herself.

Dad, listen, Laura said at the table. I don't think I'm gonna go.

What?

Might try to get work round here. You know, closer to home. I can go to Sydney any time. Maybe later in the year.

Bruce leaned forward on his elbows, prodding the air with his knife.

You've gotta be joking. You can't give up your plans!

But Dad –

No. No buts about it. You being here's not gonna change the *weather*! You're going. I'll be fine love. Just fine. Don't you worry about *me*.

He mopped at his plate with soft white bread.

What's for dessert?

Though the days were getting shorter, temperatures were high. It still had not rained. Days of total fire ban, morning, noon and night, had become intrinsic to the structure of time. The old man, still feeding the sheep by hand, sat hunched over his ledger in the evenings, blotting brow-sweat. Their paddocks were rough and dry. Laura wondered where the topsoil went when it blew away. Probably down to Melbourne. It would be swept into little pans with little brooms, and thrown out.

Laura was in the veggie garden when the phone next rang. Water trickled across the concrete earth, but would not soak in.

The phone! Bruce called. Get it will you love?

She squinted up at his shape, a silhouette against a silver sky, up on the roof of the shed.

Laura put down the bucket of shower-water, rolling her eyes.

She kicked off her boots at the door, scurried down the hall pulling soil-caked gloves from her hands.

Breathless, she said, Hello?

Hey – I was just about to hang up, Vik said. Thought you'd probably be outside.

I was.

Dark yet?

Not *yet*.

There was a pause. Laura ordered her silent tally of jobs yet left to do. Finish watering, lock up the chooks, pick dinner, water sheep, put motorbikes away, bring washing in, stack wood. Vik inhaled, shakily. Laura pressed her forehead to the tepid wall.

So – how are you Vik?

Already, the rectangle of light through the doorway was softening to rose. Vik launched into a self-conscious, bright explanation about what she had learnt that week. Cicada-song, a growing maraca-chorus, was starting to tune up. Laura pulled the phone from her ear, mimed a few screamed swearwords into the receiver. She replaced it at her head. Vik's words ran together, notes in a scale. She laughed, gaily. Laura sensed the desperation; Vik's will to keep her on the phone. But why?

Laura said, Look, Dad's up on the roof. I'll get him to give you a call back.

Vik ignored her. She asked, warmly, about Laura's plans for Sydney. Was she planning to do a course? Laura was caught off-guard. She tried to sound brisk, but had no time to lie,

which was her impulse. Her plans, her dreams, were just too close and raw to be exposed to air. She would have preferred not to go there, but to keep them hidden way down deep. Less chance of teasing, of being judged. Yet Laura found herself telling Vik the truth about her modest plans: that she had thought about getting work doing gardens, something like that. Despite herself, she held her breath, hoping for some small approval. It was pathetic, her little sister. There was a pause. It went on. Laura imagined Vik laughing silently to herself in her fancy university room, and broke first. Her voice, rough with humiliation and unshed tears.

*I like to grow stuff, okay?*

Of course! Sorry! That's great! Vik said quickly. You've always been good with your hands!

Laura slammed the phone with so much force, the bracket broke from the wall.

She went out to shoot rabbits. Bruce caught her by the shed, asked her what Vik had said. Laura couldn't speak. She shrugged, scowling. The old man's mouth, a twist-tie of confusion and concern. He looked like a man faced with a difficult crossword puzzle. Laura had not the energy to help him sort the answers out. There was an edge to her kindness and she was at it. The small square of space reserved for herself, a tiny stamp-sized island, was threatened by the high tide of her sister, her father, and their needs. Bruce called out as she walked away. She ignored him. The paddock gate clanged shut behind her. The old man's voice fell still.

There was a stark and startling beauty in the big, hot, empty silence of the paddocks on the hill. She got into the rhythm of her uphill gait, the all-consuming quiet. It was hot work, but it felt good to sweat. The grass was sweet and warm, smelling like summer. When Laura saw gold – necklaces and rings – it always made her think of that smell, hay and sunshine. She trudged up past the dam, breathing hard. On the ridge it was possible to see all the way

to town. The dryness of the landscape made her wince. At the same time, looking down into the valley, Laura felt something well up. She was overcome with the inexpressible sense that she was seeing a view that was hers alone to know, so truly and so well, that she was lucky to have it; she was blessed. It was hard to express. She understood that the feeling lay beyond language, but that it need not be communicated, she shouldn't even try. She loved the place. In that moment, she felt it loved her back. Laura knew for certain then that she would never stop wanting to stand where she stood looking down on the house. To see it as it was, rendered a tiny stone, just a fleck in the vast, rich mosaic of land and bright blue sky.

Tonight she used the rifle, the bullets hollow-point. On impact, they left bruising, but she did not shoot for meat. She'd been hunting so long the gun was a limb she rarely used, but used well when she did. Laura kept careful watch for burrows as she walked. It was best to get as close as possible, then lie down in the grass and wait. In Sydney, she would be introduced to Buddhist meditation practice, though she would not try it herself. There seemed no point. Listening to a long lecture given about technique, the speaker going on at length about meditation types and benefits, Laura would immediately think of lying so still in the grass on the side of a hill that she might have been a log, one eye cocked, barely breathing, waiting for her kill. *I understand*, she would say. *I get it*. Though she could tell they did not believe her, she really did.

It was almost fully dark by the time she got home, the sun sunk to a glowing orange line at the horizon. Propped up on the front porch, her old bike gleamed. The measure of the old man's love was apparent in the fresh-oiled chain. He had wiped the cobwebs clean, pumped tires fat. Laura stopped to admire the work, throat tight. It had been at least four years since she'd passed her driving test.

That you Laura, love? Bruce said.

He came outside in his slippers, smiling shyly. Side by side, they took in his work. He leaned over, dinged the bell. It pealed, high and clear, no sign of rust. Laura touched her chest.

Didn't have to do that you know, she said. Thanks, but.

Bruce shrugged. They stood together. Neither was good with words. His hand fluttered at her back. She brushed his arm. He masked his awkwardness, squeezing the back tyre. She touched, lovingly, the freshly polished seat. There was nothing more for either of them to say then, without repeating themselves.

Fixed the brakes there too, for you, the old man said.

Laura felt the pinch of tears behind her nose. He grinned, revealing her very own teeth.

C'mon, she said. Let's get tea on. It's getting late.



## 15.

*Melbourne Fine China Restoration* was a business, the classified said, with generations of experience in piecing together broken things. Vik rode the tram to Richmond. A tinkling chime announced her. The workshop was cool. Inside, street-rumble was audible, muffled by brick. Piano music played with the tinny sound of a radio caught between stations. A long bench ran down the centre of the room; splattered with paint, littered with tools. Chipped and shattered objects, arranged in groups, covered the surface of the bench. Some were very badly damaged. In place of a spout, a white gold teapot displayed a jagged hole. A ceramic dancing girl and her partner turned gaily around a maypole, without heads. A plate, so badly smashed it was a pile of shards, waited to be glued whole. A tiny silver jug was marred by a chip in the handle so faint Vik had to squint to make the imperfection out.

I'll be with you in a moment.

Vik flinched. At the far end of the room stood a man with skin like raw milk. He was maybe twenty-five, she thought. She would later find out he was thirty. Neat body of a dancer, collarbones like porcelain rods. Vik suddenly longed to stroke the hollow at the base of his throat. He reached down into the child-sized crate beside him on the floor. She saw his ribcage outlined through the back of his tight white shirt. A line of muscle ran vertically along his ribs. He was without padding; sinewy, the inner workings of his body exposed through the cloth. Vik tucked long hair behind her ear, smoothed her skirt. She would one day find it funny that a man whose body was so spare and surface would, in his thoughts and feelings, be so dense and closed.

Have a seat if you like! the man called. Won't be a tick.

He drew out of the box an urn, intricately patterned, emerald and red. Polystyrene balls cascaded to the floor like falling snow. He cradled the urn, turned to place it on the bench. Vik saw that it was in halves. He trailed a hand across twin humps, reading their pattern as braille. Vik released held breath.

Laura didn't know about the pot. Vik had found it herself, one wet afternoon when she was six. Abandoned in a dark corner of the studio, the lid was furry with dust. Vik remembered Kath – recalled as a watercolour woman: diluted, pastel, smudged – using the pot to prop open the studio door in summer, fresh heat flowing in to wash away the stale. Lumpy and misshapen, it was a throwaway piece. Not near perfect enough to paint with the delicate, snowy scenes Kath favoured, it remained the original russet of bush dirt. Vik knelt on the floor, picked it up. She held it the way a person might hold the face of their lover, or child, palm cupping cheek. Vik ran a finger over the unfired surface. Preserved in the grain of the clay, her mother's fingerprint.

*She was really here, Vik thought.*

Even in shaping earth, Kath had left her mark.

For years the pot lay nestled in the closet, wrapped in towel, pushed underneath their waterproof clothes. Sometimes Vik took it out, held it. A talisman, a touchstone, it connected Kath to her. When she inhaled the pot's cool, dry scent, she felt she could remember her mother more clearly. Other times, Vik had to fold it hastily away, lest she hurl it at the wall in frustration that it was only a lump of moulded mud, nothing more concrete. Whatever secrets Kath had worked into the fabric of the vessel, Vik could only guess. But over years, she poured her own secrets into the small, ill-formed bowl, whispering them in, those things that if her mother had survived, she imagined she would say. The pot – a funereal urn, a monument, a record, a safe – was Vik's most precious possession. She carried it up to Melbourne in the bottom of her case. When she unpacked her things Vik found the pot in pieces. Out of habit, Vik stuffed the pillow in her mouth to muffle tears, though there was no one in the room to hide from. There was no one to rub her back and calm her with hot tea. She grew quiet and lay on the unmade bed, clutching shards of clay. The years she had left in Melbourne loomed, hollow, dark and cold. She slept, dreaming up the kitchen in Kyree.

University was not what Vik expected, had hoped that it would be. The campus was enormous, lecture-halls full. On the first day, she tried to talk to a girl in Geography and was ignored under the guise of polite interest. The girl was from Melbourne, like so many of them; she already had too many friends. In fact, whole tightly sealed groups had migrated to uni together from their old high schools. Like herds of sheep they moved through the grounds, following their appointed leader. They resembled each other, though their uniform was so intrinsic, specific, messy, it was hard to emulate. Their clothes looked as though they cost a lot. The shock of her swift fall from popularity and the anonymity of the campus drove Vik to her room. She scurried out for classes, head down. In Kyree she could go nowhere without being known, greeted and addressed. She had not expected things to be the same, but had assumed that with time she would find her place, new friends. University, as she imagined it, would be a variation on a theme; like Kyree, only bigger. Filled with people just like her, if she were more grown up and more interesting than herself. But in Melbourne she was nothing, a shadow. It was disturbing that no one seemed to really see her, or care. She passed long afternoons lying on her bed, listening to the muffled chatter down in the courtyard. The laughter, like traffic, was constant.

Only pride prevented Vik from going home. So much had been made of her scholarship. Of those who graduated in her class – all fifteen – she was the only one to get a ‘proper’ place. The others went to the Tech, or folded themselves further into running the family farm. Two girls married, another had a child. Though the old man would be grateful for another pair of hands, Vik knew if she went back, that would be it. Her future would seal over like fresh grown skin. She knew intimately the life that awaited her there. Flies and dust and sweat and never a moment’s rest. The girls who stayed, made women by the children on their hips, by their mortgages and bills, grew leathery, wan and worn. It seemed to happen over night. When they came into town, they stood smoking together out the front of the shops. How hard it was, they told one another while screaming at their kids. To wash a million nappies without using water, to watch their husbands work with painful backs. To

Vik it seemed these women's lives had closed down to the point of suffocation. Their world in its entirety confined to the cross of Kyree Streets, Second and Main. When the principal hosted a small party to toast Vik's success, a few teachers and her family mingled in the sweaty gym. Warm, the lime cordial tasted sickening-sweet. Yet in that moment Vik felt borne up, as if on a gust of wind. She could not have been happier. Wedge-tail eagles felt as she did, she imagined, when soaring high above the land. Anything was possible; it seemed she would go on flying, and never look back.

In Melbourne it was all Vik could do not to be entirely crushed by disappointment. All those wasted hours learning equations, doing sums, dreaming. For what? Years she had plotted and worked hard to get away. Yet the freedom she thought she would find in the sandstone buildings, and in books turned out not to exist, at least not in the way that she had hoped. Without the structure of her family's past to prop her up in the eyes of other people, and make her, for them, who she was, Vik floated. She was trapped. On the farm Kath's ghost had haunted everything they did. But now, Vik saw that it had been a solid thing. For without it, she was a ghost of herself.

Thanks for waiting, the man said, turning from the broken urn. I'm Hien.

He sat down beside Vik on a small white couch, offering his hand. It was warm, dry as paper. Vik felt a zap when their hands met across her lap. She blushed; he was blushing too. They smiled foolishly together. Vik was uncertain what she was grinning about. She didn't care. Their hands pumped slowly up and down, drawing the contact out.

I'm Viktoria, Vik found herself saying.

*What an ostentatious name*, she thought, beetroot cheeks burning. How had she never realised how ridiculous it was?

I mean *Vik*, she said.

At the same time Hien said, How lovely.

Eventually, Vik unfolded the pot and passed it across. Hien took it with the solemnity and care of a good priest. She was suddenly aware that it was the ugliest object in a room of broken things. Against the fine china, glass and ceramic work, it was just fired dirt. Vik found herself telling Hien about the farm, her mother, the studio, the search. She spoke in a way she never had before. Not to impress, but because Hien's quiet, rapt attention seemed to create a small, sealed vacuum within which Vik could feel Kath's disappearance for what it was. Not thrilling, but full of pain. It seemed imperative she convey the pot's worth. She described the old man's tears. Hien's fingers brushed her arm. Vik was aware that she was rambling; seemed unable to rein in. He asked no questions, did not dig down for dirt. She saw flecks of black in honey-coloured iris.

I'm sorry, she stammered. You don't need to know all that of course!

She stared wildly around the room. It was temple-still; so quiet she could almost hear the play of light across the floor. She had that sense infusing nightmares, in which one is out in public naked.

I'm sorry, Hien said simply.

Vik felt she had never heard the words said so purely. She looked up through her lashes at his charcoal hair. She longed to wipe away her story, and she didn't. He was studying her, eyes soft. His lips were delicately shaped, plump and perfect. She wanted to go on sitting beside Hien forever in sun diluted through the shopfront glass. The burden of her isolation, wedged up and off her shoulders by the heat of his thigh, by the calm kindness in his expression as he waited for her to speak, would, she feared, redouble when she left.

Have you always lived here? she said, longing to take his hand again.

Bloody Aussie as you are! Hien blurted.

Something shifted, like a draught. Vik felt how hard Hien tried to make the words sound light. He failed.

Well, my mother was German! she said.

Her words too fell flat. Hien frowned. In a fissure at his lip, a bead of blood bloomed. The doorbell chimed. He was up in an instant and calling out hello. Their moment had passed; Vik willed her tears to dam. An elderly man stepped into the room. Vik gathered herself. She stood up slowly, biding time.

Viktoria, Hien said, briefly turning. Though he did not meet her eye, a crimson stain was spreading up his neck.

Fill in your details here. I'll take a look.

He passed her pad and pen. Vik's tongue, sandpaper against the roof of her mouth. She choked down a swallow.

Okay, she croaked. Thanks a mill.

She arranged the pot on the counter. As she turned to leave, Hien brushed her arm. His face glistened, as though freshly washed.

Nice to meet you, he said.

Vik's heart seized.

Outside on Victoria Street, Vik hunkered for a moment, stunned by the glare. Heat radiated up from the footpath; bore down from above. Yet Vik felt suddenly weightless. She walked back up towards the city through a fog of frying food, tram fare saved in jangling ten-cent coins. She was not sure what to make of what had happened, what each of them had said. Had it gone well? Or badly? She could not shake the sense that she had made an idiot of herself, just as she was giddy with the memory of his almond eyes and how carefully they fixed on her face. For the moment, striding through the heat, Vik decided all was well. Alone in her room she would soon change her mind. For weeks she would obsess, playing over and over the conversation, each time giving it a different thrust. He liked her, he found her hideous; she was honest with him, she was – it was obvious – a fool. Vik turned their meeting so often, studied it so closely, that eventually it lost all meaning. Hien became not a man but a blur. She could not separate him from the stories she told herself about those

few minutes they shared together on the couch. The meeting grew and gathered weight, becoming the single most significant moment of her Melbourne life. With little else to fill her time, it filled her up. She longed to see Hien again, if only to see if he was as she remembered, or if it was – her biggest fear – all inside her head.

She made good progress down the street, aware that she was passing through a whole new world; perhaps the world she had been seeking all along. It was nothing like what she was used to. The street was alive with colour and with scent, none of it familiar. Vik felt her heart lift. She hardly dared imagine herself an eagle, but it didn't matter. Not all was lost yet. Vik walked, feeling as though she had, in some small way, finally arrived. It was good to be outdoors, to be anonymous, not in the lonely way of the campus, where she was excluded from big groups of friends, but in the familiar way of all big cities, where everyone is collegial in their solitariness. It was beautiful. Even the weather seemed right. Vik stared about her, trying to draw it all in. She wanted to catch and preserve the sights for later, so that she would not forget: the window hung with glistening, orange ducks hooked by the beak; the sweet-foul scent of coriander; an old woman pressing sugarcane juice; paper fans like spread wings; a dark pool hall, obscured by smoke; steaming bowls of noodle soup. She almost broke into a skip. How cosmopolitan she was. Then she crossed the Yarra River. She was walking the wrong way. The city lay behind her blurred by heat.

## 16.

Laura agreed to wait until summer had passed before leaving. She didn't want to depart too soon after Vik and leave the old man there alone during the most difficult season. Now the fleece was growing back oily and thick. Main Street was awash with bronze, flooded with autumn leaves. Naked, the Avenue of Honor Elms, branches bare as the bones they were to commemorate, seemed incongruous against the cloudless, azure sky. The leaves dropped in a single cool week, which like a sigh of relief calmed the district down. Then Monday came, with fever on the wind: the hottest day on record in a hundred years, and no shade.

The morning of Laura's departure, like any other day: hot and still as sand. Yet small things changed all the time on the farm if one knew how to look; to Laura, stepping barefoot onto ready-warm verandah boards, the morning was unique. Wisp of cotton-wool cloud, floating for days, had disappeared. The sky was unadorned. Pulling on her socks and boots, Laura noticed that the daffodils lining the side of the house were blooming; there were yet more buds. Her nostrils filled with sun. In the shed, she filled an ice-cream container with feed for the chooks. It was low.

*I'll have to get more,* Laura thought - and winced.

There was a new nest in the big lone gum out back. The tree loomed over the clothesline, limbs outstretched to house and shed. In bloom, red blossoms burst from nuts. It was a hundred years old, the old man said. The tree had survived their clearing attack. Vik and Laura's tire swing hung from one thick branch. When Bruce bought out the axe, tears were shed. All these years later, he still threatened to chop it down. Birds liked to bomb broaches of shit onto their clean clothes.

Bloody mongrels! the old man said.



Bruce sat with feet spread on the platform at Kyree Station. Laura checked her ticket. The sun burned her neck. In the parking lot, theirs was the only car. Heat rose from the bitumen in waves. Only five minutes left.

Bruce said, Got a little something for you.

He produced a cocoon of cash. On either side of the tracks, dry paddocks stretched. Brittle, balding, the colour of cardboard box. Laura pushed away his hand; Bruce pushed back. The train approached. The tsk of wheel on track. Laura's eyes, rough with dust. She relented, pressing the money into the pocket of her jeans. The train hissed to a stop. A conductor leaned out. There were beads of sweat on his brow, stains bled into the breast of his shirt.

Bruce called, G'day! Mate, one to Sydney here!

They were out of time. Pale faces stared out through tinted glass. Laura stretched up to kiss the old man's face.

See you at Christmas Dad, she said.

His back was damp beneath her hands. Like pins and needles, his whiskers pricked across her cheek. She stepped into the nearest carriage, slapped by the icy temperature of the air. She found her seat, wedged in. The train began to crawl away. It took all her concentration not to get up, run back. She lifted a limply waving hand. The old man couldn't see her through the glass; she rolled past, hidden. His face remained in that same expectant stare. He craned, looking down the line for her goodbye. She watched him waiting. The train was rolling through the open land. He slumped. She was borne away. The old man, hands in pockets, walked back toward the ute. How tiny he appeared. As Laura watched, the old man grew smaller. Then finally disappeared.

The train pulled into Central Station early, grey light, sky like mother-of-pearl. It was raining. Delighted, Laura rushed to the edge of the platform and put out her hand. She caught a palm-full of water. Her face was raw with night tears, eyes salt-swollen, slits. Regardless, she laughed. Everything was dripping wet.

Bloody rain, the driver cursed, stepping down.

He slung an overnight bag across his back. With a woosh, his umbrella unfurled. Laura went into the station and out the other side onto the street. Heads down, slick as seals, Sydneysiders trudged through the downpour. Laura smelled the rain in the concrete, that damp metallic scent. Water gushed in gutters, rolled gurgling into drains. How alive the sound of water was, car tyres sending up spray. She had no umbrella, but didn't mind. It would be nine before her hostel reception opened but she started walking anyway. The air, and so the rain, felt warm. Rain picked up. Thunder broke. It was miraculous: first morning on her own, and already, a storm.

At the hostel, Laura stood dripping on the fresh-mopped floor.

I've just come up from Vic, she said apologetically, by way of explanation.

The receptionist leaned forward eagerly.

Strange times, yeah? Whole country's gone berserk hey? This weather. What about bloody Brissy? Christ. You see that on the news?

Laura nodded, though she hadn't. The receptionist touched the slick back of Laura's hand. Her brows were deeply furrowed in exaggerated sympathy.

How's things holding up down there? she said.

Laura tried to think of a way of explaining, but found the words were lost. Dust, like a dream, had receded. Washed away.

It was strange to wake up in the afternoon, and without any jobs to complete. No animals to feed, wood to chop, plants to tend. No meals for her to prepare and cook, no machinery requiring cleaning or repair. No sweeping. The rain had stopped. Sun steamed the streets. Laura swung her legs over the edge of her bunk and made a list of things to do.

She walked in the heat for several hours before she heard the oceanic din of voices blocks away. Laura worked her way over a hill, below a mass of people were spread out over footpaths, choking the road. Police on horseback strode up and down the line, the animals snorting, stamping; coats dark beneath the saddle, glistening with sweat. The street was a sea of heat and colour. She was absorbed into the crowd. Soon she carried flyers for causes she didn't understand. By turns festive and aggressive, the crowd surged, parted, let her through. Laura walked, eyes like open windows. Offered badges, magazines, she pushed away a placard with swear words. Petitioners screamed for support, waving signatures in the air. She was deep in the crowd, it surged. A chant rose up, hundreds of voices asserting their desire. *What do we want?* An echoing call came from further down the line. *No more logging! When do we want it?* Bongo beat, a patter, syncopated with the cries. *NOW!* There were other instruments, other songs, other chants: the air made of lapping melody. Banners flapped above their heads. Someone spoke into a megaphone with loudly distorted voice, impassioned and sure, unintelligible. The crowd moved off, a human river. Borne on the tide, Laura was carried down the street. Around her, fists pumped skyward. She turned to look over her shoulder; the raucous rainbow serpent wound back, the width of the road, for blocks.

Suddenly a horse reared up. It screamed, the crowd screamed. Laura turned, frantic; saw the arc of hoof, the white of a rolling eye. The crowd broiled. People struggled to get out from underneath the horse. Laura was pushed to her knees. With no clear exit from the writhing mass she did what trapped animals do best, and hunkered down. Tightly rolled, eyes squeezed shut, Laura covered her arms with her head. She waited to be crushed.

You right?

A hand brushed her shoulder. She looked up. A huge man was squatting down beside her. She lifted her head and he sat back casually on his heels. The turmoil raged around them. Laura looked into the man's blue eyes, lashes so dark they looked painted. He grinned, flashing a dimple in one stubbled cheek. Once white, his grey singlet proclaimed TREES

FOR THE FUTURE! She could smell his clothes, the reek of his body. His feet were bare, soles black with city filth. Threads dangled from denim shorts cut-off at the knee. Beautiful in the solid, carved way of Roman statues, his clothes looked like they belonged to someone else. He offered a hand.

My knee, Laura croaked.

He slid her arm around his waist, pressed her hand into the hollow above his hip. She did not know which was more frightening, to be abandoned, or swept away.

I'm Luc, he said.

Laura mumbled something, conscious of her fingers pressing into his side. He steered her toward a nearby coffee shop where he said she could clean up. To her surprise, Laura could detect nothing cruel or sleazy in Luc's manner, no indication that he wanted anything other than to help. She could tell he was unlike the boys she knew from Kyree, boys who screamed names from passing cars, bare arses at open windows, then later tried to cop a feel. She felt bad that she was wary and allowed herself to be borne along, as she had been by the crowd. He was an activist, Luc told her. As they hobbled along the unfamiliar streets, he spoke about his work. It obviously mattered a great deal. His face darkened; his voice grew loud. Laura ducked her head, embarrassed, but nobody seemed to care. She noticed something developing in his posture and his face, something oddly familiar that put her right at ease. They sat outside the café; she tasted cappuccino. She didn't hate it. He talked. There would be more protests to organise, more rallies, when he could fit them in. His parents owned a nursery and he helped them out for work. Was it this that struck a chord? She listened intently without hearing, head full of white noise. He sat back in the plastic chair. She couldn't stop watching the shape of his mouth, the incline of his shoulders against his broad neck. She reminded herself to smile and nod. He leaned forward, so easy in his skin. She told him that she had only just arrived in Sydney. Luc laughed like he could not believe his luck.

Cool! he said. There's loads to do for the next rally; we could always use another set of hands!

Luc went on, outlining his plans. Laura felt lifted up, as though cresting a big wave. He swung ankle over knee. It would be decades before Laura realised why she trusted Luc on that first day. When she came upon him in the shed, putting tools away, so carefully.

Now Laura had a friend. For months she rode giddiness, turning the torn scrap, Luc's number, over again in her hand. Of course, like everyone, she loved him. Her ignorance, fattened with the knowledge that she could not be found out, made her Luc's most enthusiastic ally. The less she understood, the harder she worked. She dreamed about his face. Though at first she knew nothing of the Green movement, she was well used to making do. Desperate to separate herself from Kyree, from the loner she had been, she kept her mouth shut. Her head stayed down. Like a missionary, Luc had recruited her and set her down to task. He had reeled her in. She would see him do it time and time again. His gift was people. He could articulate the world's wrongs in few, small and precise words. He made big issues seem, not little, but clear. Something huge and snarled by public opinion, by the media and by politics, he turned sharp and simple, a bright diamond shard. In another life, he might have founded a cult. Laura watched him, standing at his bedroom pulpit, steaming in the heat, glistening, his elegant prophecies so assured they seemed obvious. The semi-circle of upturned faces nodded happily, there were lots of rousing cheers. Sipping drinks, Luc assured them that shit and fans would meet. Each took this seriously. They'd heard it all before, and knew well their cues. Only Laura, perched on the edge of Luc's desk, chain-smoking joints to squash her creeping fear, her adoration, was taking notes. She had no pen or paper, but behind her nonchalant pose, through the insulating gauze that was her smoke, she listened with the focus of a student in a test. At night in her room, she went over the facts. As the old man said, *if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing right*. Laura remembered the weight of the axe in her hand, the sound of splintered trees crashing down through undergrowth. She tried to bury the memory. She was uncertain which was heavier: the deception she built around Luc, or the one she built it to escape.

Luc's friends seemed to like her. When she couldn't pay her bond, they each chucked in, though Laura said it would be a while before she could pay them back.

You're right, Luc said, shrugging. We're like family here.

As time went on, Laura found she cared, not superficially, but for real. She would never quite untangle which she cared about the most, the man or the cause. It didn't matter; got one, you got them both. What Luc said made sense; she had seen it first hand on the farm, though she kept that to herself. When asked about Kyree she was vague, when pushed she made stuff up. Not to lie, but obscure. She could not get free; could not change herself without the tiny white bandages that her little lies allowed. Below the façade of the new Laura, behind the picketing and rallying and late nights spent in bars, she felt the cold metallic corners of her Chinese finger-trap, the immobilizing tug between the present and the past. Behind in Kyree, there lay the things Luc fought against, that she now fought against herself. Laura had been willing, an accomplice to the clearing and the farm. Now she took arms against those acts, her penance. Her new self stung, as had the shallow cuts she once gave herself, blade to inner-thigh.

It was almost 2:00 pm. Bruce would be coming in from the sun for a cup of tea. Laura could almost hear the rustle of his newspaper as he read the *Trading Post*; smell the sweat and manure and earth on his clothes, the chemical lemon-scent of the detergent she used to wash the kitchen floor. The old man would sit with elbows propped on tabletop. He would look up at her. He would be grateful and surprised by the hot drink she served, though the tea break was routine – in fact was his idea. He would say, *thanks a ton, love!* He would take the chipped mug from her carefully, winking. He would settle back in his chair, flapping the paper to straighten errant pages. He would sigh. Laura stood in the nursery office, sipping Earl Grey. She eyed the phone. She touched the smooth grey plastic receiver. Beyond the office, people milled between pots in the greenhouse and the yard. A tiny girl in polka dots bent down to smell a red rose, an American Home. Laura longed to

hear the old man's familiar voice. But if she dialled and the call rang out, what would that mean?

Laura?

Luc said her name the Italian way, to make her smile. *Low-ra*. He was pulling off his gloves, wiping hands on his thighs.

Sorry Shorty – know you're on a break. But there's some dude out there asking questions about growing lettuces in drought. Must be from down south?

Laura put down her mug. Luc took her wrist as she passed. Laura craned up. He grinned, big lips and teeth.

Coming to the pub after?

He winked. Luc's thumb traced the veins in her wrist. She stepped out into steam. In Sydney, even the air was unfamiliar, hot and wet as breath. She imagined wrapping her arms around the tree-trunk of Luc's waist. Would they reach?

## Part Three

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### 17.

To best friends, Luc said. To love.

Side by side in the window of their flat, Laura took Luc's hand, kissed the back.

She said, No jokes: never thought we'd make ten years.

What! Thought you always wanted to marry a man with grubby feet?

You proposing?

Come on Shorty, Mama can't get everything she wants.

She got anything?

Luc snorted, frothing beer. Laura matched his grin. Galloping, rain hammered the roof.

What about your old man? Luc said, aiming for flippancy, falling short.

I'd have to go up bush to ask for your hand, he said. Don't you reckon? Can't marry a man's daughter without asking his permission face to face!

Laura's smile dropped. She crossed her arms across her chest.

Don't start this shit again, she said.

Luc didn't need to say what he was thinking; she saw it in his face. Their fight was so well worn it felt threadbare. He wanted to be with her at Christmas, and to see her family home.

Laura stalled. As years went by it became harder to find a fitting lie. She could barely breathe for the complex versions of the world she had woven, and bound around herself.

Luc's arm, a warm and heavy stole, undressed her neck. He stared fixedly into the rain, a bolt of grey fabric.

They went to sleep angry, as Laura hated them to do. She lay in the dark on her side of the bed, clutching the damp sheet, back to Luc. They did not touch. She marvelled, disgusted



and proud, at all she had achieved. The Collective was doing well. Though Luc's idea, she ran the business for them both. A vegetarian restaurant with offices and meeting-room attached, they funded their work with lentil curry-money, as Luc called it. He had wrangled a review from some journo, an old friend from his days in Animal Lib, who made a big deal about their ethics, and of the refugee chef. The piece was published in the weekend papers. That was the kind of thing Luc could make happen. Laura took on a new waitress to handle dinner-rush. Vik phoned to say she how great Laura looked in the photo, printed half-page. Caught smiling, Laura stood in The Collective kitchen, shelling peas. Luc chased down the proof from the photographer and sent a picture off to Bruce. That too was typical; Luc was nothing if not kind, Laura thought. When they fought, she recast his actions as mean little diplomacies, ammunition chalked up to being a *good guy*. You couldn't fight against such behaviour, Laura learned. She loved him, but she knew him almost too well. There was an edge to Luc's goodness against which cut the motives that drove him. They were not malicious, nor was his kindness shallow; it was heartfelt. Yet unconsciously he extended it only to acquire, make happen and affect. In dark moments like the one that she was now sunk into, Laura wondered what Luc saw that made him love her. What opportunity, what resource. Being long-trained in self-doubt, she could not guess.

Even on good nights, when they laughed and talked, when it seemed they possessed the pristine, poignant happiness of lovers in books, Laura worried at the bed-sheets long into the night. Straight after The Collective opened, Luc went back to school. At the time, she had felt his decision like an insult. *You can handle it*, he had said. *We both can; I'll still be here to help*. She felt dumped in it. Her skills were with soil and wire, not people. She felt like he had set her up in his job and pissed off to tackle the next thing on his long, private list of things to achieve. *What am I, your worker?* Laura's fists were bunched like batons. He said she could do something else if she liked. *It's a free world*, he said. Through clenched teeth Laura fought him. *I thought we were doing this together*. Luc said that they were. Laura believed that he thought this was so; she didn't. She could see the way things

would unfold, clear as hindsight. The degree, like a child, would sap his time. The rest would fall to her, all the hard work. He tried to reassure her. His nonchalance propelled her from the room. She stormed along their street, found herself at the bus stop and rode down into town. Walking along the harbor-front, bowed by rain, Laura was filled with rage. That her whole life was spent taking care, being good, doing what she thought she should. She glanced about her through the drizzle. Everything looked unfamiliar, made grey and uniform behind the city's permanent wet curtains.

She wondered, *Was there anything I ever really wanted to do?*

She pushed the thought away. It was too awful. She was afraid of the answer – that there was nothing. Her eagerness to please, her loneliness, had ensnared her inside a perfectly good life. She was a wife – or good enough – had a man by whom any woman would want to be loved. Laura knew that many wished they were. He was handsome. They were both healthy. He was kind and smart and made jokes. They had nice things. Her work was meaningful. It kept her busy. What more could she want? Yet right down deep inside her, there was the sense that she was living someone else's life. If she was honest, she had lived with that feeling a long time, perhaps forever. Laura stood watching boats bob on the water, hair plastered to her neck. The rain had eased, footpaths steaming. Unconsciously, she touched the scar at her eye. Her mother's face surfaced. It was never far away. Laura stared into the mist. Kath was still out there, somewhere. And Laura had made her bed, as the old man said. She went home to Luc to lie in it.

The tune of their late-night conversation, a duet of many movements, had played again and again, for years.

Stop *huffing*, Luc would say, rolling over. I've gotta get up in a minute.

How we gonna pay the chefs this month?

Always worrying about the big issues!

It *is* a big issue.

Luc touched her hip beneath the sheet. He braided their feet together. They lay tangled like net-drowned birds. He was training to be a lawyer. When Luc offered her reassurance, she saw how good he would be at the job. Sometimes she worried the weight of his ambition would smother them both. She tried to shut down, get on, do the work. It was better not to think.

In Italian please? she said.

She kissed him, altering the melody they played. Luc groaned.

If I'd known it was such a turn-on I would've stayed at Saturday school with the wogs! Yet he dutifully whispered her neck, forming the Rococo sounds. His big palm turned circles on her back. She was assuaged. Their knees, puzzle pieces, locked.

None of her successes felt deserved. The stiff resentment on their anniversary, like the teasing she copped at school, seemed to fit. She hadn't meant to mislead Luc after they first met. If she really thought about it and tried to understand, she would say that she had been young, stupid. The future had seemed such a far-off distant place; she never expected to be in it, yet here they were. By the time she understood enough to really get how he would feel about the land at Kyree, about her, it was too late. She loved him. She loved Bruce. In moments of weakness she wondered which she protected, which she blatantly betrayed. She rarely spoke about children; Laura always shut Luc down. She could not keep the old man from his own grandkids, nor could she imagine it: her child, a stranger to Kyree.

Objectively, she almost found it funny. Sometimes she even cracked a grim, mean little smile at her own expense. Because she couldn't be honest about her past, the future, not a thing to mould and shape, remained on the horizon, just beyond her grasp.

Immersed in her work, in Luc, in the city, Laura often found it hard to tell which self was real and which was the fake. From the interminable damp streets of Sydney suburbs, the bald baking farm seemed distant, tiny. When she went back to the farm for Christmas and

for long weekends, her damp Sydney flat, Luc's warm back pressed against her chest at night in bed. These things seemed hazy, dream-like, against the solid, familiarity of the farm. She never stayed long.

The business, she told Bruce briskly. You know, gotta get back!

He would nod, so understanding. Laura would feel some precious part of her chip away. She would try not to look back at the old man's figure as she cycled down the road, heading for Kyree station. Shrunken and dusty, reduced by distance, Bruce looked inconsequential, part of the bare hill face. Made of drought-cracked earth.

The night crept on.

Shorty!

Laura rose up through the mud of sleep.

What? she groaned. Don't pinch me.

Luc slid his arm beneath her head and reeled her in.

You were crying.

Her face was wet. Laura felt Luc's heart pumping through her palm, flesh-and-blood Morse code.

What did I say?

I don't know. Something like, "Turn off the tap!"

They laughed together. Their anger temporarily leaked out. Laura laughed loudest, like it was air. She listened to gush of rain down the road, rolled over. He wrapped his arms around her. She wore Luc like a shell.

Next morning, she cycled down to The Collective; Luc did not approve of cars. She bore the thick head that comes from serious crying, legs wooden, heavy. She stared at her face in the mirror as she removed her waterproof clothes, hung them dripping on the back of the

staffroom door. She looked ancient, weary. A lot like the old man. The sky was indigo, marbled with cloud. Turning from herself, Laura watched it through the window, darkening. Everything felt damp: the carpet, the furniture, her skin. There would be yet more rain that afternoon, and no surprises there. Rain now seemed as natural as sleep. It fell in sheets twice daily. Already, mould grew back along the walls of the flat, ruining Luc's fresh paint. Unlike most Sydney-siders, like Luc, Laura didn't find their climate angering, or bad. Intellectually, she understood Luc's fiercely made point: something was out of sync. But a childhood of rationing water had soaked in below her skin. At night she felt soothed by the precious patter of rain on roof. Though she knew that flooding was a problem – in some areas it had killed – she couldn't rewire her memory to take this truth in. Luc said that weather patterns were shifting, that the uncanny divide between the bone conditions in Victoria and saturated New South Wales would not last forever. Things would soon shift again. On the news, Laura heard it said that some in the south had packed up their farms and properties, sick with the smell of dust and dying stock, and moved north. Others, after watching their farms wash away, washed their hands of the rain and moved south, preferring drought to potential drowning. Cities were overflowing with rural families who had simply had enough. It wasn't just the east coast that was affected. All over the country citizens were reporting strange local weather; vast differences in temperature across tiny distances; too much rain in one town, and in the next, nowhere near enough. In his darker moments, late at night and after one too many beers, Luc liked to talk tough.

No point moving, he would assert. My advice? You live in the south: secure your own source of water, and be prepared to defend it. To the death.

Their friends always laughed. More drinks would be poured. Though Laura noticed that all were careful not to ask what one should do if they lived north. Luc might smile along with the rest for the sake of civility, but Laura saw how he gripped his drink as he sipped it, white knuckled. He believed in what he said.

After lunch, Laura sent the volunteer wait-staff home. The lull between lunch and dinner was her favourite time. She went through the restaurant: dim, gleaming, still as a theatre tableau, through to The Collective office. There were protests to orchestrate, flyers to print, media to approach and woo. Luc sat sprawled on the op-shop couch in the meeting room, computer open on a coffee table made of crates. Laura pulled up short.

Wasn't sure you were coming in today, she said, still icy.

His dimple formed, dissolved.

Flooding in the lecture hall.

Laura was already turning away, caging herself, arms across chest. A peal of thunder; gold streaked across the sky. Luc stood. Heat of his lips warmed her nape.

Please, he said into her collar. Let's be friends.

Silently, she flayed herself for being so unkind. She touched the face of his heavy gold watch, across her chest. Luc's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party, beneath a marquee in his parents' expansive concrete yard. A hundred guests and no expense spared. The Nursery was booming. Everyone wanted native plants. The watch, secreted across seas, kept safe in a cloth, a bag, a box, had once belonged to Guillermo, Luc's great-Grandfather. Luc cherished the gift and she loved him for it. Bruce too would adore the sentiment in him, Laura thought. That Luc belonged to a family who revered their history. Turning, she faced Luc. She wanted to tell him how grateful she was for what they had together. She wanted to wipe away her doubt with the magic of just the right line, delivered sincerely. The phone rang. Luc answered.

For you, he said.

She pressed it to her ear.

That you Laura? Doug Peterson here, love. Got some news for you. Sittin' down? Listening, Laura covered her mouth with her hands. Her cry clamped off. She groped for the arm of the couch, eased down. The phone clattered. Luc folded her away. Laura's stomach, drum-skin tight.

I've got to go home, she said.

I'll come.

He was already scooping up his things. Laura cocked her head. She laughed. Strangled, the sound was of another throat.

No. *Home*. Kyree.

He grappled with her. Laura pushed Luc away. They staggered.

My father's lost his mind, she said.

In the corner of her eye, she saw Luc's half-painted banner. *Yes to a greener future? Say no to farming meat!*

On the bus, Laura tasted blood beneath her nails. The windows were open to the soaked city, the underwater smell of wet rock. Windshield wipers moaned across glass. She edged around Peterson's phone call, his words a knot of exposed nerves.

Alzheimers, they said, or something.

One of them memory things.

Couldn't look after the place no more, turns out.

Thought it was getting the better of him, what with the drought.

Should've stepped in sooner than I did.

Didn't like to pry and that.

Nurse said: dehydrated. Needs looking after, she said.

Intensive care.

Had to take care of the sheep. Not in good shape, poor buggers.

Luc took Laura's hand.

You and little Vik, Peterson had said. You girls'll want to come home.

## 18.

Vik's tone might have passed for neutrality, to a stranger.

I'm not going to argue this with you darling, she said.

Hien's hands were coated in fine white powder. He stood in the bathroom doorway, cradling them to his chest.

Please be careful, Vik sighed. Linda just came. I don't have time to redo the floors. The apartment was medical-new, and clean. It reminded Vik of a plush hotel.

Hein said, Any more cramps?

His hands looked to Vik like two lame birds, feathers choked by bushfire ash.

It's fine, she said. I'm fine.

He stepped toward her, bare soles outlined in water on the tiles. Vik stretched her lips tight over teeth. The lipstick went on, plum coloured.

Hien said, What if something –

Like *what*? Just as safe there as here. No difference.

They locked eyes in the mirror. He held her gaze. She looked away. His breath was hot in her hair. He undid the belt of her robe, clasped her belly. Some innate balance had tipped when she insisted that they sell the Richmond shop to buy into the complex. Some price had been paid, the exact nature of which still remained unclear.

Kate's moving, Hien said.

See? All fine.

The hairdryer roared. When Hien took his hands away, their imprint remained in white dust on her skin.

Vik had selected the pink curtains. There was an alphabet rug on the floor. Tiny clothes hung from tiny hangers. They bought a rocking chair, a crib. Yet none of it added up to a



mother, as far as Vik could tell. Books said that it was natural to feel nervous. When you hold your baby, other mothers said, you will feel new depth of love. That soft pink body, the butterfly-wing skull and blindly groping hands; these trigger something. Quietly, Vik doubted. What little she remembered about Kath seemed proof: motherhood was not armour, or cocoon. If anything, it seemed a lonely place. Laura raged against their mother's faults, citing cruelties and abuses, small mean acts that Vik could not remember, and therefore not defend. As she aged, Vik came to another understanding. Perhaps Kath had been unhappy in the bush, far from everything she cared about, and understood. As Vik worked toward her dream job, spending hours hunched at the desk, Kath's studio materialised. Not as building, but as sacred place. Vik cast Kath not as mother first, but artist. Her motherhood, her marriage: accidental appendages to another otherwise complete and self-contained life. Why Kath ever married Bruce and moved with him to Kyree remained mysterious, a thing Vik couldn't map.

At night Vik felt the baby shifting, turning summersaults inside her liquid net. Already, the child was herself and refused her mother's program of wakefulness and sleep. When she found out she was pregnant, Vik called Laura right away. They rarely saw each other except at holidays, but spoke often on the phone. Once or twice Vik had gone up to Sydney for a conference. At first she stayed with Luc and Laura, then in hotels. Their house was so small, so dark. Still, Laura seemed happy; Vik envied, in some small way, her sister's life. The protests, the people, the events she organised. So carefree, it seemed fun. As though Laura were living as the student Vik never had the chance to really be. Moving in with Hien so quickly had done it. He was so much older, which at the time she had loved. Later, she looked back on those years and saw that in removing herself from campus life, she had skipped over so much about being young. Yet, while her peers were waitressing and getting drunk, she was building her career. The youngest surveyor on the team, she was also the highest paid. Their boss called her "the natural". At the office party every year she performed her party trick. One eye closed, squinting at a random block of land, she could

calculate its size down to the inch. It was always a hit; the team's drunk applause, like kisses. When asked how she did it, Vik would smile, and shrug. She did not tell the truth, that her childhood, made of wire spools and posts and piles of wood, had trained her up.

She always said, It's in my blood.

The men were roughly assembled in the Market parking lot. That morning, they would finally begin work on a new car park, digging down deep. Vik stood before the workers, their safety gear flooding with sweat. The bitter aftertaste of bile lingered. The Victoria Market was only blocks from the river, just a short walk from home. Vik had made her way to work flayed by heat. It was not yet 9:00. Sun bore down with nauseating force. Her breakfast, deposited in so many bins.

At the back of the crowd men stood smoking; the air was already hot and dry and chemical as smoker's breath. A couple of young guys joked together while Vik, handing down instructions for the day's work, talked. Mardie looked on sympathetically. They were two women, deep in the territory of men. After work Mardie downed shots while the men sipped beer. They liked Mardie because she was one of the boys, but Vik sensed their confusion when it came to her. It was said that she was beautiful, though she could not see it. This beauty was puzzling, abstract, something personal and yet impersonal; enjoyed exclusively by everyone else. The physical certainty of her pregnancy added some extra dimension of discomfort between her and the men, though perhaps it was her zeal for the work that put them off, she couldn't tell.

One thing I will say before we get started –

Vik cleared her throat.

You all know the history of the site?

The men shuffled, squinting. Murmurs rose and broke over the crowd. Vik's long ponytail swished over a shoulder, down her back. There were mutterings of assent.

Give it to us anyway, boss! Mardie called.

The men groaned. Vik took a deep breath. In the early years of settlement, Melbournians had used the market land to bury dead. As the city kept expanding and as the population boomed, a larger cemetery was needed. Its site was eventually moved. Less than one thousand bodies were reinterred of the thousands buried there. The rest were covered over, concrete, asphalt, stone. Forgetting. The Victoria Market, on the lot next door, spilled over onto buried graves. Were there a group of settlers alive, Vik wondered, at just that precise moment, who now shopped in the place they had so recently gone to kneel and weep?

Vik went into a laborious discussion of the facts: that it was likely they would turn up bones once work began; that the site was pitched right over the Indigenous part of the cemetery.

Records of exhumation are patchy, she said. You find something? You stop.

Bloody boongs, someone muttered, deep in the crowd.

The hair rose on the back of Vik's neck. She had always felt sad for the early settlers in Victoria, whose lives were hard and ended with bodies buried in foreign soil. In coordinating the plans for the market site, months in the making, it had suddenly occurred to her that Aboriginal people too were buried in foreign circumstance, though some no doubt had lived all their lives nearby on land around the river. In Kyree, no one spoke about who had lived in the valley before white people came. Certainly no one spoke to that one Aboriginal family who remained. Vik couldn't remember their name. The tracker and his son. They seemed apparitions to her now; she did not remember ever having heard them speak. She was ashamed. What had become of them? She saw the whole expansive continental mass that was her nation, and cringed.

C'mon boys, she said wearily, blotting her face with her sleeve. These are human remains we're talking about.

The digger roared to life. In the office Vik swept the hardhat from her head. A foot, a shoulder, pressed her belly through the flesh. Running down Vik's face and back, sweat made her slick, skin like river rock. Outside, the digger lurched, negotiating stakes. Vik eased down into the plastic chair behind a cardboard desk. She answered her phone, cutting the mosquito tone mid-ring.

Hello?

Her voice was breathless, lungs two shallow pools.

Sweetheart –

Hien?

Vik turned the tepid fan on her face.

Your box is here. German books? I think something from immigration as well. Did you request records?

The line was clogged with breath. Vik leaned back in the chair, lifting heavy hair from her neck. She told Hien that she was fine. He didn't believe her. Outside, mechanical teeth ripped into the earth.

There's a fleet of tiny yachts in Port Phillip Bay, Hien said. They look like white seabirds.

I'm glad you like the view. At least.

Vik sat staring at the phone long after Hien hung up. The problem was, she decided, that time moved only in one direction. While the fact of memory kept people locked, forever looking backwards, hashing over their mistakes.

She must have drifted off.

You wanna see this?

Mike loomed over. She knew all of their faces, some names. His hand was near but not touching her bare arm. He had a tattoo on his neck, a dolphin smoking a bong. There was something in his eager, fist-fighter's face that made Vik lurch awake. She made no excuse for herself, but stood. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Vinegar-sharp, his odour filled the room. She pushed past him, into ferocious sun.

Looks like we've found one, Mardie called.

She was standing on the edge of the gash they had dug, backlit against the sky, paper-thin. Vik stepped up to the crater. The white of the bone in the teeth of the digger took her by surprise. It looked porcelain. Torn asphalt like charred wood twisted back from the wound in the ground. Vik recoiled.

You right?

Mardie gripped her arm. Vik pulled away, smiling with teeth bared. She used the brim of her hand to shade her face. The lot fell swiftly into silence as machines were shut down. Slices of white light forced Vik to squint. Sun refracted blindingly by metal and glass. The city, white-hot.

Mardie kept saying, Shit's over for the day, trust. Seen it before. It'll take hours to sort this shit out, believe me. The Elders'll want in, and the Museum. Jarvis from bloody head office. Who knows, once word gets out. Horns will lock, Michael. Horns will *effing lock*.

Vik brought a hand to her ear to cut the pounding sound. It was her heart. It occurred to her that the soil where they stood was made of decomposed flesh. Most soil was. Mardie and Mike: two identically creased brows.

Your phone's ringing babe, Mardie said.

Vik felt she was moving through water made of heat.

Hien? she said, fumbling her mobile. Can't talk now. Something's happened.

It's me.

Vik staggered.

*Lor?* How did you know –

It's Dad. He's in hospital.

I thought –

I'm leaving now. Meet you at home?

Vik broke off, gasping. Laura's voice fell away like she was shrinking. Vik found herself on the ground. She was aware of the sudden hush in the lot, more complete than the absence of machine. Mardie turned toward her. Men started forward, red-faced. Someone lay her down in dirt; another stroked her clammy hair. Vik's fingers went into earth, warm as skin. Something flamed along her spine. She moaned. There was a rush of wet. Her fingers came back glossy when she felt between her legs. Some loose dirt spilled over the lip, into the hole, crumbling down onto bones. In the distance, a siren like the cry of a child, growing ever closer.

## 19.

The train rocked though moonlit scrub. Laura could not sleep. Rain slacked, dried up. The train like a jewel on a chain, suspended between cities. Working south, the sky cleared, opened up, grew bigger. The land flattened out, sand-papered. It hurt the nose to breathe. Away so long, Laura's nostrils were unaccustomed to chalk air. Even in the dark, the land was coloured gold. When the lights went out, Laura sat, still and sleepless. All around, other people dreamed. Pulling out her phone, Laura brought up Luc's number, reading bright digits as a prayer. She could hear his warm hello clear as anything in her mind. She put the phone away again. Their goodbye had been tense and hurried. If she phoned, Laura feared that she would hear only winter in Luc's tone. At Central Station, she had watched him walk away from her, and disappear into the crowd.

The sun was already up, glaring, when they arrived. Laura went straight to the hospital from Kyree Station. The old man was sleeping. She peered through the ward door; wished she hadn't. Bruce rasped against the tube in his nose. His eyes were sunken shut. He was the same man he had always been, only more frail. A strange, worn version of himself made of liver-spots and bone. Out on Main Street, she turned left without thinking and went along a footpath radiating heat. Her body knew the way. There wasn't much in town that had not changed since she was young. Long brown grass had grown in vacant lots, where agisted townie horses, tired old nags, had endured the cruel attention of bored rural boys. The school bus, always late, offered no protection on long hot afternoons. But the horses were gone; the lots razed. In their place charcoal chicken, a fish and chip, a pizza shop. Fresh streets crosshatched Main. New estates, like lego blocks, made of brick veneer. The town had seeped across the land, a human grid. Between the new TAB and the Bottle-O, Laura recognized the big gum she used to climb. It was a stump. Once scoured for Kath, the pastel hills behind the town were branded with paved roads, more new estates and building sites. An ornate stone sign read *Kyree Waters*. A pine-lined road – imitation English lane – wound away beyond the gate. Its authenticity spoiled by magpie and straw grass, by the

startling newness of each house. Laura might have found the whole thing funny, had she not felt so grim. She knew the site on which *Kyree Waters* spread. A treeless stretch of sandy land: low-lying, windy, dry. Behind one cul-de-sac an artificial lake lay empty, straddled by a faux-quaint bridge.

She crunched along the shoulder of the highway. The road rolled out, shimmering. Laura pressed the hot phone against her head. Bruce's doctor, his voice medical, cold and precise, outlined the old man's condition. Laura tried hard to absorb the details, but was overwhelmed by his words, by the heat, by the vast, bleak desert that was the farms beyond town. She knew the weather had been hard. But she had only been away a short time. Hadn't she? Laura had not pictured this. What trees were still standing were now mostly dead. The paddocks, worn down to dirt by wind and stock, were sapped.

There are options, the doctor was saying. Homes.

Laura said, But he already has a home.

The doctor coughed. Laura hung up. She sat for a moment on the verge with her head in her hands, protecting her face from the glare. Bruce had certainly seemed older, last time she saw him. Hadn't he? She tried to remember back. Perhaps he had seemed a little more forgetful than usual, but nothing so extreme she could not put it down to isolation, and his age. But the doctor insisted that he had been sick for some time. She hadn't noticed. Focused on doing her duty, on getting back to Luc. The feeling, her failure, was like vertigo. Falling from solid ground, while standing still.

At the crossroads, down by the letterbox, Mr Peterson's ute skidded a little in the shale at road's edge. He leaned out, elbow on sill. He had aged.

Bloody hot to be walkin'.

Laura nodded. The landscape swam, ripples of gold. She staggered to the truck.

Need a hat on love.



He eyed her dreds, shoved the ute into gear. There was an old dog in the tray, scrabbling to keep still. Peterson told her again about finding the old man. He was as careful with his words as he was with his stock, taking time over selection, choosing just the right one. Laura let the conversation wash over. She could hardly believe the state of the place. They turned off the sealed road and into the drive. The paddock fence was slack. She started crying.

*Oi!* the old man used to shout. *Use the bloomin' gate, girls! You'll stretch the bloody wire climbing over like that!*

A couple of skinny ewes milled, snuffling dirt around the house.

Peterson said, 'Fraid that's all that's left of the stock.

Three of the old man's decorative pines were dead; littered like fallen corpses along the edge of the drive. Laura remembered planting them as saplings, Bruce pressing her small hands into soil.

The ute wound up the drive, dust storm in wake.

*It had been all trees once, Laura thought. Hadn't it?*

Kath barked, *Leave the light!*

Bruce closed the front door, came inside in stockinged feet. Weak light from the 40-watt bulb on the porch showed underneath the door.

*Why, love?* Bruce said. *Nothing there but trees!*

With dusk, the porch light went on. In retrospect, it seemed a flimsy defense against the absolute black of bush-night in the valley. Bruce grumbled about the bills, but did not turn it off.

The house already looked long-abandoned. Scabs of paint flaked from weatherboards like sunburned skin. Laura saw that a section of the roof was missing, patched up with plastic

tarp. Rubbish lay around the tip-like yard, bleached grey. She avoided the steps; the place where Bruce sat in the morning to pull on his work boots. The door was unlocked. Laura pushed into the house slowly, familiar as dropping off to sleep. She expected, despite herself, to see him seated at the table. The old man's grey moccasins were side by side, waiting for him to step into. Laura looked down into their worn soles. The wool was flattened by years, by the weight and warmth of him. She sank down; touched one slipper the way a dead pet might be touched, gently, with some misgiving. She slipped a hand into the shoe, felt the indents from his toes, the ghost of his shape. The floorboards in the kitchen were dusty, dark with grime. By the fridge, the place where Laura stood on her sixteenth birthday, modeling the fashionable jeans Bruce could not afford. Kath was there in the path she wore with baby Vik cradled in her arms. Sad circuit of the kitchen table. All three in tears.

Some aspects of the house showed in their fastidiousness and precise arrangement the old man's lifelong ways; unsettling clues revealed his decline. On the sink a bowl, meticulously rinsed and drained. Flies gathered on the rim of the pot, a garden for porridge-mold. Washing hung from the line, pegged evenly across. Paint-stained overalls, faded shirts and socks, stiff with sweat. Books and papers were strewn across the kitchen table, piles of clothes discarded in the hall. Yet the rifle, freshly polished, hung gleaming on the wall. Three buckets of grey-water sat forgotten by the door. Laura could not bring herself to look out onto the parched veggie patch.

*In the city, they're vulnerable as,* Bruce said.

*Why?*

Laura looked up from the tomatoes, punnets of small plants.

*My old man, he kept us alive,* Bruce said. *Times was hard. Other people starved. You grow your own food love, that's security. You'll be right if you've got a place to grow free food.*

Bruce's bedroom. Laura stepped into his smell. The Palmolive soap and straw-bale, the outdoors-sweat. There was something bitter beneath the print of clothes and hair on air. Laura pulled back his winter bedding, covering nose with hand. At the heart of the sweat-soaked sheets, the yellow stain, still wet. She recoiled. The window was warped by weather. Straining, Laura scraped it up. A flood of fresh dry air rolled in. Like an old man herself, Laura pressed heavily on the sill. Wind blew across the valley, oven-hot. She leaned out into the heat. He had never once asked her for help. She closed her eyes.

In the kitchen there was torn newspaper stuck to the fridge door.

Sheep farm: experienced worker wanted.

Kyree district. Pays cash. Immediate start.

## 20.

Laura sat in the old man's place. The kitchen was sharp with Pine-o-Cleen. Vik tore a tissue into scraps, a fragile white mound. She watched the baby's mouth, an anemone at Hien's finger, a small pink O.

Is she too hot darling? Vik said to Hien. Is she burning up?

Cup of tea? Laura said brightly.

You look well Lor, Hien said. Done a good job with the place.

He swayed from side to side; Kate lay in the prow of his arms. Vik helped herself to a scone.

Where's Luc?

She caught the snap of pain in Laura's face before Laura pushed back her chair. Vik wished she could snatch the question back.

Exams, Laura said.

She turned away, bent to the intricacies of brewing tea.

Kate was tiny, but they said she was okay. In hospital Vik rode her fear. Time rose and broke in intervals. Moments of calm grew shorter until, in the early hours of the morning, there was no respite. Vik felt herself a bulkhead, crashed upon. Hien's hand, slippery with her sweat. Between contractions Vik kept hearing the old man's orders for birthing difficult lambs. Motherhood, by way of hooves and fleece. Afterwards, in the weeks Kate remained in hospital, swaddled in plastic tubes; when she grew beneath bright lights as though a greenhouse plant; when her skin and eyes were mustard and her lungs, as Vik imagined them, two pressed buds, Vik and Hien went home by themselves to float. Rudderless, they bobbed about their normal lives, paddling through the day in the wake of odd jobs and loose ends; anything to fill, to occupy their empty hands. Like children at a pet-store, they went each morning and afternoon to press their noses against the glass and watch Kate

sleep. The ache Vik felt was visceral. She imagined a desert oasis, as seen by those dying, very slowly, of thirst.

Nurses brought Kate out to be fed at specific times that only they seemed to understand. Practiced, practical and brisk, they handled Kate like she was rubber and would not break. Vik held the small, warm body like she was on display. It was theatre; she played the mother, thoroughly ill-cast. They said it would get easier, Hien had every faith, he said. But by the time they were given permission to strap Kate into their car and take her off, Vik felt convinced there had been some mistake. What could they do with her, such a frail and fragile human? How could they possibly keep her alive? Who had entrusted them with Kate's care? Perhaps if her own mother had been there to show the way, Vik might have felt secure. Instead, to Kate's lone swimmer she was an island, far out at sea.

Isn't she beautiful? Hien whispered, leaning over the back of the couch.

Vik rocked the bassinet beside her as though keeping something at bay. Kyree hospital's call waiting, amateur Tchaikovsky, began again for the third time.

Hien said, We'll be there Saturday; you can find out everything you need to know then.

Vik shrugged his hand away. Her pen's ink stamen clicked, rapid-fire, in and out.

Can you take her darling? Vik said. Lor should have the list of stuff to get. She mentioned a bar thing for the shower last time we spoke –

Hien held the still-sleeping child like a shield, kissed the top of Vik's head.

I'll be in the studio, he said.

In the old man's kitchen, Vik listened to Hien and Laura talk. How easily words passed between them: different species from different worlds. Laura moved around the fresh-wiped kitchen wearing the childhood apron, among their childhood pots and pans. Some

tight wet knot in Vik's centre – one she hadn't felt consciously before – had loosened when she first came through the door. With every cup of tea her sister brewed, with every sandwich, kind look and smile, Vik felt a little more soothed, more sure. Now Laura took Kate from Hien; she cooed.

You're good with her, Vik said.

A bolt tightened in Laura's jaw. She buried her gaze in the baby's face.

How was Dad? Laura said.

Vik described their visit to the hospital on the way up to the farm. Bruce had called her 'Mum'. Laura gasped. Hien's hand slid onto Vik's leg and capped the knee.

He said he'd "get it back", Vik said. I think he meant Cairnlea.

Laura fell into the chair, bones turned fabric. The baby pealed. Tiny fists, tiny furled flowers. Vik took the squirming child, a stranger. Kate looked up into her mother's eyes: knowing, Buddha-wise. They stared at each other completing silent calculations. Vik knew that she had brought one life into the world at the expense of another; it had been too long since she's been back. Kate's face crumpled. Her mouth stretched, wide and gummy, her eyes pinched into slits. She screamed. Vik felt the tingle of fresh tears begin behind her nose. The kettle hissed, whistled, howled. The kitchen filled with steam.

Buried beneath their baby, Vik and Hien were no use around the farmhouse. It made no difference; Laura had already washed, scrubbed and cleaned, and if she hadn't, then Vik suspected she would have found a way to do it all herself. Laura showed her hands like two dry sponges. Said she was glad Vik hadn't seen the place as it had been. Made a face like eating lemons. Complained of constant ache in her back. Despite Laura's hysterical descriptions of the house when she arrived, to Vik, the inside looked very similar to the way it always had, though the furnishings and curtains were a little more faded, a little worn. Each room remained a sepia reproduction of itself as it had been years ago, all colour muddied, or bleached to bone. The effect was that time seemed to be moving backward,

where it wasn't standing still. Each time Vik visited, she almost expected to come upon herself, a tiny girl.

It was the outside that was drastically altered; Vik could see that now. Though she supposed the place had been deteriorating for some time, she hadn't really noticed. The slip had happened incrementally, bit by bit. Her vocation might be measuring land, yet when it came to the farm she was blind. It was *home*. She no longer even saw it. It was what it was, and the old man took care of it. On some unarticulated level, Vik had believed the place would go on as it always had, forever. She hadn't thought she needed to watch out for it; hadn't realised that the place, like her old man, was no more certain, enduring, than rain. That last Christmas, Vik had certainly found the place desolate and depressing, but she always felt that way about the farm. As soon as she arrived she longed to get away back to the city, where things were aesthetically pleasing and clean. She thought nothing of it. It was only in light of Bruce's condition that Vik could observe the drastic wearing of the place. The house was falling into the dry landscape. Paint worn away by weather. Verandah sagging. Foundations shifted like rheumatic bones, like it hurt the wooden skeleton to stay still. Lopsided, the house gave the impression that soon it would slide all the way into dust. In turn, the landscape was wearing back to rock. Every day, great clouds of dust and dirt blew away across the valley. Hardly anything would grow but weed. The valley, like the moon, a monotonal surface. Hien took to sitting on the verandah with Kate, sipping tea, weathering the heat of the day. He rocked the baby, sang her songs. Despite the grim conditions, for him it was a holiday from work, a break from broken things. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

In the long hot hours, waiting for Bruce to be discharged, Vik found herself at a loose end, wedged in between worlds. She moved from room to room, picking things up, putting them back. She hovered. Theoretically she was inundated. In practice, the world run by Hien and Laura had closed over on her usefulness. Each day, Laura worked around the yard. Her to-

do lists, long and complex as algebraic sums, were continuously updated. Vik sat on the front step, watching. She saw her sister grow backwards into the skin of farm jobs. The muscle memory remained. Laura's city body fell away.

It was a hot evening in a chain of hot evenings. Laura used the vacuum to suck flies up. Easiest way to get rid of them, she said. Beer bottles ran with sweat. The three of them sat splayed around the table, panting like dogs. Vik hoped the flies would not turn maggot inside the vacuum bag. The debris of their dinner was spread across the table, picked through. Hien motioned at the spectrum of coloured pencils and papers on the sideboard by the door, his hand a listless flag. Every action happened in slow motion, retarded by heat.

Whatcha working on? Hien said to Laura.

From a menu of rice-paper rolls, thwarted by the limitations of Kyree Coles, he had settled on coleslaw, he had settled on chops. Laura eased herself up. Vik felt the radiant heat of her sister's enthusiasm. She used a magazine to shift the air across her face, like being breathed on. Laura cleared space for her papers with slow sweep of arm. Vik craned to see. Wood on wood, her chair shrieked across the floor. Laura and Hien ignored her, engrossed as they were in Laura's maps.

All this here's cleared land, Laura was saying, shuffling the first illustration.

Her forefinger traced the areas shaded red. The whole map, stained with crimson strokes.

I wanna start replanting. Rehabilitate the place. Be good as new in a few years time, I reckon.

Vik found herself standing. She clutched her hands, a beating heart of fingers. There were other maps, spanning years. Each was identical in design, coloured according to Laura's plans. Overgrown by Derwent green, in ten years time, the red was but a memory. Hien touched the small black square, reproduced on each page.

This the house? he said.



Vik took the last map, reading its terrain. It was the dense, closely treed landscape of her childhood, rendered in 2D. The land as it was before Kath disappeared. Laura had gotten advice, she said. The land was stuffed, she said. She had connections, she said, who could help. The valley could recover, with a bit of TLC. A kookaburra cried out beyond the house. The laugh echoed across the drought-stroked paddocks.

Whaddaya reckon, Viko?

Hien and Laura turned in unison to peer up into her face. Their eyes were wet and bright for a moment; then Laura looked away. Kate's milk leaked, dampening the front of Vik's shirt.

Next morning, Vik woke up alone in the old man's bed. Hien was gone. An heirloom owl, a Wedgewood dinner set, the statue of a naked boy, chipped, broken, in pieces, waiting to be restored. Vik listened to the familiar sounds of Laura making toast. She rolled over. Years had passed since they last lived here; no time had passed at all. She looked down at Kate, angelic in sleep, curled in the white bassinet.

Vik thought, *These sounds belong to you: talk-back drone, magpie call, the scrape of knife on bread.*

There, beneath the bedside table, Vik caught sight of a white triangle. In a room so scrubbed that the floorboards had turned honey, where the furniture was arranged at neat, tight angles to the walls, the errant slice of paper was startling as snow. Vik leaned down. She held her breath to pull the paper out, careful not to wake the baby, whose breath, Vik felt on her face as she stretched across, was sweet. Fifty cents for a dozen at the Kyree milkbar, the milk-bottle lollies Vik had so loved now made up her daughter's mouth.

It took a moment for Vik to understand what she was seeing. Thick, creamy paper. Kyree postmark. She held the letter on her lap. The familiar letterhead began the panic-tremble in Vik's hands; carried it like blood back to her heart. She read. She sat. She tried to comprehend. Whatever had prompted Bruce to consider selling it had been sealed in the

vault of his disease. He had never mentioned the plan to anyone, as far as Vik was aware. Working together, both Kyree surveyor and real estate agents had included their quotes for subdivision of the farm, and the subsequent sale of lots. Each letter was dated three years past. Floored by sudden sadness, Vik understood. Bruce had known enough to sense that he couldn't go on; was already too sick to get out. How long had the old man paddled about in his dimming pool before Peterson finally fished him out? Perhaps – the most desperate thought – he had wanted to reach them all along to ask for help. But, like these plans to sell the farm, had forgotten the shape and chronology of his idea as soon as it was formed. The disease replaced lucidity with blank slate. As the drought wore on and the sheep died, how often had Bruce looked about him and wondered what he was still doing there, if he even recognised the place at all? Vik wept silently, tears welling up from groundwater grief.

Viko? You up?

Laura's voice, a disembodied whisper through the crack in the door. Vik pushed the papers down beneath the sheet. The baby stirred, mewling.

I'm awake, Vik said.

Laura padded across the floor. She sat carefully, sending ripples through old mattress springs. Vik looked at her sister's profile, the familiar valleys and slopes. Laura turned, blue eyes like silver-bark in the drawn gloom.

I want to talk to you about the farm, she said.

Vik fed Kate and listened to Laura speak about why they had to keep the farm; how important it was to the old man, not only as his home – his life's work – but in terms of his condition.

It might be the only thing that makes sense to him, she said. He loves it here. It would kill him to be taken away.

Laura said that she was sorry for not speaking to Vik about her plans for rehabilitation; that the decision about what to do with the land should have been theirs to make together. And, she said, she understood that Vik's life was in the city.

I'm not asking you to stay, Laura said. I knew you wouldn't want to. I'm only asking that we keep the farm; that you let me stay here with Dad and look after him for as long as –

Vik took Laura's hand across the sheet. Kate was hot water-bottle heavy in her arms. The trill of earnestness in Laura's voice marked some deeper anxiety, some desperation that threatened to erupt. Vik felt the pages crackle against her thigh.

She said, What about Luc?

Laura looked away. Vik persisted.

What does he think about all this?

Laura spoke carefully, as though Vik were still a child.

I don't want to live in Sydney, Vik. Dad needs me.

But surely –

Listen, Laura said. This is our *home*.

She had gone all pinched and white. She sat staring at her knees, crunching the bones in Vik's hand. Vik knew she should speak up now; break news of the old man's intention to sell. But she sensed that there were things driving her sister back to the farm, to the old man's bedside, that she did not understand. Some fierce need. Intellectually, Vik understood the importance of the place in the story of their childhood, but then she had worked so hard to get free. What had happened here in the past was so tightly braided together with dark feelings: abandonment, anger and self-pity, a knot of raw nerve-endings. The idea of all the work that lay before them spurred a phantom ache in her arms and back. Though Vik could not trust Laura's motives, she admired her sister's certainty. If to stay was what Laura wanted, and wanted desperately, who was Vik to deny her that? When they had already lost so much?

Vik said, Here.

She passed Kate, warm and plump with milk.

I just wanna be here to make things right, Laura said, rocking.

Vik recalled the land as it had been long before they carved the farm out of hills. Laura would grow more trees, like turning back a clock. Shifting down in the bed, Vik covered the letters with her legs. Laura stood cooing, whispering with Kate. She pulled back the curtain; bright, buttery light fell across the floor.

You're a good girl, aren't you darling? A good girl!

Well, we can reassess any time you like, Vik said. You ever want to leave –

Laura whipped back from the window, the baby in her arms. Her long wheat hair: sheafs of gold. She narrowed her eyes. Even her posture was Kath's. With a jolt of recognition, Vik's hand found her throat.

## 21.

Laura walked through dust and was absorbed by the cool dark interior of the shed. The ocean seemed a dream, so far away. New posts, rolls of plastic hosing, roofing tin in sheets and bundles of wooden stakes were stacked along one wall. She used a rusty Stanley knife to cut through the tough black string binding the lucerne together. They had once lived in a square of cleared land ringed around by bush. Now as then, they kept mainly to the house. Red rolling acres hemmed them in as the impenetrable trees had done. The house, a raft they clung to in the midst of a big, dead sea.

Every evening Laura took Luc's call, whispering for privacy from her childhood room. She understood his point. She had, as he said, made the decision to stay in Kyree without his input or consent. He felt locked out. She felt, palpably, his hurt. Their conversation was at times cold and silvery as the Harbor at night, their words salty, their silences deep. Other nights the argument crashed and roared, orchestral. Still others their words came halting, brittle, raw. Laura ached to hold Luc in her arms. They cried together. She pressed the plastic receiver to her cheek as though it might become his hand. He didn't understand what she had to make up for, her penitence, and could not ever know. She wished he could come down to Kyree. But he might uncover the truth about the place, about her, and that was worse than the weight of his confusion. Worse than the onslaught of his sorrow down the phone. She said she was not leaving; he was still loved.

She said, Please, no. Not yet. Don't come.

She went around the house, arms full of grass. The veggie garden was a brown square, the chook shed empty. Her time, measured out in tasks. Change washers. Clean gutters. Collect wood. Sheep skittered as she approached. One wore exposed skull at its brow. A neighbour's dog, a barbed wire fence. Once wounded, the sheep's skin did not knit back. The bone showed, grey as wool.

*Bloody mongrel, Bruce had told Laura on the phone. Saw him chasin' her and everything, right into the fence. Still, heard he got bit last week. Fifth dog in the district, they reckon. Heaps more snakes this season, up round houses. Heaps more dogs dead.*

Inside, Vik was pacing up and down. Phone to ear, she held the baby like a purse. Laura spread hay beneath the bare clothesline. Sheep nuzzled dirt. Pungent grassiness of sheep dung, glossy liquorice, steeped the air. Laura waved a fly away. She watched her sister through fly-screen. Vik's voice got louder, receded, got louder as she strode up and back along the hall. The one-sided conversation, a small wave lapping, rolled away from Laura, on backyard shore.

No, Vik said.

That's not acceptable. No. They'll have to redo the plans.

Well, tell them its non-negotiable.

Well tell them to email me.

Well tell –

The door swung open with a thunk. Vik stood on the back step squinting, legs planted, mouth made of fierce lines. She barked into her phone. The baby dangled, gurgling. Observing, Laura felt the sudden urge to get away.

This is important, Vik shrilled. Understand?

Laura listened, cringing.

When the sheep were fed, Laura crunched across the drive. She stepped over the baggy fence, into the first paddock. The sun rose, she turned her collar up. At the gully, she looked down into the ravine. Deeper than she remembered, it was worn away by years. Luc talked about erosion. His bad moods were made of melting ice, factory smoke, rainforest chips

and pests. Without roots to sew soil, the fabric of the earth had torn. A tree had fallen down across the old man's fence. *Gully fence* went into the book, neat grey letters. Laura made a mental note to ask Luc about replanting and repair; whether if she brought back the trees the big gully sore would heal. Then, remembering, she quietly crossed the question off.

An ambulance was winding up the drive. Laura turned to watch the small white square. As greeting, the siren coughed, allowing a red-blue flash, a short wail. She started running back down the hill. The dam was a crater. No yabbies now. The ambulance parked inside the yard. Vik stepped down into the sun. She was too far away to be made out, anonymous in long dark skirt. She bounced the baby in her arms. It was not a soothing action, but anxious. The image was familiar; Laura skidded still to watch. There on the edge of the shimmering brown valley was the corrugated house, the tank stand. Dominating, as ocean is to beach, the rich blue sky made up the scene. Vik clutched the baby. She stood straight, as though it was her posture that held back encroaching trouble. A paramedic got out of the cab, went round to open up the doors.

When the police closed down the official search for Kath, Laura and Bruce had stood right where the ambulance was parked. Rain rushed over gutters, soaking the walls of the house. Bruce held Vik as she held Kate. Vik's red face, pressed into the crook of his neck, the mud from her boots on his back.

*I want my mu-um!* Vik sobbed.

Bruce held her like he had forgotten she was there. His hand turned unconscious circles on her vinyl back. Laura sucked her knuckles, tasted dirt. The weight of Vik's body forced his posture back into his heels. Coatless, he shivered. Laura watched the play of muscles through his translucent shirt.

Bruce called, *Wait!*

His voice gurgled.

*Just, please. Wait.*

He transferred Vik to hip. The constable loaded the big wet rope into the van. He did not turn around. A young officer, new to the job, flicked Bruce a pitying smile. Growling, the German Shepherd he restrained pawed at mud.

*She's still out there, Bruce called. For Christ's sake!*

The constable faced them, grim. Bunched, the muscles in his jaw strained against his feeling.

*We'll be going now, the constable said. I'm – sorry.*

The caravan of vans and cars was already winding away down the drive. Laura watched her father watch them go. They were on their own. She was not ashamed of the relief she felt; that came later. Vik's sobs were all consuming.

*Cup of tea, Dad?* Laura said.

Bruce stood slackly.

*Dad? Tea?*

Down in the yard, Bruce stared about him, red eyes watering in metallic heat. Vik had him round the waist. They swayed together. Laura stepped over the paddock fence.

*Cooee, she called. You right?*

Bruce licked and licked his lips. The medic unfurled a wheelchair. Laura saw liver spots, splattered mud, on the old man's face and hands. He gripped his knees. Vik hung back, directing the medic as he helped Bruce sit.

*Hello, love!* Bruce said to Laura as she came into the shade.

The sound of Vik's voice, drilling the medic for facts, was shrill as cockatoo screech.

*But how could this happen so quickly? she said. Can you tell me that? We were here six months ago, and he was fine! How do you explain that? He was fine.*



Laura touched the old man's hand.

Hi Dad. You right?

Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!

He spoke thickly, as though he held soup in his mouth. Laura kissed his tissue-paper cheek and took the handles of his chair.

That Elena then, love? Bruce said.

He twisted around in his chair. Vik broke off. The medic backed away.

Dad, Vik said. It's *me*. Viktoria. Your daughter?

Who?

Laura felt the blade of the old man's shoulder, sharp through his skin.

That's Viko, Dad. Your youngest girl. You're home now, in Kyree.

Kath, love. This some kind of –

He shook his head. Laura straightened, catching Vik's eye. There was nowhere to hide in a sister's face, or eyes.

Let's get you inside, Laura choked.

They went between the house and the shed, past the newly painted pickets lining the boundary of the yard. Vik went ahead to open the back door. The sheep milled. Bruce broke off his garbled speech. The back of his neck, visible above the hospital-pressed collar of his shirt, was deeply lined and pink. He stiffened. Laura felt it through the handles of the chair. On the clothesline, Vik's washing, white flags of many nappies, hung crackling in the heat. Bruce tilted back his head. The silver branches of the gum stretched like silver bones against a molten sky. Vik turned, waiting at the door.

The old man called, Remember when Lor fell?

He laughed, pointing up into the bough.

Never seen so much, so much –

Blood? Laura said.

She chuckled. Vik laid her cheek against Kate's crown. Her tears seeped into the baby's hair, soft and fine as embroidery silk.

Year of the fires? he said.

Laura bit her lip.

That's right, Dad.

Show us your scar, then!

Laura came around the chair. It was him. She could see her old man there, looking out through his degraded face. The breath caught in her chest. His eyebrows went up as if to say, well? What are you waiting for? She lifted her dreds with both hands. She bent over his legs the way she might bend over the sink to rinse shampoo. The dreds spilled into his lap like many snakes. Bruce found the place at the base of her skull, the crescent scar, where the doctor sewed her up.

Still there! he said.

Vik laughed through her tears. Laura grinned. Bruce turned his face up to the tree.

Been meaning to chop it down, he said. Get round to it, one've these days.

Two rosellas soared in place of clouds. The old man watched. Staring up into the sun their feathers pierced by light. Laura saw that she had been right; his memory was stored in the land.

Lor?

Vik's voice trembled; the baby wined. Laura was reminded of Vik's grown face, so beautiful, even with the swollen eyes. She wanted to scoop her sister up and give comfort.

He'll burn, Vik cautioned. You stay out much longer.

Laura went to Vik. Their arms were each the right length.

Later, Laura helped the old man from one chair to the next. He touched the wooden table top, feeling the marks and burns as braille.

Thanks a mill, he said. Better not stay, but. Mum'll be expecting me for –

Dad? Vik said.

She sounded scared.

Bruce said, Well, that's that then. Time for me to take my leave of you.

Laura knelt down. They were eye to eye. She held his hand. She spoke quietly, the way she spoke to the sheep to calm them in their pen, the way she had observed Bruce speak to the sheep, the horse, the chooks, the dogs a million times. He calmed. His hands caressed each other in his lap.

How 'bout a nice cup of tea? Laura said quietly. Yeah, Dad? A nice hot cuppa?

## 22.

They sat in the shade of the verandah, like sitting in a tepid bath. It was better than being indoors, where the drone of flies was, Vik thought, the sound of sanity slipping. She was sick of the heat, no dam to cool off in. Sweat gathered in the creases of elbows, at wrists, behind ears, and itched. Her ankles were two ripe fruits. Though no cooler outside, at least on the verandah there was the view across the valley. The sense of space, a physical illusion, diminished the closeness of the heat. And the old man enjoyed being outside, harsh as sunburn though it was. He was more himself in the open air.

Coupla young ones there, Bruce said.

A trio of grey-black magpies swooped down to the yard fence. He frowned.

Bit late in the season, isn't it? For hatchlings?

Is it? Vik said.

She worked the spoon of porridge toward his mouth. Bruce was straining forward in his chair, squinting from birds to sun. *Rousing up*, as he might have called it, once.

Usually come out in spring, he said. Am I right?

Look it's alright Dad, Vik said. Don't worry, okay? It *is* spring. Eat up now, c'mon.

There was a flicker of something in the lined face, like the twitch of a curtain. But he opened his mouth obediently and allowed her to spoon his breakfast in.

It was her last day on the farm. Hien was driving out to pick them up. Did she want to leave? The old man's fumbling and confusion were hard to watch. She felt relief that she could get away. Not since she was a schoolgirl had she stayed in Kyree so long. And she felt sorrow. How clearly she saw now that the valley, like the old man, had changed. Beyond the house the land had reduced to bone, all green fleshiness gone. Only the lie of the land remained familiar. The hills belonged to the nightmares she suffered, bad dreams

in which she ran through trees, looking for something that she could not name, and could never quite uncover.

Geez I'm glad to see you love.

He reached for Vik, stroked her cheek. They held each other's gaze. She experienced the unsettling sensation that neither of them were who they appeared to be. He looked away, squinting. She took his hand.

Vik said, You right?

What's that?

I said: you okay Dad?

He shrugged, like slipping off a coat.

Sometimes I get this feeling. Was only yesterday, and you were a little girl.

*How can I leave?* Vik thought. *How can I stay?*

The last magpie launched, a dark blur.

Bit late in the season for young maggies love, the old man said. Wouldn't you say?

After breakfast, Bruce and Laura *took exercise* along the drive, as the doctors said he should.

By jingo, whaddya think I am? A bloody – thing of the manor? Bruce laughed and said.

Laura pushed Kate in the pram. Vik watched them from the house, a strange sight. The woman in the faded jeans and broad straw hat, the shuffling, stooped old man, the jerking pram continuously chocked by stones and dirt. Dwarfed by the sepia sprawl, the rolling burnished hills, they promenaded down the drive, going nowhere but to the end, and back. Vik wondered what they would have become, Laura and her, if their mother had been there. They were the old man's product, all that *good training* as he liked to say, had made them who they were. She watched Laura squat to clear dust from pram wheels made for city

streets. Their lives, Vik thought, would always turn around the mineshaft of their mother's absence. There was no getting away from the hole she had left inside them. In another future, Kath might have been there to care for Bruce. But it was just the three of them again. And again, Vik was leaving.

There was just time to do something Vik had hoped to do since she arrived. She took down Kath's drawings from the wardrobe in Bruce's room; she was not surprised to find them there, where they had always been. As far as she knew, Bruce never looked at them. Most likely, he had forgotten they existed. It had been years since she had seen the drawings herself, but they were as she remembered. Made long before Kath had children, before she had developed her true craft, the drawings were old and showed, from what little Vik knew of such things, an artistic immaturity. They were not very good. Vik understood their age, now that she could decipher the scrawled dates. But as a child, she had believed the two little girls to be Laura and herself. Indeed, there was a likeness in the eyes and mouths, the hair; perhaps all little girls look the same. What the drawings lacked in skill they made up for in – Vik searched for the right word – emotion. The soulful eyes, the darkly shaded backgrounds, the two little girls reproduced with nightmarish frequency on every page. Something about the execution and the frequency with which they appeared said that they had been important. Who were they?

Bruce had said, *You must be Elena*. What had he meant? Was the clue here, in these charcoal faces? As a little girl, Vik had pawed over the drawings, searching for clues. There must be some key in the faces, she had thought, that would unlock her mother for her. Kath grew more translucent with every passing year. As a little girl Vik had hoped that the drawings might provide some vital clue, preventing her mother from disappearing altogether. Now, as Vik sat on the floorboards sifting the yellow pages, she realised that it wasn't so much her mother that she wanted to call into being, but a whole complex landscape, which was the past.

Laura looked up from the sink when Vik came through.

What's that? she said, pointing at the roll of paper Vik held.

Hot enough for you? Vik said. How was your walk?

She leaned into the pram and touched her sleeping daughter's face. Installed on the verandah, the old man too had his head thrown back in sleep.

You're *not*, Laura hissed. You can't show that to him. He's struggling enough as it is. She was on Vik in a second, pulling her from the pram into the hall. She closed the kitchen door.

Get off, Laura. I'm not *doing anything*. I just wanna ask a few questions.

Grow up, Laura spat. You're not stupid.

She eyed the drawing like she wanted to rip it into scraps.

He's not up to it, Vik.

Laura's fingers, five barbs in Vik's soft fleshy upper-arm.

Luc must be a saint, Vik said. You manage *him* like this?

Outside Bruce gave a quick, cut cry. Both whipped around. Vik tried to fling the hall door open; Laura was too close. They tumbled together out into the heat. The old man lay on his side, cheek to slat. Laura wailed, calling his name. She flung herself down, hands at shoulders and his face.

Bruce murmured, Dunno what –

He rocked, a turtle on its back. The whites of his eyes looked green.

Easy Dad, Laura said.

Vik worked a cushion beneath his head. They crouched, stroking. The old man's fingers roamed the air; Laura took his hand.

Gonna have quite a shiner there Dad, Laura said.

Vik became transfixed by the old man's face. It was the expression of a man in a blind taste-test, encountering a familiar but elusive flavour.

Dad? she said. What is it?

Storm's coming, he said.

Vik and Laura stared at each other across the old man's form. Vik rolled up her eyes to plug the tears. Laura stroked his rumpled brow. Her voice was winter-sad, still and blue and quiet.

Oh, Dad, she said. It hasn't rained in *years*.

They slid their hands under the old man's shoulders, sharing in the weight. Vik felt the knot of muscle in his back, a piece of chord not yet frayed by illness or old age. They hefted him up onto the rattan couch.

Bruce said, Me head hurts something shocking. What's for lunch?

They spent the afternoon on the verandah playing cards. The old man lay back in his chair, a bag of frozen peas at his head, melting through a towel. Beside him, Kate lay cooing in her pram. Despite the sweetness of the scene, Vik felt unaccountably bereft. Something in the innocence of the game she played with Laura, the quiet domesticity of their closeness, the little need for conversation, made her chest hurt. She wanted to stop time; to preserve the bittersweet feeling, one she could not wholly articulate, of being somehow whole. A magpie scrolled across the sky. She would be gone in a matter of hours. Laura slapped down her cards. She grinned.

Twenty-one!

Before Vik could reveal her hand, a peel of thunder broke and rolled across the valley. She gasped. Laura clapped hand to mouth. Vik saw her shock reflected in her sister's face. The old man looked at them and laughed. Thunder reverberated between hills, washing back and forth like eddies over rocks. It was the sound of their childhood, a long-forgotten voice. Then, it belonged to heartbreak; now was miraculous. Laura leaped up. Cards like leaves



scattered across the boards. She craned over the verandah rail, arm outstretched. Her palm came back wet. Her joy filled the sail of Vik's heart as if by wind. Laura vaulted over the railing, a move perfected years ago. Squatting in the yard she turned her face up to the sky, and opened her mouth.

Can you taste it? Vik said.

So naked was Laura's hope, that Vik was grateful when the rain fell harder and forced her sister's gaze away.

Later, Vik came to stand by Laura at the kitchen window. Hien had been delayed. Burst rivers, closed bridges, the muddying of dust. They watched together without touching. A piece of earth broke off and slipped down the face of West hill. Laura's shoulders shook. Water rushed across the yard, deep rivulets of mud. Water swirled along the drive. Water wore grooves in the ground, a liquid plough. Water arched over the gutters. Water came in below back door. Water drowning Laura's seedlings, washing topsoil away. Water sent the chooks prematurely to their perches, huddled in sodden clumps. Water, it seemed to Vik, like anger. Flood water, where dust had been before. It was still hot. The heat brought violence to the storm. Vik's arms bristled with static. The valley, a bowl brimming with light and rain.

At least nothing will burn, Laura said. If lightning strikes.

She chewed at red-raw knuckles. Vik held Kate in one hand, slid the other around Laura's waist. In the room, the sad percussion of water on water in buckets, bowls and pans. It grew dark. Strobes of lightening flicked across the velvet sky. The valley lit up.

## 23.

The old man sat on the rattan couch, red blanket spread across his lap in defiance of the weather. He stared out across the valley through rows of grey-water succulents, dangling from chains and hooks beneath the gutter. Laura stepped into the pool of shade, from the bright shallows of the yard. She pulled off her gardening gloves.

You right Dad?

The house was chalk-white, freshly painted. The crisp chemical smell of paint steeped the air. Laura touched the old man's shoulder. He started, smiled, and shifted the blanket on his knee. Afternoon made watercolour of the light. The sound of new chooks clucking, gentle castanets, could be heard behind the house.

I can't see the sheep, Bruce said. Buggers better not be loose!

Laura busied herself, scraping the squat wooden table between them.

Hungry Dad? she said brightly. Having pasta for tea.

Could be, he said. Can't think what I had for –

Lunch? Beans on toast.

The old man pursed his lips. In the paddock across the drive, lines of saplings stretched from fence to fence. She was on to her second notebook, catalogues of work.

In the wake of Vik's departure, Laura established a routine. It was not so different from the shape of the days when she was young: farm work was a natural scaffold for time. Daily meals, girders for their waking hours. She rose early and went to bed late. Sometimes she barely slept for keeping watch. Time had turned liquid for the old man. History and the past, borne on asymmetric tides, washed up into his present. Morning and night lost their purpose; hours were elastic and unformed. Sometimes he woke at 3:00 am asking for dinner. Sometimes at noon he tried to light the stove. Laura coped the way that he had taught her: by aligning time to jobs and lashing Bruce to the pillar that they formed. Head

down, she laboured, sticking close by to the house. If he called out, she came running. Wheelbarrow wheel dug a circuit in a groove around the yard. Days moved forward in the strike of pen through list. Laura made great progress, never veering from her own strict schedule. It was a technique applied by new mothers bound to the house: the eking of days in the allotment of tasks. The reality of Bruce's disease served only to strengthen the daily timetable. Managing the condition contained, in itself, an intrinsic meter: twice-daily pills, afternoon naps, bath time, bed. Their lives, clockwork in the maintenance of the old man's health, which was on a slow steady slide downhill, and in the repair of the land, which might yet come back, alive.

Need a hand, love? the old man said eagerly, at the beginning of each day.

Nah, you sit tight.

Laura set the radio on the verandah rail and turned the sound right up. The newsreader spoke of water pumped up from rural rivers into town. It didn't matter which day.

I'll be just over there, Laura said. Need anything, you give me a shout.

The old man cocked his head, listening to news report.

Strange, he said. Why hasn't father mentioned the drought?

When the dinner was made and served, Laura carried bowls of pasta back out onto the porch. The sky was harsh with stars. Jazz played, scales running against insect song.

Been eaten alive yet? she said. Dad?

The couch was bare but for the flaccid blanket. Panic fingered Laura's gut. Her cry sounded feeble, muffled by encroaching night it did not echo, but died. She scanned paddocks for human shape, for white against ink, his skin. The valley was a bowl of shadow. She did not bother with her boots.

For blind minutes, Laura called out, sprinting through the dark. Then she checked the machinery shed. Her socks were wild with burs. Light leaked beneath the roller-door. Manually she crunched it up. Blinking, crouched on hands and knees, she surfaced up into the light. Bruce turned from the tractor, grease gun held aloft.

Hello love! he said, grinning. There y'are. How's the pottery coming?

She gaped. His whiskers sanded back her cheek. Bruce bent to his work, applying gun to wheel. The grease was sticky, like coagulated blood. She watched. She didn't know what to say; he was okay. He worked over each nipple, lubricating with the gun. The task unfolded as it had a million times before. It seemed he followed silent instructions. They were stored in his skin.

*Why these? Laura thought. And not others?*

Why were the greasing neurons spared, when others were deadwood? She drew a hand across her face, smearing the corners of her mouth. It was the old man's gesture, passed along with chin and eyes. The old grease as honey seeped out from the joint as the fresh grease piped in. Laura watched him lean to polish, lovingly, with a square of rag.

Dinner's ready, Laura said as evenly as she could.

Just gotta do the –

His eyes rolled up, searching for the word. It hurt him when what had been unconscious disappeared. He mimed using the chainsaw, forcing the link from hand to brain. Laura coaxed him the way she might coax a feral kitten, luring it with food. He gave in and replaced the gun against the shadow of its shape against the wall.

Teeth're as blunt as anything, Bruce was saying. Couldn't cut butter.

He allowed himself to be led back to the house. It was deep-water black. The windows were lit, bright yellow squares. She held the old man's elbow. Something scuttled in the dirt, croaking. They leaned into each other. Together they felt their way across the yard.

All through dinner, they chatted like old friends. He called her Viktoria throughout, but was cheerful. The strange, contorted faces, his uncertainty and fear, had melted. He was himself. Laura fought the impulse to lean across, touch his hand, make light of the memory-loss. It felt a joke they had cooked up together. Swept up by a sense of wellbeing, the euphoria that comes from having endured something and survived, it was easy in the after dinner glow, while they sipped their strong tea, to believe that they were through the worst of it; that the old man would get well. She told a story about the sheep. He laughed, snorting into his mug.

Needs replacing, he said then. Inside the tap. Last time was more'n five years ago.

What's that? Laura said. What does?

His mouth worked to find the word, failed. Frustrated, he jabbed a teaspoon at the sink. Laura turned, watched a perfect bead of water form, pearl and drop. Another was already gathering at the spout.

The shower took too long to get warm, so Laura had it cold. The tap went on while she scrubbed skin pink with bald face washer, blotched brown with blood from childhood nose. It went on again to rinse. Bathing was a fractured thing. Not a pleasure, but another job. Tomorrow, Laura decided, she would take the old man with her while she worked. It was safer than leaving him alone. Perhaps she had been wrong to wrap him up in cotton wool.

In fresh clean clothes she padded down the hall. He was there. Just like that. He was there, sitting at the kitchen table, rolling a cigarette from her tobacco-pouch. Her pulse beat fast as fly-wing. Laura's hands flew together and crashed.

Luca?

She had forgotten the solidity and bulk of him. He encased her. Laura felt something fall away. She sank into Luc's chest holding tufts of his shirt in her fists.

How's Bruce? Luc said into her hair.

Laura pulled back, smearing her face on her sleeve, stunned by the flesh-and-blood reality of him standing in the room; by the care with which he asked the question, his earnest expression, the gentleness with which he clasped her upper arms.

He's sleeping, Laura said, shakily.

She kissed and kissed his face and hands, unable to speak.

Can we talk? Luc said.

Laura nodded, and shook her head.

Loud as lawnmower, the drone of insects filled the grass. Laura flicked the porch light on. They stepped out into the hay-dry night. She shut the door carefully behind them. For a moment they stood in silence, Luc leaning against the balustrade, pulling meditatively on the smoke. Laura hugged herself. She sensed that despite his kindness and his calm, the cigarette stood in for his true feeling. Ordinarily, Luc railed against tobacco. Now, he quietly drew grey smoke into his lungs. He was a good man; he hadn't come all this way for a fight. But Laura knew better than anyone that the property was not what she had allowed him to believe. If he was angry, it was deserved. Though his reaction to what he had already seen, Laura sensed, would be tempered by the reality of the old man's condition.

Didn't hear you arrive, she said to break the silence.

Her hands were pinched together. Luc's jeans were low-slung. The seam of his stomach-muscle, the twin pricks of his hipbones, stood out beneath the fabric of his shirt. He inclined his head toward the bike leaning against the wall.

Rode out from the station.

Look, she said. Say what you're going to say.

And what's that?

She saw now. He would use his gentlemanly restraint, the guise of empathy, to make her suffer.

What can I say? she said.

I can think of a few things. Start with, I dunno, why you lied to me for a decade, maybe?

They were away. She cried, raw eyed. The argument went round and round. There were only so many lines.

I didn't want you to think badly of me, she said for the millionth time. I thought you'd be turned off.

He hissed, As if I'd act like that.

I was young! I was stupid! I'm sorry!

Luc turned away in disgust. He stared out at land brutalised by Laura's own hand. She had hidden a part of herself from him. She grappled with Luc's arm. She wanted him. More than anything, she wanted to be his.

Baby –

He shook her off.

It's not just *then*, he said. You could have told me *any time* but *you didn't*.

Laura felt skinned. She lowered her face into her hands.

In the early hours of the morning, their argument shifted gear. They were both exhausted. Nothing more, or new, could be said. They crawled together into Laura's bed. Laura pressed her cheek against Luc's chest. They would survive. He would forgive her. Something had cracked, not broken.

Luc deferred the semester. Laura was relieved. She had feared his departure; that with it, the fissure between them would deepen. Now there would be time to make things up, to

grow new trust between them. It helped to have another pair of hands. Luc was kind about the farm. The state of the place, Laura saw, accorded with Luc's natural inclination to marshal and organise. He got on the phone to his mother and ordered bags of seed. He phoned a friend who worked at Landcare to ask about the gully, about irrigation, about birds. The notes he made spanned pages. He had elaborate plans sent in from Sydney showing the structure of biodynamic farms. He ordered books on growing organic fruit, compost toilets, green roofs and keeping chooks. They would get solar panels, he said, and insulate the roof. But sometimes Laura had to walk off to the shed to stop herself from lecturing – Luc's word – on the way tasks should be done. Other times, she fumbled the axe on purpose. She held her tongue when she remembered, as they walked across the hills. On seeing birds and fledgling plants she recognised she pretended not to. It was hard work to keep quiet. The observations she made on wind and weather came naturally as breath.

All that *good training*, as Bruce called it, had given her the hands of an outdoor worker; Bruce had bequeathed to her his hands. But Luc, she saw, was a city man, despite his passion for the land. A new hairline crack was forming, even as the first fissure knit. Laura felt the ache it caused, which was Luc's frustration with himself and her impatience. Later, she would look back, and understand that it was a subtle shift in power that rumbled the foundations of their relationship. Later, she would see that for Luc life on the farm had only ever been temporary; a finite project, while for Laura, it was life. But for now, in those first few weeks together, she hoped that he would stay and that the farm would grow the way they planned. Sometimes she stopped to watch him, shirtless, in the veggie garden. His skin had turned molasses. He did not seem to burn. She imagined the children they would have together. In summer, they would go swimming in the dam.

One morning, Laura set the old man to digging furrows in the new vegetable garden, which was many times the size of the old one, and laid according to Luc's plans. The old man had been up for hours, and Laura with him; their porridge cooked and eaten, bowls washed,



chooks fed. Lunch loomed, another item to complete. Bruce had wanted to chop wood; the dead pines still needed to be cut and stacked, but Laura worried about him managing a blade. No matter what the job, it was hard for him to focus long. He would start well enough, but there would come a point at which, as Laura worked along side, she could see that the purpose of the task eluded him. His work would slow, then stop. He would stare at the tool he held as if it might animate and articulate its use. Occasionally he got scared. Laura left him for a moment sweeping the shed, and came back to find him howling, certain he was imprisoned and would not be released. At other times, he worked not on the task she assigned him, but one completed long ago. As they dug holes for Luc's saplings, sent down from Sydney in damp hessian sacks, Bruce went about uprooting those already planted, condemned to relive the clearing work he'd done. Yet despite the difficulties he faced on certain days, there were others, the majority, when doing jobs seemed to prop Bruce up and provide him with a map for how to move through the world. Even when he couldn't make sense of why and what he was digging, the act of working the blade into the earth still seemed to offer some respite.

Laura walked over to the clothesline, basket of wet washing on her hip. It was not quite noon. The sky paling toward silver as the sun climbed high. Laura pegged each item with maternal care. The washing smelled wet-fresh. To breathe it in made Laura feel that all was right in the world. The line, the pegs, the heat, the scent: these were the components of a good quiet domesticity, the worth of which could not be broadcast or conveyed, but was for her to enjoy alone in that small flicker of time between the moment she leaned down to take a bright white pillow-slip from the basket and the moment she pegged it out. The screen door slammed. Luc came out bare-chested, clutching a mug. He wiped his sleep-smudged face, blinking. He sat on the back step, stretching, arching his back. He yawned.

Morning, he said. You're working hard.

When he sprang up a moment later, Laura started. A T-shirt flopped into the dirt. She swore.

What's wrong? she said.

He padded barefoot across the yard. Standing beneath the big gum, Luc silently shook his head. Laura dropped the washing back into the basket and pulled up by his side. His eyes were wide and glassy, as though he was in love.

Do you *know* what this is? he said.

A tree?

It's a *canoe* tree. Maybe that's not the right name. But, look.

He traced the big misshapen section, darker than the rest, a scar on flawless bark. As kids, Vik and Laura had believed it was the entrance to a magic kingdom; it looked like a big door. Luc explained that the trees were special, rare. He said that Indigenous people peeled back the bark to fashion their canoes.

But, Laura said, where would anyone *canoe* around here?

The beginnings of panic fluttered in her gut. She glanced around.

Didn't you say something about a lake? Luc said. A dam?

It's dry.

Luc shrugged, laughing.

Well, it still means some tribe were living *right here*!

But, she said. Here?

Still laughing, Luc ran off to get his camera, now fully awake. Laura touched the place on the trunk where a man had once cut away the bark. It gave her goose bumps: a hand where her hand now was. What had become of the boat they built? What had become of the water? Luc came charging back. He aimed the camera, fired. She shuddered in the glare of the flash. The tree had only survived the fires because it was right up close to the house. What else got burned up? Buried?

Shorty, I'm stoked!

Laura gave a grunt.

She said, I wish you'd put some bloody shoes on.

Luc lowered the camera.

Why?

Snakes.

He shrugged, but did not face her. Laura walked back to the washing and pegged a sheet between them. Luc turned away, carefully lining up the shot. Over in the garden, the old man worked, happily filling in their holes.

## 24.

Vik leaned back from her desk, stretching. She still did most of her plans by hand. Mardie said she was mad. Vik preferred to feel the topography of the land develop beneath the lead of her pencil. There was something about the manual work, as though the job of making the map in some way mirrored the natural, millennial work of forming hills and valleys.

Erosion, years of wind and water and weather, built up and wore away. The marks on the page, drawn carefully, matched that process, in miniature; drawing was another kind of building up, of shaping land. Each grey stroke rendered on paper what Vik measured of the earth. In other plans, her drawings told the future. Those were the plans for what the earth, when made perfect for building, would soon become. Vik liked drawing up those plans best. There was something so satisfying about smoothing imperfections, and rendering the lie of the land just right.

She was grateful for the air-conditioning in the apartment, especially after so long in Kyree. The city was molten. It stretched away, grey and uniform to the north, east and west, streets like veins of silver running through stone. To the south, Port Phillip Bay – a mirrored sheet of water the colour of steel – was almost still, as though waves had melted under pressure from the sun. It was birdlike, Vik thought, living in a high-rise block. Here she had the view of an eagle. The perspective thrilled her; she never tired of it. Part of the joy came from her ability to see, so clearly, the terrain of the city in ways never afforded at footpath level. From above, the city became the map Vik understood it to be, all lines and shapes, two-dimensional. Hien said it was disconcerting, waking up in the clouds. The view, though impressive, was all wrong, too overwhelmingly vast for daily toast and coffee, for toilets and TV. He said humans weren't meant to live so high up all the time; it warped the mind. Vik didn't agree. Being acclimatised to extraordinary height did do something to scramble the scale of things. At street level, everything looked too large and too close, you had to strain for perspective and distance and space.

Any marauding armies on the attack today, sweetheart? Hien liked to joke.

Vik thought of the valley she had left behind, the clean crispness of very dry heat, the screech of birds in blue blazing sky. She stared across the grey city, softened by smog. Copper snake of river water wound through city blocks. There was something so peaceful in her view of the silver landscape; the spread of the city, colours hazy and muted, the frenetic energy of the streets diluted by distance, made silent. The city was always moving, but orderly. Each part doing what it should. Vik wasn't looking for anything in particular, she said. But nor could she look away.

Part of the delight she felt in the apartment came from the sensation of being separate from the lives of those down below, protected from the elements. Temperature controlled, soundproofed, untouchable. There were security guards on the ground floor and double-glazing on the windows. From the thirty-third story, Vik could witness the minutiae of the world outside, the whole tartan fabric of the city laid bare. Confetti-rush of pedestrian traffic; cars like coloured buttons jammed along each seam of road, the play of light and shadow shifting across the scape in sheets. Yet the apartment remained immune from wind and sun and pollution, entirely safe. With such luxury and scope, it was, Vik thought, the best of all possible places to live.

Hien's hand brushed her shoulder. Vik jumped. Hien frowned. Vik took his hand where it hung limply by his side. Flecks of blue paint stained his skin. Vik caught the complex look building on her husband's face. Painting antique pottery was finicky, patient work, done with tiny brushes and magnifying lenses made for setting jewels. The idea was that, once glued back together, once the paintwork was retouched, the break in each precious object should be just about invisible. Only a person determined to find the tiny hairline would see it, and most never would. To achieve that level of repair, Hien needed time, and quiet. He didn't like to be disturbed while he was working. Vik knew better than to approach him when the studio door was closed. It had been closed all that day. Yet here he was.

What is it? she said, stepping into him, nuzzling his sawdust shirt. Honey? What's wrong?

He did not return her embrace. Vik craned, searching the planes of his face.

The baby's crying, Hien said. Can't you hear her?

Vik gave a small strangled gasp. She could hear Kate then, and it hurt. The cries were raw and high and overlapping. Vik turned sharply, shielding the flush in her cheeks. As she pushed past, she saw Hien's eyes: the quick flick of his gaze to her map. Her anger, grown from shame and frustration, boiled over, hot little tears, tiny hard rocks. She crunched them into the hem of her old shirt, splashed with chucked-up baby food and milk.

They had decided together that Vik would take maternity leave for the first year of Kate's life. Hien would earn the money; Vik would do the rest. After twelve months they would reassess and Hien would likely take over. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but what was she meant to do while the baby *slept*? There were so many hours to fill in the day and yet so little time. Kate required so much: her patience, her time, her body. It took all morning for Vik to get both of them dressed, and sometimes it took all day. There were parts of mothering Vik adored – the gummy smiles, the tiny feet, the sweet smell of Kate's clean hair. Yet with each day that went past, as Kate grew bigger, Vik felt some part of her mind whither and drop off. Hien said he understood; all new mothers felt like she did, every book on the subject made that clear. But Vik had seen his face. The way he looked at her map. Of the delicate, fragile bubbles of time she blew for herself, in a day bulldozed through by Kate, what did it matter if she sat down to work for a bit? Except, Vik knew the answer; they'd had that argument already. One evening, when Kate's full nappy went unchanged, when Vik said *in a minute* one too many times, Hien imploded. Their fight, hissed across the change table, scalding bursts of steam. Vik dug in, cleaning the baby as carefully as she could, avoiding Hien's eye. She loved her work, he said, more than she loved them.

I do *everything* for this family, she screeched. How *dare* you.

Later, she went quiet and mean and poisonous, a snake. Her anger burned through the night; kept her rigid and sleepless beside Hien, long after he had apologised, taken his statement back and brought in a nice hot cup of tea. In the dark, nursing Kate, Vik could quietly acknowledge that it wasn't Hien's words that hurt, but the measure of truth behind them. Though Vik could not admit it, she felt Hien had looked down deep into her, exposing something malformed from her core. She wept. For exams she could always study, but for this – a life of playing mother, wife – Vik had no notes, no preparation. She had no skill. Worse than all of that, she wasn't sure that she really wanted to learn.

In the nursery, Vik leaned into the cot and took up her warm, wet baby. Kate's cries sounded eerily like those of a snared fox, leg clenched between teeth in one of the old man's traps.

*Leave 'em too long, they'll gnaw through,* Bruce said once, from the treeline.

The fox could smell them. Vik had watched it, writhing in the trap. She took a handful of canvass, the leg of the old man's overall.

*They can't eat metal, but Dad. Can they?*

Bruce laughed so hard he coughed. Foxes prowled through Vik's dreams for weeks, with hacksaw teeth.

She hadn't thought of that in years. In the rocking chair, Vik worked back and forth, lulling. A motion – Vik sometimes found this funny, but not today – of both mothers, and the insane. Kate quietened, drinking. She took a strand of Vik's hair in her tiny fist. Her eyes on Vik's face seemed knowing, alert, kind. Children are so quick to forgive, Vik saw, and to forget. The depth of Kate's naked trust – there in the gentle pressure on Vik's scalp, in the quick calm to come over Kate as she clamped down on Vik's nipple – made Vik's breath catch.

*I'm sorry, she thought. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

The disk of rice paper softened in the bowl of warm water, growing soft and translucent. Vik pulled it out with wrinkled fingertips and spread it on the bench. Bathed and freshly pressed, with makeup, jewelry and heels, she tottered, preparing dinner. Kate, scrubbed pale and shiny as a pearl, rolled about in her walker, beneath the kitchen bench. Vik wished Hien would come upon them now, as she laid the thin white noodles on the rice paper skin. Now, as she selected just the right amount of carrot and pickle; as she rolled a neat little parcel, and laid it in a pyramid on the plate. But there was no one to observe. Hien was working, and so would not see them now, as Vik bent down daintily to feed Kate a choice morsel, cooing, forming a pretty little picture, mother and baby, against a vast, impressive, glittering backdrop, the city at night.

Guten morgen. Wie gehts du? said the deep voice on Vik's *Learn German Quickly* tape.

She repeated the line, trying to work her mouth around the hard sounds. The smell of Vietnamese mint, fresh as rain in the room. In the way that she had for so long clung to the pot as a talisman for her mother, holding the object, thinking *she* touched *this*, now Vik felt the same way about words. Each new phrase and rule, each sound formed with back of throat; like tasting the mother-made home cooking Vik never got to eat. Nourishing, each little morsel, each ja and du and bitte, lined her gut.

Es geht mir gut! the man said.

Through her research – another of her projects, worked under the inflamed skin of her marriage – Vik had learned a lot about the war and concentration camps and people dead in pits. While interesting, what Vik wanted was not a history lesson, but a woman. If she couldn't have a living mother, then Vik longed to go to the place her mother lived as a child, to see the townspeople and terrain who had made each of them who they were. Vik had no doubt that there would be some point of connection in her heart, like a key in a lock,



that would fire and click when she stepped off the train in her mother's village and first laid eyes on the place. It was always a train in her vision, always a village, always cobbled lanes, always mottled green and white with firs and snow. She would know it on sight. But finding the place had proved harder than Vik believed such a search should be, in a world webbed by information. When she ordered her birth certificate from the registry office – Bruce had no copy – Vik read excitedly, and then with sinking heart. Kath's maiden name was Müller, a most common German surname, and little help. Vik was determined, resourceful, resourced. She trawled the internet for hours, searching for information, anything, on Kathy or Katherine Müllers, who might have been the right age. There were plenty, but none were Kath. Vik grew less confident of success. Most of the time she felt a plunging sense of loneliness, quiet contained despair. How to find just one person in a world groaning with people? In her core, Vik feared that Kath would remain a mystery, an intangible ghost.

Vik tried to preserve the few brittle scraps that she remembered, the ashes of her mother's life. *Eat up*, Kath spat when Vik spat food out. Some *people are starve, you know, but you have everything to eat, so eat it*. The rich, dark bread that Kath made, the aroma like fresh soil. The words spoken the day of her mother's service, so long ago and so carefully replayed that Vik wondered whether they had ever really been said. *Concentration camp? How'd you know?* All things together, Vik believed that her mother had been in Germany during the war, though she would have been very young, just a girl. Kath survived; somehow got away. She had endured one of the century's great horrors, only to succumb in Kyree to the vast, hot bush.

When the rice paper rolls were made, the table laid, the baby changed and fed and soothed and bathed and kissed and clothed in soft pyjamas and read to. And then, when the baby was fed again and burped and changed again and put down in her cot with the door ajar and Vik tiptoeing away with held breath, praying that Kate might drop off to sleep easily, that

she could have a small window with her hands and arms free, Vik went quietly back down the hall to her map. It was waiting. There was still time to do a little more work before Luc, in Melbourne for a conference, something to do with laws and trees, came around for dinner. Vik didn't like to ask too many questions, and would not betray Laura by asking them of Luc. Yet, while she was looking forward to seeing him – she loved Luc almost as much as did her sister – Vik could not help feeling strange about the meeting; that she did not have all the facts. Something had gone wrong between Luc and Laura; Vik could hear the bruise in Laura's voice, the mottled sound that something painful had occurred. He had stayed on the farm for months, they were working together, fixing things up. From the outside, it all looked good.

Gonna give Kate a cousin? Vik had teased. Hurry up! The old man won't live forever! Next thing, Laura said Luc was in Sydney. Vik wanted to howl with dismay, to flood her sister with questions and sympathy and tears, to buoy her up on affection. But Laura's voice was snapped shut against Vik's puzzled, curious, *oh?*

Laura said grimly, It's alright. We still love each other. He just had to get back. It's fine. We'll see what happens.

They left it at that.

Hien thought that the map Vik was drafting in the lounge was work. It was, but not in the way he meant. To the untrained eye, all grids looked the same, she supposed. She didn't correct him. Even in close relationships, she believed there was space for silence; that keeping things back was a necessary part of getting along. She was not being paid for this, her map was different. It showed the scale and precision of Vik's usual work, though it was not drawn from measurements Vik had made herself; it was not a real place, a slice of land on which Vik had stood. Instead, it was a topographical drawing of a place in her mind – Kath's village – a survey of the imagined hometown as Vik conjured it from her memory of her mother's illustrations, and from her own cellular certainty. She built it from her bones.

There came, suddenly, the sound of something breaking in a far-off room. Vik might have stayed as she was, sitting at her desk, the nub of pencil in hand, smelling the tart, smoky grey-lead – a scent that was somehow grey itself – watching factory smoke rise over the western suburbs. But Hien cried out then, cursing. Vik's heart clenched. Sighing, she got back up.

Honey? she said at studio door. You alright?

The door swung back. The smell of the studio came rolling out: wood shavings, glue, the earthen, dusty scent of objects passed down from the past. Hien's face was red, lips a bloodless line. He couldn't speak, but gestured. Vik felt things square between them, levelled by new disaster. She took in the indigo teapot in pieces on the floor. She stretched up to work her arms around her husband's neck.

Darling, she said quietly.

She rocked him the way she rocked Kate in the chair.

My elbow, Hien said. I'm usually so careful. Three weeks, it took me to fix, and now – His face was wet against her cheek. She felt for him; all those hours. Stroking the back of his head, Vik felt the place where silken hair gave way to stubble at the nape. Hien put his arms around her waist. She told him she was sorry. She felt the rigidity, Hien's anger, give way. They swayed together, eddying sadness away.

When Vik pulled back, it was so sudden and unexpected that Hien staggered. Vik caught the blur of his face, marred by confusion, as she strode across the room. The long workbench was cast in the golden light of dusk, pouring in from outside. Light the colour of summer grass, of drought. She stopped short in front of the windows, gilded by sun. Vik found her breath was sticky, shallow. On the table was her mother's work, a vase. It was the pale grey of ash, clean and skilful work. Vik would know it anywhere by the shape, and if not, by the initials *KM*, pressed into the base of the slender handle clear as day. She

turned wildly on the spot, trying to find something to hold onto. The windows, the bench, the vase, Hien, the shattered teapot on the floor. The vase.

Is something wrong? Hien said. Vik?

She had spent hours reading about her mother's craft, another way in, or back, to the woman, and therefore into herself. Though Vik had no interest in pottery, not really, she believed that everything was important, every detail of her mother's life; that in order to build any picture of Kath, whole and real, she needed to understand it all, including clay. How deft Kath had been moulding earth. It was beyond Vik to consider that she had not put the same careful, patient care into throwing her daughters into their own, particular shapes as well.

Where did you get that?

Her voice came rasping out. Hien was behind her, trying to reel her in.

She said, Don't.

He pulled away, frowning like a little boy. Vik asked again, pointing, insistent. Hien addressed the table. The space between them hummed as though alive with electricity.

What, that one? Hien said. Some collector, you don't know him. Those three are all his, broken in a move.

It was not a turn of phrase; Vik actually felt the blood leaching from her face. Hien took her shoulder. She could not get her swallow down. For a moment, she had felt a gust of hope, that her mother was alive, but that was foolish. She remembered the boxes of ceramics that the old man had packed up after Kath went missing. Vik had searched for them many times over the years, in all their sheds and even underneath the house, but she had never turned them up. Most likely, she thought now, Bruce had sold them. Knowing the old man, the only way he had borne it was in aide of some practical gain, some outcome that overrode his emotional attachment to Kath's work. Vik had long suspected that he had sold Kath's pieces to help pay his workers for their sweat. Here was proof. Way back then, from Kyree, Kath had sent pieces off to the city to sell at markets and in small gift shops. Laura had told

Vik that. There must have been a market for them; Bruce had found it. She should have known something of Kath's could one day come across Hien's bench. But Vik had never imagined anyone receiving the pieces; had never conceived of another person beholding her mother's work. Like the woman, Vik had – without thinking – assumed her pottery too went into an abyss. Hien was shaking her gently, searching her face.

Viko, what is it? My love?

She told him. Hien reeled back. His look of surprise was so instant and open and honestly hurt that Vik gave a small smile. She still thought him so beautiful, a good man. Hien recovered well enough to scoop Vik in. He clasped her, kissing and kissing her hair.

I didn't recognise it, he kept saying. I didn't know.

She abandoned herself to the warm circle of his arms. He understood about the vase, its importance; she need not say more. Her relief was visceral. She hadn't known she required it, this understanding. Now she felt somehow remade.

Give me a minute with it, she said, wiping her eyes. Please.

Hien nodded, but he did not turn away. His mouth was oddly composed.

She was talented, he said carefully. The aesthetic is so contemporary.

For the compliment in his words, they made Vik's mouth dry. She stepped away from him.

What are you saying?

Before he could answer, the familiar, pitiful sound of Kate waking broke across the hall. They both turned toward the door. Vik couldn't help it; she glanced at Kath's vase. She sighed. Hien frowned.

Vik said quickly, Don't worry darling, I'll get her.

But Hien was already walking away, stepping over the pieces of his painstaking work scattered across the floor, shards of fallen sky.

## Part Four

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### 25.

It took the whole day to dig the old man's grave. Each shovel of dirt hurt. Laura sobbed through pouring sweat. Flies landed on the corners of her mouth, her eyes. She worked down into the ground. Hard powder, there was no moisture in it. The earth grew cooler. Strata of soil showed time, passing. Laura found it incredibly sad, how thin history was, after all; whole millennia tamped down into lines. And it made her angry, how hard it was still to dig through. Some layers were darker than others, almost black. Some were coloured ochre, or clay. One was ash.

At midday, Hien came up the hill from the house with sandwiches and sunscreen, a can of cold lemonade. He offered to help, stood pale and quiet on the lip of the hole. His hair was cockatoo feather, completely white. Laura couldn't remember it losing colour, but she had hardly seen Hien and Vik over the last years, what with caring for the place, and for Bruce. Both had suffered a creeping, steady decline, or so it seemed to Laura, who felt flayed by each new element to turn dust and crumble. She had tried everything she knew to do to stop the decline; worked hard about the place, tended the old man, as though she held in her hands the power to repair them both with sweat. When things got worse she applied herself more viciously to each task.

There's nothing more you can do, Lor, Vik said on the phone. Years and years of drought, everyone's suffering. You've done what you can to replant and that, but there's a human limit.

Laura could plant, could irrigate, could ship water in. But she could not make it rain. And she could not stop the march of time, the old man's aging or disease, though she tried. With every bath and meal, she tried. And now the old man was dead. Laura stood at the bottom of his grave and looked up at the rectangle of splitting light. One day Hien had been a

young man, the next not. Bruce had faltered almost imperceptibly, until he was gone. Laura was undecided about which was the bigger shock.

She took the lemonade. Raw palms wept against the icy can. The heat was brutal. Hien pulled the visor low over his eyes. Laura said again that she was fine. She would dig the grave herself, end of story. Hien sighed. He was, Laura guessed, under Vik's instruction to get her to stop. Perhaps there would be some small satisfaction for him, Laura thought, in failing.

Forgot to say, Hien said, Luc phoned. He got your message. He's coming. Will be here in time for tomorrow.

Laura leaned heavily on the shovel.

I don't want him here if the media come.

He knows. Said they're all on that Liberal MP with the prostitute this week, so he's safe.

Hien hesitated. He looked as if he had more to say, but couldn't find the words. They had all followed Luc's political career; it was hard not to. Constantly getting in trouble for saying the wrong thing – for saying what he believed Luc protested – he was always on TV talk shows, panels, Q&A. The camera loved him. The public were divided. Laura found it hard to watch.

She tossed the crushed can up. Hien caught it.

At least put some sunscreen on before I go, he said. It'll make Vik feel better.

Laura groaned, but smeared it on. The cream smelled of Bondi beach in summer, all those years ago. She cursed herself. Now she would have to work with that scent in her nose. It was a smell of ice-cream and fighting and fish-and-chips, of sex and cask wine and dope.

She dismissed Hien and dug the shovel in. She put her back into it, as the old man would have said.

It was early evening by the time the grave was deep enough. Laura attempted to climb out. Rivulets of loose dirt rained down. She fought panic, the thought of being buried alive. The hole was deeper than she was tall. She stood panting, hands on hips, appraising the walls. Her predicament was the sort of joke the old man would love, a job done without planning, undone.

*I'll have to tell him, Laura thought. He'll get a real kick outta this.*

The flush of remembering, a winding blow. Laura sat down hard on the floor of the trench. How many times would she have to go through this – the sudden realisation? Her tears were dry; she cried in throat and body, shaking. The old man's loss was physical. She felt it in her gut, a real cold, clamping pain. This was despair, she thought, to have hope for the future sucked away like moisture. She cried for the old man, who had not known who she was by the end. Had not known himself. The last year was the worst. No rain, just the endless cycle of physical, bodily care. She cried for her loneliness, for a decade without Luc – or anyone.

*Come with me, he had said, leaving for Sydney, all those years ago. You don't have to give away your life. We'll get nurses, come back on holidays, weekends. We'll manage this together.*

But her life, her *whole life*, was contained in each patch of dirt, each stump. She had grown from the place. She couldn't switch that off. Each square of grass was steeped in her own history, and in Bruce. There was no breathing space through which Luc could form his own connection. So he had left. And she remained. She had the place. It had her.

Lorlie?

Laura heaved herself up, hand at brow against the glare. A small girl stood on the lip of the grave, a silhouette. Laura's lips ran with cracks.



Viko? she croaked. That you?

The child knelt down. She leaned over the hole. Her face came into focus, cast in gloom.

It's me, silly, Kate said. Whatcha doing, Lorlie? Mum's making dinner.

She stretched a hand down to Laura, who reached up in turn to touch the delicate fingerfronds. Sun poured into Laura's eyes. Blood pounded in her ears. She was queasy with heat.

I'm bored, Kate said. You've been gone for ages and ages.

Mum know you're here?

Kate's face disappeared. Laura took up the shovel and cut into the wall, carving a ladder to the surface of the earth. As the old man said, she was nothing if not resourceful. At the top, Laura sat for a moment on the edge, feet dangling into the grave as though bathing them in water, catching her breath. Though she was sure she looked a right fright, face smeared with tears and dirt, showered in the day's thick sweat, Kate rushed up from behind and threw arms around Laura's neck. The little girl lay against Laura's back. Suppressing a sob, Laura took Kate's legs behind the knees and scrambled up.

Koala mums piggyback their babies like this, Laura said. Did you know?

They did a loop around the hole at a trot. Kate squealed. Laura felt like a horse about to be made glue. She put Kate down, and took up her small hand, the shovel. Her weariness felt timeless, like it was set into her bones. They started down the hill together. The dam was a mosaic of tessellated clay.

Kate said, Tell me a story, Lorlie! Mum says you tell good stories.

Does she?

Laura smiled at her niece, taking in the pretty heart-shaped face. Kate had Vik's high forehead, that same regal skull, inherited from Bruce. She had Hien's eyes, his coal hair. Kate's too would turn white one day. And when Kate smiled, Kath was there – clear as day, as Bruce would say – in the crooked eyetooth.

So, Laura thought, *people are not lost, but passed on.*

Laura was glad for the little girl's touch, her energy. Without it, she might not have had the motivation to get back down the hill, particularly to a house full of people. When the farm came into view, Laura took it in at a glance, too tired to admire her own work: the fences she had removed to allow native animals to pass through, the huge vegetable garden, the orchard planted inside a cage to keep birds out, the solar panels. Some of the saplings were still alive but many had perished. The paddocks and hills remained dotted with posts and guards, mapping Laura's best intentions, months spent with hands in dirt. Across the road, the old Peterson farm was scarred and crossed with *Peterson Meadow's* fresh-poured streets. Not all the quarter-acre blocks were yet sold; the estate was pocked with squares of razed and measured land. Yet even those blocks with complete houses were bare, buildings square in the centre of their lots, everything so new, so harshly without vegetation that it looked industrial. Beyond the estate the Preston farm had sold for a song, as Bruce liked to say. No doubt that too would be developed, the whole place made suburban. It was hard to remember that cows had ever dotted green and rolling paddocks where squares of brick now stood. Even harder to conjure up the vast expanse of bush that had flourished before that. Kate tugged on Laura's arm.

C'mon, Lorlie! Tell me something!

Well, Laura began. Once upon a time, when I was a little girl, this whole place was lush and green.

Kate didn't even look around. She just stared straight up into Laura's face, and frowned.

No, Lorlie. I want a *real* story. Tell me prop'ly about when you was little.

Laura wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. She saw that the land would always be this way for Kate, growing from drought dirt, that the world was made new for each generation; as it was now, the way that it had always been. They were at the garden gate, though there was no gate anymore; there was no fence. Laura was saved by the screen door whacking open. Vik flung herself through, already yelling. Kate stopped dead.

Where the hell have you been? Vik screeched. Kate, I was worried sick. Anything could have happened! From now on you're to stay on the verandah, understand?

Vik's face was inflamed by the week's tears. She brandished one of the old man's handkerchiefs, scrunched up in her hand. She kept blotting her nose and eyes, though both were now dry. Kate shrunk back against Laura's legs. Vik whipped her out. It chilled Laura, the echo of that other mother, in her sister's looming rage. However much they were themselves, shaped by the course of their own decisions, they were also, innately, the product of Kath and Bruce. Vik was still going on. Laura couldn't watch. Touching her daughter's skin, Vik seemed desperate to check that the little girl was real.

Don't you ever, *ever* do that again, Kate. You understand? You never go anywhere without telling Daddy or me. Not at home and *especially* not here.

Kate valiantly copped the tirade, for a moment, lip trembling. But even as she was clenching her fists against the tears, she was crumbling.

Viko, Laura said gently, touching her sister's back. C'mon, she's okay. She won't do it again, will you Katie?

Vik shot Laura a look. Laura stepped back. Sobbing, Kate vehemently shook her head. She pressed into her mother's arms. They held each other. The rage seemed to wash back from the shore of Vik's love, leaving only relief, and guilt. She kissed Kate's face and rubbed her back. Laura walked away toward the shed. The shovel went against its shadow on the wall. Though Bruce would never see its absence, he had trained Laura well.

She had only been a bit older than Kate when Kath went missing – Laura corrected herself – when Kath *left*. There wasn't one day that Laura did not think about the letter, about what, in that instant, she had done. She was just a little kid! How could she have known how one small action would press down for years, through generations, to Kate? If there was anything Laura wished, it was that: for Kate to go unscathed. But Kate's mother had been a little girl who lost her mother in the bush. It was Laura's fault, and Kate would

suffer for it. She would grow up with Vik's unconscious fear, her desire for perfection and her cellular anger, the anxiety she experienced when alone. Nothing was ever new, built fresh. Instead, rooms for one generation went up on the last's shonky foundations, made of weakness and ignorance and fear – whatever they happened to be carrying around with them at the time. It was dangerous; the implications stretched forward. Kate's children, and theirs too, would each inherit some part of Laura's desperate act.

Don't cry now Katie, you just gave Mummy a scare, that's all. I thought I'd lost you.

We're having roast chicken for dindins, that's your favourite, isn't it! There, now. All's well that end's well, alright?

They had fought a bureaucratic war to allow for the old man's burial on his land, his wish. Vik finally pulled rank in the city to get the paperwork signed and Laura didn't ask questions. Standing graveside on the hill, waves of dry grass like rippling straw, looking down on the house – a view so familiar it was pure comfort – Laura was surprised by a sense of wellbeing. They were doing the right thing; it had been worth it. It was exactly the right place for him to be. When it came her turn to speak, she bravely faced the scattered crowd. Her printed speech was grey with fingerprints. She was crying. It was so inhumanly quiet then, as though the volume had gone down on the world. Laura became acutely aware of her place on the hill, of the rustle of hot wind in the fabric of her dress, the pale blue sky: the colour of the old man's eyes. The smell of hot soil was pungent, chalky, fresh. She had changed the face of the place in the last years, but Bruce was still everywhere she looked. Laura folded her speech away, and drew breath. She spoke about the loss of Cairnlea when Bruce was a baby, of his lifelong drive to set things straight. She told them how much Bruce had taught her; what a good, kind father he had been.

He wasn't always easy, and he worked bloody hard. But he built this place up for us.

He gave us a good home. Can't ask for much more than that.

She spoke as well and purely as she could. It was only later, over grim cakes and cups of tea, when Vik whispered, *You never mentioned Mum!* that Laura saw Kath had no place in her speech. She was her father's daughter; everything had been about the farm.

It was terminally hot on the hill. Laura stepped back into the crowd, watching as men lowered Bruce's coffin into earth. She had wanted to do it herself, with Vik, but was glad now. Kate stepped up to the lectern and began to sing. Her voice was high and sweet and clear. There was a hand at the hot small of her back. It was Luc. She would know his touch anywhere. His arrival made ripples in the crowd, low murmurings. Laura glanced around, slit-eyed. The coffin hit dirt, settled. Laura felt the thud of it in her chest. Luc bent down kissed her cheek. The hair at his temples was greying. He wore a sombre suit, a tie. Laura saw her face in his shoes. The idiocy of the moment, that there was space in her grief-crammed brain to notice the quality of his pinstripe. To catch the gold in his tooth when he smiled. Weight had gathered beneath his chin, at his waist. His face was deeply lined.

I'm so sorry, he whispered. And you look beautiful.

She took his arm; she needed something to hold onto. He held a huge golf umbrella above their heads. The shade it cast, like cool water. Laura drank it in. He slipped his arm around her waist to hold her up. Her handkerchief was balled with salt. She caught a breath of Bruce, so tangible and real she almost doubled over. The way he smoothed his hair with the flat of his hand when he came indoors, and removed his hat. The detail was so insignificant but so precisely him, so precious. She would never witness it again. They rocked together in the umbrella's purple shade. Luc's lapel grew wet. Kate came to the end of her ballad.

It's one of Dad's favourite Irish songs, Vik had said.

Laura did not think Bruce liked music, especially Irish stuff, and said so. Vik looked shocked.

What? He loved it! Nan used to sing it to him, and him to us. Remember? He sang it heaps when we were kids.

Kate held the last note for a long time. Even as she stepped back into the crowd, the melancholy sound lingered lightly, suspended by heat. Laura drew out her tobacco. Her hands, two butterflies, danced. Luc took the pouch, the papers. He lowered the umbrella so that he could roll the smoke. In the full glare of the sun, Laura felt heat soak into the cloth of her dress like water into wool. The hair on her arms felt singed. Shovel by shovel, men filled in the grave. Vik shivered up to Laura, wringing her hands. She looked gutted. Seeing her own feelings, there, in her sister's face and body, Laura's strength, scraped up for the funeral, cracked away. No one else on the hill could feel it, what they felt. This loss. They clung to one another. Laura felt Vik's body, and her own, a natural fit.

Eventually, Laura pulled back. They were each slippery with sweat and tears.

She said, Let's get everyone down to the house, okay?

We're orphans, Lor.

It seemed all Vik could manage. She doubled, pressing her hands to her mouth. Hien was there to net her in his arms. Kate hugged her mother around the waist, face buried in the fabric of her dress. Laura felt weightless and dry, a brittle leaf, watching the knot of family, tied around her sister. She turned to the crowd, cleared her throat. Two grey kangaroos bounded across the slope, down below the group. Ridges of ribs and spines moved beneath dull pelts.

At least they're buried together, Vik sobbed into Hien's neck. At least they're in the same place!

Laura heard a rushing sound. She saw the sky tilt.

In her darkened bedroom, Laura lay in the double bed chosen for her by Luc, many Christmases ago. The old man's wake had spilled over from the kitchen and verandah, into the yard. It reached Laura as the lapping rise-and-fall of muted voices through the wall. She

felt relieved for the dim solitude of her bed, for the damp cloth on her head, already bruising at the eye where, in fainting, she had struck the stone dirt. Though she felt guilty for leaving Hien and Vik to the task of entertaining, Laura had nothing left to offer.

There was a soft knock at Laura's bedroom door. Luc opened it a crack; peered in. Sounds of the wake sharpened.

A real tragedy, a voice was saying. Never did find out what happened.

Luc slid into the room and sealed the door. He sat on the edge of Laura's bed and put his hand in the saddle of her hip. They talked in hushed tones. Laura was aware of how easy it was still between them, and underneath that, how much it all still hurt. At every moment she could just about taste the other life she might have had.

It was a good funeral, Luc said.

How are you Luca, she said. Really?

She sensed the answer. It was obvious from the media, and from the infrequent phone conversations they had snatched in the last year, between his meetings and her disposal of pans of piss. Luc was storming Australian politics with all the passion, every ounce of charisma he once used to fuel their green protests. Young people loved him. He used their mediums, their words, to get them to care

You know, busy, Luc said cautiously.

Laura nodded, and briefly closed her eyes. Glad as she was for him, his success was difficult for her to manage, even more so under pressure of the old man's death. She felt Luc shifting on the bed; the unexpected brush of lips on forehead. Luc's face was inches above her own. He was smiling, sadly.

Listen Shorty, I know this isn't a good time, honestly I do. But if I don't tell you now, you'll probably see it on TV. And that would be worse.

He was close enough that she could see the delicate lines feathering his mouth. She made a small sound, a moan.

I'm getting married, Luc said. Apparently it's not true you know, about old dogs, new tricks.

One part of Laura's brain felt cocooned in white noise, while at the same time, she was acutely aware of the tone in Luc's voice: his deft, unflinching delivery and earnest, open face. Such a very good politician. Laura couldn't grasp onto what to say. Sickened, she followed the script set down for receiving such news under joyous circumstances, asking all the right questions about the woman – a doctor – dates and locations.

Congratulations! she said, proud of her own resolve.

Mama insisted I bring a whole bloody soup for you, Luc said wryly, clearing the air.

Can you believe it?

Laura remembered the way life leaked out of the old man, shutting him down. She was so very tired.

Let me guess, she said. For sorrow, pasta e fagioli.

Luc frowned, genuinely.

How'd you know?

Laura rolled away from him then, a sandbag on her chest.

There had been moments in the old man's final week, when Laura was certain he would die before Vik arrived. Then, when Vik did come, driving herself through the night, arriving white and jittery with fear and highway caffeine, there had been long, dark seconds in which Laura wished fervently he would die. They sat for days in his bedroom, fan whirring, shifting the hot air around, listening as the old man's lungs struggled to inflate. Laura saw how valiantly the body fights to go on, how vital life is, even in the dying. Many times, one or other of them pitched forward, grasping Bruce's hand when the pause between one



breath and the next seemed too inhumanly long for him to survive it. When the inhalation finally came, it was ragged. Laura thought of a hooked fish, drowning in air.

In the last hour, Bruce was conscious. His eyes rolled, anxiously. He fixed on Laura's face. She touched the bristly, concave cheek.

Where is she? the old man whispered, pawing weakly at the sheet. Mum?

Laura took the softened hand, crooning comfort. She wanted to cradle him in her arms, to press away all his pain, his difficulty in letting go of life. If only she could pick him up as she might a baby, sway him away, provide some physical contact that would communicate to him all she had to say, that it was okay for him to leave them. But even as the thought occurred, she could see how weak he was. Her fantasies, the idea of giving perfect comfort, were borne of her desire for relief from her own suffering, not his. The old man had no room for anything now but the job of dying, which was his alone to complete. Laura could do nothing to help, she saw, but be there and watch. His skin looked hardened, and too loose. It hung from the bones of his face like old leather, worn out of shape. Vik eased into the room with cups of tea. She gauged the shift in Bruce in an instant, abandoned the mugs on the dresser, threw herself down on the bed. She took up the old man's hand.

What's happened? she said. Dad? You need something?

He keeps asking for 'Mum', Laura said helplessly. I think he wants his mother.

Immediately, she felt the animal spine in Vik bristle. Vik rounded. Her expression was withering, braided with scorn.

*His mother?*

## 26.

It might have been a beautiful evening, but for the hollowness in Vik's chest, and the heat. She lay on an old horse-rug beneath the big dead gum in the backyard, looking up through bare branches at emerging stars, little pricks of light, listening to the old man's radio. She wondered idly why Laura had not yet cut the tree down. It wasn't like her to leave a job so long. Though Laura had been the old man's fulltime carer, though the weather unrelenting, the house and yard remained impeccably kept. Bruce, Vik thought, would certainly have seen the dead wood as a fire risk and cleared it straight away. She felt a little jab at the thought of him. He was still so tangible, his voice clear and present. It was hard to really get the fact that he was not just up at the gully, or beneath the ute in the shed; that he would not at any moment come striding round the house with the wheelbarrow, handing down orders. Even harder to reconcile was that the old man had not done those things in years, the Bruce Vik recalled was a younger man, the Bruce of her childhood, long replaced. She could not imagine him truly gone, just as she could not believe that the pain of his death would, as people kept saying, someday dull. Vik was especially dubious about this. She knew first hand it would not. In any case, she was glad the tree still stood. The loss of it, too, would be a kind of undoing. There was beauty in the gnarled, leafless branches, and Vik shuddered at the thought of confronting the backyard without it. The gum had grown in that place all her life. Once gone, she would never stop missing it.

The pluck and run of a lonely Spanish guitar trilled, floating like smoke in air. Kate sat on the back step, quietly drawing. Hien slouched beside Vik, peeling the bark from a stick with infinite patience and concentration, giving himself over to the fruitless task. Vik saw how acutely alike Kate and Hien were in the careful attention they paid to what they were doing. Looking at them, she loved them both in ways that exposed her own inadequacies to herself. Inside, Laura was still washing up from the weekend's wake, worn on long into the night, and turned rowdy once the older guests had gone. Drunk in the staggering way of the infirm, Vik had stood in the kitchen at 3:00 am declaring that the house had seen too many

funerals, she would go to no more and none of them could make her. Later still, as dawn was breaking, Vik heard Luc and Laura fighting, way down by the chook shed, likely hoping that distance from the house would provide some small privacy. Laura's voice, hysterical with booze and exhaustion and grief blew across the barren yard. In her woozy, wrung state, Vik couldn't make out the words, could hear only the sounds: the anger in Laura's pitch, the low rumble that was Luc's famous voice, soothing, talking Laura down. In the morning, Luc was gone. And Laura, pinched and efficient, set to work cleaning the house, refusing to talk.

Just as the guitar piece came to an end, a sharp cry broke from inside. All three of them turned toward the house. The hair was up on the back of Vik's neck. Kate turned to look at her mother, eyes wide. Later, Vik couldn't say what made each of them, at some instinctual level, realise this was no stubbed toe. It was the pitch of the cry, the flinty sharpness of it. Hien stood up. He exchanged quick looks with Vik and pulled her to her feet.

Lor? Vik called into the dark tunnel of the hall.

No sound came from the kitchen. Kate stepped inside, her heavy, mouthy breath filling the space, heightening Vik's anxiety. Vik untangled her skirt from Kate's hands and tried not to run down the hall. Hien hefted Kate into his arms. She clung to his chest, legs wrapped around his waist. Fleeting, Vik wished she were being cradled in just that way. Laura was standing at the kitchen window. One hand gripped her throat. It was as though she had tried to clamp off the cry with force. A dank tea towel dangled limply from her other hand. Sudsy water was already evaporating from the kitchen floor. Laura's shoulders, tense as a taught bow. Vik was caught by the stillness of the scene, the strange hush and focus of Laura's tableau, cut through with palpable fear.

What is it? Vik said, rushing in.

Laura whipped around. Her mouth was opening and closing soundlessly. She put up a hand as though to ward Vik off. Her eyes were wide. Vik saw the whites, marbled with blood.

Laura caught Vik's upper arms. They grappled together, face to face. Vik was trying to give comfort, to ask what was wrong, to soothe. It was scary, to see Laura finally breaking apart.

What is it? Vik was saying. Can you tell us?

Laura resisted comfort with frightening force. Vik was aware of the mint tinge to Laura's skin, her red eyes welling.

What's happened? Vik said. Lor, you're scaring us.

Laura hissed, It's her.

Vik reeled back under the intensity of Laura's gaze, her huge wet eyes, the rolling energy of her stance.

I don't understand, Lor. What's going on?

Laura said something Vik couldn't make out. She released Vik's arms and seemed to collapse in on herself, as though some internal pylon had suddenly crumbled, given way. Her fingers formed a grill across her eyes. Hien put Kate down. She resisted. He was firm. He took Laura about the shoulders. Kate held onto the material of his jeans and was borne along, tangling legs. Vik's hands were shaking. She called to Kate in a clear, warm tone that told everything was fine. It was the old man's lilting animal-calming voice.

Vik said brightly, I'll put the kettle on guys. Okay?

She went, tall and efficient, to the kitchen bench, and glanced through the kitchen window.

An elderly woman was walking up the drive. She evolved out of the gloom, slowly. For a second Vik thought it was another mourner, come to give their best wishes. Unhurried, the woman neared the house, shoulders squared, seeming reluctant and curious and committed, a soldier marching into war. Her eyes darted; she took it all in. Her fingers smoothed the skirt of her dress, again and again. A taxi, coloured by dust, idled down on the road by the front gate, headlights blazing. As Vik watched, the driver cut the engine. He opened the door, stretched out his legs, flicked a lighter, inhaled smoke. The woman carried only a

purse. Vik knew it was expensive by the sheen of the leather; the way the woman clutched it tightly underneath her arm. She was such a strange sight, unlike any old person that Vik had ever seen, clearly bohemian – or unhinged. Her long grey hair was tangled in a bun atop her head, a large, grey bird's nest, clasped by a sparkling comb. Yet the sturdy leather oxfords, shoes belonging to the uniform of a young schoolgirl, the Chanel purse and outrageous dress, a short red kaftan closely embroidered at the neck, made the woman appear as a composite of many women, each with a taste for expensive, special things, each of a different age and style. Long, glittering earrings dangled from her lobes; they caught the porch light as the woman crossed the yard. She did not falter. It was as if she knew the way.

She raised her face to the house. Still, Vik might not have known her mother straight away, but for her gait, which was so much Laura's that for one irrational moment Vik thought it was her sister. Something triggered in Vik. She jerked to the windowsill, pressing her face against the glass. Of course, she realized later that they would have been quite visible to Kath, standing at the window in the blazing room, when all else was dark. Later still Vik would grapple with all the emotions she possessed, and many that were unfamiliar. She would struggle with the unanswered questions, the broiling ever-present anger, given now a living, breathing target. But in that moment, when she felt Kath's gaze meet hers for the first time in decades, all Vik felt was joy. It was such a simple, pure thing to feel. The woman raised a hand, a tentative greeting. Laura was back at Vik's side, staring. She made a low sound in back of throat, a growl.

Who is that darling? Hien was saying. Vik? What's going on?

Vik ignored him. She wrenched open the front door. It felt like a dream. There was something she wanted desperately just beyond her reach, but she would never get it. In the intervening seconds, between seeing Kath through the window and being face-to-face, Vik had no time to think about the implausibility of what was happening, to question or analyse. She was simply and wholly focussed on taking hold of her mother in her hands. Kath would

not disappear again. Vik pelted across the verandah in bare feet, jumped down into the dirt. She would later observe the trail of bloody crescents, the fresh cut on her heel. But she felt nothing as she flew across the yard toward her mother. She was weightless. Years of longing, like wind, picked her up and carried her. Kath watched Vik's progress, smiling faintly. She paused in the shadows just beyond the true pool of light cast from the porch and house, as though needing an invitation to come closer. Light lapped at her toes, casting reflections, little flames, in her shiny shoes. Vik walked cautiously the last few steps to her mother. She was suddenly overcome, and couldn't think of what to say. She heard the others follow her out onto the porch. Hien was speaking to Kate, reassuring, but Vik did not hear what he was saying, every atom of her self was focussed on the woman standing right there in front of her.

Mum?

Kath nodded. Her face was alert, intelligent, not quite warm. She smiled, but her smile was laced with reserve.

Vik said, Mutti?

Her voice cracked. Kath's face softened, somewhat. Vik felt as if she was falling from something high, the way birds dropped from the sky on days of extreme heat, soft bodies plummeting. Kath seemed to zip herself up, squaring. It was a mannerism Vik remembered. The recognition zapped. Taking Vik's hand, Kath held it in hers.

Laura?

Vik felt the big, strange smile on her face, like makeup. She couldn't wipe it off. Hurt from all the talking, her mouth turned electric propeller, whirring. She didn't even know what she was saying, something about their apartment, her work, anything to fill the silence, to keep Kath there. Except, she wasn't Kath, or even Katherine like Vik thought, but Katya. She had put them straight first thing. 'Kath' was just what Bruce called her, along with everyone else.

You know, Katya sniffed. Australians: they like every name to be easy, short.

*I looked for you, Vik thought. All those years.*

Just beyond the foam and wash of Vik's prattle was the big swell, the whys and whats and hows. Beyond that was the ocean proper: the anger and abandonment and regret. But they had not reached those deep seas yet. Having come inside together, having established that Katya was alive and had never been missing, had simply walked off the farm and left, Vik was content in that moment to splash about in the sun-warmed shallows of her mother's company. It was achingly unreal, to be sitting at the kitchen table opposite the woman she had for so long dreamed. Vik couldn't stop staring. How unlike the mother she created out of dreams and longing Katya was. Vik couldn't stop from flicking eyes to the empty chair at the old man's place.

It's very changed, Katya said suddenly, cutting Vik off. This place here, and Kyree town.

Laura flinched, fumbled the wooden spoon. Vik smiled vigorously, the elastic band of her mouth stretched beyond breaking point across her face. She watched Laura consciously unknot taut shoulders, flatten them down. She took several deep breaths, stirring the pasta sauce. Rocking Kate on his knee, Hien was attuned to the room's tension. He knew the sisters well, could sense the push-pull of Vik's joy and anxiety, of Laura's hostility and reserve. He worked light into the space, asking Katya about her art. She lived in London, was here for an exhibition. Hien made all the right noises. Vik was grateful in a way that made a clot in her throat.

Why did you come back?

Vik opened her eyes; Laura was standing with her back to the stove, glaring. Tomato gore dripped from brandished wooden spoon, onto the floor.

I mean, you left. We never heard from you. We got over it.

Vik half stood, kneading her hands. Katya cleared her throat.

C'mon Lor, *please*, Vik said.

Laura looked Vik in the eye. There was the zap of current that runs between circling dogs about to fight. The room went Church-still. Vik felt years of longing in her gaze, imploring Laura not to make a scene. Laura's eyebrows were snagged together. Vik couldn't read her sister's face. Some internal conflict was occurring whose workings were opaque. Laura brought her hands to hips. Vik's eyes, stretched wide. It was the silent standoff between people who both know what they want, but are made mute by social obligation, the desire to avoid inflicting hurt.

I wrote to you, Katya said, snapping tension. For years, I wrote.

All heads turned. She folded her hands on the tabletop, as though being interviewed. Vik listened, aghast. Katya explained that she had never intended to leave them forever. She had needed to get away; was leaving Bruce and the farm, not them. It wasn't the done thing, then, she said, leaving a marriage. But life on the farm was unbearable. It was stifling. No culture, no people, nothing.

I'm an artist, she said. Not a farmer. Bruce knows this, and I know this, when we get married. But we were young. When we meet we have no idea what's coming.

Katya sighed. Her glittery crystal earrings, like raindrops.

It was in Melbourne. He came to the pub where I worked. He had just put the down-payment on this land. He was so happy. Then, I got pregnant, so that's that. But also, we loved each other, really, in the beginning. We think, "things will be okay!" I believed, at first, they would. Then I came here.

Katya tried to stick it out, for years, growing angry, not herself. It got, she said, to where she wasn't able to be a good mother, or wife. Just getting up in the morning used up all her strength.

It was leave, or let it kill me, Katya said. That's it.

She delivered the line with such matter-of-fact evenness of tone, that it was only later Vik allowed herself to feel the full, ghastly punch of the words. The weight of Katya's absence



hung heavy across Vik's entire life, across all their lives. And wasn't it the job of parents to be with and love their children, no matter what? Even in those worst few months, Vik would never have left Kate. Would she? Laura rolled hotly in her chair as Katya spoke. Vik observed the practical fists clench and release. Laura's blood seemed to rise in the sealed bottle of her body, threatening to fizz and overflow. Vik reached across the table to take her sister's hand. The palm was rough and wet. A smile licked Laura's face. She gripped Vik's fingers. Vik gratefully squeezed back, not caring who was giving comfort. She caught a glimpse of some other Laura, the sister she might have had if Katya had stayed.

Now they call it, "custody", Katya was saying. But we never got to that. I never heard anything from Bruce. Even when I wrote, when I am *pleading* with him in my letters to see you, there is nothing. I keep writing, hoping. Nothing. I even keep your father's name, McKenzie, so you can find me if you like.

Vik clenched her hands together beneath the table in her lap. Kath Müller had gone into the scrub in the hills; Katya McKenzie had come out.

Maybe I should not have gone so far away, for so long, Katya said. I loved London. This is my mistake.

We never got any letters! Vik wailed. We all thought you were dead!

Her dinner sat untouched. Laura's spaghetti was twisted into neat little balls of yarn. Only Kate, lolling in Hien's arms, had finished her meal. Vik admired her daughter's blissful, sauce-splattered face. She felt a bud of contentment: that Kate felt so well loved she could start to drop away to sleep. Vik took her husband's hand.

Katya said, My exhibition is on tour to Melbourne, so I am here. And I see this notice in the paper. Your father is dead. I cannot believe what I am seeing. I think, so now he is gone, maybe you want to see me. He is not here to stop it.

Vik felt suddenly too far out from shore, the water of their conversation, too deep.

She cried, But he looked for you! He loved you. It doesn't make sense!

Laura pushed back from the table, violently clattering bowls. Kate stirred and sat up. Vik felt sweat roll and break across her ribs; watched her sister at the sink, bristling with unease. There was something familiar in Laura's stance. Vik saw how she leaned down to jot something in the notebook permanently propped open on the bench. There were drawers full of them in the sideboard, neat little lists.

Didn't you see the news? Vik said, unable to cork her despair. The papers? She had collected folders full of clippings, a summer's work in archives. Each showed their pictures, the old man's grainy, pixelated pain. Many nights Vik had spent, going through the headlines, searching for something, anything, that might give her a clue. Her fingers, stained with ink. Katya said the news in Europe was of other things.

And I don't watch it, television. Why would I? I leave a note to say where I am going. I write every week. When I hear nothing, I think it is Bruce. She turned abruptly to Kate, setting her earrings off, as though signalling the end of something. Vik had more questions, but was captivated by the sight of her mother, leaning across the table to take Kate's chin in hand. Vik saw with a jab that Katya's hands, her most familiar feature, were old. Kate smiled, shyly.

A granddaughter, Katya said, shaking her head. *Wie alt bist du, leibe?* A jar of tomato sauce slipped from Laura's hands. It shattered with a bang. The room broke into action. The depth of their talk filled in. Conversation turned shallow and polite. Hien whisked Kate off to bed, trying to pat away her tears. Voices overlapped, apologising, making nice. Vik got down on hands and knees to help clean the tomato-bloodied shards of glass. The room filled with the smell of the vegetable garden at noon on a hot summer day, back when things would grow. The scent of their childhood, mopped up with rags, rinsed down the sink.

They found each other on the verandah, once Katya had gone, returned in the taxi back to town. Drawn together, Vik lowered herself down beside Laura, sat slumped on the front

step. She stared into cicada-soaked night. A burning smoke dangled between Laura's bare knees, the skirt of her dress hiked up in folds. Wordlessly, Vik took the tobacco from Laura's breast pocket and rolled herself a loose cigarette. Hien brought cups of tea, bouquet of handles bunched together in one hand. He eased the front door closed against the bugs, and sat down. Aligned with them against the dark, shell-shocked, shaky, having endured something no one could reasonably expect to go through, Vik felt overcome with feeling for the two people sitting next to her on the splintery boards. The love she felt was muscular.

I was thinking about Dad teaching us to swim, Laura said.

The words came violet with smoke. Vik took up a handful of her sister's hair. She bunched it like a rope. There seemed so little she could do to bring comfort. Laura's fingers fluttered across Vik's knee. They leaned together.

Laura said, The way he would let go, but I wouldn't know. I'd get so mad when I realised he was behind me in the dam, and I'd been going on my own.

Vik smiled through her tears. Laura's sobs were raw, of a person all cried out. Hien picked up Vik's hand.

Is she what you thought? Hien said gently.

Vik felt Laura shiver through her leg.

She left this, Laura said.

Vik took the NGV catalogue quizzically, flicking through. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Though she had never before caught sight of the pieces pictured across the centrefold, they were more than familiar; she knew them as she knew herself. Painted on each bowl and vase, a recurring image: the khaki bush, their small farmhouse.

I thought she painted snow, Vik said, panicked. What is this?

She scanned the half-page blurb outlining Katya's work. She dropped the magazine.

She's fucking famous.

I know, Laura said flatly.

Vik looked up into a sky flecked with brittle stars.

Hien said, But we've been to galleries!

We weren't looking for someone living, Vik said. We weren't looking.

She had read that the stars seen on earth are suns from long ago. Not solid, but some trick of light and distance, projected across the sky.

Katya returned in the morning for breakfast. Vik awoke with a hangover made of grief. She asked her mother about the work, her exhibition, her paintings of the house.

My way of keeping you close, Katya said. I was painting from memory, of course.

She walked to the kitchen window and peered out.

But I see now, I remembered it all wrong.

She sighed, and turned to Vik.

## 27.

Increasingly in the months since Bruce's funeral, Laura was having difficulty with time. Vik phoned and tactfully suggested that Laura was depressed. Laura roused herself enough to sound appropriately outraged, anything to get Vik off the line.

Come stay in the apartment Lor, while we're gone, Vik said. It'll do you good to get away from there for a while. Cheer you up.

But Laura didn't want to be in Melbourne, and said so. That Hien and Vik were going to visit Katya in London was troubling enough, she wanted no part of it. Besides, the concerns she had about her mental health were of another degree, far beyond what she saw as the mere lethargy of depression, in line with old man's take on things. Bruce had been vocal about *a bit of sadness*, as he called it: a condition of those who just didn't try hard enough to make themselves useful. While Laura was not so dismissive, nor was she a person who succumbed easily to things, even emotions. She knew that she was not depressed, but something else, something worse. Yet she allowed Vik to think that there was something to her depression theory. Better than have Vik guess the truth.

I don't see why you won't come to London, Vik grumbled.

Laura was so tired she could barely hold the phone up to her head. It took all her energy to channel some life into her voice.

Playing happy families now? she said. After everything?

Katya wants to see you too.

Laura sighed, heavily. She had nothing spare, nothing left over with which to meet her sister's words, all their implied emotion. On the verandah, she sat in the old man's seat, staring out across the bone plains of the valley. In her own, deep self, whatever part of her it was that made her animate and unique, she felt herself going the way of the old man. There were mornings when she woke up knackered, as though her very bones were old, unsure exactly when in time she was. In a way, she had felt it creeping up for years, her memory loss. It was slight now, just a dropped stitch; an almost invisible snag in the fabric.

But she was sure it would eventually rent. The little notebooks had been more than the chronic adherence to organisation that Vik liked to tease her for; they were her attempt to hold things down, make them stick. Only now could she admit this to herself, and even then only fleetingly.

*I'm losing it*, she said to herself.

But she couldn't allow herself to believe it, despite the strange sense of slippage she felt inside her head. She had just seen her father die a long, slow, fractured death. Sliding down inside himself, a man trapped in a glass jar against whose sides he uselessly scrabbled. And now, in the mornings when Laura woke, just before consciousness gripped her, she believed she was a teenager again. Sometimes she was a child. She craned to hear the old man moving about in the kitchen, to hear Vik's breath across the room in her bed. Sometimes she groped for Luc's reassuring form across the sheet, catching fistfuls of air. It was not always frightening, though it sometimes was. More, it was strange: the sense of being caught in the static between radio stations. If she waited long enough, her mind would catch up with the present. But once she became aware of herself, of the now, it was hard to get up. The present was the worst of all possible times. How old she was. How lonely. Not even a view to cheer and bring comfort; the valley was a bowl of sand. Each early morning as Laura worked things out fresh, feeling the difficulties of her real life, like a cut, the sun seemed to rise over the valley like it had never set. It grew gradually light, but the heat from the day before, the day before, the day before sat trapped below the renewed rays, deeply embedded in dry earth. Sometimes Laura thought about the rifle.

One afternoon, the voice of a man rang out on the front porch. Laura drew her wrinkled hands from tepid dishwater and dried them on a frayed tea towel. She had been deep inside herself. Not in reverie, but in a state of nothingness, the forgetting she once looked for in dope. How long had she been sweating there in the dim kitchen, sunlight falling in shards through the narrow gaps in the weatherboards, the sound of water shifting as she washed and washed her single mug and bowl? Absenting herself would have been unthinkable

during daylight hours before, when the old man was around, when jobs stacked up like logs waiting to be burned through. But things had changed. There was so little left alive; there were few outdoor tasks. The work, too, had dried up. When the last chook died Laura left the pen empty. The conditions were all wrong for birds. They had stopped laying and she couldn't feed animals that didn't pay. The veggie garden was a fenced square of dirt. Laura had not checked her native plantation in a while, but the ferocity of the sun, the relentlessly clear forty-degree months rolling reliably as waves from one day to the next, told her all she need know. Laura had never quite gotten the hang of leisure time. Had tried knitting socks: the closest she could come to doing nothing. But the purposelessness of the task was maddening. She would not wear wool in heat, so why bother. Soon that job too fell away, her purpose in the world gone slack. Instead, Laura played a waiting game with weather, though she was helpless to affect the state of play. This was a game she could not win. Still, the weeks went by. Laura couldn't say how she filled them. Somehow evening came daily as it always had, and she'd only just managed to get dressed.

Hello? Anyone home?

Knuckles rapped on wood. Laura smoothed the front of her shirt. It was one of the old man's, worn soft as moth wing over the years. Someone was scuffling around on the doormat outside, wiping feet. The kitchen smelled of mice and brown paper bags, feathers and dust. It was bones and powdered clay and her own dead skin. Every dry thing. Laura felt the heat of the day coming through the front door. She touched the wood with her hand, the way she had been trained to test in case of fire.

*Feel heat coming through the door, if the knob's hot, the old man had said, means there's fire on the other side. Next room's burning. You've gotta find another way to get out.*

*What did it matter, Laura thought, if the lot now burned?*

She chastened herself. It was not flame she could feel in any case, but just the burning weather.

She opened the front door, like leaning into an oven. Laura was blinded. The land beyond the house came slowly into focus, a flattened panorama of horizontal shapes, brown rectangle on brown rectangle on white rectangle: the sky. A man stood on the mat. He grinned, teeth rounded like white seashells.

Yes? Laura said.

She was wary now of hazarding names, though he looked familiar. She licked her lips. He stuck out his hand. It was lighter on the palm than it was on the back. She felt dizzy.

Hi Laura, he said. It's me, Louis. Got a minute?

Laura gaped. She saw the scrawny, bare-foot kid up the back of her class. Felt her knee in his gut, and blushed.

Louis?

He grinned. It was him.

He said, Been a while. Forgot this was your place.

Second generation.

He smiled.

Mind if I come in?

She was aware that he was better dressed than she was. He carried a leather folder, a briefcase with a zip. Laura put one bare foot atop the other, a vain attempt to cover up. There was a new silver ute parked out in the drive. Louis's handshake was firm. Despite the activism of her time with Luc, Laura knew few Aboriginal people. She had always felt this as a personal flaw, the measure of her failure to belong in Luc's world. She hadn't counted Louis. No one in town had.

Inside Laura said, Tea?



He nodded. There was something about the way Louis stood silently, his hat going over and over his knuckles like a wheel, that made Laura think he might go on standing there forever, and be happy to. How like his father he was. She invited him to sit and turned her attention to the sink. When she couldn't locate the teabags, she did as she was well practiced in doing, and covered over with a practical lie.

Sorry, coffee all right?

He inclined his head and shrugged.

Fine.

She masked the lengthiness of the simple task with idle chatter. He was patient. She felt he could see right through her. There was something measured and poised about his gaze, as though he could see beyond her skin; she wasn't fooling him. Louis took the mug she offered. Laura noticed, shamefully, the round circle pressed in dust on the table where it had been.

She said, You living in Kyree?

Yeah, was up in Melbourne for a while. University and that.

Laura's eyebrows flinched. They drank the coffee. Their silence was strained. Neither wanted to break first. Each was curious to see what the other might say. Louis cleared his throat.

So, I wanted to come out and talk to you today. Got a favour to ask.

Her eyes narrowed. She listened sceptically as Louis explained that he had come back to Kyree to be with his old Dad. They'd bought the Preston place a year back, when property was still cheap. The whole valley formed their ancestral place, Louis explained. The whole district had been theirs once, but the creek was special. They'd been lucky to buy in when they did. What with the subdivision, things were on the rise. Laura interrupted.

What did you say you did in the city?

Louis said, Lawyer.

She pushed back her chair. His eyes went wide. He put up a hand as though to manually ease her down.

Wait, he said. Give us a minute to explain.

Creek's dry, Laura snapped. Has been for years. Alright?

We just want to know if you're right with us coming through from time to time. Would mean a lot to my old man, to be able to come onto the place. 'Specially now with what Peterson's gone and done.

Laura gave Louis a long, hard stare. She eased back down – an invalid – into her chair.

They spoke for an hour. He told her that his family knew the watercourse, the creek where the dry gully was now – he paused, thinking – said they knew it well, and always. Laura turned the words over and over in her mind. She couldn't stop the jab of jealousy. He had bought back a bit of land nearby, and now they wanted to be able to access the whole creek, not just the part that ran between fences on their block. Laura recalled the look on Luc's face, that beatific glow, when he saw the big tree out the back. She wanted to tell Louis about it, but couldn't remember what Luc said it was called. In any case, that last week she'd finally roused herself to cut it into logs, before it pulled from the thin soil and crushed the house. Louis was saying they wouldn't come often, but they wanted her okay before they did.

Land's pretty stuffed, Laura said. Been livestock over the road for, I dunno. Fifty, a hundred years at least. Subdivided now.

Louis winced and said, I've seen it.

Laura's hands were clenched in one big fist.

Used to be all bush on this side, too.

I remember, Louis said.

Laura leaned forward. There was something she wanted him to understand. Her voice came fast and rasping.

My old man, he bought this land, worked it. I've tried to, you know. Repair some of the damage.

They turned together to look out of the kitchen window at the view. Hills of grit. Laura found she suddenly had nothing more to say. The words had fallen away, quick as that. She sat back. Despair washed over her.

She said, It's in me, somehow. This place.

He asked again if they could come onto the property, so politely dogged that Laura might have admired his manners, his resolve, had she not been full to brim with a wretchedness whose source she could not name. Maybe Vik was right; she needed to get away. She said okay; of course they could use the place any time they liked. Louis's shoulders dropped. Laura watched them fall. In fact, everything about Louis's body appeared to soften, relax. A new looseness came into his limbs, the set of his jaw. He rocked back on the legs of his chair, laughing with relief. He rocked forward and took her hand, pumping. They laughed together. She showed him to the door, fingers splayed lightly on damp lower back. She was borne along by his excitement, his genuine happiness, the rush of parting goodbyes. Swept up. If only they had spoken years ago, back when they were kids, but what might have been was lost, with the rain.

Louis leaned out of the car window, engine running, elbow on sill.

Hey, they ever find your mum in the hills? he called.

The smile dropped from Laura's face. She tried to smile. Of course, he already knew the answer; had known all along.

No, she said. She was in London. She came back.

I'm pleased for you, Louis said. And Dad'll be keen to hear it.

Laura did not have time to say any more. He was already waving, pulling away. She watched him reversing down the drive. Saw dust settle in his wake. Her hand, held aloft, swaying like a branch in gentle breeze in a landscape devoid of trees. It wasn't until she turned away from the road and dropped the arm, until she could no longer hear the car. It wasn't until she paused with hand on doorknob, ready to go back inside the house, that she felt just how quiet the farm was. She was alone. She strained to catch the sound of birdcall and rustling leaves. She remembered the sound of the bush at night when she was a child, like waves breaking over the prow of a boat. Laura looked back over her shoulder, out across the valley. She tasted copper, and salt. There was not one single cloud. An aeroplane roared overhead, cutting the sky in two. She went in. There was nothing else for her to do.

## 28.

Melbourne grew smaller, until the city was just a cross-hatching of grey lines. The cabin smelled of chemical food. There was a sensation of being pressed on all sides by something invisible and heavy. It was so different from the feeling of flying in dreams, which was weightless and light. Would nothing ever be as she had imagined it? Vik wondered. In the next seat Kate giggled, asking a lot of questions. Hien leaned down to whisper something in her ear. She giggled. They turned to look out of the tiny porthole together. Vik flicked through the in-flight magazine again. The plane pierced cloud cover. She looked past her eager family. Down below, an undulating alabaster terrain, otherworldly. How solid cloud appeared when viewed from above. And if clouds, then why not rain? Victoria's drought was decades long and deepening. It had begun creeping north. In Sydney, they had a year of good, dry weather, until they copped the storms. Between wisps of barren cloud, Vik looked down to dust. When the attendant brought around the dinner, little foil packets, Vik found she couldn't eat. Hien reached across Kate's splayed and sleeping form and clasped the back of Vik's neck. She rose to the touch like a cat.

Hien said, You right sweetheart?

Vik lay down her plastic fork, pushed back the meal, said that she was fine. Hien smiled. He did not remove his hand. In the claustrophobic bathroom, Vik caught sight of her face in the mirror, her bloodless lips. She felt vast oceans of air and water rushing beneath her feet. She could not imagine how it would be to see it: the home Katya had made for herself on the other side of the world. In the company of so many sleeping strangers it was possible for a second to touch a truth: that Katya was not really the mother she had longed for, but just a woman, like herself.

At Heathrow, Vik stood in the queue for immigration, fantasising about turning back. Months in the planning, the trip was not just for her but for Hien and Kate too. They would go to Vietnam after London, a long-dreamed holiday. The money spent made retreat

impossible; and then there was her pride. Vik felt herself borne along on a conveyor belt of her own design; she had made it and then stepped on quite willingly. Despite this, it remained that the closer Vik drew to her mother, the more anxious she became. Vik couldn't tell Hien what she was feeling. She wished again that Laura had come, wanted more than anything to hold her sister's hand, and be held. Only Laura would understand. It was something that they should be doing together, coming here. They had borne Katya's loss side by side, propping each other up, and they should connect with her again in the same way. Vik handed over the passports and had to be told three times where they could collect their bags. She remembered how, as a little girl when she suffered nightmares, Laura would snap wide awake, as though so attuned to her little sister that she dreamed Vik's same dreams. Grumbling about the cold, her lack of sleep, Laura would nonetheless invite Vik to climb into the safe, warm cocoon of her bed. In the crook of Laura's body Vik would feel her fear melt away, warmed to water by Laura's breath. As night wore on, Vik would grow certain that everything would be okay. In the morning their hair and feet, tangled together. It would take Vik a moment to work out whose was whose. As a little girl, she lived for those few precious seconds, when the boundaries of her body were blurred, doubled. Strengthened in mingling with Laura's limbs. A cold thought occurred as Vik hefted up their suitcases from the belt, as she tried to clutch Kate's slippery hand and reel her through the crowds. Hien went out ahead in the sleet to hail a cab. Vik had never invited Laura to slide in beneath the sheets in her little bed. She had been comforted, but was never the comforter; the care went all one-way. They had not propped each other up at all, as she believed, but struggled together like swimmers in deep water. Vik had clung to the strength and safety Laura offered. But in panicking, she likely pushed her sister down. For Laura carried both their weights, two heads gasping at the air instead of one. Vik had to sit down for a moment on a plastic chair.

Mummy? Kate said, dabbing Vik's hair with fingertip.

I'm fine Katie. Mummy's just tired. Don't, okay?

Vik kept hold of Kate's skirt, a fistful of denim, lest the little girl be washed away by sea of people. Kate twisted against the grip, uncertain, searching the tide for Hien. Here was her turn, Vik thought, to care for someone else. And she was already failing. With her head in her hands, she was failing. Hien came rushing over to scoop Kate in his arms. He levered Vik up, strong about her waist and they staggered through the terminal like survivors of a wreck, clinging. Hien and Kate stole glances at her perspiring face. Some part of her had been hollowed out with Katya's disappearance and it could not be filled. Not even the woman herself could plug it up, for the hole, begun as grief, had grown bigger over years, eroded around the edges and worn away. Vik almost sat back down on the floor of the airport and surrendered. But then they were out in the cold, like glass for the lungs. Hien was folding her into a cab, piling in their bags, giving the driver directions. They were speeding away toward London before Vik had time to draw breath. She sat back against the new-smelling upholstery, drawing Kate to her across the seat. There was something so comforting in the little girl's particular warmth against her ribs, in Kate's milky breath. Vik looked out of the window for the first time. Something stirred. They were overseas. She did not recognise the place, but it accorded with some deep knowledge that she had gleaned from books. The sky was as grey as the road as the land. Everything seemed crushed together, low and flat, even the sky. It was raining.

The apartment, rented from Hien's client at a generous discount, was in St. Katherine's Dock. It was near the Tower of London, whose stones Vik imagined as being scarred by blood. The air was heavy and damp with exhaust. Vik stood with the luggage by the taxi, waiting while Hien paid. She could see water sucking at pylons beneath her feet. The cabbie had said that they would all be under water soon, if they were not careful. Some complicated damming system, or weirs or something, built along the Thames. Vik had not been listening, too wan to take it in. But Hien made all the right sounds.

Rising seas, innit, the cabbie said.

The dock-water smelled faintly of salt. It brought to mind swamp marshes, also mould, scents Vik had long forgotten, but which were stored in her memory's hairline fissures. She inhaled. Remembered then, standing on a chair at the window, water running down the glass. The smell of wood, rotting.

*Ready Viko?*

The old man, broom in hand.

*Can't let Mother Nature get in our way, can we. Still plenty to do in here!*

Vik struggled to get purchase on the memory. The old man's face was vivid as the pound coin in her hand, but the timing was hazy. Still, it must have been after Katya left. It didn't rain much after that. And there was the old man's sparking energy. That strange gleam in his eye, a kind of terror. That he might be forced by the weather to be with his sad self, and sit still.

Coming? Hien said gently, jiggling the apartment key in his hand.

Vik trundled her suitcase over stone. Kate lifted her weary head from Hien's shoulder and he shifted her in his arms. She blinked and looked around. Vik watched the slow, beatific grin spread across Kate's face. The little girl lurched so suddenly, arms spread wide, that Hien almost dropped her.

He gasped, Kate!

The word was a bullet of shock. But Kate squealed, happily.

Ice feathers! she said.

Wriggling down from Hien's embrace, Kate danced with hands above her head. Vik felt breathless watching the little girl's unbridled joy. Kate would not be damped by exhaustion or location or fear, but would be made new and fresh with each exciting thing, no matter where she was in the world. Irritated, Hien turned impatiently to Vik, expression smeared by lack of sleep.



Shouldn't be snowing *now*, should it?

Vik turned her gaze up to the sky. Icy flakes settled wetly on her cheeks. Their daughter did not know rain – there had been virtually none since she was born – let alone snow. Seen through Kate's eyes, snow seemed to Vik such a magical, unlikely thing.

In the morning, Vik rolled across the bed, groping blindly the cold expanse of sheet.

London: she was alone. Hien had agreed to take Kate out for the day to give Katya and Vik some space. On the plane it had sounded sensible, but now, in this strange room, Vik felt her nerve slip. The bedside clock read 11:00 am, what time was that at home? Vik rolled onto her back and stared at an unfamiliar ceiling, gearing up. What was she afraid of?

Katya was her mother. And this was in London, not Siberia. It was a place she knew very well, in a way, what with all the history lessons, books and films. Consciously, Vik forced her hands to release the bed-sheet they gripped.

*I'll be fine*, she told herself. *All I need is a good map.*

Vik had planned to take the tube to Katya's studio, but was too tightly wound to risk getting lost. The thought of travelling underground filled her with dread. She hailed a cab instead and was glad to step into the warm interior and be sealed inside against the cold. They wound through streets, but Vik took in no detail. London's soundscape was honking. Rain fell over the city, fine as petticoat netting. Though they had spent some time together at Kyree and again in Melbourne before Katya left, though they had spoken on the phone, it was the first time Vik would meet with her mother, alone. What must be the easiest thing in the world for most children, a trip to their mother's home, was foreign terrain to Vik. What did one wear to such an event? Which outfit would make her look normal, like herself? As Vik ripped through her suitcase, nothing had seemed right. Either she was trying too hard, or not hard enough. Struggling into anonymous black jeans, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Even her face looked strange in the strange apartment on this strangest of days.

Vik had the sense that if she went out on the street and kept walking, she could walk right out of her life. The cab splashed through the city, sending up spray. Vik had longed to come to London when she was young. It had seemed so stylish and cosmopolitan, compared to Kyree. The centre of the world.

*But what does it matter how lovely it is, she thought, if it doesn't belong to me?*

We're almost there, said the cabbie. That's it up ahead.

The imposing terrace seemed to rear up through the fog and rain, just as buildings always did in British novels. Vik scrabbled with the handle of the door, thrusting foreign money through the grill. They had arrived. More than anything, in that moment, she longed to be back on the farm.

Katya kissed Vik carefully at the door, brush of tissue-paper lips. She took Vik's umbrella and her coat, stowing them neatly on their respective stands. Coloured light fell across the floor through a stained-glass door. The ceiling was adorned with plaster roses. They went down the black and white tiled corridor. Vik found herself talking, trying desperately to claw down the tension with words.

Well this is the most beautiful hallway I've ever seen!

She was aware of her brute accent, sounding nasal, unrefined. A gilt-framed mirror, very old, hung against one wall. Vik avoided her own eyes; rubbed her hands together to warm them, and to hide their shake.

She said, Will everything in London be like in the movies?

Katya turned abruptly. Vik almost mowed her down.

You mean?

Katya appraised her daughter, hands on hips. Vik swallowed, glanced away from Laura's eyes, embedded in the woman's face. Vik had forgotten, so quickly, how uneasy Katya

made her feel. There was little warmth about her mother. Vik had to keep reminding herself that. Katya was as she was, and not as Vik dreamed.

Vik shrugged, This house.

Pft. Is nothing, just a place to live.

Katya turned away. Vik felt dismissed. They went through double doors, made of golden glass. The room was large and warm, far messier than the grandeur of the space implied, but somehow regal for it, as though Katya could afford to be untidy, what with her taste. Vik took in the floor-to-ceiling windows, the small green garden, covered in frost. Two sparrows tapped atop an ornate frozen birdbath. Vik pressed down on the memory of her baby birds, truly belonging to this cold, neat landscape, and not the dry valley at Kyree where they died.

*Will Katya ever know it all, Vik thought. The details of our lives? Can she ever catch up the missed years? Does she want to?*

For something to do with her eyes, Vik admired the room. All surfaces were spread with books and pads of drawing paper. There were Persian rugs on the floor and embroidered pillows. Though each element was plush and colourful, each looked often used. It was a space that suggested deep thought and warm laughter, good conversation: a family room. Vik could almost smell the spotless kitchen in Kyree, scrubbed weekly by Laura's red-raw hand, until the grain looked rubbed away. She saw four chairs, one bathed in dust. Katya was arranging herself in a red velvet armchair, worn bald at the arms, but solid.

You're rich, Vik blurted.

Katya inclined her head, a fraction. A smile rippled at her mouth. Vik didn't know whether to be embarrassed for herself, or angry. All the years of hand-me-down uniforms, of school lunches: thin vegemite sandwiches made on cheap white bread. She felt tears prick the backs of her eyes. She felt betrayed. Her fingers curled into fists.

Please sit, Viktoria, Katya said. I am glad you are here.

Vik strode to the windows, hugging herself. She stared out into the yard, bright with ice and afternoon sun. Her shoulders ached with tension. They would never have enough time, or the right words, to remake all that had happened between them. Vik knew in her marrow the truth in this, as she felt her mother's eyes at her back. They were just two people who barely knew each other, nothing more miraculous. They had scars. Their meeting was not a salve, but a microscope for old wounds. Nothing, Vik suddenly felt, would ever be resolved.

Vik thought, *Lor was right not to come.*

Yet even as the thought occurred, she could not help but want to embrace the little woman in the velvet chair, to have Katya's eyes upon her, to crawl up in her mother's lap, and be rocked.

Katya said, Your trip? Was okay?

Vik heard the sound of liquid pouring, the clink of spoon on china rim. She felt herself shift quite naturally into small talk for the relief it provided, discussing the flight, the weather; every mundane thing. There was nothing for it but to sit down in a matching chair, and take up a cup of tea. But even as she was drinking, as she smiled sweetly, nodding in response to Katya's suggestions for their stay, Vik heard roaring inside her head. Her cup rattled on rose-print saucer. Her mother's house, her mother, and there was chitchat about the Tate? Vik fought the uncontrollable urge to break something.

She said, I named my daughter after you, you know.

I name *you* for my mother.

Katya's gaze was steady, unnervingly so. Vik felt that something had been broken, but not by her. Were they arguing?

He wanted to sell the farm, Vik tried. The old man, I mean Bruce.

She pointedly drew in the lush surrounds with her eyes. Katya's posture suggested something restrained by force of will, face preternaturally impassive.

Laura doesn't know, though. That he wanted to sell it. I didn't tell her.

Is she okay? Laura? I feel – Katya formed the words carefully – I feel *disappointed* that she couldn't come.

Vik knocked her cup back onto the saucer, set them clattering on the marble table by her chair. She took a deep breath.

Look, I'm sorry, but I'm having a bit of trouble here. I mean, look at this place. Did you know there were some years when we couldn't buy shoes? I had to wear gumboots to school. We weren't the only ones in the district who did. But do you know what that's like?

Katya leaned forward. Her smile was small and sad, the first genuine bit of emotion to pierce her restrained façade. Vik leaned back. Katya gestured, taking in the room with her hand.

None of this I can do if I stay, Viktoria. You see? My art is what it is now because I go. For this I make a big sacrifice, and you too. Is it the right one? I think this every day, and do not know the answer. I do what I do at the time; I live with it.

Katya reached for Vik's hand across the table. Vik picked up her cup; Katya sat back. She squared her shoulders, straightened her back. Vik looked at her mother's face. How could she explain to Katya what "living with it" had meant to them? The police search, starting school and graduating; school plays and football games; her degree; her wedding and the birth of her child. Those big events that make life what it is. She had done each without a mother. And how to explain the small, mundane parts of life, those that go unreported, uncelebrated, unmarked? What it felt like to ride the Kyree bus in winter, wind whistling through window cracks; to go into parent-teacher interviews with only one hand held? The sound of Laura in the bathroom, sobbing over some fresh schoolyard taunt; the old man up on the hill, dragging a drowned sheep from the dam, and nothing Vik could do to help any of it? How to explain the backbreaking work of clearing, which was too much, an obscene task for one man and two little girls? Or the private thrill Vik experienced, each time she

uncovered another clue to Katya's identity and past? Just scraps of knowledge, but precious to her as rain.

Katya said, I send money too, you know, for some time. Cheques. I send catalogues of my work. Even photographs, sometimes. I don't know why Bruce never used, or read them.

Vik felt a shiver; a tightening at the back of the neck. She was overcome by an eerie certainty. Bruce might have kept Katya's letters from them, maybe. But money? Vik felt sure of his devotion to her and Laura. He would have made them work as hard as he did regardless of what Katya did or where she was, but he would not have seen them go without. Not if there was money coming in. Would he? Vik felt the past, like sand, shifting.

Numbly, Vik accepted the biscuit Katya offered. She bit in. The answer came slowly, like nausea. The biscuit was a wad of sharp sawdust stuffing her mouth. Vik tried to choke it down, but her mouth was dry, the biscuit drier. She could not believe she had not seen it all along: Bruce had not kept anything from them, because he had no idea that there was anything to keep. He had been as clueless as she was. He had suffered too. Vik lurched for a pale pink napkin, splayed decoratively on the tea tray. She spat biscuit mush, folding it away.

Katya said, Is something wrong?

I'm okay, Vik was saying. I'm okay.

Her skin was flushed and clammy. She reached for another napkin, blotting desperately at her forehead, trying to blot away her realisation. A strange polite smile was plastered to her face. There was nowhere to put the regurgitated biscuit, warm through the paper in her hand. Vik formed a fist around it. Katya was talking about the farm in Kyree, saying how beautiful the valley was. Vik couldn't focus on the words. Part of her brain was aware that she should be smiling, responding, nodding politely her head. The rest was in panic. Everything had slowed right down, except her mind, which was racing. Bruce had not

known that Katya was writing. Katya, unaware that she was missed. The spare napkin was damp with Vik's sweat. She knew that she was right. No man would look so thoroughly haunted, so wan and desperate as Bruce had looked all those gruelling months, while searching for his wife. Not if he had known all along that Katya was alive and well. His behaviour had never been an act, but true sorrow. He never got her mail.

I need the bathroom, Vik said, cutting Katya off.

She stood. Katya's eyes went wide. Vik barely waited for the directions, but ran. The hallway was cool and quiet, library air. She found the right door, flung herself through it and then locked it close. Sitting on the toilet, Vik leaned her head against the tiles. There was a claw-foot bath. Two sinks with golden taps spread side by side, each with their own handtowels. The room smelled of jasmine. Each fitting, polished to a shine. Vik tried to gather herself. How could it be true? It was beyond belief that Laura could have done it, and yet Vik knew that her sister had. Laura, who had washed Vik's face when she was sick, who had made school lunches and tucked her into bed and kissed and reprimanded and loved her, really loved her. Vik had no doubt that she was loved; felt it in the way Laura scolded and bossed and never forgot a birthday. And yet, it was also Laura who had wrecked things – really wrecked Vik's whole life. The mushed biscuit, wet, had seeped through. She was still clutching the balled mess in her hand. Vik had never felt more wretched. At the same time, one small corner of her brain was surprised to find she was not angry. It was more than anger. Vik had gone through the floor of her emotion, was now far underground. She stood, lifted the seat and flushed the napkin away. At the sink, she splashed cold water on her face. The woman in the mirror was a stranger, so much older than Vik knew herself to be. Taking up a handtowel from the pile of fresh, crisp linen, she pressed it to her face. She howled, muffling with the artificial smell of spring. More than anything, Vik wanted to speak to Laura, to hear her say it wasn't true. At the same time, a part of Vik already believed that there must be good reason. Laura was many things, but she had never been bad. Something had gone terribly wrong. The adults had failed to fix it.

Katya was calling through the door, Viktoria?

Vik said, Just a minute!

She pressed her face into the towel. There was nothing for it. She couldn't stay in there forever. But nor did she want to discuss the issue with the woman beyond the door. There was only one voice she wanted to hear, one person to whom she wished to speak. And she was on the other side of the world. Vik felt suddenly the whole trip as a mistake. She replaced the towel and unlatched the door. She felt a part of herself as distant. She went out into the living room to endure the rest of her visit. Her whole life had changed, and there was Katya, her long-lost mother, sitting drinking tea. There was nothing for it. Vik filed the information, squashed it down. She took a biscuit from the plate.

You've grown beautifully, Katya was saying, wistfully. Your face, it is lovely.

Vik shrugged, forced a smile. A face was a face, an accident of genes. She felt ambivalent about its beauty since the design was not hers to own, but inheritance. In fact, it was the only part of her that Katya could lay claim to; knowing nothing of their lives, she could only compliment what she could see. It irritated Vik that her mother only cared to speak of what she herself could take credit for.

Vik said, They say I have Bruce's mouth.

Katya hid her expression in the act of drinking tea.

It's so cold, Vik ventured, her atonement.

A little too eager to accept it, Katya nodded amiably.

The winters, they are hard. Coldest on record this one, newspapers say.

Vik smiled politely. She felt the space yawn between them across the coffee table. A grandfather clock ticked loudly in the hall. Her throat burned from the scalding liquid she kept bringing to her lips.

You must have many things to ask Viktoria, Katya said finally.

No one calls me that, Vik snapped. I'm *Vik*.

Veek? But Viktoria is a beautiful name!



Katya tutted. Vik caught sight of her mother's hands, so incongruous with the rest of the dainty, eccentrically dressed woman. They were thick and rough of palm, worker's hands. In that detail at least, her parents had matched. She told Katya as calmly as she could that she wanted to know where she was from; it was all she had ever wanted. Katya turned away from Vik then. She eased out of her chair, and went over to the glass doors, stood in the pool of lemon light spilling in through the glass. Vik felt like weeping. She had never seen sun of this quality, such fine, delicate light. Vik did not know what she had said to make Katya pull away; she didn't know what to say to make things up. She waited. Eventually, Katya turned in profile, addressing her comments to the room.

Viktoria, she said softly. I'm sorry. I do not know this myself.

Katya was born during the war. She told Vik that she didn't know her parents; whether they were taken to a concentration camp, or killed fighting, or in raids. Perhaps her mother was just too poor or young to care for her, anything was possible, and Katya couldn't say.

But my name? Vik said.

Katya cleared her throat.

Ah. This I am told. But there is no birth record. No proof.

She was brought up, Katya said, in an orphanage with her 'sister', the girl from the drawings, another orphan like herself and no blood relative. As she spoke, Katya came slowly back to her place opposite Vik. She sat down. It was as though with each sentence something lightened between them. Vik found that they each leaned into the space, never touching, but offering something intangible and precious to the other through exchange of words. Perhaps it was this exposure to her mother's suffering, the fact that Vik could suddenly see how Katya had lived a life not just of cruelty toward her daughters, as Vik had reckoned it since their reunion. But one of loneliness and sorrow beyond the bounds of Vik's own life and experience. Listening to her story allowed Vik to be newly generous. They were – Vik saw it now – akin, two orphans, though they were not really even that, for

Vik had been truly loved by the old man, and by Laura, and knew it. Later, Vik would lament the news Katya delivered. She would struggle to come to terms with the fact that some things could not be pinned down and explained or mapped, but were lost to the mess of living in the world. She would, she realised, have to be satisfied with half a past. After all, that inheritance was far more than many people – Katya included – could ever hope to get.

After the war, Katya said that she was sent to live with one family after another, each expecting from her varying degrees of servitude. There were many orphans, she said, and everyone was reeling. Not just in Germany, but across Europe, everywhere. She was not a special case, but one of millions. And though she tried to find out who she was, who in those years did not have someone to search for? A baby has no real memory – not even their mother's face – and so the woman that baby becomes has no real chance of finding out anything about the past. Especially not when she is searching through rubble for it.

Katya said, When I am eighteen, I am free to go. I get lucky. I go to the Academie in Paris. You know it?

Vik shook her head.

No matter. First I go as working girl, cleaning, anything. Later as a student. I learn if you want something, you can always find a way!

Vik caught a glimpse of the woman her mother might once have been and still was: a survivor. She wanted to feel admiration, and did, but the emotion was complicated by her own bleak childhood, by too many years of loss. Vik could not simply forget. Katya explained that when the chance came for her to go to Australia, she jumped.

I know nothing of the place, Katya said. But I am young, my girlfriend goes there to paint the land. I am thinking: a fresh start!

What about the paintings you did in Kyree? On the pots?

Katya's eyebrow shot up, as if to say, *you remember?*

My dream home. A fairytale. Something to take me away from all that dust.

By now Vik had been listening for more than two hours and was exhausted.

You've had a lot of practice at leaving things, she said, and was immediately regretful. Katya pulled back. Her mouth compressed into a line. She busied herself with the cold tea tray. The light had turned ashen. It would be dark soon, and not yet four o'clock.

I'm sorry, Vik said. *Mutti*, forgive me.

Katya's eyes flicked across.

You remember something of my language? The lullabies I sing?

Vik raked her fingers through her hair, eyes downcast. It felt a terrible betrayal somehow, to admit that she did not. She shrugged.

I was only four, she said.

Katya picked up the tray.

Hungry?

It seemed they had come to the end of something. Vik did not feel ready for whatever was coming next.

Actually – she half stood – I do remember one phrase, I think!

She tried it out, a nervous approximation of sounds, dug up from mind's bedrock. Katya stood at the gold glass doors. Vik saw the zap of tension flinch across her mother's back. Katya turned slowly, careful not to drop the armload of fragile things she held.

Of everything, you remember this.

It was not a question, but a damning sentence of some kind. Vik felt done in. There seemed nothing for it.

What does it mean? she said.

Katya spoke so quietly that Vik had to move across the room to hear her words.

It means: I don't belong here.

Vik watched her mother walk away, that ramrod spine.

## 29.

Laura phoned to give Vik the details of her trip to Melbourne. She lied, said the ute was in the shop and insisted that she liked catching the train. Fact was she was just too nervous now to drive such long distances. Dr. Callagan insisted that it would be a while before the symptoms of the disease could be fully felt. She was still young, he said. But even he had to admit that while it was unusual, it was not unknown for the disease to develop in a person of her age. She was younger than Bruce had been. But they could not say for sure when his symptoms had begun to take root. He had been resourceful, the doctor said, and it was possible that the old man's decline had been far more gradual and enduring than any of them had realised at the time.

You'll be right for a while yet though, the doctor said, smiling. You're like him.

His words were meant to reassure, but Laura felt her future in them. It was grey. She looked away, veiling her face in tissue.

Despite what Dr. Callagan said, Laura felt her memory, like sand, shifting. Familiar journeys sometimes went blank; the route from shed to house made mysterious as if she were a stranger to the place. The fear she felt then was desperate, the knowledge that she could not rely on herself. Laura had grown grateful that the hills were bare. If she took a wrong turn, walked for an hour away from the house, she would never be far from a good clear view of the valley, which sometimes helped, if she were calm, to guide her back. Had the bush remained then she, not Katya, might have been lost forever, among trees.

You'll pick me up? Laura said.

She tried not to sound too pressed, or too eager. Vik said that she would, in a tone that suggested she would wait to see what her schedule was like on the day. Laura came down to Melbourne on the train, palm-cards in purse, carefully annotated. Vik's name, phone number and address, scrawled in hand gone strangely loose. There was another card in

Laura's wallet bearing her own name, her condition and Medicare number. Her date of birth.

She was going down to tell Vik the truth, as she remembered it. More notes, made over days. A drought project, for when all other jobs had withered. Laura knew it was now or never with the truth. Vik would not understand why she wanted to sell the farm all of a sudden, not without the full, grim story: Laura's meddling between Katya and Bruce, and now the cloud-cover amassing in her mind. She had to let the farm go; couldn't save it, any more than she could save herself. And if she didn't get out now, it would finish her. Far more quickly than they had pushed it to the brink, and finished it.

Vik came to the station. It took a moment for her face to emerge from the jostling crowd. Laura felt first fronds of panic but it was Vik's hand, warm on her arm. She almost cried with relief. Her sister was well into a story, words rushing, as if they had been talking for some time. Laura tried to find a second of stillness to draw in the familiar face. They embraced. Vik looked cool and put-together in her white linen suit. She did not stop talking. Laura, boots tanned with copper dust, felt smeared. Vik ushered her through underground terraces to the car. Laura carried her own bags. The apartment was only streets away. Still, as Vik said, the car was air-conditioned, and it was far too hot to walk.

They waited in traffic.

Laura said, How was your trip?

Vik pressed the horn, aggressively.

What trip?

London.

Vik sighed, bright enthusiasm gone. Her fingers plucked at the wheel. Alarmed, Laura observed Vik's quick tears; the way she leaned her head against the window-glass, exhausted.

Look, can we not go there now? Vik said, tight and quiet. I've told you a million times, I'm not angry with you for what you did. I get why you did it. You were only a little kid. I've said I forgive you. Okay? I just need time to process.

Laura coughed, covering confusion. Vik had confronted her weeks before, she remembered now. Something their mother had said in London. There were no more secrets. The phone had rung out at midnight. Laura picked it up, groggy. Vik was howling, in tears. Laura had thought that it was Kate; that something had happened. She got up to find her keys and shoes. It took ten minutes to work out what Vik was saying; that she knew about the letters. Phone to ear, Laura crawled back in to bed. The conversation had been difficult. At the end of it nothing was resolved but that they would have to talk about it all again, and keep talking, maybe for the rest of their lives. In the car, Laura sat back in her seat, trying to get used to the fact, all over again, that Vik *knew*. She groped inside her purse, touching the vital cards. How could something so pivotal slip her mind? Was her brain selectively forgetting the things it did not like? Or forcing her to relive them? She wanted to say something then, to give comfort or receive it. But Vik was reaching down to turn up the radio. Everything about her body bristled. She avoided Laura's eye. Her gaze, fixed on the baking road.

The streets were almost deserted, footpaths glittering, sticky in heat. The city seemed turned to glass. Laura didn't remember it being so big and bright and high. It had been years since she'd come down; that was progress for you. She had to squint against the glare, the sunlight made piercing by the millions of mirrors against which it bounced.

It's all over the news, Vik was saying. The fires, they're getting closer.

Laura nodded. They shared a quick look. Laura felt the tension between them get pushed aside by shared memory. Bushfire was ripping through Victoria. Laura knew that Vik was feeling, as she was, the blistering heat from that long-ago front on her face. On the outskirts of Melbourne, this front was already kilometres long, fed to atomic proportions by the extreme heat and the dryness of the land. The whole state was on high alert. Laura had been lucky the trains were still running; they wouldn't be for long. Footage of galloping flames had been flooding the airwaves in continuous coverage for days. Laura had watched just that morning as a house, then a street, then a town were swallowed whole, their complete engulfing displayed simultaneously on every channel. The news said arson, but as Vik pointed out along with every anchor, in these conditions who could tell? The sun beating on a piece of broken glass might do it, or one carelessly extinguished cigarette. Laura wasn't worried about the farm. The new estates on Peterson's place would be well protected by the CFA. And if the fire did sweep through, well. She had nothing left to lose.

Vik's apartment was cool and quiet, as though belonging to a wholly separate atmosphere. Vik showed Laura how to control the temperature in the guest room, a pattern of buttons and processes. Laura smiled, nodded, said she understood. The room was neat and bright and white, just like Vik. Laura felt she could think a little more clearly in the impersonal space, which imposed nothing but comfort, was airy and quiet. The world beyond its walls, held back. Vik was plumping pillows, bustling, saying it wouldn't be so calm once Kate got home from Saturday school with Hien.

Thank you, Laura said suddenly, dropping her case, turning abruptly to face Vik. She took Vik in her arms, that familiar shape. In fact, it was Vik – statuesque, gym-strong – who held her. Laura lay a cheek on Vik's shoulder, sucking back tears. The relief, a flood. Finally handing herself over to Vik's care.

What's this then? Vik said, bemused, covering her alarm.



It wasn't often Laura was demonstrative. After a moment, Vik tried to pull back. Laura pressed her face more firmly into Vik's chest. Her arms, winched tight around Vik's waist. Laura told Vik then. Eyes squeezed tight, rocking, she told her. It came out just like that.

Viko, she said. I'm sick.

Golden flame flickered, stretched across the horizon. Laura sat on the couch nursing a cup of tea. She felt as though she had front row seats to the end of the world; the view from the thirty-third floor was phenomenal. It was almost possible to forget that the fire was real; to see it as the impressive lightshow it appeared to be from their vantage point well out of harm's way. From the tower, it appeared the whole world was burning. The line of fire stretched from left to right as far as the eye could see. It was only centimetres high to Vik and Laura, but advancing. Each centimetre to them marked metres of ferocity on ground level, flame devouring land and sky.

They had been talking quietly for some time. When Vik had recovered well enough to stand, she went straight into manager mode, as Laura knew she would, wanting to map the whole thing out. She fired questions, steely-eyed. Laura listed her symptoms, unfolding the report she had received from Dr. Callaghan, the two deft words of her sentence: early onset. She used her notes, where they were legible and knew her struggle to articulate the rest was information enough for Vik. In any case, they were both familiar with the disease. Vik used the word *haunted*. Laura joked that she couldn't believe how much she was like Bruce: to get sick like him, on top of the rest! Vik didn't laugh. Laura found that she was grateful. She could see how hard Vik was trying not to break down, how much energy it took to maintain that confident, in-charge face.

What about you? Laura tentatively said. You been tested for the Alzheimer's gene? Do you have it?

Vik's hands were visibly shaking. She inclined her head a fraction, eyes downcast. Laura caught the meaning. Relief like adrenalin surged. She scooped Vik's hand, squeezing.

She said, Thank god! But that's great, Viko! So then Kate's also –  
But she couldn't think of the word.

Laura admitted, finally, that she couldn't go on at the farm.

Vik wailed, How can we sell? After everything?

There was sweat on her brow. It had grown warm in the room, as though the heat from the flames – out in the gilded suburbs beyond the bounds of the city – were reaching them on air.

Sit down, Viko, Laura said calmly, exhaustedly. It'll be okay. We'll work it out.

Vik's home-phone broke the tension. It rang, one short, sharp peal.

Strange, Vi said, examining the caller ID. That was Hien calling, he was cut off.

Vik's eyes on Laura's face had gone navy, dark and wide. Her look sent a little fizz through Laura's gut.

Is it hot in here? Vik said slowly, wincing.

But even as Laura was agreeing, Vik was rushing to the wall, jabbing at the temperature control. It did not give her what she wanted. She wheeled and pulled a mobile from her jeans. It slammed against her ear. Laura sat forward. Something was happening; she could not grip onto what it was. The way Vik had looked at her. The same as when, after a long day's search, Bruce came back inside the house, alone.

What is it? Laura said.

She rose up stiffly from the couch. Vik dropped the phone.

Line's jammed. Probably too many people calling out.

Laura had no idea what Vik meant. There was no time to ask. Vik was already pushing past, jogging down the hall. When Laura reached the front door, Vik had her forehead up against it. Her eyes were closed.

What's going on? Laura said. You're scaring me, Vik.

Vik's voice was monotone with disbelief.

Fire's cut through the phone lines, she said. And we're locked in.

They went back dazedly into the lounge. Vik's words, tripping. Laura tried to piece them out, to find some way of breaking Vik's gush, but it was all coming out so quickly, a geyser, that Laura had to let some meaning go. Vik said the whole building ran on swipe cards, not keys, for entrance to lobby, lifts and homes. A new design.

Can you feel how hot it is in here? Vik said. Power's down.

They stood agitatedly at the windows, staring out. Vik touched the glass with back of hand. She winced. Laura copied; the glass was faintly warm. She could feel the heat on Vik's skin, the pulse of her fear. Three helicopters in formation flew north toward the flame.

Whole city's out, Vik said. See?

Laura looked where Vik pointed. She saw what she hadn't seen before. In office buildings, no lights were lit behind glinting glass. Chaotic roads were jammed to a halt. Traffic lights gone blind. Laura watched a white ambulance, small as pearl, race towards a smash. Threaded on a string of stationary cars, it ground to a halt at the first cross of streets. Some cars took matters into their own hands and edged out into intersections, only to turn into the next long queue. Laura could see what the drivers could not; that it was hopeless. She traced road into road until the pattern of cars blurred with distance and the haze of smoke. The city, fallen into uncanny stillness. Jammed by the failure of its own clockwork. Without electricity, Laura saw that it had stopped being a city at all. Became a vast, hot, stretch of concrete.

I don't understand, Laura said. What you meant about being locked in.

I guess the key-cards don't work, Vik said. Without power. I don't know. It's never happened before.

Vik groped across the space between them, and took Laura's arm. There was panic in the touch. Without power, no water could be pumped up to them, or down. They had no fresh air, for none of the grand windows opened. It was forty degrees outside, maybe more. The city, a migraine of heat. Without conditioned air, the tower, a glass tube, would quickly equalise. Laura remembered out loud how there was always this or that family in the district, died in fire when their generator failed, the electricity was cut and they could not pump or access water to fight back. Laura could not read the look on her sister's listening face. There was some internal conflict taking place. Vik swallowed several times, inhaled deeply, squaring shoulders. Her eyes strayed to Laura's scrawled notes, scattered by the couch. Laura wanted to tell Vik something then. It was a snake in the grass and she was behind it snatching the tail as it whipped, and disappeared. She needed a moment to focus the thought, to dig it out of the dark burrow it had coiled up in. But Vik was shaking herself, grinning artificially. Whatever struggle had gone on, the manager in Vik had won.

C'mon, she said, bustling. I'll put the kettle on! Think there's still some water in it.

Laura was swept along by Vik's vigor, ushered enthusiastically back to the couch. Installed on a wad of cream cushions, Laura was urged by Vik to rest. Laura watched her sister zag around the kitchen, a lightning-bolt, all energy with little domestic application, which was her way. Vik worked as if it were any other day, clattering cups, spilling sugar, humming under her breath. She kept her back to the windows, fixed on the task. Laura saw suddenly that Vik would be okay. She watched Vik scoop the kettle from its base, avoiding steam. It was not the action that did it, but Vik's face and body in the space. Laura saw clearly that Vik was fine. And in that moment it was like a great hot pressure, a heavy hand, was lifted off Laura's chest. Whatever happened next, she felt sure her little sister would survive it. She lay back against the pristine couch, feeling bone-tired, the way she had been after gruelling days of clearing work. Vik was making the tea as Laura had trained her: pouring

water, measuring leaves, then warming up the cups. The farm might be lost, but there was something Laura had done well.

*Vik knows how to make a good cup of tea, Laura thought. Because of me.*

She closed her eyes for a brief moment. The temperature rose.

Night was falling when Laura next awoke. The darkened city, mired in smoke. Gluey with thirst, her tongue felt swollen. She sat up slowly. The sun, muffled by haze, was being snuffed out. Usually a landscape of merrily twinkling lights, the city was plunged into deep and layered gloom. Disorientated, it took Laura a moment to work out where she was. Then she remembered the fire. They were trapped. It took another moment to feel the reason for her journey to the city: that she was giving up the farm. She thought about lying back and closing up her eyes again, and would have, but for the nagging parched condition of her mouth. She stared instead at the fire, even more eerie against a darkening evening sky. It was impossible to gauge its scope. Parts flared up, sunk back, flickering. The smoke, so much more voluminous than the fire itself, was misleading. Yet there was no denying that the fire was big. The entire horizon licked and spat. An iridescent line at fifty kilometers was what, when right there on the ground? A word came like an insult: inferno. She had seen enough domestic fire up close to know that this was something else. Smoke billowed, curling up, expanding. The sky in premature sunset, made of flame. She thought of Kyree range, sun sinking low behind the hills, those crimson evenings. *Red sky at night, shepherd's delight*, the old man used to say. But this was something else, something unnatural. Above Melbourne's darkened suburbs, both sky and land were of the same coal hue. One might have been dark water, reflecting the other back.

Vik came in from the hall.

She said, You awake Lor?

How many times Laura had heard that voice in dead of night. Vik said that she had got through to Hien on the mobile. He and Kate were fine, if locked out. They had gone to the Botanical Gardens where the council had set up tents and generators and were passing out cold drinks. They were being told the power would come back on soon.

Funny, Vik said. To be a refugee, so close to home.

She sat beside Laura on the couch. Hien had said that Luc was down there in the park, giving speeches in the dark. This was exactly the kind of event he had for so long been predicting. With the election coming up, they were saying he could not lose now. Laura smiled and let mention of Luc slide by. It didn't hurt to hear his name anymore, but it would never be comfortable; it still gave a little jab. And the pain would only worsen. That image of him was everywhere: suited, handsome, with one strong arm around his wife. Time and again Laura started at the sight of them together; that her Luc had been caught, publicly, with someone else. Each time she had to relearn their history, teaching herself. In dark moments, she was grateful for her disease. If she waited long enough, he would be erased.

Despite Vik's brave smile she was pale, and had been crying. Laura touched Vik's knee. A quick warm look passed between them. Vik passed Laura the tepid tea – there was no other drink – and Laura knocked it gratefully back.

Vik said, It'll be really dark soon. I couldn't find candles.

How beautiful her sister looked, Laura thought, oiled in sweat and shadow. Vik stared out at the view looking down at the city was like looking into a crevasse. Scattered headlights moved cautiously along roads tunnelled by dark. Laura caught the red-blue flash of fire-truck siren, so distant, far away down below.

Listen, Laura said. Do you want to do the plans?

Vik wiped a hand across her face. Horrified, Laura realised that until that moment, Vik had not understood that she meant to subdivide the farm. Had she not made it clear, Laura

wondered? Yet even as she was apologising and trying to explain, the surveyor in Vik was compressing her emotion. She shrugged Laura's words away. Her voice was professional, cold, clipped. It stung Laura to hear it.

Vik said, No no, you're absolutely right. Kyree's almost part of Melbourne now.

Land'll be worth buckets in real estate, and not good for much else, from what you say. I'll do the plans.

Vik picked at the fabric of her pants, creased with heat.

Rather me.

She stood up and got a notebook, though it was really too dim to draw. She set about sketching their valley, barely looking at the lines.

You don't have to start now, Laura said.

But Vik made a face that mirrored what Laura felt. They had gone through a door that could not be reopened. Laura thought of Louis, whom she had promised access to their land. She had phoned him up to explain her plans; had heard his voice break down the line. An aching sound. So close to the sound she imagined for the old man's heart, had he lived to see what she would do with the place. He would turn in his grave, whose hill would eventually – in line with Vik's clever design – be made into a neat little park on the new estate. Louis asked for time, a chance to get the money together to buy the land himself. Laura granted it. But it cost too much. Even at a discount, it cost too much. When he called back after weeks to say so, Laura felt the despair in his voice. She couldn't tell him about her illness, that without it she might have just given him the place and be done with it. But there were Vik and Kate to think of; it belonged to them too. There was her medical care. She had no choice.

Lor, there's something I have to tell you, Vik said suddenly, casting the book away. She turned to Laura. They were sitting eye to eye. Laura listened, trying to hear what Vik was saying: that Bruce too had thought to sell the farm when he got sick but Vik had wanted to protect Laura, she said. That's why she didn't tell.

I thought it would kill you, Vik said. I thought you loved it there.

Laura opened her mouth, lips cracked with heat. She thought of all the years she had spent before and since the old man's death, trying to make things right. The oceans of sweat. She had given her life to the place, like kindling for a fire. She'd thrown in Luc, thrown herself, made her whole life a pyre. All for some misguided sense of duty. Because it was what Bruce would have wanted. But even as this thought occurred, Laura knew it was not wholly true. She had loved the place herself, as Vik said. She had burned, willingly, without realising that's what it was she was doing. When she looked back, it seemed she had blamed everyone else for the choices she made, when they were hers to own and bear. Weren't they? Vik was crying. Laura took her sister's hand.

Don't be sad Viko, she said. I'm here.

Vik cried harder. Laura rubbed her back. She was almost glad to have this moment, together in the dark, with all their secrets exhumed, bare and behind them. Yet, there was something prickling the edge of Laura's mind. She did not feel entirely relieved.

Do you feel better? Laura said. To have told me?

Vik nodded; Laura said she felt the same way. Vik did not stop crying. They sat together, watching the brilliant orange banner burn across the land. It was the fire, Laura realised, that was so unnerving. It wasn't the flame itself, though the visible ferocity of the burning made her heart pound; the florescent haze magnified and distorted against the artificial dimming of the city without lights. Even as she watched, something exploded at the front. A fireball burst above waves of flame, flares shot into the sky. The final marker of a family home, gas bottle at back door. Laura had to work on rubbing Vik's shoulders. She focussed her attention on the circular movement of her hand hard against Vik's clammy back, just to prevent herself from bolting like an animal, though the fire was still a way off, and there was nowhere she could run. Laura felt cold in the gut, like she'd lapped up a lake of ice water, even as sweat rolled off her skin.



She saw that for all their conversations, for all the hard work they had done to make something of their lives and of the farm; for all their efforts to be honest with each other and come clean, they were no more in control of their fate now, than anyone down there on the ground was in control of the fire. It would burn. Despite the fire engines and evacuation plans, the careful clearing of dead brush, domestic sprinklers on roofs and all that television coverage, it would burn. What remained of the land beyond the city in the morning would be what it was. Either ashes, or alive. It was outside them. Or maybe, Laura thought, they were outside it. Either way, it was simply bigger than they were.

Laura took Vik's hand. They had done their best together. Hadn't they? Down below, the darkened city stretched in all directions, amorphous without lights. The fire breathed embers into the sky. It was hard to believe that when it was over, there would be anything left to save. Laura saw a jumbo-jet, circling Tullamarine, unable to land. Its lights, like shooting stars. Though it would soon be fully dark, she could just make out twin plumes of smoke trailing behind the plane. As she watched, the contrails evaporated. Gone wherever smoke goes, when it can no longer be recognised by the naked human eye.

# Landfall: Exegesis

## Introduction

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*Settler Australian concerns for the future of the continent are best understood to have a dual aspect. The first is in the context of our increasing awareness of how badly wrong things are going here. The second in the context of identity and the process of trying to understand how we fit into this world* (Press cited in Rose 1996, p. 83, emphasis added).

This exegesis tells a story of intersections between people and the land. In the Australian context, that story is particularly poignant, for it speaks to and illuminates both Indigenous and settler Australian histories with the continent, with each other, and more recently with climate change. The story is also complex: one of invasion and dispossession, ecological degradation and potential environmental catastrophe. It is a story that stretches backward in time across the millennia over which Indigenous peoples inhabited the continent prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1788, and forward into an unknown future, as climate change continues to reshape our continent and our lives.

For the past two centuries, Australian lands have been largely managed by settler Australian peoples in ways that are based on their epistemological understandings of and relationships to the non-human world. Such understandings, by virtue of the history of non-Indigenous settlement in Australia, have primarily been imported from Europe and elsewhere. These modes of living and knowing land have had largely disastrous consequences for the health of Australian eco-systems, flora and fauna, prompting the fundamental question posed by this exegesis: why haven't settler Australians yet learned to accept, live with and adapt to uniquely Australian conditions? Danielle Clode chillingly echoes this question in the context of Australian bushfires – summoning Tom Griffiths and Judge Leonard Stretton before her – when she writes, ‘Two centuries is surely long enough to learn the lessons of our environment. And yet we have not. We are still unprepared’ (2010, p. 8). Why is this so? These questions, and the multifaceted exploration I undertake

here to help find an answer, could not be more crucial at this critical juncture in relation to climate change.

The discussion below is an attempt to illuminate and come to terms with a response to the questions posed by this work. This exploration unfolds on two fronts: the ecological and the cultural. Together, these lenses provide two quite different yet symbiotic intellectual landscapes in which an examination and discussion of settler conceptions of land, and their impacts, can take place.

In **Chapter One: Climate Change**, I provide an overview of the ecological crises faced by Australia as climate change develops, arguing that the scale of the crises is alarmingly (though revealingly) disproportionate to the pervasive lack of public action being taken to first mitigate, and now adapt to, the likely devastation that climate change will bring to Australia.

In an attempt to establish why this may be, in **Chapter Two: Land**, I provide a brief overview of Western epistemology as it informs settler conceptions of the relationships between nature and culture, imported with the settlers to Australia and underpinning the development and management of the continent. Using two ecological examples of the intersections between settler understandings and Australian conditions – fire, and structures of human habitation such as homes and suburbs – I go on to demonstrate how settler understandings and approaches are fundamentally ill-suited, even damaging, to Australian lands. However, there have always been other ways of conceptualising the relationships between people and land and other approaches to caring for and living with the Australian continent, as demonstrated by the ways in which Indigenous peoples know and engage with country. I suggest that being open to, and learning from, Indigenous knowledges and modes of land management may constitute a possible – though potentially problematic – alternative to the imported and maladaptive frameworks underpinning the contemporary dominant culture in Australia. Yet simultaneously, I argue that settler Australians cannot engage with Indigenous peoples and approaches without also encountering their own

founding histories, thereby undermining their own sense of “ownership” of, and legitimacy on, the continent.

In **Chapter Three: Literature**, I deepen this line of argument by making a case for settler Australian *unsettlement*, the uncanny cultural condition that I suggest, in line with the work of Jacobs and Gelder (1998), underpins settler cultures. This condition derives from the double bind settler Australians find themselves in. On the one hand, as a result of the historical application of *terra nullius* to the continent and the broader project of settler colonialism until very recently,<sup>1</sup> and in order to assert their own rights to sovereignty, settler cultures have had to believe that the continent was empty and available when they arrived, and must continuously work to eradicate or de-legitimise an Indigenous presence in order to substantiate this view. On the other hand, the obvious reality of Indigenous peoples on the continent at the time of first landing and since clearly undermines this conception of history and disavows the legitimate rights of settler peoples to ownership of Australian lands, thereby giving rise to cultural *unsettlement*. Though these founding realities have been – necessarily – largely silenced and “forgotten” in settler cultures (Stanner 1969), I demonstrate that *unsettlement* surfaces as a form of pervasive anxiety regarding issues of belonging, home, ownership and the nature of Australian lands, particularly as these anxieties are manifested in settler cultural forms such as fiction writing. I pursue this analysis in depth through an examination of three contemporary Australian novels: Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005a), Liam Davison’s *The White Woman* (1994b) and Carrie Tiffany’s *Every Man’s Rules for Scientific Living* (2005), as well as in my own work of fiction, *Landfall*.

Taken together, the overarching argument of these three exegetical chapters is that settler Australians will not be able to fully and consciously address the ecological realities of Australian lands as they are (rather than as they are collectively imagined to be when

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<sup>1</sup> *Mabo v Queensland No 2* (1992)

continuously viewed through imported cultural lenses); nor will they be able to address and resolve the ecological damage done to these lands under settler tenure; and nor will they be able to face and adapt to climate change without first adequately acknowledging the reality of the land's founding histories. Most fundamentally, this involves acknowledgement of the enduring nature of Indigenous sovereignty over Australian lands.

In order to mount this argument, it has been necessary to engage with a suite of theoretical frameworks and texts, including those belonging to history, ecocriticism, environmental, literary and cultural studies, post-colonialism,<sup>2</sup> settler colonialism, anthropology, architecture and planning, and science. The story I have attempted to tell here is one of great breadth. Restricted as it is by the parameters of the exegetical exercise, at times this has meant that the work cannot journey as deeply into any one of the discourses or formations named above as I would have liked. Thus, instead of being wholly situated within and responsive to one critical discourse, this work rather seeks to draw a range of diverse discourses together in order to weave a multifaceted and highly interdisciplinary narrative.

My narrative, as it intersects with the enquiries of this work, could be seen to begin with my pilgrimage to England, “the Motherland”, where I first encountered climate change discourse in 2006. Yet stretching backward in time, it could also be traced to the 1970s, when my father came into possession of our (home)land in Northern Victoria; or even to the 1950s, when his family first moved there. It could begin earlier still, with the arrival of my English ancestor Captain Robinson in Tasmania. Likewise, the ending of this story cannot be found in the final pages of this work, but exists beyond the line of sight, perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> In respect to a choice between using the term “postcolonialism” or “post-colonialism”, the ‘signifying hyphen or its absence’ {Ashcroft 2007, p. 168} is important, as Leela Gandhi has noted, for ‘[w]hereas some critics invoke the hyphenated form ‘post-colonialism’ as a decisive temporal marker of the decolonising process, others fiercely query the implied chronological separation between colonialism and its aftermath—on the grounds that the postcolonial condition is inaugurated with the onset rather than the end of colonial occupation. Accordingly, it is argued that the unbroken term “postcolonialism” is more sensitive to the long history of colonial consequences’ {Gandhi 1998, p.3}. This is, therefore, the term I will use throughout.

in my soon-to-be-born child's lifetime, or in the yet-unimagined generations to come. It exists in the ways my child may – like Laura and Vik in *Landfall* – manage and come to understand his or her inheritances, cultural and ecological. And it exists in the outcomes of the decisions and actions (or inactions) of current generations – including my generation – regarding whether and how best to respond to climate change.

This moment of writing in the present marks the interregnum between the ways of life and understandings that have precipitated the ecological degradation we now face in Australia and around the world, and the potential for some other, future ways of life – either designed by us in cognisance of what awaits us, or imposed by catastrophic changes produced by our cultural and political inertia. At this juncture, poised between these personal and cultural histories and an unknown but impending, glimpsed-at future, I cannot say that this work offers any wholesale answers to the questions posed here. Nor can I say that it is inherently hopeful, or optimistic. What my discussion does provide is a narrative that charts where we have come from, and a map – conceptual in nature, like the imagined German village that Vik creates from “memory” – of where we may find ourselves in the not too distant future.

## Chapter One: Climate Change

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### **Bearings: locating myself as settler and scholar**

The term ‘settler Australian’, as well as referring to settler Australian cultures and settler Australians like me, features prominently in this exegesis. It is thus important that I provide a framework for what I mean when I refer to this group of peoples, and I borrow this definition from the field of settler colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Settlers have been defined by Lorenzo Veracini as ‘*founders* of political orders [who] carry their sovereignty with them’ and can be distinguished from migrant populations on the basis that the latter move to ‘a political order that is already constituted ... and are characterised by a defining lack of sovereign entitlement’; whereas ‘[m]igrants... move to *another* country and lead diasporic lives, settlers... move ... to *their* country’ (2010, p. 3). Yet the boundaries excluding migrants from the settler population are not permanently fixed, for settler colonialism is ‘a dynamic environment where different groups are routinely imagined as transiting from one section of the population system to another’ (Veracini 2010, p. 20).

Within the bounds of this work, the construction of a settler Australian population may be understood to closely resemble Ghassan Hage’s categorisation of ‘White Australians’, into which migrants may be ‘assimilated’ through the accumulation of sufficient ‘practical nationality’ (2000). In Australia, the dominant ethnic core of the (settler) nation (Smith 1986) has been historically constituted by settlers of Anglo-Celtic origins and descent; it is this section of the Australian population to which I primarily refer as ‘settler Australian’. In doing so, I acknowledge the complexity and contingency of the non-Indigenous population in Australia.<sup>4</sup> By adopting the term ‘settler Australian’, I am not intending to artificially

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<sup>3</sup> Elements of the following discussion have been published in *The Australian Humanities Review* (Robinson & Tout 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For example, settler Australia’s history – and therefore population – includes the large number of Chinese peoples who migrated to Australia during Victoria’s Gold Rush, as well as subsequent waves of migrants from

homogenise an inherently dynamic situation. Rather, I am consciously adopting the framework provided by settler colonialism in order to uncover and analyse the defining cultural elements that underpin and have shaped the settler Australian experience. Importantly, as Read has outlined, settler Australians can and do experience a sense of belonging *in place* (1996). It is not my intention to undermine or dismiss these legitimate individual experiences, but to outline the cultural barriers against the emergence of a deeper, collective settled-ness in settler Australian culture, one derived from Australia's settler-colonial foundations.

As a settler Australian myself, the story told here is partly my own. After beginning this research in 2008, I swiftly realised that in order to understand what was occurring with climate change from both ecological and cultural perspectives in Australia, I needed to go back and establish what had already occurred in these spheres in the past as well as the present. It is only now, in retrospect, that I am able to see that the discoveries this work has made, and the way in which it unfolds, mirror my own journey of discovery as a young Australian of settler background. For years I believed that I was "just" doing research. As I come to the end of this work I see that I have also, in many ways, written my own story.

In 2006, I was living in England when I first became party to serious discussions about climate change. It was one of the coldest winters of recent years, but it wasn't as cold as it should have been; English winters had been growing infamously warmer, everyone said. Even so, transplanted from Australia, I struggled with the weather. Quietly dubbed the "hippies", my housemates allowed the ducted heating to stay on for just a few hours each day: an hour in the morning before work, between getting home and bed. With the sharp realisation that comes from firsthand experience, it occurred to me that descriptions of the

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around the globe who now contribute to Australia's non-Indigenous population. Cassandra Pybus offers an overview of the group black convicts – the 'black founders' – who were shipped from England to Australia with the first fleet, thereby disrupting the dominant portrait of the first settlers as being of white, Anglo-Saxon heritage (Pybus 2006). Even so, as Sneja Gunew puts it, where 'are the histories and analyses of 'first contact' for example, with those many non Anglo-Celtic settler others?' (2004, p.22).



cold in British novels that I had believed, from the vantage of an Australian childhood spent burning in the Antipodean heat, to be the work of dramatic license were more likely observed from the realities of English life. Inverting the experiences of so many early English convicts and settlers upon arrival in Australia, what I discovered in England was the world, turned upside down.

Though for part of my life I had grown up in country Victoria and believed I was aware of environmental issues, I had never heard the kind of environmental discourse with which the hippies engaged. They ate no meat, did not fly in aeroplanes or drive cars, and were hyper-vigilant about individual and global carbon emissions. At the time, their zeal was matched only by my irritation concerning what I perceived to be that zeal's imposing and judgmental nature. My English housemates made no secret of their disdain for what they clearly felt was my Antipodean ignorance of "important issues". I felt oppressed by what I began to see as their overtly colonial and largely unfounded cultural superiority. The confluence of a growing awareness of my own colonial roots with my discovery of climate change seems significant, in hindsight, particularly in respect to the deep connection between European settlement and environmental degradation that underpins this work. I did not set out to draw a connection between one and the other in England; nor did I set out to do so in my research. Nevertheless, an important connection exists in the Australian context, for as I will go on to explore, the ecological crises we face on the continent today are a legacy of the intersection of European peoples with Australian lands.

I went to England on a working holiday visa, hoping to fulfill an inchoate desire to find and live in a place "with history", something I then sensed Australia lacked. I felt a deep connection to "Home" despite possessing a tenuous genealogical relationship to it many generations past; a connection physically – if not culturally – terminated when my father's grandfather's grandfather, Captain Robinson, sailed from England to Tasmania. Yet reinforcing this personal relationship, most of the history I had been taught at school and the understandings I held of "culture" – literature, architecture, art – pointed me toward Europe. I perceived the destination to be so culturally sanctioned as to be necessary as

schooling. Traveling to England, the home of “our” Queen was “just something Australians did”; a destination made accessible by the Australian government with the effortless provision of the necessary visas. Enhanced by the sheer numbers of young people who seemed to make the trip, I cast journeying to England as a rite of passage, something necessarily undertaken at a certain age in order to become the most worldly and developed adult possible. This just could not happen, according to my constricted line of thinking, if one remained in Australia for a lifetime. As I saw it then, Australia was a place to get away from quickly and never look back.

My time in the English hippie house, however, was not quite what I had imagined my grand overseas experience might be. I had carried with me to England the un-interrogated notion that I would be received in the “Motherland” as one of its own children, or at least as a distant cousin. Yet what I found there was a culture quite separate from my own. Far from recognising me as kin, and even despite our notionally shared head of state, most of the English people I met were ignorant of, or uninterested in, our cultural connections to one another. I found myself retelling the story of the First Fleet often, in vain attempts to illustrate the meaning of and reasons for my presence in England, which was often curiously questioned. The colonial events of the past, while highly significant to me – after all, without them I wouldn’t be Australian, or even born at all – were apparently very distant to the English people I encountered. They had little, if any, knowledge of their nation’s historical or contemporary relationships to mine, and they did not necessarily want to know. This came as a rude shock. I was suddenly forced to reconfigure Australia as I imagined they saw it: not as indicative of any shared past, but as one distant colony among many. The colonial relationship, I realised, while very much present in my reality at home, was no longer necessarily relevant in the worlds of my English acquaintances. England, it seemed, had moved on. At the same time, I was only then beginning to think more carefully and closely, more analytically and fondly, about the place and culture I had left behind. I hadn’t found what I was looking for in England; my attention returned to the home I had all too quickly abandoned. I wondered what it was about my culture that kept me in such close

contact with a colonial history that the colonising nation itself had long ago forgotten. What was it about my place that had led me to forgo my own home and strike out to foreign shores? I grew increasingly homesick. Clichéd as it might sound, I longed for eucalypts and sunshine.<sup>5</sup>

When I eventually left the hippie house, I travelled home across Asia. Everyone was talking about climate change. They were not necessarily using the term “climate change” to describe what they were experiencing, but they expressed that something was out of kilter in their worlds. Seasons were changing or failing to arrive; crops and rainfall patterns were not what they had been. Climate change did not wholly enter mainstream public discourse until after the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim 2006); I returned home that year, right on the cusp of mainstream reception of the idea that our lifestyles were causing ecological damage to the environment; that something was seriously going wrong. Though I had bemoaned the hippies’ speechmaking in England, I could not now shake what they had said.

I was home in 2006 in time to rejoice with my father as he celebrated the fifty-year anniversary of his connection with the land on which he lives. His property, *Casuarina*, is in Wallan, north of Melbourne. He first moved there with his family as a boy in 1956. The farm was subdivided in the 1970s and my father developed ten acres for himself. I grew up on that land with him, as well as in inner city Melbourne with my mother. Although my father is quick to point out that two or three generations of contact is very little in the context of Indigenous connection to country, and even far less than many rural settler families can claim in other parts of Australia, it is a connection of a longevity more enduring than any other about which I personally know. While I thought I could shrug off that connection and move on to more exciting shores, in practice, I could not. Far from

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<sup>5</sup> This experience closely mirrors the feelings of homesickness portrayed in John Morrison’s story *The Incense-burner* (1988). Morrison depicts the character of an Australian expatriate in London, who burns eucalyptus leaves in an attempt to recreate the scent of bushfire, thereby staving off longing for Australia and Australian conditions.

“getting away”, my attempt to move to England precipitated four years of Australian-centric writing, and research, culminating in the present work.<sup>6</sup> Much of my experience – if not literally, then in essence – at home and overseas, and the experiences of my family in Wallan, have been creatively synthesised into my work of fiction, *Landfall*. I was not conscious of “writing in” these experiences at the time, but I see now that this is what I have done. These stories and understandings reside within me; they came out unbidden, on the page.<sup>7</sup>

In that first summer back home I was already beginning to become interested in climate change. In fact, my interest was cemented by the dawning realisation that I had places, homes, worth caring for and preserving. I saw those homes as being local (Wallan and Melbourne), but began to understand that they were part of a symbiotic, global ecosystem of places, each reliant on others to survive. I am now convinced that climate change is occurring and that it is serious. Aside from the academic and scientific evidence at my disposal to support this belief, I experience the effects of our changing climate daily. Beyond the empirical, scientific substantiation from experts that support and reinforce it, my individual experience too tells me that something is changing in our climate and ecologies; as John Passmore asserted more than thirty-five years ago in respect to human impact on nature, ‘the evidence in its favour is more apparent to our nose, our ears, our palate, our eyes, and is reinforced by scientific investigation’ (1974, p. 3). What I have uncovered about our environments in the last several years invokes a feeling akin to grief.

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<sup>6</sup> Far from being a unique experience, the reflection on and engagement with Australian-centric concerns, invited by distance from the continent, is one shared by prolific Australian expatriate writers such as Peter Carey (2000), Shirley Hazzard (1980) and Nikki Gemmell (2009), as well as Germaine Greer (2004) and Robert Hughes (1996) among others, whose works are often situated in or relate to Australia, though their authors no longer live on the continent.

<sup>7</sup> Given such a strong sense of place and an enduring, inter-generational connection to (a piece of) land, the ways I felt about and conceptualised Australia before leaving for England seems startling, in hindsight. Yet it is only through doing this work that I have come to see the value in those things I was so quick, like many travellers and expats, to give away. At the same time, I see now that my connection to place did not easily register, because in a world that prioritises cultural artefacts over access to and relationships with the non-human world, the chance to see “old things” in Europe was both more compelling and more pervasively culturally sanctioned than the prospect of engaging with my home terrain.

As a young Australian, feeling hope in the face of climate change is difficult to maintain. Yet to be without hope is a kind of death in itself, one I am not ready, or willing, to accept.

If climate change is occurring, then we need to act, beginning yesterday. In fact, we have an obligation to act, one driven by ethical and humanitarian concerns as well as those that are practical, because the future of our planet, its flora, fauna, peoples, their ways of life, safety and survival, depend on and are shaped by the actions of those alive today. To me it matters not whether the forecast effects of climate change inaction are felt in my lifetime, the next, or in two centuries. We cannot sit back and allow the possibility of widespread destruction of the elements that sustain life. Without our environment, we cannot survive. Climate change science and the implications it heralds have been obscured by some,<sup>8</sup> yet even when those implications are made clear, indeed manifestly evident, they are not being taken seriously enough. Climate change is not being meaningfully engaged with in Australia. Why not?

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<sup>8</sup> Although I would prefer not to privilege climate change deniers with acknowledgement in this work, in pursuit of thoroughness it is necessary to underscore that as long as scientists and commentators have worked to promote research supporting human-made climatic changes, deniers have attempted to cast doubt on such findings, relying on their public profiles, the density and difficulty of climate science, and the “inconvenience” of its truths (Guggenheim 2006) to inject doubt into the debate (see for example Plimer 2009; Monckton 2008). Deniers are prolific in politics, as showcased by US Republican Sarah Palin (McCullagh in Washington & Cook 2011, p. 44) and by Australian Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, infamous for his oscillating views ('Climate Change is Real, Says Tony Abbott' 2011, *The Herald Sun*, viewed 15 March 2011, <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/climate-change-is-real>>; Keane 2011; Thompson 2011); and of course in science, where misleading information such as the *Petition Project* published by the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine (OISM) (2008) too often relies upon quasi-scientific material and credentials to undermine more legitimate – though arguably unpalatable – findings. Writers and commentators such as George Monbiot (2007), James Hoggan (2009), Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway (2010) and Haydn Washington and John Cook (2011) have done important work undermining and clarifying the so-called “expert” evidence and experience relied upon by deniers; each provides in-depth analysis regarding the roles, scope and positions of global climate change denialists.

## Climate Change

Anthropogenic (human-made) climate change (Crutzen 2006) is manifesting at an accelerating rate. While dissenters maintain attempts to undermine the reality of this,<sup>9</sup> a majority of scientists and commentators concur with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC's) assessment that climate change is occurring as a result of human pressures and activities (Stern 2007, p. 7). The IPCC, alongside economists Nicholas Stern (2007) and Ross Garnaut (2008; 2011b), while world authorities on climate change, are among the more conservative, if persistent, voices in the debate. Disturbingly, even in 2008, Garnaut believed that our chances for mitigating climate change were slim.

The international community is too late with effective mitigation to avoid significant damage from climate change. So in the best of circumstances, Australians and people everywhere will be adapting to substantial climate change impacts through the 21st century. The international community may yet fail to put in place effective global mitigation, in which case the challenge of adaptation to climate change will be more daunting...some of the possible consequences of climate change would test humans and their values and preferences in profound ways (2008, p. xxvi).

While the intricacies regarding how, when and to what degree the effects of climate change will play out remain the subject of both specialist and public global debate, the predominant understanding is that, particularly if we follow a “business as usual” course of (in)action, climate change will seriously affect, if not outright destroy, most facets of the world as we experience it now (see Flannery 2005b, 2010; Stern 2007; Garnaut 2008, 2011a; Spratt & Sutton 2008; Hamilton 2010). Robert Correll, chairman of the Arctic Climate Change Impact Assessment (ACCIA) underscores this when he notes that for

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<sup>9</sup> Though some remain skeptical about the actuality of climate change, one of the world's most outspoken climate change deniers, Bjorn Lomborg, declared in 2010 that climate change was, in fact, a serious and pressing issue facing humankind (Jowit 2010).

the last 10,000 years we have been living in a remarkably stable climate that has allowed the whole of human development to take place...Now we see the potential for sudden changes of between 2 and 6 degrees Celsius [by the end of this century]. We just don't know what the world is like at those temperatures. We are climbing rapidly out of mankind's safe zone into new territory, and we have no idea if we can live in it (cited in Spratt and Sutton 2008, p. 3).

It is unlikely that any part of the globe will remain unaffected by climate change, particularly as we are already committed to a degree of certain warming, no matter what recourse or adaptive strategies we now implement (Hamilton 2010, pp. 2-28; Garnaut 2008, p. 122). As Correll implies, changes initiated by 2 to 6 degrees Celsius of warming could precipitate disaster for the sustenance of (at least) human lives, which rely upon particular climatic conditions to endure (see also Rose 2000; Stern 2007; Spratt & Sutton 2008, pp. 89-99; Hamilton 2008, 2010, pp. 190-209; Dyer 2010).

Disturbingly, Australia's contemporary ecological realities have been globally appropriated as the "canary in the mine" for projected climate change outcomes elsewhere on earth, as epitomised by the 2009 *Los Angeles Times* headline, 'What will global warming look like? Scientists point to Australia' (Sandell 2011; see also Goodell 2011). This echoes earlier assessments of Australia as the bellwether for how climate change might eventually affect other parts of the world:

Americans – particularly those living in the more arid regions of the U.S. – may glimpse part of their own future in Australia, a future in which water restrictions, drought, and more intense, longer-lasting, and deadlier fire seasons become a way of life (Drollette 2005).

Conditions currently evident on the Australian continent, such as enduring drought and catastrophic fire, thus illustrate ecological expectations for global futures. Considering that recent Australian conditions already exemplify such outcomes, it is likely that Australia's own future will grow exponentially more unstable, perhaps catastrophically so, as climate change continues to manifest (see Diamond 2005). In general, Australians can expect to

endure more extreme weather, including an increase of natural disasters in coming years (Lowe 2005, p. 97; Preston and Jones in Stern 2007, p. 151), as foreshadowed by the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 and by epic flooding in Queensland and Victoria in 2011 and again in 2012. At the same time, ongoing drought is likely to deplete already strained water systems (Preston and Jones in Stern 2007, pp. 141-157; Garnaut 2008, p. 136), as presaged by the long period of severe drought experienced in south-eastern Australia until 2010. These examples illustrate David Spratt and Phillip Sutton's assertion that climate change 'is already dangerous. The signs are evident globally...[and] in Australia's depleted Murray-Darling River system...Our world is already at the point of failing to cope' (2008, p. 89).

Both human and non-human domains in Australia have weathered ongoing change for millennia as a result of cultural and ecological shifts, predominantly those resulting from the combined impacts of Indigenous peoples' very lengthy custodianship of land with the more recent effects of European settlement. The continent has also undergone geological shifts and other ecological changes of a kind that occur naturally over time. It is likely that both human and non-human lives and environments would go on changing incrementally into the future even without human-made climate change. Australia (like all living things) is not static, but constantly evolving under pressure from human occupation, as well as more slowly in response to natural elements like wind and water.

Nevertheless, I find little that is inherently hopeful about the potential impacts of climate change on Australia with respect to the long-term endurance of current human and non-human domains. The human-made changes that have manifested in the last two hundred or so years have been largely disastrous for Australian lands and ecologies, and for Indigenous peoples, as discussed in Chapter Two. Considering this, it may seem problematic to mourn climatic changes that undermine current conditions. Yet the potential changes heralded by climate change are worth grieving over because, in the long-term, climate change can really only impact Australia negatively (CSIRO 2007; Garnaut 2008). At present, a majority of Australians enjoy a high standard of living by global measures. These standards are slated to decline in line with climate change-related pressures. Life as



we know it, human and otherwise, may never again be as comfortable, affluent, or safe. Current living standards exist even despite critical ecological degradation, and arguably contribute significantly to it. Yet under pressure from climate change, our comfortable yet tenuous prosperity will not likely last. Likewise, from an ecological perspective, the substantial environmental degradation apparent since settlement,<sup>10</sup> including mass species extinction of flora and fauna, desertification, salinity and erosion,<sup>11</sup> is likely to be “as good as it gets”.

There are two main interrelated ecological reasons for Australia’s particularly grim outlook in the face of climate change. The first is the environmental degradation suffered by Australian lands and ecologies since European settlement. This issue will be explored in more detail below. The second derives from the particularities of Australia’s fragile and unique ecologies. While an in-depth discussion of the historical and ecological specificities of these is beyond the bounds of this exegesis (see Rolls 1997; Diamond 2005; Flannery 2005a; Robin 2007), a critical point to emphasise is the relationships between the relative health of Australian lands and ecologies and the dominant land use and management strategies employed by Australian peoples, Indigenous and settler, over time. This is to say that historical and contemporary relationships between nature and culture underpin our current ecological situation; the continent’s ecological histories cannot be teased apart from

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<sup>10</sup> In 2001, a report was submitted to the Australian Government by the Australian State of the Environment Committee, CSIRO and the Department of Environment and Heritage, which noted that significant ‘environmental degradation has occurred to land and water systems in Australia...enormous areas are still suffering from damage, and large areas are being degraded or are under threat of degradation in the future. Parliamentary debates, media reports, recommendations from inquiries, and first-hand accounts by landowners, travellers, scientists and government officials all attest to abuse of the land (and to a lesser extent, the sea) since 1788’ (Thom et al. 2001).

<sup>11</sup> The environmental degradation enacted on the continent since 1788 has been established; it is widely understood that the environmental impacts of European settlement on Australian lands have been vast (see for example Bolton 1992; Sexton 2003; Dovers 1994; Diamond 2005; Young 1996). This is not to say that Indigenous peoples did not impact the land, or that the land management strategies imposed prior to European settlement were wholly “good”, while settler strategies have been wholly “bad”, but to underscore the fact that since the arrival of Europeans, and under their “care”, Australian lands – and waterways – have been substantially degraded.

human interaction with them without subverting the reality of the symbiosis between the two (Rose 1996). In 1836, Charles Darwin highlighted this when he wrote:

[The] rapid prosperity and future prospects of this colony are to me...very puzzling. The two main exports are wool and whale oil, and to both of these productions there is a limit...Pasture everywhere is so thin that settlers have already pushed far into the interior...Agriculture, on account of the droughts, can never succeed on an extended scale...I formerly imagined that Australia would rise to be a grand and powerful country...but now it appears to me that such future grandeur is rather problematical (cited in Flannery 2005a, p. 350).

These observations are telling when considered alongside those of Darwin's grandfather Erasmus, who in 1789, only a few decades earlier, had conveyed such optimism regarding the continent's prospects in his poem *Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove, Near Botany Bay* (Langford 2009). How Australian lands have been cared for and utilised and, in turn, how their particularities and realities have influenced and developed Australian cultures (discussed in Chapter Three), reveals not only the nature of where we live and have lived, but of who we are and have been. In the context of climate change, by examining historical and contemporary relationships between nature and culture, I suggest that we may also explore our potential futures on the continent – futures that, given the cultural and ecological “climates” in Australia both now and in the past, seem likely to be as ‘horrendous’ as Hamilton suggests (2005, p. 187).

Global climate change itself is as much cultural as it is environmental because it is made manifest by human activities, rather than in response to wholly natural shifts and cycles. So acute is human influence on the non-human world that we have arguably created an *Anthropocene Epoch* (Irwin 2010, pp. 1-2): a period of geologic and historic time delineated by the severity of human impact on non-human spheres. The wealthy, industrialised nations of the world, like Australia, are most culpable for these impacts because they are producing a majority of the carbon emissions that are the primary causal factors of climate change. Such nations produce high emissions because the economies and

lifestyles of their citizens are highly reliant upon various human-made, polluting elements and activities such as large-scale agriculture (mass production of food), industry (power, mining) and non-renewable energy-based transport (motor vehicles and airplane travel). These frameworks and elements are contributing exponentially to the manifestation of climate change, and subsequent ecological degradation. As Tim Flannery puts it, an ‘insatiable demand for air conditioners is already evident in countries such as the US and Australia...in order to cool our homes, we end up cooking the planet’ (2005b, p. 202).

The ways of living most responsible for contributing to climate change – modes that, as Flannery insinuates, most often place immediate personal ease and comfort above enduring global degradation – are mediated by ‘choices’ that are culturally informed, underpinned by certain ‘beliefs and sets of ideas which determine [a culture’s] view of the proper ordering of things’ (Gascoigne & Curthoys 2002, p. 1). How and where we seek shelter; how we are fed and with what; modes of transportation, entertainment and communication; perceived wealth, or lack of wealth; perceived health, or lack of health, and so on, are each products of the cultural ordering John Gascoigne refers to, which determine the structure and demands of human lives. In industrialised nations, this cultural ordering largely dictates ways of living that are inherently harmful to the non-human world. As in other industrialised economies, Australian lifestyles are contributing to and showing the impacts of climate change; in turn, these lifestyles are supported by particular cultures and cultural prerogatives. In order to explore what is occurring ecologically, we must uncover the supporting cultural understandings and epistemologies which are fostering a way of life that, no matter how “civilised” or comfortable, is ‘rapidly causing to degenerate our sole habitation’ (Passmore 1974, p. 3).

I argue that the fundamental cultural ordering that creates and supports this degeneration, and the seeming lack of urgent action in response to this, both globally and in Australia, stems from an intrinsic ‘Disconnection from Nature’ (Hamilton 2010, pp. 134-158) implicit in Western epistemology. This is to say that the beliefs and ideas underpinning cultural ordering, which in turn tell us how to live, originate in a culture’s

relationships to and positioning(s) of the non-human world.<sup>12</sup> Further, the way in which a culture conceives of the non-human directly impacts upon choices made regarding the sustenance of life, choices which in turn have the capacity to impact nature itself. “We” affect the environment just as the environment affects “us” (Weir 2008, p. 156). I will explore this disconnection in relation to epistemology in greater detail below. However, it is important to emphasise here that climate change is a particularly disastrous outcome of culture’s impact on nature, a result of such cultural disconnection. Since ‘an organism that deteriorates its environment commits suicide’ (Bateson cited in Rose 2001, p. 3), we manifest these potentially disastrous outcomes at our own expense.

Humankind is thus in a perilous position. While acknowledgment of and concern for the human impact on natural systems is not new, but has been developing for decades, since even prior to Rachel Carson’s seminal publication *Silent Spring* in 1962, the limited scope available for this work has necessitated that I focus only on the contemporary context specific to climate change. Further, I am purposefully centering my discussion on the ramifications of climate change for humanity, rather than for other species, not in order to perpetrate the epistemological dominance of humans over every other living thing, but because I argue that it is the Western epistemological separation of humans and nature that has generated the cultures and cultural prerogatives that contribute most to climate change. While from a *cultural* perspective some humans may understand themselves to be separate from the non-human world, in reality, every living thing exists in relationship; the long-

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<sup>12</sup> Although some settler Australians have been concerned about the degradation of their lands almost as long as the exploitation of those lands has been systematically and exponentially occurring – that is, ever since first contact (see Bonyhady 2002, pp. 4-11) – climate change campaigners and anti-climate change movements and scholars advocate for a change of *thinking* about the world, rather than just the cessation of whatever damaging activity is taking place. This shift is indicative of the work that emerges through ecophilosophy and ecocriticism, and now new materialism and eco materialism (see for example Iovino & Oppermann, 2012). These fields explore and interrogate possibilities for shifting the way we conceive of, understand and treat nonhuman others, including places. In line with this, Hamilton argues that climate change ‘arises from the reshaping of human consciousness’ (2010, p. 158) away from nature, and that in order to combat it, we require a ‘new consciousness’ (2010, p. 159) regarding our innate connections with the natural world. There is thus already, among those concerned about climate change and working in ecocritical fields, recognition of the fact that we need to realign ourselves in the world; to see humanity as part of a larger ecosystem, and to see our own actions, our lives, as the cause of our environmental strife.

term survival of humankind is dependent on the long-term survival of the rest. Considering that what is at stake is not “merely the environment” but also our own individual survival and security, one might expect climate change to be, culturally speaking, of the utmost concern, particularly in an ecologically vulnerable Australia.

Yet Australia maintains its status as one of the world’s largest contributors of carbon emissions (Garnaut 2008, p. 153) despite the increasing fragility of its lands and ecosystems. According to Garnaut’s most recent assessment, the nation is ‘a drag on the global mitigation effort in contradiction to its own strong national interest in effective global mitigation’ (2011c, p. 25). Remaining one of the more politically and socially disengaged developed nations with respect to recognising and addressing climate change, Australia is currently lagging behind even its historical counterparts – Canada and The United States – in dictating the scope of its emission reduction targets (Garnaut 2011c, pp. 21-27). At the time of writing, the Australian Government has unconditionally committed to reducing emissions by only 5 per cent by 2020 (Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency 2012) and by 60 per cent below 2000 levels by 2050 (Garnaut 2008, p. 177). These are very modest commitments, considering that most other developed nations have pledged to drop their emissions substantially below those measured in the 1990s, and some nations, like Norway, aim to be entirely carbon neutral by 2050 (Garnaut 2008, p. 177). James Hansen is one of the world’s most outspoken climate scientists. His work, while critical of more conservative bodies such as the IPCC, demonstrates an acute understanding of the serious and dangerous nature of our position, in line with the grimly realistic predictions of others like Spratt and Sutton (2008) and Clive Hamilton (2010). Hansen writes that as:

we continue to pump greenhouse gases into the air, we move onto a steeper, even more slippery incline. We seem oblivious to the danger...If we wish to stabilize Earth’s climate, we do not need to return its atmospheric composition to preindustrial levels. What we must do...is reduce the planet’s energy imbalances to near zero. Of course, the climate then would be stabilized at its current state, not its preindustrial state. Climate

may need to be a tad cooler than today, if, for example, we want ice sheets to be stable...business-as-usual emissions would lead to eventual ice sheet disintegration and large sea level rise...3-degree global warming, or even two-degree, [is] a recipe for global disaster (2009, pp. 70-75).

Hansen's contextualisation of the kinds of responses required if we want to prevent wide-scale disaster helps us understand the ineffectual, token nature of Australia's target emission reductions. Moreover, since pledging to make reductions, Australia's emissions have in fact increased.<sup>13</sup>

Put bluntly then, the situation is not improving in and for Australia; it is getting worse. Not only is the potential for climate change to negatively impact on the continent now increasing, but we are also failing to shift the culture, to make the collective change necessary to prevent further and future impacts. In 2012 the Gillard Government passed the long awaited Carbon Tax (Australian Government 2012), and while I support this as a positive adaptive and preventative measure, the heated debate surrounding parliamentary approval of the initiative is indicative of the large numbers of Australians who remain either unconvinced of climate change's reality, or unconvinced of the critical time pressure we are under if we wish to in some way temper its effect. The debate has also highlighted why many people, myself included, remain unconvinced of the effectiveness of any carbon tax to seriously undermine the potential disaster brought by climate change in Australia (see for example Butler 2010). The cultural inertia in the nation is thus despairingly palpable to me as I write; the message that 'if current trends continue, we will not' (McGuire cited in Hamilton 2010, p. 185; see also Spratt & Sutton 2008, p. 64) could not now be more poignant for Australia.

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<sup>13</sup> Garnaut notes that while the global financial crises of 2010-11 have necessarily meant a reduction in the emissions of most developed nations since 2008, Australia's strong economy, while beneficial in some contexts in the short-term, has unfortunately meant that the production of Australian emissions has remained unaffected; that 'the projection of Australia's emissions trajectory without mitigation to 2020 has grown to 24 per cent above 2000 levels' (2011b, p. xii).

I have tried here to illustrate what I see as the gaping discrepancy between Australia's present and likely future ecological realities, and the cultural disengagement with them that has persisted in Australia. At first glance, it may be difficult to intuit why, as a culture, we have allowed our environment to degrade to such a perilous point in the short time since European settlement. The underlying reasons for our cultural inertia with respect to climate change may appear equally opaque, particularly since Australia is well placed to respond to the challenges it foretells.<sup>14</sup>

There may be a variety of reasons for lack of individual interest in, or response to, the issue of environmental degradation generally, and climate change more specifically in Australia. The nation's reliance on industries such as coal and uranium may be interwoven with its "inability" to make wide-scale changes regarding shifts to clean energy production, for example. Some argue that it is only when climatic changes begin to affect the populace *personally* that true action and cultural change can occur.<sup>15</sup> Spratt and Sutton believe this phenomenon revolves around 'the proposition that a solution to global warming is possible, but only after an unacceptable prior step... "We'd need a huge disaster to happen before people would act"' (2008, p. 169). Yet in parts of Australia, that 'unacceptable step' has already occurred. We have already been feeling the effects of climate change for years. Many Australians, particularly those in rural areas, attuned to and reliant on natural cycles for their livelihoods, are already suffering the effects of a changing climate. Suffering also

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<sup>14</sup> Jared Diamond articulates this well when he notes that, 'Australia has a well-educated populace, a high standard of living, and relatively honest political and economic institutions by world standards. Hence Australia's environmental problems cannot be dismissed as products of ecological mismanagement by an uneducated, desperately impoverished populace and grossly corrupt government and businesses, as one might perhaps be inclined to explain away environmental problems in some other countries' (2005, p. 379). The reason for Australia's lack of response to climate change is then not rooted in financial or circumstantial realities, but in something far deeper.

<sup>15</sup> Speaking to this, Clive Hamilton writes that sometimes 'facing up to the truth is just too hard. When the facts are distressing it is easier to reframe or ignore them. Around the world only a few have truly faced up to the facts...It's the same with our own deaths; we all "accept" that we will die, but it is only when our death is imminent that we confront the true meaning of our mortality' (2010, p. viii).

are those affected by various recent Australian natural disasters.<sup>16</sup> Even those residing in the city of Melbourne where I live, buffered from natural elements to some extent by the various human-made frameworks of “civilisation”, cannot fail to be at least marginally aware of the climatic changes taking place; not after living through more than a decade of drought (1999-2010) and experiencing first-hand the often anxious reality of living with the stringent water restrictions that severe water shortages entail.

From a cultural perspective, there are few social, economic or political factors, overt or otherwise, that would seem to prevent Australian cultures from engaging proactively with climate change. As Diamond asserts, Australia is characterised by relatively high individual and national wealth, high levels of political and personal freedom and generally high national standards of education (excluding Indigenous communities). Taken together with the fact that Australian lands and peoples stand to be so thoroughly and negatively affected by the impacts of climate change, Australian communities should be on the frontline of climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Garnaut substantiates this when he argues that as ‘a nation, Australia has a high level of capacity to plan for and respond to the impacts of climate change – that is, its adaptation potential is high’ (2008, p. 124). And yet, few meaningful adaptive strategies are being implemented. Considering what is at stake for Australian peoples, aside from the national economic reliance on fossil fuel industries and mining for example, which could arguably temper and slow changes in infrastructure and policy, we might *at least* expect greater public interest in and support of the issue from a cultural, if not practical, perspective. In 2005 Hamilton wrote bleakly:

[In] a continental nation where the climate deeply affects our psyches, Australians in general, and the government and its policy advisers in particular, appear to be in a state of denial. Opinion polls show widespread concern about the issue, but at another level, Australians don’t want to know (p. 187).

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<sup>16</sup> These arguably include the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, as well as the vast flooding that devastated Queensland and Victorian in 2010-11 and again in 2012.



Little has changed in the intervening years. Instead of engaging, Australian peoples, communities and industries have largely continued with “business-as-usual”. The resulting indifferent mismanagement of Australian lands and ecologies, and the ramifications of such practices for current Australians, if not for future generations, could be construed variously as a bizarre oversight; an indicator of general lack of interest in environmental issues and personal safety; or a frightening, wilful disregard for the long-term endurance of both human and non-human wellbeing. At its most extreme, the failure of Australian cultures to adequately address climate change can be seen to indicate a flagrantly casual attitude toward the intrinsic elements sustaining human and non-human life on the continent.

Yet we need to go deeper into the settler Australian psyche, as constructed by the unique histories of European settlers on the continent, in order to discover what underpins the lack of engagement with climate change in the present. Arguably, the way that climate change is being dealt with and understood correlates with the way the environment has always been understood by settler peoples on the continent. Interconnected with this is how settler peoples understand their relationships with that environment. This has been, and continues to be, a largely problematic relationship since European arrival.<sup>17</sup> Climate change is thus only the tip of the iceberg in Australia in terms of lack of engagement with the realities of Australian lands. At a deeper level, settler Australian responses to climate change are indicative of broader cultural ambivalences and uncertainties regarding

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<sup>17</sup> In critiquing what I see as the lack of cultural and community engagement with climate change that characterises contemporary Australia, I do not wish to discredit or disregard those Australian environmentalists, environmental movements, conservationists or other individuals and groups who have worked tirelessly, almost since first contact, to oppose, correct and prevent the damage done to Australian lands. Both Tim Bonyhady (2002) and Eric Rolls (1994), among others, point out that some early settlers had immense affection for the Australian environment and often saw it as being amenable to their agricultural purposes, albeit this perception was based on the largely unrecognised impact of Indigenous land management strategies on that environment. That the settlers who so admired Australian lands degraded it is due perhaps more to their methods than to their intentions (Rolls 1994, p. 26). The same might be said regarding contemporary attitudes and behaviours: I do not believe that we necessarily act (or fail to act) on climate change out of malice or indifference. Yet the outcome for the environment and for humankind is the same, regardless of intention. Despite those who have sought to protect Australian lands, settler Australian cultures at large continue unswervingly along the path toward ecological annihilation.

Australian environments, and of the place of settler peoples and cultures within those environments.

Climate change, like other “natural” disasters, is often personified as nature’s “revenge” on culture, a malevolent “natural” force seeking to condemn and destroy human achievements. After the Black Saturday fires, it was approvingly reported in *The Age* that Marysville residents had agreed ‘that they would stand together and “loudly reclaim” Marysville from nature’ (Murdoch & Doherty 2009, p. 3), implying that nature had maliciously burned the town to the ground. Similarly, the early settlers saw Australia as a ‘land of punitive nature’ (Gibson 1984, p. 54), a view that is enforced in and by settler literatures, both fiction and non-fiction accounts, which depict settler peoples as being thwarted, oppressed and damaged by fire, drought, flood and other environmental difficulties, including the harshness and impenetrability of the bush. Climate change can therefore be understood through the lens of the settler Australian context, and its complex history as offering just one more example of nature’s punitive qualities. Yet not only is the existence of climate change as much a cultural issue as it is an environmental one because of its human-made origins; the way that climate change is understood and addressed in Australia is tightly interwoven with settler cultural histories of and in the Australian environment. In order to understand the way we are responding to climate change then, we need to understand those histories. To “see” the current situation, and to address Australia’s future, we first need to excavate its past.

## Chapter Two: Land

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### Introduction

The Europeans who invaded Australia embodied particular cultural beliefs and understandings. Through these, they positioned and interacted with Australian lands and the Indigenous peoples they encountered when they arrived. The outcomes of these interactions have been largely disastrous for Indigenous cultures and for Australia's unique and fragile ecologies. In this chapter, I outline the underpinning epistemologies that have shaped and continue to shape settler cultural understandings of, interactions with, and impacts upon both land and Indigenous Australians over the last two centuries. I focus this discussion through the lenses of two key issues: fire, and the structures of human habitation on the land, such as homes and suburbs. As I will show, these issues provide a means of exploring the convergence of European understandings of 'land' or 'country' with Australia's ecological and climatic realities, highlighting the damaging, maladaptive and unsustainable nature of that convergence in the context of climate change.

Importantly, there have long been other ways of living with and knowing Australian environments and lands, as Indigenous peoples' extended occupation and stewardship of the country that became 'Australia' suggest . Indigenous ontology, and the land management strategies and outcomes to which these have given rise, showcase important alternatives for ways of relating to and caring for Australian ecologies and managing the relationships between human and non-human domains. Indigenous cultural approaches to land management and ways of living on the continent are fundamental to consider in the context of this work. This is because they have developed in response to, and in relationship with, Australian lands over millennia, whereas many settler practices constitute European imports of far briefer duration and with more resistance to what they have encountered during that time.

## Land Belonging to No One<sup>18</sup>

The ways in which settler Australian cultures conceive of the relationships between human and non-human spheres is underpinned by the Western epistemologies of the Enlightenment. From this standpoint, nature can be defined as that which is *out there*, to the extent that nature ‘becomes everything that is Not-Man’ (Seddon 1997, p. 7). This understanding of relations between humans and an *externally* envisaged environment is not value-neutral, but rather conceives culture as separate from nature, rendering nature less ontologically important. Nature thus becomes ‘an external domain to be managed and/or preserved’ (Palmer 2006, p. 33) by ‘rational, superior humans’ (Suchet 2002, p. 147). This construction is based on René Descartes’s philosophical proposition of *cogito ergo sum* – ‘I think therefore I am’ – which attempted to establish a ‘polar opposition between mind and matter’ (Ryle 1991, p. 52) and thus instantiates consciousness as ‘the criterion of existence and the status of humans as thinking beings, the ultimate proof of their separation from the rest of creation’ (Johnson & Murton 2007, p. 122). The world is thus split, with nature – or the external world – constructed in binary opposition to culture. Self is then defined in opposition to and against nature, and is therefore directly implicated in the disconnection from nature (Hamilton 2010, pp. 134-158) that is a facet of settler culture today.

Whether attributed to Descartes, Newton and the Scientific Revolution, the invention of the heavy iron plough in Europe in the Middle Ages, Plato’s ‘philosophy of death’, or even the ‘emergence of the very concept of “nature” as distinct from “culture” ... which evidently postdates the development of agrarian civilizations in the Middle East, China and Meso-America’ (Rigby 2009a, p. 134), it is clear that the fundamental—and fundamentally irrational—hyperseparation of subject/object, human/nature and self/other underpinning the monological anthropocentric stance of the modern Man of Property and Master of the Universe (Plumwood 2002) predated, contributed to and accompanied the colonisation of

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<sup>18</sup> Portions of the following paragraphs detailing Western epistemological constructions of nature have been published in *Stolen Lands, Broken Cultures: The Settler-Colonial Present* (Hinkson et al. 2012).

Australia (Gascoigne & Curthoys 2002). While epistemological dualism – the dichotomisation of nature/culture, or mind/matter – constituted a foundational premise from which modern Western thought evolved, related Enlightenment discourses of scientific exploration, universality, atomism and progress were equally critical. Importantly, these modes of knowing were transplanted to Australia with the first Europeans; settlers arrived in Australia with the nature/culture binary and the premises of Enlightenment thought firmly established in their approach to engaging with new lands.

Enlightenment thinking had become so deeply engrained...that it was a natural export when the British government came to establish the penal colony...the extent to which it coloured the thinking of those who constructed this new settlement meant that the Enlightenment was to form a central core of the mental world of what eventually became the Australian nation (Gascoigne & Curthoys 2002, p. 6).<sup>19</sup>

Crucially, the ideas of John Locke were similarly transplanted. Locke regarded land devoid of *signifiers* of Eurocentric cultivation to be part of nature, and therefore common property, stating that in the process of cultivating land, ‘man’:

removes [it] out of the State that Nature hath provided...[and] hath mixed his Labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*” (1823, p. 116).

Lockean conceptions of land and property included the argument that ‘unimproved land was *terra nullius* – land of no-one’ (Gascoigne & Curthoys 2002, p. 8). Land that can be *observed* as cultivated is then no longer ‘natural’, but becomes the property of the person who has altered it. Conversely, land lacking any signs of cultivation is perceived as pure, untouched wilderness and therefore “land belonging to no one”: *terra nullius*.

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<sup>19</sup> The relationship between European Enlightenment epistemology and colonisation, as well as the implications of both the precepts and products of this system of thought for Australian peoples and ecologies, have been thoroughly explicated elsewhere (for example Carter 1987; Reynolds 1987a; Griffiths 1991; Lines 1991; Langton 1996; Langton 1998; Wolfe 1999; Plumwood 2002; Suchet 2002; Rose 2004; Rigby 2009a).

In the Australian settler-colonial context, the implications of this discourse were vast and its consequences continue to resonate in the present. No ‘matter how far back from the coast the Europeans advanced they found the Aborigines in occupation of the land’ (Reynolds 1987a, p. 35), indicating that the land was clearly occupied. However, the perception was that Indigenous peoples ‘did not engage in European style agriculture, [therefore] they did not really own the land, but merely ranged over it’ (Lloyd 2000, p. 34). As a result, in the eyes of the settling parties the land was rendered legally and morally susceptible to colonisation. Because the settlers could see no *discernible* signs of civilisation, they believed that ‘the land was available for settlement without [Indigenous people’s] consent’ (Carter 2006, p. 70). The European “founding” of Australia was thus based on a lie that employed Western epistemological precepts to justify its claims regarding the assumed absence of Indigenous sovereignty over Australian lands.

Aside from the ways in which the physical existence of Indigenous peoples served to undermine the doctrine’s legitimacy, the land itself has always indicated that the continent was carefully managed by Indigenous peoples; the very landscapes that attracted the settlers were in fact the product of Indigenous land management practices (Hallam 1975, p. 72; Pyne 1991, p. 160; Hughes 1996, p. 3; Rolls 1997, pp. 39-40). When settling parties arrived in Australia, they found the continent brimming with what they perceived to be agricultural potential. As a result of their cultural understandings regarding what constituted cultivated land, the settlers misread the impact of Indigenous land-management practices for the continent’s “natural” state. This misreading forms the basis of ongoing contemporary debates regarding conservation and the management of and access to “wilderness” areas (Dwyer 1994; Langton 1996, 1998; Rose 1996, 2000; Rolls 2003; Buell 2005). I do not have the scope here to explore the debates in full. However, within Western epistemological understandings of nature, in which humans are placed ‘over against’ (Ingold 2008, p. 1805) their environments, “wilderness” is conceived of as ‘allegedly pristine “natural” areas’ (Langton 1996, p. 16). This conception is fundamentally problematic within the Australian context because there is no place on the continent that

Indigenous peoples have not known and managed, as Gammage (2011) has recently outlined in extensive detail (see also Langton 1998; 2000; 2004). Therefore, any attempts to conserve “wilderness” areas in their “natural state” actually undermine the roles of Indigenous interaction with Australian lands (Bayet-Charlton 2003). That is, in its implicit establishment of a binary relationship between human as subject and environment/nature as object, “wilderness” may be perceived as having the effect of ‘denying the imprint of millennia of Aboriginal impacts on, and relationships with, species and ecologies in Australian environmental history’ (Langton 1996, p. 18).

In many ways, then, debates surrounding “wilderness” reinforce the disavowal of Indigenous cultivation of Australian lands that not only precipitated and allowed for European settlement, but also made the prospect of settlement so inviting, at least initially, to the settlers (see Rose 1996, p. 75; Gammage 2011, pp. 5-18). There thus exists a largely culturally unacknowledged correlation between Indigenous land management, settler beliefs regarding the suitability of the continent for settlement, and the desire of the settling parties to gain control over Australian lands. Indigenous land management practices rendered the land so amenable to settler purposes that the settlers worked hard to remove, disenfranchise and slaughter Indigenous peoples in order to take those lands for themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The active land management carried out by Indigenous peoples was not necessarily obvious to the early settlers. However, the ecological degradation that has occurred as a result of restricted management by Indigenous peoples highlights, by contrast, how vastly conditions have changed under settler care. Bill Gammage eloquently assesses the impact of settlement on Indigenous practices, and therefore the land. He writes that when Europeans arrived on the continent,

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<sup>20</sup> Not only did European settlers find the landscapes created by Indigenous peoples to be to their liking, however; the places that were *especially* productive for Indigenous peoples were most *actively managed* by them. In turn, the continent’s most productive lands were, arguably, most *actively desired* by the settlers (see for example Hallam 1975).

Parks chequered Australia...The parks have gone. Overgrazing had a transforming impact...1788's controlled fire stopped when Europeans arrived. Today's bushfires devastate, and decimate species which flourished during millennia of Aboriginal burning....Since 1788 at least 23 mammal extinctions have been in Australia. Recognising how extensive such changes have been, to plants, animals and the land, is crucial to understanding how constant and purposeful 1788 management was (2011, pp. 15-17).

Australian ecological degradation includes four predominant spheres of destruction: water, land, flora and fauna. I do not have here the scope to cover the ecological effects of the usurpation of Indigenous management in favour of settler approaches to land management, particularly as the destructive changes wrought on the continent are contested, complex and ongoing. Yet contemporary examples abound. For example, the depletion of major water sources, most notably the Murray-Darling River basin (Cathcart 2009; Weir 2009), is one of the most critical recent issues arising from the intersection of settler cultures with Australian lands. George Seddon notes that the contemporary water crises lie 'not only with water deficiency, but also [and perhaps more saliently] with water use' (2006). This underscores the extent to which the water shortages in Australia are not *necessarily* or *only* environmental in nature, but are derived from cultural approaches to water; the "founding" of an arid nation by European 'wet-country people' (Cathcart 2009, p. 8). The degradation of Australian lands, predominantly in the service of European agriculture (see Flannery 2005a, pp. 344-357), and its resultant and interconnected effects on native flora and fauna, are similarly indicative of settler cultural understandings, and have been disastrous for Australian ecologies. Perhaps the most catastrophic and pervasively degrading act is the extensive de-forestation enacted in order to create grazing lands for stock (Bolton 1992, pp. 37-59; Crawford & Crawford 2003), which has precipitated salinity, soil erosion and loss of habitat and biodiversity across the continent (Sexton 2003; Diamond 2005, p. 383; Healey 2011, p. 2).



The issues I discuss below – housing and urban development, and fire – provide lenses through which to view more closely the ecological ramifications of settler interactions with Australian lands. I have chosen to explore these issues in particular not only because they serve to illuminate the concerns of this work, but also because they are fundamental to the narrative, characters and themes in *Landfall*. These appear in the novel because they were and are foundational in my own and my father’s lives in Wallan; in writing about life in settler Australia, these issues “naturally” formed a part of my narrative, quite apart from any analytical or academic imperatives. Moreover, these personal narratives also seem to mirror the larger cultural discourses I have sought to address in this exegesis. As I mentioned above, in seeking answers about my culture, and in writing a novel to address them, I have perforce arrived at the door of my own story.

Development of land has pervaded my personal narrative of home and family. My grandparents Frank and Beryl Robinson bought property at Wallan in 1956; each recorded the move to their new farm, *Benalta Park*, in their journals, revealing very different attitudes toward it (see Appendix 1). Some of the characteristics embodied by *Landfall*’s Bruce are recognisable in Frank’s account, in which an overwhelming work ethic at the expense of all other attributes is overt. Frank’s focus on physical work was inherited by my father Paul, who passed it to me through demonstration, as well as in the form of oral narratives about his life and childhood. *Landfall* constitutes my recognition of this multi-generational inheritance, at the centre of which sits the vocation of shaping land through hard work.

Prior to Frank and Beryl’s ownership, *Benalta Park* was used “just” for wood, rather than for agriculture, according to my father’s retelling. As a result, the “farm” was a forest of stumps when my family first arrived. Under my grandfather’s care, *Benalta Park* was transformed into a sheep farm. In the 1970s the farm was subdivided, sectioned into ten-acre blocks. Selling these earned my grandfather a good amount of money; he offered to loan his five sons the funds to buy a block each. My father Paul was the only son who took up the offer, naming his holding *Casuarina*. In turn, Paul helped me buy property when I

reached adulthood. I read this as the passing on, and inheritance, of certain cultural imperatives regarding property ownership, as well as of the land itself. Throughout my father's early life, Wallan remained a small rural town on the Hume highway; a "highway town". Today, the boundaries of Melbourne have spread. Wallan is now considered an outer suburb of the metropolis. The change in the town is dramatic. Across from *Casuarina*, once bare rolling hills have been developed. A housing estate is being built, much like the *Peterson Meadows* depicted in *Landfall*, and like the estate that Bruce McKenzie's farm is slated to become.

Growing up, my father was involved in fighting two bushfires at *Benalta Park*, one of which he takes some responsibility for starting as a child. As flames raced toward the house, he remembers kneeling in the backyard, praying for his life. Decades later, my mother, an American migrant, recalls watching in horror as the Ash Wednesday fires crested a hill near *Casuarina*, before the winds changed. Such narratives, combined with my own experiences of familial fire drills at *Casuarina* in summer, inform the depictions of fire in *Landfall*. The cumulative weight of bushfire narratives, both personal and cultural, on my understanding of and relationship to fire's prevalence, centrality and danger in Australia is evidenced by fire's centrality in the novel. The role of fire in Australian literature generally is further indicative of its centrality from a cultural perspective. In 2009, the Black Saturday fires came within 5km of *Casuarina*. My father remained on the property, determined to stay and defend, as he always had in the past. Stemming from the research I have done regarding the impact of climate change on bushfire in Australia, and in response to accounts of those fires in particular (see for example Kissane 2010; O'Connor 2010), it is my belief that had the Black Saturday fires swept through *Casuarina*, there is a good chance that my father would not have survived. Today, he remains committed to staying and defending his property should future fires threaten his home.

In what follows, I have restricted my discussion to Melbourne because Melbourne is "my place"; I am most familiar with, and invested in, its terrains and troubles. In the context of climate change, I have chosen to centre my discussion around Melbourne

because by '2031, Melbourne is projected to have experienced the largest increase in the number of households of all capital increase...an increase of 72,000' (Ewing 2010, p. 9). Melbourne disturbingly demonstrates the problems inherent in the ways we are now living in Australia. The increasing rate of development in and around Melbourne, indicative of a continually growing population, can be already felt in many facets of life in the city. Housing prices skyrocketed by 33 per cent over eighteen months to December 2010 (Wilson 2011a) and although they dropped again in 2012 (Australian Bureau of Statistics), the ongoing demand for housing, fed by unabated population growth,<sup>21</sup> has precipitated an arguable, ongoing "housing crises" in the city (Department of Planning and Community Development 2002; Casey 2010; Dowling 2011). Roads and public transport<sup>22</sup> have become notoriously and increasingly congested (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission 2006; Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics 2007), and prior to the breaking of the long-term drought in 2010, Melbourne's water supply was dangerously depleted at under 50% capacity (Melbourne Water 2011) as a consequence of symbiotic environmental and developmental factors. In many ways, Melbourne epitomises the grim future we will encounter across the nation if our ecological and cultural circumstances are not adequately addressed.

## Homes and Suburbs

And her five cities, like five teeming sores,  
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state  
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
Timidly on the edge of alien shores  
– AD Hope, *Australia* (1966)

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing on studies conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Age* reported that in 'the year to June 2010, Melbourne is estimated to have grown by 79,000 people, or more than 1500 a week. For the ninth consecutive year, Melbourne had the biggest growth of any city in Australia' (Colebatch 2011).

<sup>22</sup> The Public Transport Users Association argue that Melbourne transport users experience crowding 'on trains (as well as on trams and some bus routes...Beyond the trains, trams and a few Smartbus routes, services are poor: infrequent...and no competition for the motor car, despite increasing traffic congestion' (2011).

Australia is the most (sub)urbanised nation in the world; for ‘most of our history, most of us have been living in a suburb’ (Seddon 1990, p. 1). This reality poses specific ecological implications for Australian peoples. In just over two-hundred years, huge tracts of land have been transformed from the nourishing terrain (Rose 1996) maintained by Indigenous peoples prior to settlement, to the sprawling, congested, low-density landscapes most Australians live in today.<sup>23</sup> The overwhelmingly urban nature of Australian population distribution<sup>24</sup> is projected to continue growing; all ‘capital cities are projected to experience higher growth...resulting in further concentration of Australia’s population within [them]’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008, p. 4). These human-made landscapes reveal not only the ecological changes wrought on Australian lands since invasion, but also the cultural understandings and prerogatives driving those changes. If we are to negotiate the environmental challenges we face, we need to understand the cultural and social factors at play in how and why post-settlement development in Australia – in particular, the construction of cities, towns and homes – has progressed as it has.

In her literary analysis of Australian housing, Elizabeth Ferrier argues that architecture is ‘a powerful symbol of cultural identity’ (1987, p. 42), pointing out that after invasion, the lack of permanent structures contributed to the European perception of Australia as a land without culture. Considering the ways in which housing – or lack of housing – shapes settler relationships to the land, as well as how it forms and reveals settler cultural identity, it is informative to note that Australian homes are arguably identifiable by their size.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This is not to suggest that Indigenous development and management strategies are categorically “good” for the environment, while settler strategies are categorically “bad”, though in some cases – particularly in regards to the pollution generated by cities – this may be true. Rather, I seek to underscore just how swiftly – and in some areas, completely – the face of the Australian landscape has been modified, affected and impacted upon by European settlement.

<sup>24</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that between ‘1996 and 2006, the populations in Australia’s big cities grew faster (1.6% per year) than the national average (1.2%), while the number of people living in Australia’s remote areas fell’ (2008, p.1). Further, more than ‘two-thirds of people lived in major cities (68%)’ in 2006 (2008, p.1).

<sup>25</sup> In 1999, 57% of Australian houses were found to have 3 bedrooms, 29% had 4 or more, and 73% of households were found to have more bedrooms than required to reasonably house occupants (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). By 2005, the ABS found that residential buildings had continued to increase in size, with the average

Overall, the ‘average size of houses in Australia has doubled in the last 20 years [to 1995] (while families have become smaller)’ (Trainer 1995, p. 38). While the trend towards large houses has finally started to wane over the last several years as the affordability of housing has decreased, shifting building practices away from the McMansion and toward higher density apartment blocks (Perkins 2012), Trainer’s assessment is broadly indicative of historical and recent practices. By ‘the turn of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century...there were actually 100,000 more rooms than persons’ in Australia (Butlin in Brown 2000, p. 110). This preference for large houses can be linked to the culturally informed notion that Australia was a land of unlimited space and resources, especially in contrast to the crowded conditions left behind in Europe (Davison 2000, p. 205). These two factors – historical relationships to and experiences of housing, and a culturally proscribed perception of Australian lands – arguably worked together to construct a national vision for desirable housing in Australia; a habitus (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 78-87) which predisposed settler Australians to certain attitudes and approaches to the built environment. At the same time, the suburbs in Australia developed for the same reasons they had in Britain; allowing the middle and upper classes to travel into the city from spacious, supposedly clean suburbs for work (Forster 1995). Yet the size of the continent modified the outcomes of such development. The ramifications of this are felt today, indicative of Melbourne’s infamous “suburban sprawl” and resultant over-reliance on cars at the expense of easily accessible public transport (Public Transport Users Association 2011).

In addition to size, the fully detached dwelling is another predominant feature. ‘In 1999 (as in 1994) 79% of homes across Australia were separate dwellings’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999), meaning that they were not attached to other houses by any wall, nor were they flats or apartments. While national and particularly urban population growth may

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floor area of new residential buildings increasing by 37.4% between 1984-95 and 2002-2003 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). These trends appeared to show little sign of abating between 1994 and 2008, wherein ‘the number of homes with four or more bedrooms rose...while the number of one, two and three bedroom homes all decreased’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).

impact these figures to some extent in coming years as higher-density living becomes more prevalent, it is fair to say that currently, as well as historically, Australian suburbs have been dominated by large, detached homes with private yards, encouraged by what Graeme Davison terms ‘the suburban ideal’ (1994a, p. 99), which has historically included a strong settler cultural preference for the quarter-acre block. Implicated in the ‘suburban ideal’ is the extent to which the homes primarily built by settler Australians are designed with that ideal, rather than the Australian ecological reality, in mind.

In line with the ‘suburban ideal’, lack of sympathy with, understanding of and engagement with the conditions and terrains within which Australian houses are built is another fundamental quality of their construction.<sup>26</sup> This quality is often evident, even when the other two qualities (size and separateness) are not. To take one example, the Victorian terrace that characterises much of inner city Melbourne, while neither large nor detached, nevertheless constitutes a design imported from England<sup>27</sup> rather than one developed specifically for Australian conditions. While such dwellings are not necessarily ill-suited to Melbourne, and may function passably at certain times of year, for example by restricting the infiltration of harsh summer sun, terrace houses do not take *particular advantage* of the area’s local conditions in regard to heating, cooling or design. In contrast, Australian architect and environmentalist Marcus Ward advises owner-builders to:

gather information about the site... [Look at] maps which will give you an idea of slope, altitude and water catchment...rainfall, wind, sunlight and temperature...ask your neighbours about the local climate...try to spend some time at the site, overnight a few times through the year...Listen to your animals...Keep in mind the basic passive solar principles (1994, p. 16).

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<sup>26</sup> Speaking to this, in David Malouf’s story ‘Southern Skies’, the protagonist, a European professor, is described as having ‘no family – or none in Australia. He lived alone in a house he had built to his own design. It was of pinewood, as in the Old Country, and in defiance of local custom was surrounded by trees – natives’ (1985, p. 8).

<sup>27</sup> Terrace houses are usually long, narrow and dark with small windows, high ceilings and small rooms (Howells & Morris 1999).

While the terrace was an originally a product of nineteenth-century architectural ideals and prerogatives, the underlying lack of cultural awareness or engagement in the specific realities of Australian lands and conditions endures today. The ‘colonists stepped ashore [in Australia,]’ Troy argues, ‘with a set of inherited regulations and construction processes, and clear ideas of what constituted a house’ (2000, p. 1). Those ideas have fundamentally changed very little within the mainstream since settlement. Forester Andrew Campbell deplores the lack of sensitivity displayed by settler cultures towards Australian lands. He asks, what ‘would it mean to live like an Australian, a real Australian?...A true Australian would live and work in buildings and towns and cities that are actually tuned to the place’ (2003, p. 247).

In contemporary times, settler cultures have largely employed a “one size fits all” approach to mainstream residential building in Australia.<sup>28</sup> This approach has been supported and encouraged bureaucratically and is, therefore, a culturally sanctioned form of construction. Until recently, particular kinds of houses – largely those built using traditional and sometimes mass-produced plans and materials<sup>29</sup> – are not only made cheaper and easier to build than other designs according to government regulations, but in fact achieve the best energy ratings over and above more sustainable designs and materials (see Crossthwaite 2004; Houston 2004; Ward 2005). It is no accident that Ward appeals to owner-builders, who may have greater measure of control over implementing sustainable, site-specific design and construction methods.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In her article ‘Crowded land of giants’, first published in the *Good Weekend*, Janet Hawley describes the suburbs around Sydney and Melbourne: ‘Streetscapes are virtual walls of neat, look-alike, fridge-magnet, big-hair houses dominated by wow factors ... [while one resident agrees that,] the houses do have a conformity’ (2003).

<sup>29</sup> The Nillumbik Mudbrick Association, at the forefront of the campaign to have the energy efficiency of earth homes reconsidered by government regulators, notes that the ‘need to subject new buildings to an energy assessment led to difficulties for the software designers when it came to mudbricks because they considered them purely as an insulator and consequently gave the material; a very low rating. This has been rectified and, now, mudbrick buildings are able to easily achieve a 5 star rating’ (Nillumbik Mudbrick Association Inc.).

<sup>30</sup> Speaking to this, George Seddon argues that one approach to building is to ‘survey the site, orient the proposed building in relation to the topography...Another way is to take the block of land itself as the design unit...But

There have been modern architects – perhaps most famously Glenn Murcutt – who have taken inspiration from the Australian landscape in developing recognisably Australian styles of design and construction. Further, there has been a push toward more ecologically sustainable methods of living and building, particularly in recent times. Yet for a very large percentage of the population, brick veneer (Heritage Council of Victoria et al. 2007) and weatherboard houses remain the stalwart of affordable housing in Australia; in 1999, 71% of dwellings had walls of either brick or brick veneer, compared to 65% in 1994 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999, 2010). That these methods of construction are favoured in Australia is evidenced also by the fact that it is one of the four main modes of housing construction<sup>31</sup> detailed in *The Australian House Building Manual* (Staines 2004, 2011). New suburbs around Melbourne are further testimony to the dominance of some methods of building over others; one need only drive out on one of Melbourne’s arterial roads in any direction in order to see that the majority of new houses being built are largely identical to one another, and in keeping with the traditional model of the brick veneer, if now disguised under trendy cement render.<sup>32</sup>

Australians have always shown a penchant for living in a bungalow of their own surrounded by their own lawn and garden...The result: immense urban spread, huge residential suburbs, long distances between home and work, and public services strained

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our building regulations do not encourage this, although it often suits our climate. So we buy a block, flatten it, and plonk a house in the middle’ (1997, p. 149).

<sup>31</sup> Updated in 2011 and aimed at builders, apprentice training, designers, teaching institutions and owner-builders, the only four methods of construction outlined in the manual are, ‘Brick veneer, Timber Frame, Cavity Brick and Concrete block’ (Staines 2011, p. 4), none of which are particularly environmentally focused or site specific.

<sup>32</sup> In 2002 the Victorian Labor government released plans for the ‘Melbourne 2030’ scheme, designed to restrict urban growth at the city’s boundaries, and instead encourage more high density housing to prevent Melbourne from continuing to sprawl to the North, East and West. One of the prerogatives of the scheme was to encourage denser housing everywhere, including on the fringe, with the hope of accommodating an additional 600,000 households in the city by 2030 (Birrell et al. 2005, p. 1). One of the products of the 2030 scheme has been that housing lots on the fringe have reduced in size. Those areas now consist of ‘tight road pavements, limited footpath provision and a wall-to-wall brick and asphalt streetscape devoid of canopy trees and shrubs’ (2005, p. 38), demonstrating that although there has been some movement toward modifying the dominant approach to housing in and around Melbourne, the move has failed to substantially overhaul that approach “from the ground up” as is required. Instead, it has arguably focused on economic outcomes, which have and will lead to even worse conditions from both ecological and cultural perspectives.



to breaking point. Melbourne, with a quarter of the population of London, covers an area twice the size (Archer 1996, p. 217)

In contemporary times, few blocks are actually as large as the idealised quarter acre (see Hall 2010), meaning that in many new developments and estates, Australians are living on ever smaller blocks, even greater distances from urban centres, arguably gaining none of the benefits of either city, rural or even typically suburban conditions.

Culturally directed, shaped by and responsive to the European housing conditions left behind, the houses built in Australia also remain indicative of settler cultural relationships with Australian lands, and of the fundamental struggle within settler cultures to create a sense of “homeliness” in unfamiliar, often threatening circumstances. As Ferrier notes, in ‘a colonial culture, feeling at home may be held as an ideal which indicates cultural adjustment, and the house often embodies the fulfillment or failure of that ideal’ (1987, p. 40). The presence of Indigenous peoples on the continent, and the resultant anxiety regarding settler rights in, ownership of and sense of belonging in Australia, discussed below in Chapter Three, arguably combined to help situate “ownership” of private property as central to settler cultures (Davison 2000, p. 21).<sup>33</sup> These founding realities also influenced the way that development occurred in Australia, for ‘when the builder’s sense of belonging is uncertain...the efforts to build are all the more obsessive’ (Ferrier 1987, p. 44). As a result, Australian development has served to construct a physical and cultural landscape of private spaces (Beattie & Lehmann 1994, p. 79), in which the boundaries between home and Other are delineated along clear (fence)lines (Brown 2000, p. 79). Reflecting on Robin Boyd’s seminal, if somewhat outdated, text *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Peter Conrad writes that:

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<sup>33</sup> This reality is poignantly expressed in Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River*, discussed further in Chapter Three. Protagonist convict/settler Thornhill considers that to ‘be stretched out to sleep on his own earth...he felt he had...at last come to a place where he could stop...*My own*, he kept saying to himself. *My place. Thornhill’s place*. But the wind in the leaves up on the ridge was saying something else (2005a, p. 139).

Boyd saw [the] ornamental fussing [in Australian housing design] as a symptom of our revulsion from the hot, dangerous, inhabitable land that lies beyond the perimeter of our cities; it was evidence of our timidity, our preference for comforting illusions (2010).

In these times of increasing ecological peril, it is possible to view the ongoing cultural focus on private spaces as diluting the necessity to address cultural and ecological issues “beyond the garden fence”.

Each of the above-mentioned housing characteristics – size, separateness, design – pose particular, serious ecological issues for Australia; each is indicative of a disconnect between settler peoples and the qualities and requirements of the lands on which they live. But it is not only within Australian *houses* that these characteristics are apparent; as touched on, they are identifiable within Australian suburban planning and design as well. In Melbourne, the suburbs are infamous for their sprawling nature, stretching for (at least) 50 kilometres to the North, East and West. The design manifests much-lamented issues with transport: roads, trains and buses necessarily work from the centre out and back again, along linear passages. Those who live in far-outer suburbs have restricted access to public transport, and so car-dependence is high.<sup>34</sup> Clive Foster’s observation that in Australia ‘cross-suburban journeys are difficult if not impossible to make by public transport. Shorter journey times have therefore only been achieved at the cost of dependence on cars’ (1995, p. 66) certainly rings true of life in Melbourne.<sup>35</sup> The city’s design limits local work opportunities for those in the suburbs. Further, it isolates those who don’t work, exiling them on the margins. The cost of this arrangement is:

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<sup>34</sup> The car-centric design of Australian suburbs enforces certain design necessities, including access to each house via road and one-or-more-car garages, leaving little room for interaction with the natural world, while suburbs themselves to some extent erase and alter that world, often irrevocably. Cities ‘are both directly and indirectly responsible for the destruction of biodiversity: directly in that urban development replaces the habitat of non-human species with habitat for humans, and indirectly and far more seriously through the city’s agricultural ‘footprint’ on the land’ (Low et al. 2005, p. 29).

<sup>35</sup> As awareness of climate change has increased in recent years, and as congestion on roads and public transport increases, more Melburnians are turning to cycling as a reliable and sustainable form of transport; in March, 2010 *The Age* reported that peak-hour cyclists had in fact increased by 50% in 12 months (Levy 2010).

great: above all the costs of servicing such a low density, which makes public transport grossly uneconomic and thus leads to car-dependence, with all its problems, including the isolation of young women with children, and of the elderly and of young teenagers – all of those *without* a car become locked in their green prison. The aesthetic cost is also great...the natural diversity of landform, soil, vegetation and aspect has all been wiped out and the grid then emphasises monotony (Seddon 1997, p. 152).

Settler Australians – a culture of suburban peoples – are thus isolated not only from each other by the design of their home places, but from the non-human world that sustains them.

Cities are vulnerable to climate change because they require that essential resources be shipped, pumped or otherwise brought in from elsewhere (Flannery 2005b, pp. 203-210). This contributes to their ecological ‘footprint’ (Low et al. 2005, p. 29). The design of Australian domestic spheres on the whole do not require food, power and water to be generated, grown or stored in the home. These are brought in from other locations around the periphery, even the globe. There is little “productive” land in Australian suburbs; while many Australians grow vegetables and fruit in their yards, and often keep chickens, particularly in times past (Seddon 1990) and increasingly again now in response to growing awareness of ‘food kilometres’ and their environmental impacts, it is fair to say that overall, even those properties with edible gardens remain unproductive in the sense that they are unable to self-sufficiently sustain human life.<sup>36</sup> Most homes, therefore, remain reliant on importation of food, energy and water.<sup>37</sup> This may be both because Australian backyards

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<sup>36</sup> I do not have the scope here to adequately explore the role of gardening for migrants in Australia in their attempts to (re)create home on the continent; to explore the role of plants in maintaining a connection to “roots”. Needless to say that such gardening practices have involved wide-scale importation of non-native plants to Australia which poses particular ecological outcomes, but have simultaneously been an important part of place making, landscaping and cultural practice in Australia (Mathews 2000; Cerwonka 2004; Morgan et al. 2005).

<sup>37</sup> In some Melbourne suburbs, particularly new estates, there is literally “nothing there”. They are situated in the “no man’s land”, also a land of few other creatures, between the city centre and rural areas, destined to be bordered on all sides by more suburbs. Newly built, they contain few plants, minimal gardens, and are not located within walking distance to shops, necessitating a drive in order to bring food and other resources into the home.

are shrinking, reducing options for “off-grid” activities, and because, regardless of size, Australian gardens have always been, and remain, designed with other prerogatives, like children’s play and car storage, in mind (Hall 2010).

A majority of Australians living in suburbs are thus vulnerable to the ramifications of ecological degradation because they are wholly reliant on *transport* (of themselves, of goods, of resources) in order to survive. A simple flaw in the flow of water, access to power, or the ability to travel by road to buy food, for example, would potentially create dire circumstances for urban dwellers. Recent drought in Victoria exposed not only just how vulnerable our homes and cities are, but also how ill-suited much Australian urban development and design is to the particular ecological conditions – such as irregular rainfall – that exist on the continent. This emphasises how integral is the relationship between the two (for perspectives on drought and water in Australia, see for example Stanley 2006; Pearce 2006; Cathcart 2009; Weir 2009). The following exchange, from the ABC’s *Australia Wide* program in 2006, provides one chilling summary of the extent to which Australian urban developments are without connection to the conditions and landscapes in which they are situated, and the vulnerability this creates:

*Geoff Mitchell, Coliban Water:* Most cities are based on rivers or being near a water source. Places like Bendigo, Ballarat are there because of the gold.

*Matthew Stanley, Reporter:* The gold rush that built Bendigo has long since dried up. Now the water that’s sustained its growth ever since has slowed to a trickle.

*Geoff Mitchell:* This is the lowest that the storages have been.

*Matthew Stanley:* Things are so bad that the city of Bendigo, and surrounding towns, have been placed on the toughest water restrictions ever seen in Victoria: A total ban on outside water use.

*Unidentified Female:* Horrible.

*Unidentified Male:* If we’d known, we would never-

*Unidentified Female:* We would never have come here (Stanley 2006).

What is most disturbing about this exchange is the extent to which it exposes the persistent lack of knowledge about, and engagement with, the life-sustaining characteristics of Australian lands. The focus is instead on wealth and resources – in this case, gold over water – to the population’s detriment, even demise. I find disturbing the resonance of the unidentified female’s words: ‘If we’d known, we never would have come here’, which might just as easily have been the words of early settlers encountering the continent for the first time.

Australians are now asked by environmental commentators such as Flannery and others to consider what would happen if water stopped flowing from household taps, ‘if petrol supplies came to a halt. Food could not be delivered, garbage wouldn’t be removed, and people couldn’t get to work’ (2005b, p. 205). Those trapped in the suburbs would suffer; their literal distance from life-sustaining natural resources rendering their large and lovely homes their downfall.<sup>38</sup> Low et al. ominously argue that ‘[u]nless cities themselves become more focused on and designed for sustainable consumption, environmental damage will multiply. The cities will be the last to know, and by that time it will be too late’ (2005, p. 17).

It is recognised that only a few necessary changes need be made to the planning and design of our homes and suburbs in order to shift them from conveying the ‘impression that they are a cancer growing uncontrollably in the social body’ (Davison 2006, p. 209) to being wholly sustainable in themselves. To some extent, this is already beginning to happen in individual homes across Australia, as residents retrofit for sustainability, adding water

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<sup>38</sup> The vulnerability of urban areas to dystopian and climate-related breakdown has been, quite aptly, the preoccupation of some contemporary settler Australian literature. For example, Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (2009), Andrew Sullivan’s *A Sunburnt Country* (2003), Thea Astley’s *Drylands* (1999), Gabrielle Lord’s *Salt* (1990), George Turner’s *Sea and Summer* (1987), as well as the cult 1959 film *On the Beach* starring Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner, all grapple with what it means for ‘normal’ urban society to break down under external pressures, as does John Marsden’s *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1993). Most recently, Meg Mundell’s *Black Glass* (2011) interrogates this same territory, joining Turner’s novel and *On the Beach* as overtly and explicitly grappling with systemic breakdown in the context of Melbourne. Aside from *Salt* - openly set in Sydney - the other texts each take place in unnamed or fictional locations arguably based on Australian cities.

tanks, solar panels and vegetable gardens to their homes in a private bid to combat climate change, and manifest some control over their daily food, energy and water requirements. Yet far more widespread change needs to be initiated, not the least in terms of the way new houses, suburbs and estates are planned and built. This can really only occur if there is a fundamental shift away from the Eurocentric positioning of land as a commodity, to land as a symbiotically sustaining organism; a precious resource.

## Fire

Like other facets of the nature/culture relationship in Australia, those between settler Australians and fire are both inherently interconnected with development of property, and indicative of a disconnection between people and the realities of the Australian environment. As eminent fire scholar Stephen Pyne observes, the settlers' 'relationship to fire was [and is], by synecdoche, their relationship to the land' (1991, p. 183).

As I suggested above, European understandings of living on, with and (in economic terms) off the land produced permanent and sedentary ways of living that place intrinsic value on the gain and cultivation of personal property. The construction of permanent dwellings, towns and cities evolved from these ways of living, as did the necessity that these constructions be protected in their permanence.<sup>39</sup> To 'the European mind fire is inherently destructive' (Richmond 1981, p. 75); this explains in part why in earlier periods British authorities, 'eager to protect property, strengthened the laws against arson and careless fire' (Pyne 1991, p. 168). These understandings, perceptions and laws were transported with the settlers to Australia. As a result, the culture's focus on the protection and preservation of private property sits at the centre of the debate regarding fire regimes on the continent, from a settler Australian perspective.

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<sup>39</sup> The acquisition and trading of property sits at the centre of settler Australian cultural imperatives – as the dream of the 'quarter acre block' attests – and is also fundamental within interconnected realms of the economy, where owning property is a culturally sanctioned and encouraged form of investment and money making. From both perspectives, it is the *permanence* of the property that is important; a good investment is an enduring one.

While fire is hardly a new occurrence or concern in Australia, climate change brings a new dimension to the firing debates outlined below, and a new urgency in regard to attempts within settler Australia to reconsider dominant approaches to fire and to land. This reconsideration is particularly critical at present because climate change is likely to manifest conditions that result in bushfires that are more frequent and of greater intensity than ever before (see Lowe 2005, p. 81; Lucas et al. 2007, p. 36; Hasson et al. 2008; Garnaut 2008, pp. 118, 135). The costs in property and lives will therefore increase as a direct result of climate change's impact on the kinds of fires experienced on the continent. More fundamentally, as Pyne points out,

with or without global warming or arson, damaging fires will come, they will spread as the landscape allows, and they will inflict damage as structures permit. And it is there – with how Australians live on the land – that reform must go...The choice is whether to kindle those fires with some degree of deliberation, or whether to leave that task to lightning, clumsies, and crazies' (2009).

The most widely recommended effective method of addressing and preventing very large, very hot fires of the present and the future, as well as managing Australian lands more generally (particularly in Northern Australia)<sup>40</sup> is to follow regular burning regimes, as practiced by Indigenous peoples both before and after European settlement (Pyne 1990, 1991, 2006; Haynes 1991; Attiwill et al. 1994; Rose 1995; Head & Hughes 1996; Drollette 2005). Advocates of this practice say that 'the most effective protection against bushfire is large scale prescribed burning to reduce bush fuels to safer levels' (Packham cited in Pyne 1991, p. 417). This approach, which uses fire to fight fire, would necessitate a cultural conceptual shift within settler Australia regarding the role of fire in the community. Although complicated by contemporary urban development in practice, thereby rendering "unrealistic" any wholesale attempt to "return" to Indigenous firing, the fact remains that

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<sup>40</sup> See for example the discussion of cross-cultural fire use regimes and their ramifications in Northern Australia in Head and Hughes (1996), as well as Haynes' analysis of firing in Northern monsoonal lowlands (1991).

inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and practices into fire management regimes could only benefit the nation (Bowman 2003, p. 11).

Creating a mosaic of fire regimes...should be a goal of both ecological and fuel-reduction burning...We still have a lot to learn from Indigenous Australians about their knowledge and use of fire...their understanding of fire can be integrated with current scientific knowledge and adaptive management to improve bushfire mitigation and management across the continent (Ellis et al. 2004, p. xv).

The Australian Government's inquiry into the 2003 bushfires in Canberra and other states similarly recommended that 'the Commonwealth...develop specific prescribed burning guides...[because] the implementation of prescribed burning has fallen significantly behind the levels that are possible and required for the maximum possible protection of life, property and the environment' (The House of Representatives Select Committee into the recent Australian Bushfires 2003, p. 89). Implementing such burning programs would necessitate a shift away from the cultural perception that all fire is 'bad' (Ellis et al. 2004, p. xiii), and towards a greater understanding of the continent's fire-prone nature and the critical necessity of managing that environment, particularly in response to climate change.

Key to the argument for incorporation of Indigenous firing practices to help manage interconnected issues of fire and land in Australia is the extent to which Indigenous cultures, unlike settler cultures, existed for millennia in symbiosis with Australian lands and ecologies (Rose 1996, 2000; Deveraux 1997; Graham 1999, p. 105; Martin 2003, pp. 203-214; Weir 2009, pp. 153-164). This symbiosis, fostered and supported by the extent of intimate Indigenous knowledge of and 'know-how' concerning their country (Rose 1996, p. 63), is what makes it possible for Indigenous peoples to burn their country "appropriately". Knowledge of country makes possible safe and productive firing, just as productive firing feeds into knowledge of the land, since it serves to shape and maintain particular ecologies and terrains. From an ecological standpoint, knowledge of the land is crucial to the success of firing regimes. Indigenous practices are carefully timed and placed, indicative of the fact that Indigenous firing accords with the requirements of the land.



Fire has long served an ecological function in regard to land and resource management within Indigenous cultures (see for example Langton 1998; 2000; 2004), as implied by the term “firestick farming” coined by Rhys Jones (1969). Indigenous cultures hold both spiritual and custodial motivations for firing the land. ‘All over Australia, where people speak English, they describe their burning practices as “cleaning up country”’ (Rose 1996, p. 65). Indigenous peoples see unburnt land as “wild”, sick and neglected (Crawford & Crawford 2003, p. 32). Since settlement, there have undoubtedly existed large parts of the continent that could be viewed this way from within Indigenous ontology. Such perceived neglect comes at psychological and spiritual cost to those Indigenous peoples who are unable – as a result of dispossession, the development of land by settler cultures, or the sequestering of country into national parks – to adequately care for land as their cultural prerogatives dictate (Rose 1996; Langton 1999; Russell-Smith et al. 2009). The ecological ramifications of Indigenous interaction with country are acute. Healthy country, burnt by regular low intensity fires, is kept safe from larger, hotter, more destructive bushfire (Langton 1998, p. 9), while unburned country is left vulnerable to bushfire destruction. In reference to Northern Australia, Smith et al. note that:

burning in this region was once widespread and systematic. This is no longer the case. Today only a relatively small area is burnt by the Indigenous owners of the country. Fires now occur more frequently in the later months of the dry season (2009, p. 25).

When utilised within the cultural parameters as understood by Indigenous peoples, and in conjunction with careful attention to Australians landscapes and to local climates, controlled firing can be a source of rejuvenation and growth. Indigenous firing regimes therefore protect animals and plants, as well as people, from the kind of intense burning that would be difficult to recover from and is disadvantageous to all.

Yet despite the evidence of how controlled burns and periodic firing can actually help manage and control the land for the benefit of human population, this practice was met with fear and resistance by the earliest European arrivals. European settlers regarded Indigenous firing of the land with anxiety largely based on the threat such fires posed to property. For

example, after ‘the foundation of the Swan River Settlement in 1829, settlers’ observations on “native” fires and their threats to crops and homes were legion’ (Hallam 1975, p. 35). In contemporary times, the tensions in and discussions surrounding Australia’s ‘leave early or stay and defend your home’ policy (Griffiths 2009) indicate that the focus on property remains, even when human lives are put at risk, as identified by the post-Black Saturday debates (Marr 2009, p. 9; Griffiths 2009; Pyne 2009).

Yet the focus on property is only one factor influencing settler cultural relationships to fire. Equally important is the lack of cultural recognition regarding the nature of and propensity for the occurrence of fire in Australia. I do not have here the scope to address the complex ecological reasons for and outcomes of fire in Australia, nor the multifaceted and intrinsic relationships that fire has long held with Australian landscapes and ecologies – itself a contested issue, as I explore further below. However, an underpinning assumption of this discussion is that fire is a natural and necessary part of Australian conditions; that fires ‘have played an important role in shaping Australia’s environment, and [that] particular fire regimes are necessary to maintain most Australian ecosystems and much of Australia’s biodiversity’ (Ellis et al. 2004, p. 7; see also Pyne 1991, 2006), especially given the innate propensity for burning characteristic of the Australian bush. This reality – that Australia constitutes a flammable continent – has not been adequately engaged with by settler cultures (see for example Cary et al. 2003). Instead, even in contemporary times, settler Australian approaches to fire are dictated by imported cultural perspectives, underscoring the degree to which settler cultures are not yet acclimatised to Australian realities. One example of this is the response to ongoing bushfire disasters suffered in Victoria in 1939, 1983 and 2009. Each of these fires has been ferocious, precipitating wide-scale loss of property, and life. Many argue that while fire will always happen on the continent, disasters of this magnitude can potentially be avoided with the institution of regular firing, after the management strategies of Indigenous peoples (Haynes 1991; Pyne 1991, 1997, 2006, 2009; Ellis et al. 2004; Griffiths 2009).

In 1939, Judge Leonard Stretton, presiding over the Victorian fire's Royal Commission, found settler Australia's lack of comprehension regarding the Australian environment unforgivable. He argued that:

the full story of the killing of this small community is one of unpreparedness, because of apathy and ignorance and perhaps of something worse.' The 'something worse' that he tried to define was an active, half-conscious denial of the danger of fire, and a kind of community complicity in the deferral of responsibility (Griffiths 2009).

Little has changed since then in regard to cultural perspectives on fire management (Pyne 2009). In 2004 the *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* reiterated this, arguing that given 'the inevitability of bushfires, all Australians must learn how to live with them. This has been recognised at least since the Stretton Royal Commission of 1939' (Ellis et al. 2004, p. xii). Regardless, in 2009 fires raged again, killing more than 200 people in Victoria. Griffiths points out that in 1939 Judge Stretton lamented 'the environmental knowledge of both victims and survivors. He was pitying the innocence of European immigrants in a land whose natural rhythms they did not yet understand' (Griffiths 2009). Today, settler Australian environmental knowledge, if it has grown at all in the intervening years, has still largely failed to shift the dominant cultural understandings of and responses to fire, and by extension to land in Australia more generally. Feeling this failure acutely, Campbell asks:

[When] are we going to learn to live like Australians? When are we going to learn as if we are living in Australia and intend to stay? When are we going to start managing, no longer like colonists, but like people who actually want to go on living here? (2003, p. 246).

There are several key reasons why, despite the evidence to support the use of Indigenous firing practices, its mainstream adoption is problematic in contemporary times. Within the limitations of this exegesis I can offer only a brief and relatively un-nuanced

overview of the debates that characterise this issue. Put simply, there are two dominant sides to the multifaceted debate about fire management,<sup>41</sup> each of which variously ask and assert ‘what is normal in the Australian environment, and therefore, what is sustainable in terms of resource use and land management’ (Head & Hughes 1996, p. 278). These positions are largely characterised by a set of beliefs regarding Indigenous cultural relationships to country and also the role, extent and actuality of Indigenous firing on the land (see Clode 2010, pp. 24-27). On the one hand, there are those who believe that Indigenous firing practices affected Australian biota in extreme ways, thereby shaping the *nature* of Australian lands as much as their appearance, often for the worse, as exemplified by Flannery’s work (2005a). Such understandings are predominantly premised on Eurocentric notions, often conservationist in nature, regarding what constitutes “healthy” lands, particularly in respect to national parks (Clack 2003, pp. 39-51). These are frequently premised on a perception of ‘human intervention...as *disturbance*, almost always seen in a negative light’ (Seddon 1997, pp. 13-14). Opposing such arguments are those who assert that Indigenous firing constituted a productive way of managing Australian lands, arguing that firing is a fundamental facet of Indigenous cultures that should not be disavowed by mainstream policies and ideas (Rose 1995, 1996; Langton 1998, 1999). Others, like Pyne (1991, 2006), argue that fire is intrinsic to the nature of the continent, and Indigenous peoples’ use of it constituted a clever means of controlling a potentially disastrous, though naturally occurring, environmental reality. Ultimately, Jones’s question underpins much of the contemporary debate and decision-making process regarding fire. What, he writes, do

we want to conserve? We have a choice. Do we want to conserve the environment as it was in 1788, or do we yearn for an environment without man, as it might have been 30,000 or more years ago? If the former, then we must do what the Aborigines did and burn at regular intervals under controlled conditions (1969, p. 228).

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<sup>41</sup> Bill Gammage offers a comprehensive overview of the state of the Australian firing debate in *The Biggest Estate on Earth, How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011, pp. 2-4, 325-342).

Yet the fraught contemporary politics surrounding Indigenous issues, particularly land rights, and the way in which fire can be manipulated in the name of conservationist agendas, problematises assessments of fire in both historical and contemporary times. Complicating this further is the permanent nature of settler Australian homes, and the desire to protect them as assets, which renders the kind of wide-scale and continuous burning practised by largely nomadic Indigenous cultures potentially impossible to implement around dense areas of settlement where the mitigation of bushfire disaster is arguably most needed. These issues make a cohesive, cross-cultural, nation-wide approach to fire both theoretically and practically difficult to assert. Such an approach would potentially jar with Indigenous knowledges that have survived colonisation in any case, as each is specific to particular locations and not necessarily adaptable elsewhere on the continent.

### **Australia as a Nourishing Terrain<sup>42</sup>**

Through the twinned lenses provided by urban development on the one hand and fire on the other, as these have been conceptualised, manifested and managed by settler Australian cultures, I have attempted to provide an exploration of the intersections between those cultures and Australian lands. I have done this with a view to demonstrating that settler cultures have developed ways of living with and shaping Australian lands that are largely imported, rather than emplaced. I now turn briefly to Indigenous approaches to land and land management, not in order to polarise the cultural understandings of Indigenous and settler peoples in Australia, nor to simply compare them, and certainly not to appropriate Indigenous knowledges and methods for use by settler peoples. Rather, I do so because when I began this work in 2008, I sensed that climate change marked an important contact zone (Pratt 1991) between Indigenous and settler peoples, through which a move toward meaningful reconciliation might be initiated on the one hand, and more emplaced attitudes

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<sup>42</sup> The term 'nourishing terrain' is applied by Deborah Bird Rose to describe Indigenous attitudes to and understandings of land in her book *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (1996).

to and knowledges of Australian lands fostered in settler Australians on the other. I will return to my earlier assumptions momentarily, but will first tease out some aspects of Indigenous ontology and ways of living, thereby illuminating the characteristics of the contact zone referred to.

One of the ways that Indigenous knowledges are conveyed, stored and transferred is through the popular trope of “Dreaming”, or, as these knowledge systems are also called, “History” or “Story” (Rose 1996, p. 26). Indigenous cosmologies are cultivated in *relation to* the land, so that available resources can be utilised effectively in an on-going capacity, and in part so that information regarding resources can be transferred. Over time, Indigenous cultures have developed large oral repositories of localised knowledges regarding seasonal weather patterns, flora and fauna, rainfall, water sources and travel routes. These oral repositories are linked to the broader cosmologies that preserve their message through story, song and dance. But the stories also protect the places and animals they refer to. A Dreaming place or sacred site ‘is protected. No hunting, fishing, gathering, or burning can take place within the proscribed boundaries...Dreaming sites thus function as refuges’ (Rose 1996, p. 49). As a result, for at least 50,000 years (Clarke 2003, p. viii) prior to European invasion of Australia and since, Indigenous peoples have managed and cultivated Australian lands by knowing and holistically protecting country. They have amassed intimate knowledge of the land by understanding the environment as a ‘nourishing terrain’; a place ‘that gives and receives life’ (Rose 1996, p. 7).

The Dreaming therefore operates not only on a metaphysical plane – as a religion might – but also on a practical plane, incorporating instructive information regarding how to live, and how to maintain the life of all things together. Specific knowledges are transferred within Indigenous cultures with a view to keeping all things in balance; Indigenous peoples live within a sphere of connectivity (Martin 2003, p. 207). This notion of interconnectedness within symbiotic ecosystems, of which humans are but one elemental part, is reiterated time and again in the testimonies and writings of Indigenous peoples regarding ontological understandings of and relationships to country (see for example Rose

1996, 2000; Deveraux 1997). Considered from an ecological perspective, the import of Indigenous conceptualisations of human life as being in symbiosis with a nourishing terrain is not that the non-human is particularly worth caring for – in the way that a conservationist might see it – but that all things are worthy in themselves. Each element has a right to exist and a function to fulfill, and all things must operate within their ecological sphere in order to nourish and preserve both themselves, and each other. Within Indigenous knowledges there is ‘no justification required in asserting that other living things also want to live, and have the right to their own lives’ (Rose 1996, p. 10). Every living thing is understood as being valuable, necessary and worthy in itself and in connection to other living things. In this way, Indigenous philosophies ‘are all about keeping things alive in their place’ (Mueke cited in Rose 2008, p. 159). Indigenous cultures are, therefore, both implicitly enmeshed within and connected to country, and ontologically bound to preserve both themselves, and country, in balance.

This work is premised on the idea that, following quite a different set of cultural prerogatives, ‘Europeans radically changed the Australian landscape, perhaps irrevocably, in their efforts to tame it, subdue it and dominate it’ (Clode 2010, p. 52) and that, intersecting with this, climate change heralds further momentous ecological changes for the continent. Given that the post-settlement changes wrought on Australian lands – along with anthropogenic climate change – have occurred largely as a result of Western cultural understandings regarding how and in what manner we should live, it follows that in order for any (positive) ecological change to occur, radical *cultural* change – particularly around conceptual relationships between nature and people – is a necessary precondition. As I remarked above, a few years ago I saw climate change as a potential contact zone; a space through which settler and Indigenous peoples might come together to fight a common battle as they have done historically on occasion, as indicative of the Indigenous-environmentalist collaboration to fight mining in Kakadu national park, to take one example. Fundamental to this hope was the idea that settler Australians need not look far for new (to them) ways of living with and understanding Australian lands, given they were

uniquely placed to engage with those already long in existence on the continent. In this way, I hopefully – perhaps naively – imagined that the reality of climate change could facilitate massive and arguably unprecedented cultural shifts with respect to reconciliation between settler and Indigenous Australians; a new privileging of Indigenous understandings and knowledges by mainstream Australian culture; the forging of new paradigms for settler Australian and “their” lands; and the acceleration of Australian attempts to cope with and manage the effects of climate change.

As a result, I wholeheartedly agreed when I read Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin’s assertion that the

sharing of ecological knowledge is an important response to the crises in which our lives are entangled. The sharing can go both ways, for in contemporary Australia there is knowledge on both sides that can help to recover the capacity of systems to nourish human and other forms of life’ (2004).

Similarly, when Michael Cathcart concluded his book with the optimistic observation that cultural change is, though slowly, occurring on the continent, I was pleased and inspired. Cathcart argues that settler Australians are coming to terms with their culture and lands. There is, he writes,

new hope of reconciliation. Between settlers and the indigenous peoples. And between settlers and the land itself...today’s settler Australians are changing. They are learning to hear their country...They are learning that theirs is not ‘a new country’...They are starting to belong (2009, p. 259).

When Tim Rowse asked, ‘is it not time for [settler Australians] to learn from [Indigenous peoples], to reconsider western philosophies of nature’ (1993, p. 104)? I felt this was a fundamentally important question. And I was heartened to read that Joe Ross, extending my own views, had written in *The Age*, ‘If there is truly to be a new way in dealing with climate change under this federal government, then the next step needs to be calling on the experience and expertise of our indigenous communities’ (2010). Indeed, I



had hoped to situate this work around the central idea that settler cultures should look to Indigenous cultures, not in the spirit (or practice) of appropriation, nor with a desire to reject their own cultural histories, but to foster the idea that communication between settler and Indigenous Australian cultures regarding pragmatically shared lands could potentially encourage positive developments for the future of the continent on ecologically and culturally interconnected fronts.

Writing now, I remain committed to the hopeful statements above, and still yearn myself for the emplaced settler Australia, the acknowledged and respected Indigenous Australia, and the reconciled nation that they describe and foreshadow. Yet I no longer necessarily believe that such statements hold true with respect to their potential for “easy”, positive impact on Australian lands and cultures. This is not to say that the approaches they describe are no longer legitimate. But there are two reasons I now hesitate to rely upon the case I had hoped to make (aside from the fact that my initial thinking did not sufficiently account for the inherent complexities of the settler-colonial situation, particularly for Indigenous peoples, nor acknowledge that Indigenous relationships to and management of country have both survived and been disrupted - in some places irreconcilably – as a result of European settlement).

One of these reasons comes as a response to the current and likely future climates of Australia in both ecological and also cultural senses. All evidence now points to the fact that climate change has already arrived and is making its impacts felt; our time for meaningful mitigation of its effects is already past. Over the course of the last few years, climate change discourses amongst experts and concerned citizens have shifted from heated discussions regarding whether climate change is really occurring, to talk of effective mitigation strategies, to fear for our potential for adaptation when the outcomes of climate change manifest.<sup>43</sup> Despite the more optimistic assertions about the survival of the world as

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<sup>43</sup> This is indicative of the IPCC’s recent report outlining current expectations for the occurrence of extreme weather events (2011).

we know and enjoy it (see, for example, Flannery 2010), I perceive few grounds for hope that change will be enacted of the kind that will protect human and non-human realms from disaster. Already, I sense climate change-related discussion turning from adaptation to apathy and inertia: the slow slide of adaptation-talk into resignation-talk amongst those for whom climate change remains a topic worth discussing at all.

The second, perhaps more pervasive reason I hesitate to make an optimistic case for potential transculturation (Ortiz 1995, pp. 97-103) through climate change – even should this be engaged with and managed in ways that are positive for climate, land, culture and people – is that, as I will go on to discuss, there remains “unfinished business” between Indigenous and settler Australians that must first be resolved. This business revolves around issues of sovereignty, which themselves derive from the historical application of *terra nullius* to an inhabited continent, and the ongoing failure, or even ability, of settler Australians to adequately and meaningfully acknowledge Indigenous ownership over Australian lands. As I will go on to outline, this failure has enacted profound consequences, not only for Indigenous peoples, but for settler Australians as well. In order for climate change to constitute a contact zone in the most productive and positive sense, and for Indigenous and settler peoples to truly work together, sharing knowledges and responding to the difficulties that climate change heralds without exploitation or appropriation, settler Australians must first address the ‘founding forgetting’ (Garbutt 2011, p. 191) that legitimated European settlement in the first place.

## Chapter Three: Literature

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### Unsettlement

The application of *terra nullius* to the Australian continent – legitimised by its association to Lockean conceptions of land as discussed in Chapter Two – made way for European settlement, and in doing so, disavowed the reality of Indigenous sovereignty over the entire Australian continent. The construction of Australia as an uncultivated and un-owned land, empty of people, belonging to no one and ready for inhabitation and development by settler peoples, prepared the ground for European settlement on Indigenous country, but at a cost. In attempts to assert their tenuous legitimacy, settler cultures cast the moment of “settlement” as Year Zero (Rose 2004) and as the beginning of history (Arthur 2003, p. 45) in attempts to cover over Indigenous knowledges and histories in support of their own legitimising cultural and imperial fictions. Ongoing legitimisation of European inhabitation and “ownership” of Australian lands has therefore necessitated collective maintenance of the idea that Indigenous peoples were not existent on the continent and actively engaged with country at the time of settlement and afterwards, an idea that is simultaneously and continuously undermined by the obvious reality of Indigenous peoples in Australia. As Rose points out, ‘to get in the way, all the native has to do is stay home’ (cited in Wolfe 1999, p. 1). This reality leaves settler cultures in an unsettled space. Unable to truly engage with Australian lands on the lands’ own terms without also encountering Indigenous peoples and the “forgotten” aspects of European founding histories, settler cultures exist in a double bind. The High Court’s decision in *Mabo v Queensland No 2* (1992) (Mabo) clearly expressed the limits of settler cultural capacity to do away with the “legal fiction” of *terra nullius* (Langton 1996) without undermining settler legitimacy when it overturned *terra nullius* ‘in relation to property but reaffirmed ... in the matter of sovereignty’ (Goldie 1999, p. 139).

Indigenous sovereignty therefore remains – and in the context of maintaining settler legitimacy, must necessarily, if unsettlingly, remain – effectively unacknowledged in settler Australia. Settler cultures have set about attempting to wipe away Indigenous peoples and histories, which constitute a ‘maximal threat to [the] legitimacy of settler Australians by undermining their already insecure sovereign foundations’ (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 25). This cultural disposition toward the eradication of Indigenous presence is a fundamental aspect of settler colonialism itself, wherein ‘colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies’ (Wolfe 1999, p. 2) through a ‘winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement’ (Wolfe 1999, p. 163). Unfortunately for settler cultural security and settlement, Indigenous peoples have persisted and resisted, thereby continuously calling into question settler founding narratives, and legitimacy.

The cultural condition that WEH Stanner famously termed ‘the great Australian silence’ (1992) marks a settler colonial strategy – albeit a failed one – to bury such realities. Stanner’s term refers to the enduring lack of recognition and acknowledgement given by settlers to the events of Australian frontier history, to the premises of settlement, and to Indigenous cultures generally. Modifying the qualities and characteristics of Australian lands, flora and fauna<sup>44</sup> was one facet of generating and maintaining this silence,<sup>45</sup> which in

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<sup>44</sup> Increasingly, settler Australians are growing aware that they need to “do something” about environmental degradation and climate change, to find a new way of seeing, understanding and living with the land, and of addressing the land on its own terms. Australian philosopher Val Plumwood reasons that in order to overcome the ‘cultural deafness’ that settler cultures experience regarding the actualities of Australian lands, they need to ‘create the basis for two intertwined cultural dialogues, with the philosophy of the indigenous people who were here before us, and with the land that has endured for so long and which our way of life is destroying. It is in the process of these dialogues...that we will finally place ourselves by coming to terms with the others we have denied, and will be able to resolve in a positive way the unhappy riddle of Australian identity’ (Plumwood 1999, p. 160). Plumwood argues that integral to these dialogues is the construction of new, place-based philosophies (which she terms ‘philozophies’) that precipitate fundamental shifts regarding how settler Australians see and understand the land.

<sup>45</sup> The changes wrought on Australian lands by settlers also highlight the difficulties experienced by migrants and settlers on unfamiliar terrain. The actions of Australia’s early settlers were not always malicious, indifferent to local surroundings, or even always purposeful. A more complex analysis is required, one that acknowledges the deep cultural displacement that occurs in respect to the migration experience (Pesman 1996; Dawson & Johnson 2001; Christou 2006; Sussex 2010). This displacement is arguably more acute in the circumstance of wide-scale migration, as in the “founding” of a colony, and even more so when the displaced peoples in question, like the convicts, are relocated against their will. It is not difficult to imagine why the early settlers might have wished to

turn maintains the culture – or ‘cult’, as Stanner put it – of ‘disremembering’ that defines both settler frontier histories and contemporary cultural ways of understanding these histories (McKenna 2002, p. 2). Yet despite the muffling effect of Stanner’s silence and its continuing enablement of the cultural disavowal of ongoing Indigenous inhabitation of, and claims to, sovereignty in Australia, the founding realities of the nation inescapably exist, acknowledged or otherwise.

In speaking of Australia as an ‘uncanny’ home (1998), Gelder and Jacobs provide another frame through which to view the resultant unsettledness experienced by settler cultures. The uncanny or *unheimlich*, a Freudian concept literally meaning the ‘unhomely home’ (Ryan 2006, p. 52), connotes the ‘experience [that] may occur when one’s home is rendered...unfamiliar; one has the experience...of being in place and “out of place” simultaneously’ (Gelder & Jacobs 1998, p. 23). After invasion, for example, familiar European gardens and landscapes were overlaid on unfamiliar Australian lands, epitomising the simultaneous existence of homely and foreign elements that creates the uncanny. Because the uncanny renders that which is *best* known – the home – unfamiliar, it arguably contributes to the sense of unsettlement. Read observes this when he writes, ‘I belong but I do not belong; I seek a solemn union with my country and my land but not through Aboriginality; I understand our history but it brings me no relief’ (Read 2000, p. 21). Indigenous sovereignty not only disrupts the neat, linear narrative of European settlement and legitimacy. It also undermines even the rights of those settlers who strongly identify as “Australian” to belong. Terry Goldie articulates this uncanny reality, situating it in the Canadian context, by arguing that the

white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? (1989, p. 12)

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plant “homesick gardens” (Cerwonka 2004; Morgan et al. 2005), or to introduce familiar animals for food and labour, in order to root themselves more firmly in an unfamiliar world.

Adding another dimension to settler unsettlement, Schaffer labels settler cultural identity ‘a ghost tradition’ (1988, p. 4), which she defines as a ‘nationalist code’ that ‘exists’ even if it does not speak for “us” (1988, p. 4). Schaffer also points out that in constructing national identity, the ghost tradition can serve to obscure, hide or disremember some aspects of the culture, just as it can represent others as being dominant or central (1988, p. 5). Much of settler Australian cultural identity is attached to, shaped by and invested in the Australian environment (Schaffer 1988; Frost 2003; Elder 2007). In line with this, and despite the prevalence of land-centric cultural myths, Martin argues that as ‘a nation we experience a fundamental ontological insecurity in respect to our land...[Therefore,] can we explain our love of clustering in big cities in merely geographical terms?...Is there not something deeper at work?’ (2008, p. 20) In anxiously representing themselves as connected to the land, settler cultures arguably attempt to disavow the extent to which they are illegitimate within, disconnected from and damaging to it.

As John McLaren asserts, settler Australian literatures fundamentally explore the intersections of peoples with the Australian environment; the ‘history of Australian literature is a history that records this encounter’ (1989, p. viii) between settler peoples and the new and strange conditions experienced at the time of settlement and afterward. It is logical that settler cultures have been largely dominated or preoccupied with portrayals and explorations of land, developed as they are from acts of conquest over both lands and peoples. Yet, complicating this, as Ellem points out (1998), is the fact that while the land-focused myths and traditions that feed Australian settler literatures define the culture as being fundamentally connected to “the bush”, the reality is that ‘most Australians don’t depend on or really live in the Australian environment: they live instead in one of those five big cities...connected to the outside world rather than to the Australian landscape’ (Diamond 2005, p. 388). In the following section, I examine a selection of literary texts dealing with the theme of unsettled settler relationships to Australian lands.

## Writing Home: Settler Australian Literature

Before turning to a discussion of several key instances of Australian writing, I want to touch briefly on my choice of literature as a lens through which to view the broader concerns of this work. Literature offers a particularly clear view of cultural unsettlement because the relationships between literature and culture are symbiotic. On the one hand, cultures are sustained through narrative, and narrative is fundamental to nation building, as suggested by Schaffer's discussion of the Australian literary 'ghost tradition'. In line with this, James Donald writes that "the nation" is an effect of the cultural technologies, such as storytelling and image making, not their origin. A nation does not express its self through its culture: it is culture that produces "the nation" (1993, p. 163; see also Bhabha 1990). On the other hand, the literatures of a culture do not merely reflect the place and peoples to which that culture belongs, but sustain and develop that culture; they *define* and *shape*, as well as represent.

Narratives (or stories) in general, and historical narratives in particular, are basic to nations. It is narratives that largely provide a nation's people with a sense of nationality – a sense that they belong together to the community called the nation. This community, Benedict Anderson has explained, is an *imagined* community...A nation's peoples come to know their nation through the telling, hearing and seeing of stories about it' (Atwood 2005, p. 13).

Cultural attitudes to place, to belonging and to Australian lands are (often selectively) encoded and reflected within Australian literatures; they serve to influence the on-going cultural project of nation building. According to the American postmodernist J. Hillis Miller, we 'see the world through the literature we read...We then act in the real world on the basis of that seeing' (2002, p. 20). Literature can underwrite understandings of what is appropriate and allowed by a given culture; there exists a connection between how land is written, for example, and what behaviours Australian culture condones within that landscape. Writer Liam Davison argues for this when he asserts that writing about landscape functions to shape and 'mould the land...while the land might physically stay the

same, the writing re-invents it...and, in doing so, shapes the way others will see it' (1994b, p. 191). Literature, then, is inherently powerful. It is constructive as well as reflective. Importantly, it functions to work on and with culture to create "the nation". Literary texts can offer poignant access to understanding the way in which unsettlement pervades settler Australian cultures, and how this state mediates and dictates settler relationships with the land.

In order to explore these themes I look here at Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005a), Liam Davison's *The White Woman* (1994c) and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). In so doing, my reading draws upon, but is not restricted to, two approaches to literary critical analysis: ecocriticism and post-colonialism.

Ecocriticism seeks to interrogate any representation of the non-human in cultural artifacts, including novels; it also examines and critiques the interactions between the human and non-human in those artifacts (Coupe 2000; Armbruster & Wallace 2001; Marzec 2007). William Howarth asserts that an ecocritic can be described as 'a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view towards celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action' (2000, p. 163). As a theoretical framework, ecocriticism provides perhaps the most relevant discourse for thinking about and interpreting text for my purposes here, because it recognises that literature constitutes a site at which nature and culture coincide and sometimes collide. Ecocriticism legitimises and contextualises the use of literature as both lens and mirror through which to view cultural understandings of land. As the ecocritical scholar Cheryl Glotfelty suggests:

All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on the land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (1996, p. xix).



Given that this exegesis straddles the traditionally separate spheres of culture and science through its focus on both literature and what are broadly understood to be the scientific concerns of climate change, ecology and the environment, ecocriticism provides a way of bringing these spheres together, seeing them not only as relevant to one another, but in continuous dialogue.

As demonstrated by key Australian ecocritics such as Kate Rigby (2002; 2009a; 2009b), along with seminal Australian ecophilosophers Freya Mathews (1994; 2000; 2010) and Val Plumwood (1999; 2002; 2007) such an approach to reading and analysing text is also particularly revealing in the Australian settler-colonial context where—as outlined above—the inherently problematic interactions between people and place, or nature and culture, have been complex and defining.

Drawing on the earlier work of Judith Wright, as well as the European Romantic movement more remotely, these Australian ecocritics and ecophilosophers are involved in working through the problematic nature of relations between people and place under Australian settler-colonial circumstances. In doing so, they have attempted to overcome the epistemological dualism so foundational to Australian settler colonialism, as outlined above, with the intended outcome what Mathews has framed as a project of ‘reinhabiting reality’ (2005). Yet to the extent that this thesis posits a fundamental disjuncture between settler Australians and Australian lands, the Australian ecocritical project might more appropriately be framed as one of *inhabiting* reality.

Crucially, this project has not been undertaken in a spirit of appropriation towards indigenous ontologies, but rather one of realisation. In much the same way as quantum physics has begun to mirror much more closely the inter-connected and relational metaphysics underlying indigenous ontologies of being (Johnson and Murton 2007, pp. 125-126), the insights of ecocriticism and ecophilosophy have begun to reveal the fundamental epistemological problematics of person and place and attempt to overcome Cartesian dualism through what Plumwood has termed a “radical green writing project”.

Speaking to the importance of this project in the Australian context, Robert Zeller and C A Cranston provide a number of justifications for the suitability and centrality of ecocriticism to exploring and understanding Australian writing, as well as of Australian writing to the development of ecocriticism at this time, including the suggestion, echoing McLaren (1989), that place 'has always figured prominently in Australian literature...[and that] environmental issues are becoming more prominent in Australian literary texts' (2007, p. 13). They write,

By moving the study of place from the periphery to the centre of critical consideration, by moving what is sometimes still considered mere background to the *foreground*...ecocritical approaches could radically shift the reading positions of Australian literary scholars (p. 14).

Considering that, as I have argued, there is an urgent need for us to reposition ourselves in relation to our places under the imminent threat of anthropogenic climate change, by making nature visible, the work of ecocriticism mirrors in text what must be done literally in place, rendering it a salient framework not only for reading Australian literature broadly, but for considering Australian writing within the confines of this work.

I also draw upon postcolonial frameworks in my analysis here. Postcolonialism is concerned with the often subversive literatures generated in the aftermath of colonisation, literatures that often speak back to, redress or serve to undermine or reposition dominant colonial narratives (Ashcroft et al. 1989; Hodge & Mishra 1990; Gelder & Jacobs 1998; Wisker 2007). This mode of analytical discourse also provides a framework for critically re-reading literatures generated from within the colonial context. In a postcolonial reading of literature, text

both reflects and creates ways of seeing and modes of articulation that are central to the colonial process. Literary texts are crucial to the formation of colonial discourses precisely because they work imaginatively and upon people as individuals. But literary texts do not simply reflect dominant ideologies; they also militate against them, or contain elements which cannot be reconciled to them...literary texts, both through what

they say, and in the process of their writing, are central to colonial history (Loomba 1998, p. 74).

Postcolonialism positions literature as an important 'contact zone' (Pratt 1991) between the complex competing and conflicting narratives and ideologies that both support and disrupt colonial discourses. In this sense, it offers a framework through which to read representations of the colonial project, including representations of colonial authority and subjugation, including the politics of engagements with the Indigenous 'other'. In their placement as *Australian* texts, grown out of the particular colonial contexts here, postcolonialism invites my chosen works to be read suggestively in these contexts, both reflecting and also disrupting or critiquing them.

While other critical frameworks and readings are always possible, taken together, ecocriticism and postcolonialism provide a critical framework that helps make sense of how we might read the unsettled relationships between settler characters and Australian lands and their original inhabitants. Such a reading, crucially, allows for critical consideration of the ecological degradation in Australia to be linked with the imperatives and consequences of colonialism and its aftermath. Australian literature has long wrestled with these issues, which arguably define works written in and about Australia.

Settlers fighting and taming or retreating in defeat from the land, European man against the Australian continent, has been a leading theme of Australian history. Both the strangeness or special character of the land and the conflict between man and land have been central in the Australian imagination and major inspirations for the creative artist (Serle 1987, p. 15)

The consequence of this is that – because of the uncanny structures that arise from the junction of settlers with an unfamiliar environment – Australian literature is saturated with unsettlement. As Huggan observes, settler literatures 'register a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards their native environment' (2007, p. 29). It is particularly evident in works of fiction that situate a settler protagonist in a landscape portrayed as hostile and unknown, and also in those that depict cross-cultural encounters. These narrative threads signify settler cultural preoccupations; they are often iterated in settler Australian writings in

various forms, as critics and writers have explicitly pointed out (Schaffer 1988; Goldie 1989; Healy 1989; McLaren 1989; Hodge & Mishra 1990; Gelder & Jacobs 1998; Haynes 1998).

I don't have the scope here to review all the works of fiction, historical and contemporary, that I would argue in some way depict or interrogate either anxieties about settler legitimacy and rights to belonging, or sense of uneasiness toward Australian lands and alienation within them (see for example Lord 1983; Hospital 1996; Marsden 1993; Bail 1998; Gemmell 1998; Astley 1999; Goldsworthy 2003; Miller 2003; Tiffany 2005; Grenville 2008; Leigh 1999). However, I do want to focus here on two categories of texts that portray unsettlement in particular modalities. There are those texts produced in the preliminary stages of European settlement – broadly, in the first century after invasion – that I would argue *unconsciously* embody feelings and portrayals of unsettlement, in that the condition is an inherent facet of their author's responses to life at the frontier and afterward (for example Baynton 1965; Lawson 1970). There are also those texts, products of more contemporary times, which *consciously* seek to address and portray the conditions those earlier texts were responding to. In so doing, and in line with other postcolonial literatures, such works make explicit many of the cultural and ecological issues inherent in the “founding” of the nation (McGahan 2004; Grenville 2008; Wilson 2011b). There is perhaps a third category of works whose narratives do not necessarily involve frontier conflict or depict a rural or otherwise non-urban setting, yet in which it is possible to identify a pervasive and palpable sense of anxiety and uneasiness regarding belonging and “at-homeness”, so that protagonists and their worlds are not and cannot be wholly settled (Garner 1991; Jose 1998; Drewe 2008; Tsiolkas 2008; Kennedy 2010; Silvey 2010).

From these works, I have chosen to explore three contemporary novels authored by settler Australian writers, each published in the two decades (1994 – 2005) since the High Court's decisions in *Mabo* and *Wik Peoples v Queensland* (1996) (Wik). While all three novels derive from the same contemporary cultural context, they do examine different historical periods. Two of them, *The Secret River* and *The White Woman*, are set during the

early years of settlement subsequent to invasion, offering portrayals of the project of European colonisation. By contrast, *Every Man's Rules for Scientific Living* takes place in the early twentieth-century, dealing with some of the cultural and ecological outcomes of that colonial project. Despite obvious variances in setting and style, all three novels are contemporary works of fiction that take postcolonial attitudes to their subjects, and all are engaged in purposeful and conscious re-examination of the history of Australian settlement. Most importantly, each delivers a particular literary representation and interrogation of the extent to which settler Australian cultures remain unsettled. Unsettlement is apparent in the content and trajectory of each work's narrative, setting, themes and other elements, as I will go on to discuss. But it is also evidenced by the continued existence of writing that takes up issues of settlement and belonging as an informing and animating focus. That novels seeking to explore and address the tenuous, anxious nature of settler inhabitation of Australian lands continue to be written and published suggests the centrality of unsettlement, acknowledged or not, within settler cultures today.

As in my own novel, *Landfall*, the novels of Grenville, Davison and Tiffany depict the various, often frustrated attempts by settler peoples to make themselves "at home" in unfamiliar Australian places. These places are often experienced by their protagonists as menacing and strange, locations in which mere survival poses inherent difficulties.<sup>46</sup> Both *The Secret River* and *The White Woman* portray the inherent conflicts that arose between Indigenous and settler peoples as European settlement spread, as well as the alienation and fear expressed and experienced by settler peoples. That these long-ago events remain intriguing and important to contemporary settler writers like Davison and Grenville indicates that what occurred at the frontier and afterwards continues to be not only relevant but also culturally unresolved.

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<sup>46</sup> John McLaren (2005) offers an overview of several other contemporary Australian novels covering similar terrain, particularly as they relate to "haunted" nature of settler cultures, and the way in which that haunting pervades settler fiction. Of Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003), McLaren writes that the 'powerful but shocking climax to the novel seems to suggest that the white settlers can never be at home in their new land' (2005, p. 159).

The novels of Davison and Grenville certainly speak back to dominant cultural narratives about what occurred when Europeans invaded Australia, particularly as each features Indigenous peoples being brutalised, disposed and massacred. They offer a fictional window onto and re-imagining of colonial events exhaustively documented by historians such as Henry Reynolds and others (Reynolds 1987b, 1995, 1996). *The Secret River* and *The White Woman* offer “rewritings” (or “rightings”) of historical events that are already culturally represented, or situated, by particular cultural discourses, and also simultaneously disremembered through them. Such disremembering is signposted by the ‘Secret’ in Grenville’s title,<sup>47</sup> while Davison’s narrator observes that it ‘comes with living in a new country, this trying to forge a satisfactory past – valour, glory, noble deeds. Better not to scratch too deep I think’ (Davison 1994c, p. 144).

Tiffany’s protagonists, Robert and Jean, like the McKenzie family in *Landfall*, might easily be the descendants of Grenville’s Thornhill family, or of the narrator in Davison’s novel. Yet even though Robert and Jean’s story takes place around a century after the arrival of settlers in Australia, they do not appear to have gained any deep cultural knowledge regarding Australian conditions. They are thus condemned to apply ill-suited techniques and technologies to the land. No more grounded in place than the characters of Grenville and Davison, Robert and Jean struggle to survive in “harsh” and “hostile” conditions. They struggle also with their relationships to their places, and with the histories of those places. ‘It is hard to imagine the Mallee before it was cleared’ (Tiffany 2005, p. 109), Jean observes. In reading this, I consider that a few generations on from Robert and Jean, it is likely that another character from another novel, like little Kate in *Landfall*, will

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<sup>47</sup> Kate Grenville, in interview with Ramona Koval: ‘What I wanted to describe or suggest was the fact that Australian history does have a series of secrets in it. There are cupboards in Australian history that we have just drawn a curtain over; we sort of know they’re there but we sort of don’t want to look at them. Other parts, we’ve drawn the curtain back with great pride...the first planting of the flag by Captain Cook, the gold rushes...but there are other cupboards that make us uncomfortable, and for 200 years we’ve just chosen not to look at them too closely...my feeling is that until we are prepared to look at all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history, we can’t actually make much progress into the future’ (Grenville with Koval 2005, ABC Radio National).

not know that the Mallee was ever cleared; will not “remember” any other history at all. The following discussion offers a particular contextualisation of *Landfall* not only in literary terms through providing an overview of works that explore similar themes and terrains, but also in historical terms. As a trio, the novels of Grenville, Davison and Tiffany portray settler interaction with Australian lands as they develop from the moment of European invasion to the opening of *Landfall*.

### **The Secret River**

Opening in London with the transportation of protagonist William Thornhill to Australia for theft, *The Secret River* literally portrays the “beginning of the story” of Australian settlement. Thornhill arrives in Sydney in 1806, eighteen years after the landing of the First Fleet. The reader experiences the invasion of Australia through the frame of Thornhill’s arrival; this constitutes, within the text, the first glimpse of the continent. It is a place Thornhill cannot see, literally, and arguably culturally as well; ‘it took William Thornhill some time to see what was around him...It was a relief to be sick...onto the planks’ (Grenville 2005a, p. 76). Grenville is explicit about the extent to which European invaders, settlers and convicts began almost immediately to change the land according to their cultural notions of how it should look. Grenville depicts this activity as an attempt by the settlers to create a sense of place and home in a frighteningly unfamiliar land. Yet Grenville also implies that Thornhill sets out to shape the land according to his own prerogatives because he is unable to do otherwise; he can only work from within the limits of his epistemological sphere, and though conscious that what he knows is inadequate and ill-suited to this strange new land, he has no recourse for adaptation. This is particularly so upon first landing, when everything is foreign; he simply lacks any experience of the place. Thornhill cannot read Australian conditions – ‘the sky was...a scatter of stars as meaningless as spilt rice. There was no Pole Star...no Bear that he had known all his life: only this blaze, unreadable’ (p. 4) – and so works to fashion what does fall within his sphere of control, in order to construct conditions that align with the knowledges that he does possess.

Embedded within Grenville's descriptions of Sydney Cove is the strong sense that European settlement, and thus the "ownership" of the new land by settlers, is only "surface deep"; from Thornhill's very arrival, Grenville undermines the solidity and certainty of European tenure. 'It all had an odd unattached look...a broken-off chip of England resting on the surface of the place...Thornhill had imagined that all the world was the same as London...This place was like nothing he had ever seen' (p. 80). Thornhill's response to this unfamiliarity, like those of the majority of the novel's other characters, is to force the adaptation of Australian conditions to known European understandings.

It was easier to turn to the familiar, this speck of England laid out within the forest. Sydney looked foreign, but in all the ways that mattered to the Thornhills it was the Thames all over again. It had no means of surviving except for the thread that bound it to Home (p. 82).

As a character-based vehicle for the themes Grenville explores, Thornhill himself mirrors on a personal scale the sense of cultural illegitimacy and longing for belonging that I have argued characterises settler cultures in general. The ghost of Thornhill's dead brother, another William Thornhill, haunts Grenville's protagonist from birth, endowing him with the uncanny sense that although 'he was warm flesh and blood...the dead William Thornhill seemed the first, the true, and himself no more than a shadow' (p. 11). At the same time, Thornhill can never quite manage to reinvent or craft his rightful self; he is arguably a man condemned to live between selves as well as between worlds. 'It was an old pain returning to find that William Thornhill, felon, was waiting under the skin of William Thornhill, landowner' (p. 173). Thornhill experiences internally the unsettled sense of illegitimacy that will only be culturally reiterated and exacerbated in perpetuity upon his arrival in Australia. This is particularly so because Thornhill arrives in Australia a convict, with few personal freedoms; he is illegitimate not only in respect of his rights to belonging in place, but even within the structures of his society. Grenville nevertheless constructs a meaningful relationship between Thornhill's past and his understandings of place, and the ensuing efforts he makes to secure "his own" land in Australia. In evolving Thornhill's



character in this way, Grenville points to both the relationship between Australia's penal history and the contemporary cultural focus on land ownership and private property, as well as those relationships' impact on settler treatment and positioning of Indigenous peoples.

After settlement, only Indigenous peoples were considered to be lower in social status than convicts. This positioning 'presents an inexorable movement towards violent deracination of Indigenous people by a class of Europeans already violently deracinated' (Ryan 2006, p. 52). Grenville positions Thornhill's *lack* of grounding as a permanent, defining part of him, a part mirrored by the 'deracination' that defines his experience as a convict. As Ryan suggests, it is Thornhill's attempted suppression and dismissal of Indigenous peoples that, from his very first night in Sydney, serves to elevate and legitimate his status on the land *in his own eyes*. When he shouts at the Indigenous man outside his hut, Thornhill undermines the rampant unsettlement he feels by providing himself the tenuous illusion of control over his circumstances.

It took a moment to understand that the stirring was human, black as the air itself...He wore his nakedness like a cloak...Clothed as he was, Thornhill felt skinless as a maggot...*Damn your eyes be off*, he shouted...After so long a felon, hunched under the threat of the lash, he felt himself expanding back into his full size. His voice was rough, full of power (Grenville 2005a, p. 5).

Thornhill's anger is arguably grounded in fear and guilt. He experiences a strong sense that the Indigenous man belongs, so much so that the man literally appears to Thornhill as a part of the land. When the man responds to Thornhill's verbal attack, Thornhill understands that his own threats are being mirrored; the Indigenous man, too, wants the trespasser gone. Time and again throughout the novel, Grenville forces Thornhill to sense, though he cannot easily articulate it, that there is little difference between his own desires regarding ownership and land rights, and the desires of the Indigenous peoples he is dispossessing (see for example pp. 93, 141, 147, 287-288). Yet because Thornhill has nothing except 'the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place' (p. 6) he is, from that first evening in Sydney, ferociously committed to protecting this meagre holding at all costs.

Grenville demonstrates powerfully just how bound up the brutal outcomes of invasion for Indigenous peoples were in the experiences and circumstances of the colonial context, particularly the penal situation. Simultaneously, she also demonstrates how tenuous the settlers' claims to ownership and belonging are, for all they have in the world to claim and defend is their 'small grip' on an alien land they do not understand.

Gesturing to Lockean conceptions of property ownership, Thornhill thinks of the land he comes to settle as:

His own, by virtue of his foot standing on it... he dragged his heel across the dirt four times, line to line... Now there was a place where a man had laid his mark over the face of the land. It was astonishing how little it took to own a piece of the earth (p. 134).

Of course, such notions of "easy" ownership can be equally easily unsettled, whether within the text or within the lived experience of settler cultures. Thornhill is disturbed to discover signs of active Indigenous land management on "his land", which include the growing of edible plants. He must adduce such evidence as incidental or accidental in order to maintain legitimacy as owner, for to recognise purposeful Indigenous land management would be to disavow his rights to habitation within his own epistemological frameworks. Thornhill's interior narrative of the settlement experience, the story he "tells to himself", thus includes a positioning of Indigenous peoples as culturally inferior, little more than animals. Thornhill must convince himself that Indigenous peoples are undeserving of the land, even lacking any meaningful understanding of his usurpation. Denigrating them as 'savages' (p. 141) provides a measure of self-justification for his actions, no matter how unconvincing he finds them on a deeper unarticulated level. Speaking of European settlement, Ross Gibson notes that 'it was best to describe natives of such a lowly character that there could be no compunction about taking their land and destroying their culture' (1984, p. 148).

Gibson's assertion is highlighted in *The Secret River* when Thornhill goes to purchase dogs from another settler, Smasher. There, Thornhill is exposed to an Indigenous woman chained inside a shed. Though at once appalled, Thornhill 'imagined himself taking the

woman...[it was] the animal in him' (Grenville 2005a, p. 252). Deeply conflicted, Thornhill struggles to reconcile what he is seeing, as well as his response. If the woman is an animal, then perhaps so is he, for his desire positions them together. Otherwise, she is human, and thus the way she and her people are being treated is profoundly problematic in its dehumanisation of the 'Other'. Thornhill is paralysed in the face of this logic, because his Eurocentric construct of the world is unable easily to incorporate either option. Within Thornhill's epistemological understandings of the world, he and the woman can exist only in binary opposition to one another without risking either the undermining of his humanity, his rights to land, or both. After the massacre (pp. 303-309), Thornhill yearns that 'he might become something other than human, something that did not do things in the stick clearing that could never be undone' (p. 308). In this utterance, Thornhill implies that his once superior humanity, his supposed civility, is in fact less desirable than the "savage" natures of the Indigenous peoples he has killed.

When Thornhill first encounters the Indigenous peoples whose land he has invaded, the Indigenous elder gestures. 'In any language, anywhere, that movement of the hand said, *Go away*' (p. 252). Clearly, the elder recognises the existence of trespass; he is warning Thornhill that the land is already inhabited. Likewise, Richard Broome writes:

the Aborigines realised that the Europeans were permanent intruders who aimed to use their land. At Burrumbeep, Victoria, in 1841, Timberroon of the Bullucs stamped on the ground and yelled at George Robinson: "County belonging to me; country belonging to me. My Country" (2001, p. 36).

Yet Thornhill is a displaced man with a vested personal interest in settlement, for whom Indigenous relationships with land fall outside his ken. He is unable to allow himself to recognise the elder's assertion, and thus perseveres with his occupation and land cultivation. It is in Thornhill's determined invasion – despite the semi-admitted evidence of Indigenous ownership – that a source of narrative tension emerges. This tension derives from the extent to which Thornhill can ever acknowledge "his" land as belonging to another group. Despite his dismissal of Indigenous people's rights to land or even to being

considered 'human', Thornhill admits to himself that while 'this might look like an empty place [it] was no more empty than a parlour in London' (Grenville 2005a, p. 155). Semi-consciously, then, Thornhill observes that the lives of his Indigenous neighbours constitute a legitimate form of occupation. This is apparent, not only in his observations about the ways Indigenous peoples manage their lands – 'the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were' (p. 229) – but in the unrelenting, unsettling disquiet that saturates Thornhill's attempts to create a home for himself on stolen territory.

Thornhill expects that he will come to cultivate "his" land, seizing control over nature and his life, thereby gaining freedom from the oppression of his circumstance. However, even when he is granted legal freedom under the penal system, there remains an air of oppression and unease, derived from the fact that the land at 'Thornhill's Point' does not wholly belong to him. The bush is as alive as the Indigenous peoples who "haunt" it; to Thornhill, the two appear largely interchangeable. 'He looked around, but no one was there watching him, nothing but the eternal trees' (p. 154). In the same vein, Thornhill remarks of an Indigenous woman that she 'stood watching him, the way a tree stood on its piece of the earth' (p. 194). It is not enough for Thornhill to merely cultivate his property in order to truly own it; he must also remove any Indigenous presence. Yet when he does just that, through massacre, it serves only to entrench his anxiety and alienation from the land (p. 333). At the same time, in perpetrating violence against the Indigenous peoples of the area, a firm settler/Indigenous binary is formed along the line of battle. In taking part in the massacre, Thornhill firmly situates himself with the settlers, a grotesque iteration of mateship. It is his violent, unspoken act that also marks the end of Sal's expectations for return Home to England; by committing the murders, Thornhill has entrenched them in Australia, but not in the settled way they might have wished (pp. 324-325). Thornhill's actions literally and metaphorically seal off any option for pursuing another kind of relationship with Indigenous people, another life for himself in Australia, one less burdened by shame, guilt and silence.

This “other relationship” is represented in the text by the pointedly named Blackwood, a settler who forges a peaceful, respectful relationship with local Indigenous peoples, and who attempts to protect them from the encroaching forces of invasion and, in particular, from the massacre itself. It is represented also by Dick, Thornhill’s son, who chooses to disown his family and move in with Blackwood after the massacre. Dick, born on the voyage to Australia, can be read as the first “real” Australian in his family. Perhaps it is his distance from ideas of Home that frees him from the presuppositions and ways of knowing that so shape his parents’ worlds, allowing him to engage with Australian circumstances on his and the land’s own terms. I feel this makes for an overly neat reading, however, particularly as his younger siblings do not also naturally align themselves with the Indigenous peoples over their own family. I see Dick as made up of all the same complexities of any human, with his own mind and morals; what separates him from the other settlers is not only his place of birth, but his willingness and ability to be guided by both morals and mind. Dick is open to seeing and assessing the Indigenous peoples’ way of life in ways that the other settlers are not. *‘They don’t need no flint or nothing, like you do, he sulked. And no damned weeding the corn all day’* (pp. 215-216). Ultimately we might see Dick’s appreciation for the Indigenous peoples’ cultures and lives as proceeding from an internal logic. In line with Cook’s observations (cited in Smith 1985, p. 169), the Indigenous peoples’ lifestyles simply appear to Dick to be more comfortable and simpler than his parents’ own. Thornhill takes part in the massacre largely out of fear of losing his land or his wife, or both (Grenville 2005a, p. 298); he ends up losing his son. Dick becomes another site of haunting for Thornhill, another example of the way that purposeful disremembering can shape “reality”. *‘He had lost something that he had never known to value it until it was gone...Newcomers did not know that [Dick] was Thornhill’s son’* (p. 326).

In taking part in the massacre, Thornhill creates a “secret” place within himself, a site at which he feels, acutely, the absence of the Indigenous peoples, and arguably mourns his role in their deaths. Years afterward, Thornhill has become ‘something of a king...[Sal]

something of a queen' (p. 314). Yet when Grenville describes the massacre's end as marked by 'a great shocked silence hanging over everything' (p. 309), she might as well be referring to Thornhill's divided and conflicted interior self, foreshadowing as she does the willed forgetting that will befall the massacre in future narratives of the frontier. When a majority of the Indigenous peoples of the area have been killed, when Thornhill has a house, riches and three hundred acres, he cannot shake the intrinsic unsettlement he feels. For he cannot erase his memory, which contains the truth of his history at "Thornhill's Point", undermining the integrity of all he has achieved. At the end of the novel, Thornhill acknowledges 'something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit...he could overlook all his wealth and take his ease [but he] could not understand why it did not feel like triumph' (pp. 329-334).

Thornhill's feelings of emptiness in the face of prosperity speak compellingly to settler cultural unease regarding frontier histories and a rightful sense of being in place. At the same time, Thornhill actively engages in a project of willfully revising his past, in the hope that future generations will not know of his actions or question their own rights to belonging. Instead, they will inherit not only Thornhill's Point, but a palatable history manufactured to support their tenure on that land. Grenville writes:

Under the house...the fish still swam in the rock...It would not fade, as the others out in the forest were fading, with no black hands to re-draw them...Thornhill thought of it underneath him...his children might remember, but his children's children would...never know what was beneath their feet (p. 316).

Of course, Indigenous histories cannot easily be erased. The stone carving, a permanent marker, lies beneath Thornhill's carefully constructed estate, just as the truth of Indigenous ownership exists, unsettlingly, below the surface of settler constructs concerning their rights and relationships to land. Despite prolonged cultural efforts to erase Indigenous ownership through massacre, dispossession, land cultivation and development,

legislation, and the construction of narratives that support the legitimacy of settler inhabitation, settler Australia, like Thornhill, remains haunted<sup>48</sup> by the founding realities outlined above. Australian poet Judith Wright, arguably the first poet to address frontier histories in her work, also saw Australia as a site of such hauntings (Davidson 2008). She wrote, 'He imagined the whole civilisation haunted, like a house haunted by the ghost of a man buried under it...they were all haunted' (Wright 1959, p. 162). Chillingly, it is clear that Thornhill's experience is, if not modelled on, then certainly indicative of Wright's observations; his house has been built literally and metaphorically on the graves of the murdered. The ghosts of those dispossessed, anchored by the fish in the rock, remain grounded and lingering, despite Thornhill's best efforts to bury them for good, through his cultivation of the land.

Certain contemporary events, such as the *Mabo* and *Wik* judgments and the Rudd Government's apology to the Stolen Generations (Australian Government 2008), did work to pull back the cultural floorboards in settler Australia to some extent, revealing the stone fish carving underneath: the truth of frontier histories, and of Indigenous claims to ownership and sovereignty. As a result, Thornhill's wish for permanent disremembering does not wholly come true in contemporary Australia. *Mabo* and *Wik* exposed the nourishing terrain of country beneath settler Australian feet. At the end of the novel, Thornhill observes an Indigenous man touch the earth at Thornhill's Point. '*This me*, he said. *My place*' (Grenville 2005a, p. 329). In that moment, the reader, if not Thornhill, senses that his actions in denying the reality of Indigenous ownership have precluded his own ability to utter with any real meaning those same words.

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<sup>48</sup> In her book *Haunted Nations: The colonial dimensions of multiculturalisms* (2004) Sneja Gunew outlines the ways in which colonial histories haunt cultural decisions concerning who may belong in settler nations, like Australia, as well as debates concerning ways of viewing and understanding multiculturalism and diaspora. Gunew argues that we might view 'this period of history as a struggle over who controls the codes and practices of nation-building and other forms of legislated belonging' (p. 22). In the Australian context, as mirrored in *The Secret River*, this struggle remains "haunted" by the realities of European invasion and Indigenous dispossession.

## The White Woman

Loosely based upon the experiences of Eliza Fraser,<sup>49</sup> who spent time in the company of Aboriginal people after being shipwrecked off the Queensland coast in 1836 (Schaffer 1995, p. 1), Davison's *The White Woman* explores the malleability of history and its relationship to narrative.

Don't think I haven't tangled with the past myself. I know what I'm up against...the sleight of hand, the slow process of forgetting and inventing. History! Truth, you say. More like the practiced art of illusion (Davison 1994c, p. 105).

So declares the unnamed narrator, who understands the role of narrative in shaping and maintaining particular "pasts" as he recounts the events befalling the search party that he took part in during his youth. The party travelled deep into the Gippsland bush, after sightings were reported in Melbourne of a white woman being held captive by "natives". The narrator speaks of the search, recounting events for the son of another search party member. The novel thus unfolds in the second person, an intimate and direct narrative voice, less commonly used than first or third person. Yet it works well in *The White Woman*, giving the impression that the narrator is in fact speaking directly to the reader. When the narrator articulates the deep sense of shame that is inherent in the search party's motivations, and in its acts, he is arguably inviting the reader to view Australian history in this way, indicting all of settler culture. Coming to the end of his story, the narrator reflects:

It's not the history you wanted, is it? Not the past you'd choose. Still, it's easily forgotten. I'm an old man; dementia in the family. You could write your own for all I

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<sup>49</sup> Fraser's story has been previously explored in literature by Patrick White in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1997), which gave voice to Eliza Fraser's story through Ellen Roxburgh, White's iteration of "the white woman". Unlike Davison's portrayal of Fraser's narrative, in which the white woman is ever just out of sight of the settlers who seek her, Roxburgh is visible, and sits firmly at the centre of White's novel. *A Fringe of Leaves* is seen by Schaffer to 'offer a critique of what White perceived to be the deep malaise of social, moral and spiritual emptiness in twentieth-century Australian society, stemming from English inheritance and the brutalities of the convict system' (Schaffer 1995, p. 159), Davison's novel is arguably centred around the reasons for such cultural conditions; the desperation the narrator feels in attempting to negate or justify that emptiness.



care and, when it comes to it, no one need ever know...And when I'm gone...Well, you've got your story...that's all there really is (p. 154).

Evident in this excerpt and pervading Davison's novel, is the inherent sense of illegitimacy experienced by the settlers in respect to their inhabitation, and the "dark" actions at the frontier that have allowed for it. The narrator draws connections between stories, memories and histories; in so doing, like Thornhill, he alludes to the broader project of construction that has occurred in settler cultures in regard to disremembering, and therefore reshaping the events of the past. Also like Thornhill, the narrator is aware that without living memory and an enduring story, the past may be "lost" or covered over, wiped away with whatever story is told about past events to, and by, subsequent generations.

Most problematically for his sense of self, legitimacy and place, the narrator is painfully aware of the discrepancies that exist between dominant narratives of European settlement and frontier history, discrepancies that in contemporary times have come to be known as the History Wars, characterised by the 'Black Armband' as opposed to the 'White Blindfold' views of Australian histories (Reynolds 1999; Macintyre & Clark 2003). For Davison's narrator, the acute differences between Indigenous and settler versions of events are made explicit by the *very presence* of Indigenous peoples, which undermine the settler's legitimate presence in Australia. In searching for the white woman, the narrator implies that the search party was perceived as far from heroic in the eyes of the settler populace. Instead, they were dismissed, even reviled for drawing attention to the tenuous nature of settler inhabitation. They undermined that tenure in legal terms by acknowledging the existence of Indigenous peoples, but also by drawing attention to and exposing to the public eye the vast tracts of land, whole dense areas of bush complicit in the white woman's disappearance, which remained largely unknown to the settlers, outside of their control.

Not everyone was behind us, you understand. Not like those grand departures of expeditions in search of pasture land or new routes to the north...Only shame and guilt. Many would have preferred we let her rest (Davison 1994c, p. 11).

Regardless, the narrator sets out from Melbourne full of hope, buoyed by the belief that the party's work is both honourable and necessary. Though the existence of the woman is only hearsay, and the stories regarding her identity various and conflicting, he desires her. 'She couldn't have known how much I wanted her. It's only now that I can see how foolish I was, how lovesick with the idea of her' (p. 16). Though perhaps he is only able to articulate the source of his desire with the benefit of hindsight, the narrator wants above all, more than the offerings of a flesh-and-blood woman, some justification for his presence in Australia, as do all the settlers who follow the search.

We'd heard the same stories as everybody else...The blacks were charged with an insatiable lust for blood...In a way, the stories reassured us...There were other stories though – not fully told or fully admitted to – but more unsettling for that...things about ourselves so far outside the realm of acceptability we couldn't hope to face them...they ran like a dark, heretical undercurrent beneath us. And we edged around them, not daring to test how deep they ran...You see why we had to find her? Why we had to believe? Which story would you prefer to believe?...You see how attractive she becomes now, how much she justifies? You see what we'd have to face without her?' (p. 36).

As the narrator implies, what the (idea of the) woman provides is justification for the bloody actions of the settlers in securing the continent for their ongoing possession. At the same time, the unspoken uncertainty regarding the level of agency that the woman wields in her "captivity", the underlying sense that she may have in fact *chosen* to remain with the Indigenous peoples, also profoundly undermines the project of invasion and usurpation, and therefore the need for any justification. That the white woman might prefer to live with Indigenous peoples is a potential reality almost impossible for the search party to contemplate. When they do not find her, the possibility that she is evading their advances underlies their fervent fears that she is lost, but might be found.

The narrator is cognisant of other narratives “blighting” the project of colonisation, those ‘not fully admitted to’, those most likely pertaining to massacre and dispossession. Simultaneously, he acknowledges that the disappearance of the white woman, her supposed captivity at the hands of ‘the blacks’, both enforces the depiction of Indigenous peoples as savages, and serves to erase any doubt regarding settler superiority, the legitimacy of their actions. In the end, whether she exists or not, the narrator comes to see the white woman, in hindsight, as fundamentally necessary. The search party, inexperienced with Australian bush conditions, nonetheless attempts to locate the white woman with feverish, misguided and dangerously inept intensity, despite their own cognisance of the folly of the task: ‘It was clear from the start we wouldn’t find her. Still, we persevered’ (p. 152). They must locate her or face the heinous events of their histories, the savagery of their culture and of their own actions. What the search party is looking for out in the mysterious, unyielding landscape is evidence of the justifying truth in the founding stories they have been told. To some extent, they set out also to create those justifying truths for themselves throughout the course of the expedition.

Instead, the search party experiences only fear, anxiety and alienation both from the landscape and from the Indigenous peoples who populate it.<sup>50</sup> Davison is clear about the extent to which the bush is a foreign experience for the settlers in the search party, so much so that being in it affects their health. ‘The next day DeVilliers was still unwell. It seemed the place affected him’ (p. 21). What is most apparent about the search is the hopelessness of the task; the quiet despair they feel in attempting to find one woman in an enormous stretch of bush they cannot read, or even really “see”. ‘Everything was deception...Each hollow looked the same, each clump of grass, each stunted bush we passed...You see, we couldn’t tell’ (p. 149). The search party distributes mirrors throughout the bush to confuse ‘the blacks’. In the searching, they find only their own reflections, creating a fitting

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<sup>50</sup> These feelings and experiences form a strong undercurrent in *The Secret River* as well, shaping the Thornhill family’s arrival in and inhabitation of the “wilderness” at Thornhill’s Point.

allegory for the imposition of European cultural understandings on the land. The rigidity of those understandings, which necessarily seek to undermine Indigenous humanity and knowledges as justification for their actions, is the very thing that in the end keeps the search party so long in the bush, and ultimately thwarts their aims. Using brute force, they interrogate as many Indigenous people as they come across, most of whom insist that the white woman has been taken by ‘Bunjil-ee-nee’. While Davison is never explicit about the identity of this “man” – and indeed the party does arrest a person they attach to that name – Davison implies that there is inherent meaning in the Indigenous peoples’ stories that members of the search party cannot comprehend. Reading the Indigenous peoples’ responses as resulting from their own conceptualisation of European invasion and settlement, the ‘Bunjil-ee-nee’ they refer to may be connected to the creator-being Bunjil, rather than signifying a flesh-and-blood man, as understood by the party.<sup>51</sup> In ignorantly casting the Indigenous peoples as savages, the search party is unable to recognise Indigenous responses as evolving from wholly different ontological positioning to their own. Instead, to the detriment of all, they misread them through the constricting aperture of a Eurocentric lens. When the party brings the supposed Bunjil-ee-nee back to Melbourne, the narrator recounts: ‘He never spoke of her again...in the end, he died at Narre Warren...where they held him...And her still out there’ (p. 154). The search has not alleviated their guilt, shame and unsettlement. If anything, it has only served to entrench these further.

The men of the search party are urban rather than pastoral settlers. They are thus rendered doubly illegitimate in the “wild” landscapes they traverse. The party becomes increasingly and recognisably ‘foreign’ as it pushes into the sparsely settled lands beyond Melbourne. The attitudes of the rural settlers they encounter mirror some of the contemporary divisions between urban and rural Australians, particularly those that occur

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<sup>51</sup> Carolyn Briggs tells the story of Bunjil for the *Culture Victoria* website. She asserts that the ‘Boonwurrung and the other Kulin nations were in conflict...The people went to Bunjil, their creator and spiritual leader...This land will always be protected by the creator, Bunjil, who travels as an eagle’ (Boonwurrung 2010).

over environmental and Indigenous issues.<sup>52</sup> Rural settlers view the party as ‘Do-gooders’ (p. 22), which further undermines their already questionable purpose.

The further out we went the worse it got...There was a man who kept his sugar in the skull cap of a black. There were rivers choked with bones...Misguided zealots, they saw us as. Meddlers. Too self-consumed to see what difficulties we faced (p. 23).

Many of the rural settlers do not appear to require the same justifications as do the urban narrator and his party for their existence and tenure on the land; they rely instead on the “realities” of their everyday experiences – the clashes between themselves and local Indigenous people – as ongoing justification for the savagery of Indigenous cultures, and thus their rights in usurping and murdering them.<sup>53</sup> As a result of their day-to-day dealings with Indigenous people, the rural settlers are portrayed as comfortable in the dispossession they enact:

It gave [the rural settlers] strength, this ignorance...They built on it, propped it up with stories, protected it with ridicule and lies...there were times when I envied them their carelessness...times when I longed to join them. You can see how fear can give a people strength (p. 23).

Davison’s narrator is a man particularly unsettled. He is unable to identify himself or his place, or to feel belonging within cultural narratives about who he ought to be, as opposed to who he is.

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<sup>52</sup> Many writers and critics have highlighted the somewhat stark distinction between rural and urban communities in Australia, commenting on the predominantly urban distribution of the population, as opposed by the bush-centric narratives that underpin settler cultural identity. There are also narratives that speak to the disjunction between the experience of urban Australians and rural Australians (both settler and Indigenous), exploring complex issues regarding which group’s experiences are most legitimate, and which, if either, should decide on national policy (see for example Jordan 2005). Clashes over the Brumby government’s North-South Pipeline epitomise such debates in recent times (Harrison 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Such clashes between what is sometimes positioned as urban “idealism” versus rural “realities”, particularly over Indigenous issues, endure today. These clashes are reflected in narratives centering around the experiences of urban settler Australians in their interactions with Indigenous peoples and communities (Goldsworthy 2003; Miller 2003; Jordan 2005; Moss 2010).

In *The White Woman*, as in times past and present in Australia, Davison depicts the media as playing a pivotal role in positioning and then reporting the search party's actions, constructing those narratives about settler cultures that then serve to alienate the narrator.

The narrator remarks:

The press were there of course...That's what we were, you see: a story...They couldn't lose, even if we never came close...the thing is, we believed it...Even now, reading over those stories Cavenagh wrote about us for a gullible populace, it's hard not to believe they're true. The real past slips elusively from memory while what he wrote holds fast (pp. 13-14).

The narrator highlights the pervasiveness and power of the written word or testimonial, and the ability of particular narratives to endure, to overwrite "the facts" of past events.<sup>54</sup> This trend has continued into the present with serious consequences for the material outcomes of Indigenous peoples' claims over country,<sup>55</sup> as indicative of Judge Howard Olney's ruling in the Yorta Yorta case (Grossman 2012, pp. 184-185; see also Chapter 7 in Strelein 2009). In addressing the power of writing to shape national narratives and histories through the construction and existence of their novels, Grenville and Davison add their own particular construction of events to cultural discourse regarding frontier histories.<sup>56</sup> Along

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<sup>54</sup> Likewise, in *The Secret River*, Grenville depicts the media as pivotal in representing, and thus shaping, the events of the settler's cold-blooded massacre. A newspaper asserts that there 'had been an affray and the settlers had dispersed [the Indigenous peoples]. It was not exactly false. Nor was it the way Thornhill remembered' (Grenville 2005a, p. 232).

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Wolfe has suggested that the current Australian native title regime functions in effect to displace 'the burden of history from the fact of expropriation to the character of the expropriated' by requiring claimants to prove their continuing 'traditional connection' with the land subject to claim (1999, p. 202).

<sup>56</sup> Grenville in particular has come under pressure for taking an active role in writing, if not shaping, Australian history. Accused of being a 'novelist wanting her work to be taken seriously as history' (Grenville 2005b, emphasis added), Grenville asserts that she has never made this claim, but that her comments were taken out of context by journalists, whose portrayals of her words were 'inventions...it means that the words that appeared in the newspaper may not bear much, if any, resemblance to what I actually said' (Grenville 2005b). Responses to Grenville's (re)writing of history, and the manipulations of her own comments *about* that rewriting, then equally demonstrate the way that narratives and histories may be positioned, some elements highlighted, others diminished, after the fact. Grenville's response to the claim that she seeks to 'write history' is to vehemently argue that she does not. As I have implied here, a more interesting question in the context of Australia might be to ask whether historians are not also writing fiction.

with the novels of Grenville and Tiffany, *The White Woman* is a novel about the ability of stories to shape how we understand our places and ourselves; it is also an example of one such story. Perhaps, as Schaffer explores in her book on the white woman, Eliza Fraser's narrative makes a poignant vehicle for such explorations precisely because it has been retold, and therefore adapted, distorted and mythologised, many times, including by Fraser herself. Within her lifetime, Schaffer tells us that Fraser became a 'media event' (Schaffer 1995, p. 43), arguably rendering her no more tangible in "real life" than is her iteration in Davison's novel.

It was not until after I had largely completed *Landfall* that I read *The White Woman*. I was conscious that the trope of the lost figure, often a child, pervades much settler Australian writing about the bush (Pierce 1999). I was conscious of participating in, iterating and speaking to this tradition when I "disappeared" the character of Katya (see Lindsay 1970; Perkins & Romeril 2001; Bond & Marshall 1971; Torney 2005). Although I had not been familiar with Davison's treatment of this theme, it did not surprise me to encounter it in his novel; it is one of the dominant cultural narratives in settler culture, after all. However, I was surprised to discover that *The White Woman*, like *Landfall*, makes use of memory loss as a vehicle, literal and metaphorical, for exploring the connections between the past and the present, and the impact of memory and story on understandings of both – particularly as Davison has the memory loss passed through his narrator's patriarchal line, as it is in the McKenzie family.

Should I tell you about my family? It's not the story I wanted to hear...but it's the one I have – my father retreating prematurely into his past, back to his childhood: senility, imbecility, dementia...I wait for the telltale signs, the gradual slip of memory, the loosening of reason's grip...You see what the past does; how it alters things? (Davison 1994c, pp. 106-107).

This is not to say that I believed my literary representation of these complex issues to be unique, or that I was disappointed to find another writer had chosen memory loss as a poignant way of highlighting the malleability of historical "realities". Rather, after reading

*The White Woman*, and finding so many of “my own” themes represented within it, I felt both novels constituted apt examples of the ways in which cultures produce *particular kinds* of literatures, or narratives. Even when unconscious of incorporating certain tropes and concepts into my work, they appeared nonetheless, funneled in through the ideas and narratives I have absorbed in the course of living in this land as a settler Australian, then emerging on the page.

### **Every Man’s Rules for Scientific Living**

Some of the themes and tropes that Tiffany deploys in *Every Man’s Rules for Scientific Living* appear also in *Landfall*. For example, I purposefully set out to write about settler attempts to control and change the face of the land, because, as already noted, this impulse constitutes a dominating facet of settler culture. It also forms a central aspect of Tiffany’s novel, arguably for the same reason. Likewise, Tiffany’s depiction of the Mallee as harsh and hostile, her rendering of the settler’s ineptitude, and their failure to modify their cultural understandings and management strategies for Australian conditions also draws upon known historical settler behaviours. These are echoed in *Landfall* to some extent as well. More surprising to me, however, is that Tiffany features miscarriage in her text, a plot element that I return to below. I see this narrative thread in *Landfall* as the work of unconscious decision-making on my part, drawn from and shaped by my own personal and cultural situated-ness, rather than by any deliberate attempts to “write about” any particular issue. Tiffany uses miscarriage as a way of revealing protagonists Jean and Robert’s lack of control in a world they seek to dominate, however selflessly, through scientific knowledge. In *Landfall*, Vik does not actually miscarry; her episode is only a scare. This medical event occurs in response to several shocks: first to the exposure or “surfacing” of Indigenous remains at her workplace, and second to the information that her father has been hospitalised. I have used the event of miscarriage to demonstrate how the past may “come into” and affect the present; in fact, to demonstrate that the past is (ever) present. At the same time, the event indicates that, as Robert and Jean also discovered, the world cannot be controlled, even though Vik has staked her life as a surveyor and cartographer on believing



that it can. In both novels, then, miscarriage works to shake the protagonist's faith in reason, science, certainty and control.

*Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* is the story of Jean, who, like Vik and Laura in *Landfall*, grows up without a mother. Jean loses her father in childhood when he dies fighting in the First World War (Tiffany 2005, p. 24). In this narrative thread, Tiffany references dominant cultural myths of fighting honourably for 'The Motherland' that have been a fundamental facet of nation building in Australia. Jean parrots her teacher's depiction of events: 'We were being good at war – especially on the Gallipoli Peninsula' (p. 24), a myth that remains central to settler national identity today. Jean is an orphan when she joins the Better Farming Train as a young woman. The train journeys throughout the Victorian countryside, delivering Eurocentric advice to farmers about growing 'better' crops and caring for their animals. Jean remarks that at each stop, in 'those few days...we make a place like somewhere else. Somewhere new' (p. 1). This desire for continuous "improvement" of Australian lands, particularly if those lands can be rendered more European, and thus more "like home" and more "homelike", constitutes a core desire of the colonial project in Australia.

Largely displaced and without family, Jean marries Robert, an English scientist who believes that science can improve the prospects of growing crops in the arid landscape of the Mallee. The marriage goes ahead despite doubts voiced by Jean's friends (p. 68). Jean's willingness to marry hastily a somewhat ill-suited man can be read as an attempt by her to find and secure a place, a true home, away from the continuous journeying of the train; away from the unsettling experiences of orphanhood. In defense of her plans, Jean relies on the markers of place and homemaking. She asserts, 'We will be together – and have some land around us. I was thinking I could plant some fruit trees. Start a bit of an orchard?' (pp. 67-68). Converging within Jean's marriage to Robert, in their individual desires and plans, are intertwined facets of settler culture: in Jean, the desire to find and create home, and in English Robert, the colonial desire to study, know, categorise and improve Australian lands.

Their project, encouraged by depression-era instructions to ‘GROW MORE WHEAT’ (p. 136), soon takes on the language of warfare. Robert positions his work as constituting a battle against the hostile land, an attitude that is common in settler accounts of their interactions with the Australian environment. ‘I have been called to arms, and I come to extend that call to you. Our country...is in dire need of your skills. The world stands on the brink of a serious depression’ (p. 138). Robert does not – likely cannot – “win” the battle, which is premised on fundamentally problematic assumptions about the characteristics of Australian lands and their capabilities. Not only does he “lose” the fight as a result of drought, but he incurs the wrath of the farmers he tried so hard to help. Jean observes Robert remark to a farmer, ‘Have I misled you at some time?...but he slurs his words and the “misled” comes out as “missiled”’ (p. 233), perpetuating the warfare theme. Poignantly, when the farmer attempts to beat Robert, he speaks to the very issue that sits at the heart of this exegesis: the lack of place-based knowledge held by settler Australians, the ill-suitedness of their methods. ‘You’re cock-eyed, man. You go around doling out advice – do this, do that – and it’s just stuff you’ve read in books...Let me tell you...anyone can read a book...Where’s your bloody experience?’ (p. 235). Robert believes ‘that’s all we need – history, knowledge, and a piece of paper’ (p. 156). This speaks to his understanding that in managing land, the power and importance of studying history and of being informed are paramount. Yet he is speaking of *Eurocentric* knowledges that, no matter how deep and detailed, are little use in the Mallee, particularly during conditions of drought.

It is not only Robert’s lack of *practical* experience that undermines his dreams and faith in science; it is the “unexpected” drought conditions encountered by the couple. These conditions confound Robert’s conviction that with the right amount of work and planning, such events can be negated far more easily than settler approaches can be modified for Australian circumstances. ‘We don’t need to insure with money. We need water. If every

farmer had a big enough tank to see them through several years – enough even for irrigating – we’d be shored up for as long as it takes’ (p. 155).<sup>57</sup>

After her miscarriage, Jean poignantly reflects, some ‘of the baby is still in the paddock where I bled. I look for a stain – a sign – but it must have all soaked away. In a few months the cultivator will come through. A few more months and the ground will be hidden again under the wheat’ (p. 212). This is a highly significant passage, distilling Jean and Robert’s cultural experiences with and relationships to the land. When Jean reflects that the cultivator will come through, that the site of her miscarriage will soon be covered over, this speaks to a Eurocentric notion of inexorable progress, as well as lack of deep attachment to the land. Although the site of the miscarriage is significant to Jean, she nonetheless holds no illusions that it will continue to be maintained as part of their agricultural allotment; the farming will go on, there will be no ceremonial marker of her child’s death. From a cultural perspective, and to Robert at the least, the land is there to be used and cultivated. It can no more be sacred after the death of Jean’s child, after her blood has soaked into the dirt, than it was prior to that event. In this way, the miscarriage can be read as a sacrifice; Jean gives her child, however unwillingly, to the farming project. Her baby soaks into the drought-parched earth, an overt depiction of the physical relationships that exist between humankind and the land; in contrast to the cultural separation of nature and culture, and as the invocation of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” reminds us, all bodies are of the earth, and must return there, become fertiliser. Jean imagines the process of cultivation going on, right over the top of the “grave”. In fact, the cycle of agriculture is broken by what Robert perceives as an unnaturally disrupted rain cycle. The sacrifice of Jean’s baby is not enough, in the end, to set either back on course.

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<sup>57</sup> In contemporary times, we might see the suggested construction of the North-South Pipeline, and the desalination plant in Melbourne, as indicators that such culturally informed notions about the ability of humans to control their surroundings, as well as the focus on this ability over any attempts to change behaviours, have not been overturned.

The miscarriage marks the most significant delineation between Robert and Jean in regard to place. It is the moment at which their relationship is cleaved. During the miscarriage, Robert 'is trying not to look at the blood' (p. 212). From that instance, he grows further from the land, until he finally leaves it altogether. Though the miscarriage is for both in the couple a symbol of the miscarried hopes and dreams of what they longed to achieve, Jean actively searches for a sign of her child in the earth. She does not find a physical marker. Yet in contrast to Robert's desertion of the land, the actuality of the miscarriage works to bind Jean to the place. The inherent, unsettling duality embodied in the miscarriage – the existence of 'some of the baby' in the earth, despite its physical absence – is illuminated by some of the issues Peter Read raises in his discussion of the meaning of lost places, particularly in regards to the pain experienced by those who return to them, for Jean's baby is both "lost" and quite literally grounded (1996). Read quotes a returnee, who observes that at

least you've got the memory intact...there's a real physical tie to the land and a feeling that is part of your spirit that's divorced from all arguments of logic and reason and behaviour... A little bit of you dies, not for the material things, but for the spirit of the place (1996, p. 20).

Though a little bit of Jean dies, though some of the baby remains in the paddock, like Read's returnee, she is connected to the place by memory and spirit. The baby becomes her physical tie to the land.

At the same time, Jean's inability to see any sign of her baby also renders the child another kind of secret river, hidden but actual; an invisible yet tangible reminder of the tragic events that have happened in that place, as well as an unspeakable marker for what might have been. Like Davison's white woman, as well as the absent Indigenous peoples at the end of *The Secret River*, Jean's baby is there, but not there. She is everywhere, and she is lost. After the miscarriage Jean dreams of the baby. The child comes to her, a haunting, night after night.

Dream baby...is old...She has the face of someone waiting for the end of life, not the beginning. But as I struggle to make out her features I think, each night, she is getting a little younger...if she were back inside...my body would grow her young again...Except this would be in ideal conditions, not in the conditions of the Mallee (Tiffany 2005, p. 213).

When Judith Wright wrote about Australia being haunted, she was referring to the presence of Indigenous peoples past and present, to the suppressed cultural knowledge that Australian lands belonged to “someone else”. She wrote: “[the] love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion – have become part of me. It is a haunted country” (cited in Read 1996, p. 10). Here Wright absorbs the guilt of what happened on Australian lands; it becomes a part of her body. Inverting Wright’s observation, Jean’s baby, a literal part of her body, is released into the earth, where it too becomes a haunting presence. Just as Jean’s attempts to tame the land are being thwarted by “Mother Nature” through drought, so too does her body betray her, disavowing her own abilities to safely mother.

The miscarriage appears to occur in part as a response to the climatic conditions Jean experiences: severe drought, the fires cultivated by Robert. Jean’s unconscious appears to sense also that the miscarriage occurs because Jean is not in “her place”. In her dreams, it is implied that her displacement is literal (from the Mallee), but also emotional as well; her relationship with Robert is floundering. Dreaming, Jean forges a link between the baby’s death, the land and her own lack of settledness. She senses that while her body constitutes a nourishing terrain for her child, the land does not; in the former, her child is “native”, in the latter, like Jean herself, the child is foreign, and does not (perhaps cannot) survive. The ‘ideal conditions’ Jean refers to can be read as those suitable for European cultural prerogatives and farming practices. In contrast, the Mallee is depicted as unsuitable and even hostile. It disavows the growing of European crops, and as Jean discovers, it disavows the growing of European-descended children as well. “Her” patch of earth is rendered sacred to her through bloodshed, not birth. This calls into being, or brings to the surface, all the other blood spilt on Australian soil, particularly the blood of Indigenous peoples shed in

frontier conflict and through massacre, as depicted in both *The Secret River* and *The White Woman*. Jean loses her baby. But in going back to look for signs of blood, she unconsciously points to other absences: those belonging to other missing and murdered peoples. These, like Jean's child, remain buried in collective memory and in the land, whether visible and acknowledged or not.

It is World War Two that ultimately provides the drought-affected an honourable means of escape from their impoverished circumstances. Jean reflects of a friend,

How else can he leave his girl?...But how else to put five bob a day in her purse?...If he comes back injured (he thinks this is unlikely) she'll be well looked after and if he is killed (most likely) she'll get the same as the widow's pension – a bit of money and some dignity with it (Tiffany 2005, p. 245).

It is as though the men of the Mallee hope to be killed, if only to provide for their families.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the events of Australia's history are recast through the settler's struggles with the land, their wartime service providing a neat escape from agricultural failure. Although Robert's 'pigeon chest' technically precludes him from fighting, he is passed for service by a less than scrupulous woman who 'is flattered to be part of something so male, so larrikin, so daring' (p. 251) as by his deception. Robert has then failed doubly, both in his attempts to institute "better farming" practice, and in his efforts to escape his failure legitimately through service in war. Jean is not told of Robert's intention to join up; she does not get to say goodbye. In one sense he abandons her, but in another he sets her free. Jean is free to settle, without Robert's imposed and imposing rules. Strong-willed, Jean decides to stay on the Mallee farm, and in doing so, she learns the ultimate lesson about living on that land. 'I make only two decisions. The first is to ask Ollie Bowd to stay...Perhaps together we can grow a different kind of crop – something that belongs

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<sup>58</sup> During the recent decade of drought affecting Victoria, there has been no war requiring conscription of civilian soldiers, providing no such "opportunity" for farmers to escape their failing properties and potentially provide for their families via defense force pensions. Farmer suicides were heavily reported in the media up until the drought broke in early 2010.

here' (p. 255). When the novel ends, there is a new sense of hopefulness and settledness regarding Jean's future prospects; the anxiety and unsettledness that pervaded the novel until Robert's departure evaporates. She has finally found her place, her home.

The McKenzie family in *Landfall* endure many of the trials Jean and Robert face on the land: ill-suited and imported land management strategies, drought and fire. Yet Vik and Laura's story takes place a good fifty years after Jean's ends. By then, climate change has begun to manifest. Despite their best intentions, despite a deep desire for belonging and an ongoing connection with the farm, their narrative cannot end so optimistically, or well. Vik and Laura, like Jean, do have the option of searching out another kind of crop, or a way of living and being that belongs. In fact, Laura tries to repair some of the damage inflicted on the land. But climate change shifts the boundaries of what is possible; what can be expected and controlled. For Vik and Laura there is no guarantee that, no matter what they do, their world will remain stable for long enough that they might institute such changes, let alone heal. The ending of *Landfall* is far more ambiguous than Tiffany's, which allows both Jean and the reader to imagine that all might yet be well. *Landfall* ends with the Vik and Laura stranded in the tower as bushfires threaten Melbourne. I have refrained from stating one way or another whether they survive; it is up to each reader to decide. Personally, I see only danger and hardship for them. Their lives were built on the environmental and cultural foundations of those like Thornhill, Davison's narrator and Robert and Jean, who came before; the intersection with climate change of the inherited cultural unsettlement that is a part of Vik and Laura's experience leaves me fearing for their safety, and the safety of their world.

In this chapter, I have explored the notion of cultural unsettlement as this is represented in some contemporary Australian literary texts. I have argued that because Australia was inhabited when the settlers arrived, and Indigenous ownership has never been meaningfully or adequately recognised, settler Australian culture exists in an uncanny state, one that fosters an anxious sense of alienation from the home environment. At the same time, settler cultures are to some extent *unable* to acknowledge Indigenous ownership without

undermining the legitimacy of their tenure, which in itself produces its own cultural anxieties about rights to belonging to, and on, the land. As I have outlined, Australia's unsettled and conflicting histories have given rise to a set of cultural tropes, myths and narratives that serve to highlight certain elements of Australian history – those that largely support and justify settler usurpation as owners – and disremember others. Not only do these narratives not always speak to historical “realities”, they do not always adequately or cohesively represent the settler Australian experience, particularly as it is lived in highly urbanised, multi-cultural contemporary Australia, producing a ghost tradition. In this way, the project of nation building and the stories “we tell about ourselves” have served to help bury frontier histories. They also serve to reveal and reflect what can't be fully hidden, sustaining and even nourishing cultural unsettlement in Australia. Yet some contemporary writers are attempting to rewrite, or “write back”, to dominant narratives about what has occurred in Australia between settler and Indigenous peoples and the land. The three contemporary novels I have explored here, as well as my own, do just that.



## *How Will We Live Here? A Conclusion in Three Seasons*

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### **One**

When he comes to my house for dinner, my father tells me that he has begun to think about aging, and what it means for his future on the land. The work of maintaining the ten acres at Casuarina is exponential, never ending. It is taking its toll. The maintenance in 2011 and 2012 have been particularly extreme; “sub-tropical” conditions, as he calls them, have made the garden go “berserk”.

“Not sure how long I can keep it up for,” he says. “One day I just won’t be able to do it anymore.” He clasps his hands together across his knees, mirroring the set of his mouth. “But I’m the custodian of that land. I’ve got it, and I’ve got to take care of it.” I am surprised by my father’s use of language; this is the first time that I have heard him use the word ‘custodian’ to define his relationship to the land and his role there. I’m troubled by the usage on the one hand, in its inference of Indigenous relationships with country. Yet on the other, knowing what I know of my father’s connection to the land and his sense of responsibility to it, this also fits, though problematically. I ask my father whether it would break his heart to leave the property, if it ever got to the point that he could no longer manage.

“A bit,” he admits. “I bought that land when I was eighteen; not the most practical block in the subdivision, but the most spectacular. It was the block an eighteen-year-old *would* choose, right on top of the hill.” I nod. The view is breathtaking, sweeping down into a valley, and across rolling hills. I imagine my father as the hopeful, romantic young man he must have been all those years ago, choosing land for beauty over practicality. I look at his hands, leathery and cracked by years of hard outdoor work.

He says, “I’ll either be carried out of there in a box or I’ll just let it all go and move on.” I find the latter hard to imagine, and say so; he doesn’t even like to go away for the

weekend. He can't understand how people "just live anywhere". He's seen two marriages bloom and struggle in the shadow of his plans for the place.

"It's shaped the whole course of your life," I say.

He smiles. "I've had a massive impact on that land as well. I've done earthworks, had three dams dug; that changes the shape of the place. When I first arrived, it was just a bare hill. Most of the plants I put in. It's a life's work, is what it is. The garden's just starting to mature now, and my name first appeared on the title more than forty years ago! But that's nothing in the lifespan of the gums I've planted. They might live till they're five hundred or a thousand years old, unless someone cuts them down. Or a fire comes through. You have to think about the garden in that way: long-term. One day I'll be gone, but it'll all go on without me."

He looks at me steadily across the old table in my suburban rental property.

When my father is gone I lie in bed, sleepless with all that he has said. And when I wake up, I will think on it some more, and go on thinking about it for weeks, months, years. It is no new concern. The future of *Casuarina* has been an undercurrent in my life since I was old enough to understand its history, and appreciate the deep meaning it holds in, and for, my father's life and my own. As a teenager and young adult, though I always loved that piece of land and felt connected to it, I found the weight of my potential responsibility suffocating, in that my future then appeared ready-charted, not by my own agency and decisions, but by circumstances determined by someone else, someplace else. When I imagined my life as it might unfold if I took up the work my father had begun, I was forced to acknowledge that I would most likely never grow old in Paris, or New York, or even Melbourne, but would have a particular kind of life, one that was not surprising and exotic, but largely familiar. In accepting the responsibility of custodianship, I would retain and preserve my history, but forfeit any number of potential futures. However, despite entertaining these thoughts from time to time, never before has the reality of succession,

and inheritance, been so tangible as now. My father seems genuinely weary; he needs help. He has only one child.

Night falls over the city. I think about the novel I have written, so full of the anxieties I am only just beginning to realise I have endowed it with. My father is not Bruce; I am neither Vik, nor Laura; *Casuarina* is not their farm. Yet I have had these women wrestle with the decisions I must now make myself. To move back, to take up my place on that land? Or to search for my own self-made place and risk never finding it? What choice is there, when I cannot stand to imagine *Casuarina* sold, another family living there after my father is gone. But neither can I stand to imagine living there without him, when every leaf was grown and every fence-post dug in by his hand. How much do I allow the past to shape my future? Is there ever a meaningful choice in the matter, or does the choice exist in recognition of the relationship between the two? As I think through my decision, I find a new dimension of meaning in what is occurring between my father, his land, and myself. I see that he is offering me a sense of place; that, far from being suffocating, I could embrace my relationship to that land, allow it to stabilise, to nurture and to ground. At the same time, I am troubled by the deeper cultural implications of his offering. We have both long loved *Casuarina*, yet as this work points out, it isn't really ours to love. Is it?

As I mentioned earlier, my interest in climate change was cemented by my return to Australia generally and to *Casuarina* specifically. I have argued that such settling could potentially occur on a cultural scale, should settler cultures address their founding histories and meaningfully acknowledge Indigenous ownership of the land. I don't hold all the answers regarding how such cultural settlement can take place, nor what such acknowledgement would look like; complex issues such as these would require a whole thesis of their own to tease out. My instinct, however, is that meaningful recognition of Indigenous ownership, and the cultural "remembering" of settler founding histories that necessarily underpin it, could take place across at least two landscapes: first, legal and governmental recognition; and second, cultural recognition, by which I mean the use of art, literature and other cultural artifacts to assert the truth of Indigenous ownership and to give

voice to those aspects of Australian history that may otherwise be silenced. In saying this, I am not advocating for the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges or experiences within settler narratives, but rather suggesting that settler artists and writers could consciously make reference to and represent the truth of Australian founding histories effectively, even from within their own paradigms. To some extent, as my discussion of Australian literature has shown, these issues are already interwoven with literary narratives of the settler experience. However, an even more conscious and purposeful assertion of settler founding realities in cultural artifacts could, over time, help shape the dominant culture toward an understanding that settler tenure is both fictitious and damaging on cultural and ecological fronts. It could enable settler Australians to better and more clearly see, hear and understand “their” lands.

How such acknowledgement might resonate on an individual scale – with respect to my family’s tenure on *Casuarina*, for example, in the meanings we hold in owning and caretaking that land – both complicates and makes the theoretical arguments herein intensely personal. I cannot say what the practical, psychological and spiritual ramifications of the argued-for cultural settlement might be in respect of my own relationship to (that) land. Laura brushes up against these issues in *Landfall* when she offers access of the farm to Louis, and again when she sells the property to developers. How my own potential negotiation of these complex interpersonal, cultural and ecological terrains will play out remains to be seen. What is certain is that my engagement with my home environments has led me to become more invested in and interested in preserving them. It would make for such a neat and complete ending to this work if I could write that I am moving back to *Casuarina* to live a wholly sustainable life; that my own journey as a settler Australian, in the face of climate change, has led me “home”. My life, working in tandem with and unfolding alongside this research would create a poetic parallel, satisfying in literary and sociocultural terms. Yet I can write none of those things. For I do not know what will happen next. As I will go on to suggest there is no nice neat ending. The only certainty is uncertainty.

## Two

L.P Hartley famously began his novel *The Go-Between* with the line, ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’ (1958). The essence of this statement resonates in settler Australia, where for many the past may be a foreign country, not only metaphorically but also literally. Yet Hartley’s assertion does not hold entirely for Australia insofar as the past of settler Australia – its European roots and prerogatives – has remained particularly *present*, driving and shaping life on the continent even in contemporary times. In contrast, it has been Australia itself that has remained largely foreign to settler cultures, even now. I would like to end this exegesis by asking whether, inverting Hartley’s phrase, it might be hoped that, for settler Australia, the future can become a homeland, where things are done wholly differently to the way they ever have been done and are still done today. Believing in and maintaining such a hope may be fraught and complex, but I would argue it is also necessary.

On one level, this combined novel and exegesis have attempted to explore the connections between the past and the present, tracing these lines of connection across lands and oceans, and across generations, asking what these connections might mean for the future under the impacts of climate change. I have explored these connections on a cultural front, tracing them from Europe to Australia and from first contact to contemporary times. I have traced them to a lesser extent on a personal front, as they span the generations of my family histories and stories of place. I have traced them also across the generations of the McKenzie family in *Landfall*. And I have traced them within the bounds of conducting and constructing this research, in the sense that my initial optimistic hopes for what I would uncover here now exist in the past. As I am poised to end this exploration, I face a future whose past projections I am still attached to, though I cannot say with any certainty that I still hold those projections to be true. The difficulty I have in closing this work is that in the course of conducting my research, too much has changed climatically, too little culturally. Coming to terms with these changes (or lack thereof) and what they mean for our now less-than-certain future will necessitate a process of cultural adaptation on one level. On

another, it will require a process of personal adaptation in the context and trajectory of this work, and within myself as writer and researcher as well.

I would like to emphasise that despite the doubts expressed at the end of Chapter Two, meaningful recognition by settler Australian cultures of Indigenous ownership over Australia must occur. I saw climate change as offering something valuable to the project of reconciliation between Indigenous and settler Australians, and to the development of national strategies for land care on the continent, and am heartened by the fact that others appear to be thinking along the same lines (see for example Altman & Kerins 2012). No matter what our long-term prospects are as climate change takes hold nor to what extent issues of recognition and reconciliation are entwined with climate change discourses, settler Australian cultures must find a way to address their founding histories and acknowledge the rightful owners of this land. Such landmark occurrences would not only fundamentally change the state of the nation forever, but would constitute acts of tremendous and necessary hope. Such acts would demonstrate the enduring capacity for humankind to exert control over their world and to effectively shape it, even as that world spirals increasingly out of (our) control in climatic terms. Against national histories defined by bloodshed, dispossession and alienation, and from within an era defined by greed, excess and ecological corruption, such acts would also serve to positively define and preserve the great capacity for humankind to act meaningfully, positively and thoughtfully, against the odds.

Although I wish to reiterate, somewhat painfully, that the recommendations on which this work was initially premised have shifted; that the triumphant, neat and optimistic way I had intended to close no longer remains legitimately available to me, I do not wish to situate myself, or this work, in a position of resignation. In spite of the real impacts of climate change we can now expect to experience, my expectations for the future have not diametrically shifted to become entirely negative. I have found throughout this work that any investigation into the past reveals just how resistant it is to a neat, ordered, or fixed reading. Instead, it requires explicit acknowledgement of its contingency and complexity. The same can be said of the future. My own subjectivity further complicates any neat

prediction, or even position, because despite everything I have uncovered, I cannot easily submit to, or accept, the grim circumstances foretold by my novel. By the time this work is finished, I will be just thirty years old; too young to wholeheartedly believe that – although we now face certain change – we are inevitably “doomed”. Though I feel immense grief about the failure in Australia to meaningfully engage with the issue of climate change, and thus grief over what this means for the future we will now encounter, I remain – perhaps irrationally – hopeful.<sup>59</sup> My belief that our future might in fact improve upon present and past circumstances holds in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. I have tried and failed to reconcile these conflicting feelings and beliefs. In spite of an increasingly insurmountable body of evidence which points to global environmental catastrophe, I concede that these beliefs may legitimately co-exist. Just as settler Australians can feel both at home and not at home on the continent; at home and not at home elsewhere in relation to other histories and homelands, so too can relationships to the changing climate, and the future, be multiple, overlapping and conflicted, particularly as we struggle to become “acclimatised” to the potential changes we now face.

Some of the grief I feel over our cultures’ lack of initiative and desire to protect our environment stems from fear and uncertainty for my own life and for all of those, like the child I will give birth to in 2012, who will live through what comes next. I feel a deep sense of loss and regret regarding the impacts, present and potential, of human actions on so many ecosystems, plants, animals and other living things. That the landscapes and natural beauty I have so enjoyed, loved and been inspired by may not endure for future generations is a loss too great to articulate. I fail to see how future generations will come to terms with the fact that we destroyed so much in the name of personal wealth, convenient

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<sup>59</sup> Clive Hamilton writes articulately about the psychological difficulties associated with coming to terms with climate change, which are as much a part of our adaptation processes as any legislative or structural changes we attempt. ‘In the face of the evidence of climate disruption, clinging to hopefulness becomes a means of forestalling the truth. Sooner or later we must respond and that means allowing ourselves to enter a phase of desolation and hopelessness, in short, to grieve...The process of bringing our inner experience into conformity with the new external reality will for many be a long and painful emotional journey’ (2010, p. 211).

transportation and consumerism. I fail to see how they will understand that, when we had a chance to lessen the impact of climate change, we were unable to make any meaningful, significant changes to prevent wide-scale disaster. Some argue that humankind will survive because we are well used to processes of change and adaptation. While I am sure that this is true to an extent, it does little to comfort me. Adaptation will not be possible or available for everyone; those whose homelands are destroyed by rising sea levels, for example, as well as those who do not have the economic capacity to meet the challenges imposed by climate change, will struggle to adapt and may fail to do so. This is to say nothing of the many plant and animal species that will be wiped out; that will survive only in the dusty footnotes of academic texts, and as photographs.

### Three

During the decade of drought we endured in Victoria, like many Melbournians I had, to some extent, reconciled with our lack of water resources and with the prospect of a very dry future. And then, gloriously – or so I thought at the time – it finally rained. Australian novelist Helen Garner recorded the drought breaking in her diary. She wrote

In the morning it rains. Ambrose has passed his whole two years of life in drought. He looks up at the ceiling and says in a surprised voice, “Noise!” (2010).

I had believed that the question of what to call *permanent* drought exemplified the problem of our times, because while we know that climate change is happening, our language and behaviours, our understandings of the world in which we live, remain embedded in some other time and place now past. The floods we then endured as a result of long-awaited rains are further indication that this is so; we cannot take for granted that we understand the trajectory of drought times, or their eventual break. To some extent, settler Australians have always grappled with uncertainty when it comes to understanding and predicting weather in Australia (Rigby, 2009a; 2009b; Sherratt et al, 2005), but alarmingly, our lack of knowledge and preparedness will only become more obvious and dangerous under the intensified strain of further climatic changes. Helen Garner’s diary entry shows us



how it might be to look back on these times from the future; it shows just how quickly natural elements, like rain, might be lost to us. Not only literally, as a result of climatic shifts, but also culturally, as collective knowledges of past conditions and climates fade and disappear over time.

Our response to climate change does not require a finite and definitive adjustment to an altered world, as I had suspected during the drought. Instead, I see now that climate change in Australia means necessary adaption to an ongoing, complex, continuous and permanent state of uncertainty. We do not know what our weather may bring and we can't be certain that we will arrive at a time in which we *will* know. Instead, we find ourselves in much the same predicament as early settler Australians, who struggled to gain purchase on a place that defied their understanding of how nature should behave. In the context of the droughts and floods we have endured, we can see that the old, familiar dichotomy of rain as healthy and good and lack of rain as bad is no longer necessarily applicable. "How will we live here?" the first settlers asked one another. We ask that question again now, as we imagine and try to prepare for a climatically changed future.

As I see it, we are still settlers in a foreign land. Our children, second-generation immigrants in the unknown lands of climatic uncertainty, will maintain connection to *their* land of origin – that long lost time of livable climate – as the descendants of migrants in Australia have maintained with England and other homelands. And the language required for connecting with their roots may be inaccessible to them; as Garner's anecdote suggests, it may even become altogether lost.

While the climate on the continent has never been dependable or easily predicted by settler Australians, climate change will push idiosyncratic climatic patterns into dangerous and unlivable territory. For our descendants therefore, there will be no passport with which to travel back. Nor will there exist anywhere safer or more tenable to flee to; no land of opportunity exists in which to build a better life, for climate change will manifest on a global scale the extreme weather Australia already endures.

Yet our futures are not yet set in stone. Though I sense that many of the conveniences and certainties we now enjoy may be diminished, I cannot say for sure that they will be. Humankind may yet surprise me; may yet rally and make meaningful change, enacting positive and profound cultural and ecological outcomes. I hope so with every fibre of my being. This planet, its plants and animals and ecosystems and all our human achievements are too precious to leave to chance. This ancient country now called Australia, which has existed in the face of human changes for millennia, should be protected so that many more millennia of interaction between humankind and the land may take place.

Climate change may be conceived as offering settler Australians an opportunity to finally settle. In the current climate, all Australians find themselves with something to lose. While Mabo and Wik ultimately failed to deliver the recognition of and reconciliation with Indigenous Australians many had hoped for, all Australians not only have something to lose but something to gain by opening themselves to the histories of the continent on which they live as a necessary precursor to addressing—or at least adapting to—imminent climate change. That being said, as Greenblatt rightly argues,

[t]here is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated ... communities ... [w]e need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity (2).

What I am proposing then is an, ‘ethics of location’ (Garbutt, 2008; 2011) or ‘ethics of place’ (Plumwood, 2005; 2008) arising within an active and collaborative ‘ethics for decolonisation’ based on principles of situatedness and openness as advocated by Rose (2004). To borrow from Arendt alongside Rose and Garbutt, what I propose as a potential means of finally and substantively settling settler Australia ‘is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing’ (1998, p. 5) in place.

I end this work not with any decisive outcomes, grand orders or fervent predictions, but simply. I finish by allowing the weight of our histories in this place to settle like snowfall,

so that we might each look over our shoulder to trace an intricate trail of footsteps leading back to the horizon. I end with some small hope that the untrodden ground we have yet to traverse, our footfalls into the future, might allow for safe passage, though I cannot guarantee that they will. I leave you in the place I left Vik and Laura, standing in the tower, watching the flames advance.

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# Appendices

## Appendix One

Of the move to Wallan in 1956, my grandfather Frank Robinson wrote in his diary:

### **Mon 24 Dec:**

Vincent came in morning and we shifted to Wallan. [My eldest son] Peter and self went back to Greensborough in afternoon. I rang Jim Goodwin and sacked him.

Home to Wallan. Down to Ormond with Goodwin tools, to Greensborough and then Wallan at 12.45AM.

### **Tuesday 25 December:**

Over to Greensborough after boys had wakened us at 8AM. [My second son] James and [third son] Paul came. We cleaned up and took rubbish to tip. Home to Wallan. Ted Poulter came over and we got milk from him. Murphys, Rolls and Bakers came up for tea.

### **Wednesday 26 December:**

Over to Greensborough early 5.00AM. Home. [My wife] Beb then went over with James and cleaned up house 9.00AM to 6.45PM. David came up and did wiring 4 hours.

In contrast, my grandmother Beryl Robinson later, and far more emotively, reflected:

Nobody could understand why we chose Xmas eve. We didn't choose it really. It just happened that the carrier was free then, and Bill could start his "holiday" and so cope with the moving. And besides, I had a feeling that if we woke up on the first morning in our farmhouse and found it was Xmas that it would seem like home anyway. It did help, too, and father Xmas found his way to us without any

trouble, though the children had worried a little. We slept in the still unfinished room with one wall missing and no glass in the window and a floor that went half way and then just studs and supports with grass growing up between.

The children all rushed in, astonishingly awake, to show us all their presents in the first pale light and we sleepily raised up on one elbow and made appreciation noises and gazed out where the walls should have been at the unfamiliar sight of hillside and gum trees and one straggly cypress.

Xmas day passed very happily with Bill's sisters and families, and we fitted up a cypress Xmas tree, and all exchanged gifts. The next few weeks passed quickly and happily too, with so much activity with builders and bricklayers transforming our small box room into a pleasant long narrow light room. The boys were packed into the other two tiny bedrooms and somehow we fitted in the furniture, a dining room chair in a breezy corner, the sewing machine in the bathroom, the linen in the cedar chiffonier behind the boys bedroom door and in our room, the one built-in wardrobe held, besides all our clothes, a filing cabinet, 2 guns, boxes of papers, projector, box of paper patterns, shoes, pictures and, in desperation, a basket of medicine.

[some material missing]

Then there were days when I watched the road. I kept looking, but no car ever seemed to turn in at our gate. On one occasion when the SEC man turned up to read the meter, and he was the same man who came at Greensborough (it was then always regarded as just another bill – wonder how big this one will be) I greeted him like an old friend and kept him talking about anything at all for ten minutes, poor man.



## Appendix Two



*Image 1: My uncles, James (at left) and Peter Robinson, with my grandfather Frank Robinson at Benalta Park in Wallan.*



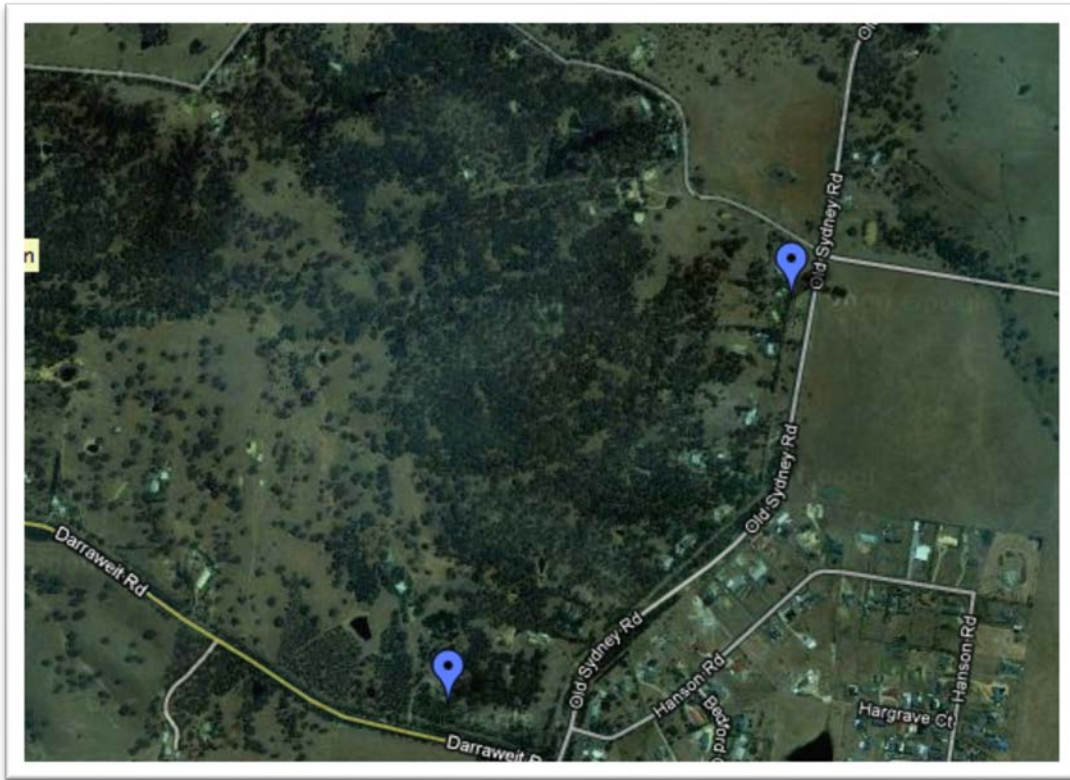
*Image 2: The Robinson family at Benalta Park in 1958/9*

*Back row from left: A cousin, Peter, my grandmother Beryl, an aunt, my grandfather Frank, James, a cousin.*

*Front row from left: John, Andrew, my father Paul (at far right)*



*Image 3: Myself, with friends at Casuarina, 2010 (photo courtesy of Steph Tout)*



*Image 4: Relationship of the original farmhouse at Benalta Park (bottom pin) to Casuarina (top right pin) at Wallan.*