Lawson, Stow, Prescott
and the Mythos of the Outback Town
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Abstract:

The ‘outback’ sits at the heart of the understanding of Australian identity; that Australia is a hard and harsh land, tamed by hard working white people. But it is a myth. However, as the thesis will examine, the ubiquity and resilience of this outback myth makes it difficult to perceive that the identity of white Australia is founded on a fictional construction. Beginning with the short story works of Henry Lawson (1867-1922), the thesis explores how the myth of the outback came to encapsulate this fictional understanding of Australia. It finds that this harshness was not the case for the Indigenous inhabitants, that Australia was originally a fruitful and fecund land. The thesis finds that the myth became entrenched to allow white Australians to cauterise a negative colonial history. The harsh ‘outback’ grew from fictional stories as a means to hide the true history of Australia’s modern settlement. This outback became embodied in the uniquely nation spanning Australian accent. The thesis examines how the accent, combined with the outback myth, has provided a powerful foundation for creating a unified white Australian identity. The thesis then explores recent fictional works that question these mythical constructs. Randolph Stow’s *Tourmaline (1963)* draws attention to the separating, segregating nature of the outback myth as he presents a fictional town that satirically draws attention to the belief in the myth and the self-protecting nature of it. In *The Town (2017)* Shaun Prescott presents the myth as causing his town to begin disappearing as it succumbs to a useless and unsupportable belief in the falsehood of its own existence. The exegesis will utilise the theoretical groundings of Barthes (1973), Gibson (2002) and Carter (1987) to explore the manner in which, as Donna Lu highlights “The process of Australian colonisation, from the systematic massacres of Indigenous people to the instatement of the White Australia policy, has enabled a national myth prioritising white hegemony” (166). By comparing the fictional texts, the thesis also examines how the outback myth and its impact have changed over time. It attends to the action of forgetting the past that is essential for the myth of the outback to continue its work of separating white and Indigenous Australia today. The thesis then turns to my own fictional work, *The Willton Tales.* This novel incorporates global myths of monsters alongside fantastical characters and events to present the outback town as something other than it has been culturally presented. Where the outback myth has rested on an assumption that the land at the heart of Australia is a simple, hard place populated by simple, hard people, *The Willton Tales* tells of people living vastly complicated, intertwined lives, frequently at odds with the hardness of the outback myth. *The Willton Tales* seeks to continue the work of the later authors, raising questions about, and unsettling, the false yet powerful heart of Australian national identity hidden by the outback myth and the accent that supports it.

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In Gerald Murnane's satirical reversal of the myth of the outback, *The Plains* (1982), he draws an Australia where "[t]he coastal districts would then be seen as a mere borderland where truly Australian customs were debased by contact with the Old World" (34). And "plainsmen generally began to use the term 'Outer Australia' for the sterile margins of the continent" (24). It is a concept that upends generations of myth-building, reversing the 'outback', placing it at the centre of white Australia rather than at the distanced, fearful extremity.

Shaun Prescott's 2017 novel *The Town* also takes readers to a mythical outback, where he explains it as a place with no past, no history and no future. As the unnamed narrator investigates this Australian space, he "asked Jenny how the town was founded, but she said it hadn't been. Thinking of being founded was the height of arrogance. People just ended up living there" (13).

Prescott points to a deliberate ignorance. It is an ignorance born when we turn away from a past that must logically exist and choose instead to live solely in the physical present. Both novels are, in different ways, questioning "white Australia's history of silence and forgetting" (35), as Rachael Weaver puts it. This forgetting is an essential component in the formulation of the myth of the Australian outback. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that "Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history" (151). Both authors, by presenting an alternate vision of Australia, are questioning both the mythmaking and the silence and forgetting that have enabled the myth. They are exploring what Bruce Pascoe defines as "the mental gymnastics we currently perform to rationalise colonialism and dispossession" (156). Claude Lévi-Strauss highlighted myth's disruption of the past, in his contention that "in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity" ("Structural Study" 429). Myth allows the events of history to be emptied of their force. Facts and images become simplified as story, leaving only small elements of history to remain. Upon these remnants of the past a new history, a mythical history, can accrete. Myth is history made simple in order to be re-made as something without the offending elements of the past. In

Barthes' semiotic understanding, the first order of significance, the historical reality, is replaced by a second order of signifying stories and images: mythical significations. I would suggest that the greater the offences of the past, the more powerful the attendant myth becomes, and the simpler the foundation required to support it. In this exegesis I will explore how the myth of the outback remains a powerful assumption in contemporary articulations of Australian identity, sustained to avoid attending to a history of murder, racism and dispossession. The popular representation of this mythical identity is constantly re-enacted and reinforced by a cultural and fictional focus on the simple, iconic representations of the landscape created by writers of the past. This exegesis will propose that while fiction does not suppress dark colonial history, stories can function to impoverish that history, washing the past out with a simple, powerful, fictional representation which becomes the outback legend, growing in time to impoverish history via a false myth (Barthes 118). It is that which W.E.H. Stanner referred to as "Popular Folklore", characterised by "a splendid credulity towards the unlikely and an iron resolve to believe the improbable. It mixes truth, half-truth and untruth into hard little concretions of faith that defy dissolution by better knowledge" ("Dreaming" 30).

By exploring the work and context of three Australian writers, from before Federation to today, I will explore how myth has formed and been maintained to assist this cultural forgetting. I will begin with the myth of 'outback'. I will be drawing on critical and fictional works that have already sought to understand how the myth has been questioned and exposed, and how the myth still shapes the understanding of modern Australia. The exegesis will then seek to build upon this knowledge, presenting a contingent supporting myth of accent and Australian speech. I will show how the outback myth has accreted into a powerful myth of the importance of the Australian way of talking. It is that component of the national conversation that Stephen Muecke notes is "torn between exhortations to be 'natural' in our speech and demands to be correct. Speech is either the mirror of our individuality or the badge of our authority" (Benterrak et al. 64). I will explore the popular place of the Australian accent – its role as a determinant of national identity – and demonstrate its work in the consolidation and maintenance of the outback myth at the heart of Australian identity.

Chapter One will present key critical understandings of one of Australia's foundational authors of identity, Henry Lawson (1867-1922). Lawson is described as "the most monumentalized, the most memorialized, the most popularly celebrated of our writers. He is

revered as one of the greatest and most 'typically Australian' of our literary figures" (Heseltine 5).

Most importantly, Lawson was writing at a time when, as Benedict Anderson notes, fundamental change was taking place in modes of "apprehending the world which, more than anything else, made it possible to 'think' the nation" *(Imagined Communities* 22). Anderson explores the impact of early globalisation, colonialism and print-capitalism in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. These factors will be shown to be prominently at work in Australia and instrumental in the formation of a national identity as the young nation embraced Lawson's images of bush, outback, speech and character. W.E.H. Stanner notes that this time, when nationalism was emerging and Lawson was writing powerfully, was also a time in which "[t]he justification of what was being done to them- [Aborigines] was more violent and moralistic than before or since" ("Dreaming" 34). The destructive actions of white settlers were at a peak at this same stage in the country's development. This confluence of influences was the environment from which the outback myth could emerge. Anderson particularly notes the nature of nationalism as an imagined artefact, formed in the mind in concert with others, thus making it immediately available for the creation of myth. Anderson also claims that a nation can be defined as an imagined political community "and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" *(Imagined Communities* 6). This formulation of the nation attends forcefully to the myth of egalitarianism, the "belief in the equality of all people" (*Macquarie Dictionary* 681), if the nation is "'imagined' as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" *(Imagined Communities* 7). I will show how this imagined community of Australia imagines this comradeship as the outback myth in order to distance the present from the history of moralistic violence, inequality and exploitation that marked its foundation.

Lawson's stories, which "describe a [singular] phase of Australian life" (Medway Day 6), became popular across Australia thanks to publications such as *The Bulletin* and internationally as "a means of giving Australians of all classes some sense of a common cultural base and of social unity" (Heseltine 5). Lawson became a powerful voice of the fledgling nation. I do not propose that his stories were the driving force behind the development of national identity, but rather that they were uniquely situated to be utilised in the emerging formulation of national identity. The mythologies that emerge around this

formulation can, therefore, be explored through Lawson's short stories in order to examine what Paul Carter highlights as "spatial history – history that discovers and explores the lacuna left by imperial history – [that which] begins and ends in language" *(Road* xxiii). Lawson's writing and his image became a tool for forming a stable identity in a nation seeking to grow beyond the reach of colonial power and its own terrible past. I will explore the central place of land in this Lawsonian Australian identity, particularly the fictional geography that Joanne Sharp notes is the province of "[l]iterature, its metaphorical and allegorical nature, the fact that it does not bear the responsibility of 'truthful' representation" (329). Drawing on Carter's conception of spatial history, the exegesis will explore the creation of the identity of a harsh land with its origins in white ignorance and the need to cauterise indigenous history and pre-white understandings of land and presence. It will explore what Carter refers to as this "new country … a rhetorical construction, a product of language and the intentional gaze" *(Road* 36) to understand that Lawson's works and his personal image became icons of myths that were doing work to empty the short colonial history of its negative connotations. In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, Ross Gibson writes that Australia can be regarded as a "nation which still prefers to deny the process that forged it so recently" (54). It is a denial that is supported by a belief in the myths that can be seen growing, long ago, upon the stories of Lawson and the icon he was held up to be. It is this myth-making that will be seen to be both acted out and questioned in the later fictional works of Randolph Stow and Shaun Prescott.

In Chapter Two I will turn to a critical consideration of works by Randolph Stow, particularly *Tourmaline* (1963), to ascertain the continuance of these myths. This will allow an examination of how literary critics have understood Stow's exploration of these myths and their evolution since Lawson's time. Here the exegesis will directly question the myth of the outback, including Black and Rutledge's claim that no one has as yet established a definite meaning of 'outback' (73), a claim they made in their 1995 exploration of outback tourism. Whilst they draw on various literary texts to try to define 'outback', they still find the concept consistently elusive. And yet the suggestion of 'outback', and myths attendant on it, appear prominently in works of Australian literature. For example, despite Randolph Stow never using the term 'outback', *Tourmaline* is introduced by Gabrielle Carey as "the outback town [that] could be any outback town" (vii). The assumption of 'outback' is attached unquestioningly to the work. This exegesis will utilise the theoretical groundings of Barthes (1973), Gibson (2002) and Carter (1987) to explore the manner in which, as Donna Lu

highlights “The process of Australian colonisation, from the systematic massacres of Indigenous people to the instatement of the White Australia policy, has enabled a national myth prioritising white hegemony” (166). It will explore the impact of the myth of the outback as it becomes a myth of the nation’s identity. The myth will be shown to be useful in maintaining white Australian comfort by hiding from view its history of racist dispossession and distancing the present from colonial invasion and settlement. It will align this with Gibson’s understanding that “a myth is a popular story that highlights contradictions which a community feels compelled to resolve *narratively* rather than rationally, so that citizens can get on with living” (170). This is the functionalist understanding of myth that L.R. Hiatt argues is a “conservative, socialising force whose function is to sanctify existing institutions and foster the values of sociality” (5). It is a mythology formed to support the developing desires of the white colonisers. The exegesis will examine the way in which Stow frames these myths of the nation in terms of the internal and the individual as he examines the inner environment of his characters in conjunction with his examinations of the damaging falsehood of the outback. I will then attend to these myths as seen in a contemporary work.

Shaun Prescott’s *The Town* (2017) seeks to question the myth of the nation, as he presents a more urban rendering of a rural town than either Stow or Lawson and presents characters with a way of speaking that is now entrenched and consistent. This, as Jennifer Mills writes, allows *“The Town* [to dig] at the foundations of authenticity, culture and identity, revealing (and possibly contributing to) dangerous levels of subsidence” (5). It is this subsidence that the exegesis will suggest is the sliding of myth upon reality.

I will also explore how accent and manner of speaking ‘make’ Australians. I will examine Lawson’s use of the vernacular and how it made his work so powerful. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines the vernacular as speech that is “expressed as the native language of [white Australia], spoken in the Australian accent” (2351). As Raelke Grimmer noted in “Sentenced to Discrimination: Language as a Weapon of State”, if one “[s]peak[s] English with an accent that is not Australian … the person will be marked not as someone who speaks more than one language, but as someone who is not Australian” (282). I will examine how Lawson’s use of the vernacular helped mythologise a language “associated with being in the Bush”, as Lucy Frost states (56), and which remains prominent today. I will build upon claims that Lawson’s vernacular established a belief that “Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush and the bush is the heart of Australia” (Eggert “Convergence” 85). This will highlight a

disproportionate emphasis on the Australian accent and the vernacular in popular articulations of national identity. *Tourmaline*, set entirely in the bush, displays this propensity for accents, with spoken language that can be shown to be peculiar to the Australian bush. Martin Leer, in his "Honour the Single Soul: Homage to Randolph Stow", notes how he found new meaning in *Tourmaline* when he *heard* it. As he writes, "the real revelation of *Tourmaline's* impact to me was a performance of the dialogue as a radio play in broad Strine on ABC Radio in the mid-1980s" (4). The exegesis will examine how the myth of outback and vernacular speech work together to create a powerful national identity. It is an identity that is used to harness the concept of an egalitarian nation in the service of supporting white dominant culture. In *Age of Globalization*, Anderson highlights the essential nationalising work of the folk story, stating that "[u]rban composers foraged for folk songs, urban poets captured and transformed the styles and themes of folk poetry, and novelists turned to the depiction of folk country sides" (22). This makes the work of Lawson especially relevant, as Walter Murdoch wrote in 1905 that "Mr Lawson is a folk-singer or he is nothing" (127). I will argue that utilising the Australian accent, particularly in dialogue, in a manner that can only apply to Australian voices provided a powerful marker for 'Australianness'. And further, that this is an Australianness of exclusion. Viewing this through fictional works allows the consideration of an Australia defined by myths of accent and the myth of outback. As Tim Soutphommasane noted in 2018, when stepping down as the national Equal Rights Commissioner, these myths need to be exposed in order to overcome shortcomings in Australia's self-identity. He said: "That is the nature of any national project: it is never complete but always ongoing. Yet any such recognition seems to be stifled by the national myth of egalitarianism" (49).

The exploration of the works of Lawson, Stow and Prescott will allow the exegesis to examine these myths in light of Barthes' claim that "[m]ythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (110). The repetition and reforming of the myths of outback and vernacular speech will be seen as "[t]he fictional voice…the voice which can tell its story anywhere and over and over again. It is the voice of white history", as Carter explains it *(Road* 347). With this understanding of the myths attending to Australian identity, the question will then arise: how have these myths been brought to light? How have these myths of nation been questioned in the formation of the fictional geographies of Stow, as young Rob Cobram, in *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965) wonders "of himself, of who he was, and why … I am Australian, and wonder why"

(5). This will be highlighted in Shaun Prescott's satirical questioning of national identity as he writes of his unnamed town, "[t]here was no founder, there was no strange or noble history that the people could marvel at" (72). These fictional works will be examined in light of Gibson's claim that "[h]abits such as fear and denial don't get wished away. Nor do they atrophy through being ignored" (150), and Barthes' claim that these myths are potent because "*Myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (121). The exegesis will examine how these literary works have questioned the mythical foundation of the national identity, and how the fictional geographies they create may make visible what could otherwise remain hidden.

In the third chapter, the exegesis will turn to my fictional work, *The Willton Tales*, to explore these theoretical considerations further. As I create my fictional small town of Willton I will attend to the question that Gibson presents: "Sooner or later, any society that would like to know itself as "post-colonial" must confront an inevitable question: how to live with collective memories of theft and murder?" (83)

The Willton Tales deliberately takes the form of a collection of short stories, much favoured in early Australian literature. It takes up fantastical moments and European mythology, placing these unsettling factors in a predictable, established outback setting. In his review of Prescott's *The Town*, James Lasdun points out how the town "may have seen better days, but suddenly no one can remember them – or indeed anything else about its history" (24). It is this work of forgetting that *The Willton Tales* seeks to reframe, by creating stories deliberately featuring mythologies of the past that are transformed within the history of Willton, to formulate a familiar but unsettling view of the outback Australian town. This disturbance allows *The Willton Tales* to question the formulation and actions of the cultural myths of outback and accent that have allowed European ideas and people to fit into the land they have usurped. It will ask, what might be exposed when European myths and fantasies are transposed unexpectedly onto fictional Australia? Into the more traditional stories of love, family and growing up, I infiltrate tales of vampires, werewolves, zombies and other mythical creatures, to interrogate how they take on an Australian 'accent' and how they can contest an idealised Australian context.

The stories of Lawson and the formulation of the Australian myths at the end of the nineteenth century occurred at a time when religion and its influence and power were being questioned and overturned by nationalist ideas. In Europe, at this time, other myths were at

work emptying religiousness, and challenging and even reframing the sacred, through stories of un-death and impurity (Arnds 2015). For example, as a societal outcast, the werewolf was seen as a way of expressing unwanted racial elements in a fashion that opened the door for nationalism to flourish, because "nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations" *(Imagined Communities* 149). This and other myths were used by the culture of the time to bridge the gap between its aspirations of stability and its racist reality, and to allow narratives of racism and nationalism to emerge together. Peter Arnds follows the changing shapes of the werewolf and wolf myths across Europe, and Jennifer Rutherford (2013) notes the changing identity and use of the zombie. These are evolving, changing myth-narratives. Barthes notes that:

> In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this open character of the concept: it is not at all an abstract, purified essence: it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function. In this sense, we can say that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated. (119)

Both the traditional myths of white Australia and the more global myths of vampires, zombies and wolves, are therefore all open, ready for appropriation, and flexible enough to move across boundaries of nations and time and to open doors to alternative understandings.

My opening story, "Willton Dogs", unleashes across the landscape mythical hounds that seem to kill two of the town's young people. These dogs hark back to the wolf mythology of Europe and the wolf's association, within those myths, with "rootlessness, foreignness and crime" (Arnds 70). As a metaphor for the rootless, threatening arrival of white colonists, this is a powerful framing device for the rest of the stories. It also touches on the place of the dog on the land as an iconic component of the Australian outback. Dogs in various guises recur throughout these stories. The story of the broken, crippled outcast Keelty in "The Long View" also features the mythical Willton dog, but now as a guard and protector of a strange man living in the sand dunes. These stories in particular adopt the traditional approach to the outback tale, as Ann Curthoys stated, that "Australian popular historical mythology stresses struggle, courage, and survival, amidst pain, tragedy, and loss" (2-3) However, in my own work I have sought to suggest that these myths of struggle and survival are not necessarily complete. "A Man on the Run", the story of Baker, the town butcher, presents the werewolf

myth. It upends this known tale by presenting a werewolf who is a vegan, a butcher who kills animals because he loves them too deeply to let anyone else do it. He is a frightening beast only in name; in reality, he is a deeply compassionate, caring and self-sacrificing being. The outcast nature of the wolf and werewolf myths attend to the concept of the outback itself as a land deliberately created to be separate and cauterised. This story begins to question this concept, offering an alternative view of the myths. At the end of *The Willton Tales,* the farm dog becomes central in "Something About Dogs", which presents a typical farming homestead from which the presence of family has been lost. Into this place is born a litter of puppies that are first left to die, useless and wasteful in the reality of rural survival. However, through the compassionate ministrations of the farm wife, the puppies survive and are soon found to be magical and wonderful creatures.

The Willton Tales seeks to present the stories of the town as far more than a simple representation of a simple outback. It presents many stories of recognisable characters in a town that is far more complex and integrated than the traditional outback myth allows for. The simple lives are simply the surface. Beneath are many and varied stories, such as "The Coming Storm". This is a seemingly simple story of a married couple in a cooling relationship. It also presents the truth beneath the surface, of a passionate woman, a vampire, who has escaped from the city to hold onto something more valuable to her than the eternity of her vampire future. Bruce McClelland states that "[i]n contemporary Western European and North American popular culture, the vampire has become one of the most pervasive and recognizable symbols of insidious evil" (2). I have inverted this belief. 'The Coming Storm' is the story of a woman choosing to remain human in a little town, presenting an unexpectedly positive vampire and thus an unexpected aspect to the outback town. It is a place where people can choose to live and love.

"Brian's Night Out" is a zombie story, again deliberately upending a myth to explore life on the Australian land. Rather than a post-apocalyptic vision of the undead rising, this story presents the 'return' of a farmer who has given his kidney to his daughter and died as a result. He emerges from his grave for a last walk through the town that he had previously been too busy and too self-focused to enjoy. It is a joyful wander rather than a terrifying invasion, once again reframing the outback town as a place where joy can be found if one looks.

Not all the stories are of joy, however. “The Girl Who Went Away” deliberately plays on Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) to disrupt the assumptions of life in the small outback town. This is the story of Transyta, a girl born in the town but always separate from it, and of her mother who becomes a murderous insect in a bid to protect herself emotionally from her own failings. Transyta befriends the only Indigenous person left in the town, which ultimately leads to his death at the hands of her mother and the girl’s transformation into an impossible, tortured, vengeance-seeking wraith. The story presents the breakdown of a traditional mother-daughter relationship and questions the belief in the egalitarian nature of the small town’s people.

Many of the stories feature elements that are not based on known myths but that might better be described as 'Fantastic” (Todorov 25). These elements allow *The Willton Tales* to question notions of identity and the basis for the beliefs about the town’s nature. This speaks to John Tosh’s statement that:

> For any social grouping to have a collective identity there has to be a shared interpretation of the events and experiences that have formed the group over time. Sometimes this will include an accepted belief about the origins of the group. (2)

The interpretations of the town’s past and present are drawn into sharp focus by the presence of a family of Madagascan cockroaches in the story “Africans”, as the mother cockroach tries to understand their place in a world that seeks to destroy them. The story unfolds a simple family tragedy that it is transposed upon the arrival in the town of human refugees, and questions the way in which they are accepted into the town. In the story “Like Clockwork”, the town’s history is explored through the life of the wind-up painter who comes to town every three years to repaint the Post Office. When the painting goes wrong, the whole identity of the town is called into question and the people find they have no way to comprehend that their Post Office is no longer the colour it has always been. The satire attends to Tosh’s claim that “[a] nation that cannot face up to its past will be gravely handicapped in the future” (29), as the painter, the embodiment of the past, is destroyed and the Post Office is allowed to crumble.

These stories all work together to evoke the unknown beneath the known. They work to unsettle the constantly assumed. In an exploration of Renaissance myth, Jane Kingsley-Smith points to the role of the mythological story: “Part of the fascination of mythological allusion, however, was its inherent ambiguity, the sense that it was always shadowed by alternative

(often disruptive) meanings, accrued from other mythographical studies, contemporary fictions, and polemical texts" (141). *The Willton Tales* deliberately sets about creating a 'typical' contemporary fiction and then unsettling it with mythological allusions. It uses extant myths, both global and colonial Australian, alongside fantastic or magical elements, to layer them upon each other, building a deliberately disjointed fictional geography, an undeniably Australian landscape that is also undeniably unusual and unexpected. These stories allow for a confronting look at the outback myth. The fantastical elements, like fairytales, can be perceived as less realistic and thus are less likely to alienate the reader. In an article exploring the fictionalising of traumatic events, "She's Having an Episode" (2013), Lauren Berlant states this as "the generosity and intimacy of the fairytale [which] is still less harsh than the brutal technicality of a professional jargon whose searing criticality scores its users as well as its objects" (27). Their disruptive nature allows the stories to be more than just entertainment, "but also to make readers uncomfortable as they question the social, political, and natural world around them" (14), as Melissa Edmundson argues in her examination of *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing* (2018). *The Willton Tales* is a collection of small stories, individual human stories, occurring in a small town, but with supernatural, fantastical elements that allow them to attend to nation-sized myths and to question assumptions that have existed for generations.

Chapter One:

Henry Lawson's outback and Australia's Accent

The work of Henry Lawson (1867-1922) has been the subject of an evolving critical discussion virtually since his first poems (1887) and stories (1888) began to impact the Australian reading public. This exegesis will explore the impact of his work to examine the outback myth that has formed around them and remains in Australian writing and identity to this day. It will also assess the uniquely Australian way of talking that features in Lawson's work – the accent that developed as an iconic indicator of association with this mythical outback.

Lawson can be seen to be relevant to the nation's understanding of itself, not because he was one of its earliest writers, nor because he was necessarily unique, but rather, because he was utilised by others, becoming a highly effective identifier at a pivotal time in the nation's formulation. In 1896, in *The Worker*, Henry H. Boote wrote that "[a]mong the verse makers of Australia no one is better known, or surer of welcome at all times, than Henry Lawson" (34). It is a view long maintained by critics. H.P. Heseltine claimed in *Quadrant* in 1960 that Lawson "is [still] revered as one of the greatest and most 'typically Australian' of our literary figures" (5). The reason for this beatification of 'Saint Henry', as the title of his article names Lawson, is hinted at when Heseltine points out that "[a]s an instrument of cultural policy, a means of giving Australians of all classes some sense of a common cultural base and of social unity, [the] image of Lawson is not without its uses" (5). The success in making Lawson an icon of a particular partisan position ebbed and flowed after his death. The political positions seeking to recruit his image swung back and forth, sometimes to the left, other times to the right. However, the process itself formed Lawson as a potent entity and, more importantly, gave rise to the concept of Lawson's Australia, an entity that could be traded upon and believed in. It solidified Lawson's literature as an authorial product, suitable for creating a vision of Australia that was held up as authentic and valuable. It is around his stories that the myth of 'outback' developed and, in the era of nationalist growth, that the creation of Australian identity was internalised. The national identity will be shown to become the "common cultural base" forming around the outback myth, becoming cemented as a form of "social unity" (Heseltine 5) by the uniquely ubiquitous and singular expression of the Australian spoken accent.

Into the twenty-first century, a diversity of views about Lawson remains. More recent criticism from Paul Eggert explores the impact of Lawson, explaining that the importance of his works, particularly in *The Bulletin*, was to bring the stories of the 'bush', the image of the 'bush' and, perhaps most importantly, the idea of the harsh Australian 'bush', to the great mass of newly Australian people who were keen to find their own sense of a nation. Eggert states that "Lawson…fed a need: that appetite in the postwar [WWII] period for new sources of value" ("D.H. Lawrence" 17). And he did it well. Lawson's success as a writer "was to put the middle-class reader in conditions of unaccustomed proximity to the rough characters being portrayed" ("D.H. Lawrence" 6). John Barnes writes that "Lawson lived at a period when the ideology of 'race' went almost unchallenged, and 'national characteristics' were frequently appealed to as explanations of individual behaviour" (64). Barnes points to the reality that Lawson's world was a racist one and he was a product of it. The question becomes, what impact does that have on the Australian identity of today? Especially given the myth formed about this identity by the man who was upheld as the 'folksinger' of the nation (Murdoch 127)?

In his biography of Henry Lawson, *City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination* (2004), Christopher Lee focuses on the funeral of Lawson in 1922 as "an important moment in the development of his cultural reputation because it represented an attempt by the political establishment to incorporate his popular authority" (54). It is Lee's contention that, from this moment on, many and varied political and social forces found a useful and powerful icon in the image of Lawson. Lawson was no longer just a writer; he became an image used in the name of articulating an understanding of Australia's identity. Even before Lawson's death, Charles Bright wrote in 1896, that "[s]lowly but unequivocally a school of authentic Australian literature is unfolding itself" (22). It is Lawson's presence at this assumed 'unfolding' of Australian literature that will be seen to be most salient for this exegesis, as it will examine what emerged from Lawson's particular prominence at this time.

Henry H. Boote was another of those identifying Lawson's writing as founding an image they could relate to, not just for literature but for the nation as a whole. He claimed that Lawson "has exercised a more potent influence on the moulding of our national character and the shaping of our destiny than any politician" (34-35) This national shaping becomes a most important consideration as it makes it clear that Lawson was not just being read, as these critics all note; he was being utilised. After his death the man himself became a mythical

identity as "history evaporates" (Barthes, 151), emptied of any solidity by the various, often opposing, voices that sought to harness his iconic representation of Australia. As Lee notes:

> Henry Lawson's funeral was a political struggle over the national capital vested in his reputation. The malleability of this resource allowed it to be used with differing degrees of success by an array of political figures and the organisations they represented. Lawson's reputation was rendered multiple in form by the occasion of his funeral. (*City Bushman* 67)

His writing was useful for the "moulding of our national character" (Boote 34-35), but it also carried within it aspects that were problematic for the burgeoning national mythos. As Boote noted, for example, "not one line will you find breathing love, or admiration, or awe, in the presence of loveliness, the grandeur, and the profound mystery of nature" (37). As a voice being held up as iconic of the nation, it is important to note that Lawson was not bringing a promotional brochure; he was not painting a lovely picture of a proud, egalitarian nation. Indeed, Heseltine sums up Lawson's short story work by saying that "Lawson's most compelling response to the Australian landscape is one of horror" (8). This leads to a particular view of the nation being formed and a mythos of the land being carried forward. In a story written whilst in New Zealand, "His Country After All", Lawson frames what could practically be the modern definition of outback:

> What's Australia? A big, thirsty, hungry wilderness, with one or two cities for the convenience of foreign speculators, and a few collections of humpies called towns – also for the convenience of foreign speculators: and populated by mongrel sheep, and partly by fools, who live like European slaves in the towns, and like dingoes in the bush. *(While the Billy* 52-53)

This Lawsonian view played perfectly into the prevailing understanding of colonial thinking. As W.E.H. Stanner wrote, "the continent at occupation was held to be disposable because it was assumed to be 'waste and desert'" ("Dreaming" 215). The European belief was that the land was available for colonial settlement and there was no reason not to just take it. This taking of Australia for settlement, however, required the belief that the land was desolate and worthless. This belief came at a terrible cost for the Aboriginal people. In his repudiation of colonial settler beliefs, *Dark Emu Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014), Bruce Pascoe points out that what the early explorers actually found was "Not a wilderness, not a land peopled by wanderers, but a managed landscape created by the enormous labour of a

people intent on creating the best possible conditions for food production" (9). According to Pascoe, Lawson's "thirsty, hungry wilderness" *(While the Billy* 52), did not originally exist. Lawson presents the rural landscape as "a blasted barren wilderness that doesn't even howl. If it howled it would be a relief" (42). This is, however, the foundation of the story Lawson was telling. The land 'out there' becomes the outback myth and hides the possibility of pre-settler Australia that Pascoe describes: "Large populations of Aboriginal people were manipulating the Australian environment and husbanding plants to produce surplus food of such great quantity that populations could lead more or less sedentary lives in the vicinity of their crops" *(Dark Emu* 78). This flies in the face of the assumption, still very much alive today and enshrined in Robert Hughes's 1986 portrait of early Australian life, *The Fatal Shore*, that "the Aborigines were hunter-gatherers who roamed over the land without marking out boundaries or making fixed settlements. They had no idea of farming or stock raising" (273). This view is maintained in spite of Hughes' recognition of white sheep graziers pushing their land claim "west across the Blue Mountains to the golden grasslands that stretched around Bathurst and Mudgee" (275). These golden grasslands were, as Pascoe suggests, the result of Aboriginal agriculture. This consideration needed to be ignored for colonisation to proceed favourably. When Lawson bemoans the hardness of Australia in "His Country After All", he writes; "Why, the [white] Australians haven't even got the grit… to throw a few dams across their watercourses, and so make some of the interior fit to live in" *(While the Billy* 53). This is a powerful statement when placed against Pascoe's finding that the original inhabitants of the land had a highly established aquaculture including damming of the major water courses, such as:

> a series of dykes placed across the Murray River flood plain to prevent it from receding too quickly during summer and thus ensuring retention of fish stocks. The dykes, built from vast quantities of clay, were over a metre high and extended along the river as far as the reedy plains extended. *(Dark Emu* 54)

Presumably, Lawson was not writing of the land that existed at the time of white arrival, but of the land as it became. The assumption that Aboriginal people were nomadic wanderers allowed them to be painted as primitive and having no claim on the land. The wandering savage was a core description of Aboriginal people in early fiction, with them being referred to as "children of the soil", "sable friends" and "knights of the desert" *(Dark Emu* 77). This was a central tenet of the early colonial annexing of the nation.

For the outback myth to form in the heart of Australia, the settlers first had to make land into something it wasn't. The colonial force had already established, for its own benefit, the concept of 'terra nullius'. This is described in the *Dictionary of Law* as "A method of acquiring territory in which good title can be gained by claiming previously unclaimed land" (2018). In the case of Australia, this relied upon colonisers believing that the original inhabitants had no rights to ownership, that the land was unencumbered. W.E.H. Stanner notes this as the point at which "the principle of the consent of the natives was buried at the very centre of the cult of disremembering" ("Dreaming" 60). This is the land the Europeans labelled 'the bush'. Lucy Frost notes that "Lawson played a significant role in detaching the conventions of realism from an imperial paradigm in which landscape was figured under the English word 'wilderness' " (55). She points out that Lawson's writing made the Australian landscape simple to understand, allowing it to be perceived as "'bush.' An English word (and importantly, I think, a simple English word) was redefined to carry distinctive meanings not shared with the United Kingdom" (55). In his short stories, Lawson deftly, often humorously, and powerfully, draws this simple bush, for example in "His Father's Mate":

> Golden Gully was a dreary place, dreary even for an abandoned goldfield. The poor, tortured earth, with its wounds all bare, seemed to make a mute appeal to the surrounding bush to come up and hide it. *(While the Billy* 146)

Frost raises the suggestion that the 'bush' of Australia, as Lawson (and other writers of the time) presented it, was received by readers in Britain as a simple, harsh place. Strange and unusual, certainly, but also simple. This first step to representing a mythical space saw the true nature of the land and its pre-white history largely stripped away. Paul Carter notes the transformation from 'bush' to 'outback':

> To call what lay out there 'the bush', was to urge colonists to a comparable sense of unity and common destiny. Out there was also 'outback', that is to say, amongst other things, culturally invisible. To invoke another Australian colloquialism, what was 'beyond the black stump' belonged to the realm of cultural darkness. *(Road* 149)

It is notable that Carter specifically denotes 'unity and common destiny' as endemic in the creation of bush and 'outback'.

In 1891 Lawson and A.B. 'Banjo' Patterson carried out a poetic jousting in the pages of *The Bulletin*. Ostensibly a contestation of Australia as bush or as coastal settlements, Bruce Elder

notes, that "[n]o one at the time queried whether the Australian character was intimately connected to the bush. That wasn't an issue – it was a 'fact'" (97). Whilst this publishing promotion was conceived of as a great seller of *The Bulletin*, it also worked to highlight the primacy of the 'bush' as iconic Australia. However, it was a bush that Lawson painted in sinister but powerful tones, such as this passage from "Up the Country":

> Treacherous tracks that trap the stranger, endless roads that gleam and glare,
> Dark and evil-looking gullies, hiding secrets here and there!
> Dull dumb flats and stony rises, where the toiling bullocks bake,
> And the sinister gohanna, and the lizard and the snake. (*Camp-fire* 228)

The effect of this staged conflict in *The Bulletin* is minor in comparison to the work achieved by Lawson's greater body of work as it was taken up to turn 'bush' into 'outback'. Ann Curthoys crystallises another consideration in "Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology". She claims that

> the popular narrative of horror in the desert, of the land and landscape as the malignant unknown, is not innocent, or transparent. Rather, it offers a colonial society a way of displacing the conflict between settlers and Indigenous peoples onto a more acceptable narrative of a direct conflict between the settler and the land itself. The land and the [I]ndigenous people become merged, the former foregrounded, the latter denied a place in history at all. (13)

The simple 'bush' was soon turned to the purpose of denial. The image of the hard and terrible bush promulgated by Lawson soon became known as 'out back'. This outback is found in "In a Dry Season", when the narrator is told "'Yer wanter go out back young man, if you wanter see the country. Yer wanter get away from the line'" (*Fifteen* 5). This fictional land was the villain in the hands of Lawson, allowing the true horror of Australia's 'bush' invasion to be offloaded. It was not white Europeans fighting Indigenous people. It was a story of white people bravely fighting the hard, terrible land that Lawson had created on the page. It was a land that was being envisioned by European eyes that sought only to exploit and appropriate it. Pascoe notes that nowhere in the colonial reporting is there a suggestion that the white settlers came only to explore. They came primarily to take over the land. They were not looking for the wealth of agricultural experience that existed in the generations of Aboriginal farming practice, so they didn't see it *(Dark Emu* 13). However, the land that Lawson was describing as the "[w]ildest of the wild" (*Camp-fire* 229) was seen very

differently through Aboriginal eyes. The effect of this difference in perception is slowly emerging through Indigenous writing. In her 1997 novel *Plains of Promise,* Alexis Wright presents one postcolonial Aboriginal viewpoint of Australia:

> No one was able to look at the land anymore, not all of the time, the way they used to in the olden days. Life was so different now that the white man had taken the lot. It was like a war, an undeclared war. A war with no name. And the Aboriginal man was put into prison camps, like prisoners in the two world wars. But nobody called it war: it was simply the situation, that's all. Protection. Assimilation… different words that amounted to annihilation. (74)

The observation that no one called it what it was can be applied equally to the Aboriginal genocide and the 'bush'. It was soon no longer the fertile, storied place that Aboriginal Australians had thrived in for millennia. It was now simply a hard and harsh place that Europeans struggled in. The outback became the story of what white Australians needed to believe about how they became dominant. "In the devious statements of the myth", Mary Douglas claims, "people can recognize indirectly what it would be difficult to admit openly and yet what is patently clear to all and sundry" (52). The outback is what it is because to admit what it hides, to understand what it may really be about, is extremely problematic. This myth has proved to be incredibly resilient and effective. Bruce Pascoe, in an article entitled "Andrew Bolt's Disappointment", notes his own ignorance of the true nature of early Australian settlement and the millennia of Indigenous cultural history that are hidden by the outback myth. "It is how we've grown up", he states. "A certain view of history believed by our parents and buttressed by our education. This is what I believed until 1981" (236). The white right to land is central to Lawson's iconic representation of Australia. It also means there is now an outback, a waste place, somewhere good for nothing but hardness, toughness, wilderness and Australianness.

The *Australian National Dictionary* records the first use of the term 'out back' to specifically refer to a physical, identifiable region denoted by these two words, which appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 12 May 1862, when readers were told that "they went out back to look for country" (1095). The *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1989 cites the hyphenated 'out-back' as first appearing in 1900. "1900. H Lawson Darling River in Prose Works (1948) 'the Queenslands' rains… seemed to be held responsible… for most of the out-back trouble" (1005). Both dictionaries cite further readings of Australian literary works, from Lawson to

Rolf Boldrewood, and newspapers and journals of the early 1900s. As the term becomes more normalised, the dictionaries find the two-word term, out back, being used to describe a place beyond civilised settlement, frequently emphasised as 'out back'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes 1906 as the year that A.B. Paterson wrote a poem titled "An Outback Marriage", and 1913 as when W.K. Harris wrote "Outback in Australia", presenting the one word term. By 1951 the *Australian National Dictionary* finds G. Farell writing "Outside Track" and saying "My friend… was not a bushman, though a year or two outback had infected him with what Lawson calls the 'wanderlight'" (1095). The term 'outback' had come to mean what the myth holds today: the land of Lawsonian hardness.

The outback is primarily a construct of literature. It is born of fiction and grows from it. It will be seen that what is actually signified by the term 'outback' is as fluid and malleable as the word itself. In one of many examples of this fluidity, Henry Lawson's "Stragglers" is published with the term variously presented. In the 1984 compilation *A Camp-fire Yarn* the term used is the two-word version, out back: "…tell a bigger out back lie" (284). In Colin Roderick's 1959 compilation *Fifteen Stories,* the line is rendered with a hyphen: "…tell a bigger out-back lie" (11). The hyphenated term is also present in the version from 1898 in *While the Billy Boils* (83). The fact that the term and its presentation differ over time and across editions points to the fluid nature of the concept of 'out back', 'out-back', or 'outback'. That the term can change within a single story over time highlights the flexible nature of 'outback' and highlights its readiness to be absorbed into the culture as a term referring to a mythical place, condensing multiple, malleable, meanings. The emergence of the term 'outback' is an example of John Tosh's observation that "our world is the product of history. Every aspect of our culture, behaviour and beliefs is the outcome of processes over time" (11). As Barthes has highlighted, mythology "shows well its fundamental justification, which is to deny any identification by history…the main thing is to deprive it of its history" (96). Formed over time but outside of time, the myth of the outback is a constant presence experienced as having always been. Joanne Sharp refers to this as a 'fictive' or 'imagined' geography, "the 'imagined geographies' created through all sorts of media are central to the geographies used by people when going about their daily lives" (333). A place, the outback, comes into being initially as a fictive creation. This becomes clear when trying to define the term. In 1995, Black and Rutledge sought to define the outback in a report on 'Outback Tourism: The Authentic Australian Adventure' for The Department of Tourism in North Queensland. They leaned heavily on fictive geography, claiming that "there is no difficulty in

finding a literary definition of ‘outback’. Australian literature over the past 205 years has amassed innumerable writings defining, describing, delimiting the term ‘outback’” (72). Their search for a definition of outback lists a number of literary sources, starting with Lawson and including this from Randolph Stow’s *Tourmaline:*

> There is no stretch of land more ancient than this. And so it is blunt and red and barren, littered with the fragments of broken mountains, flat, waterless. Spinifex grows here, but sere and yellow, and the trees are rare, hardly to be called trees, some kind of myall with leaves starved to needles that fans out from the root and gives no shade ....(5)

Black and Rutledge end their search for a definition by claiming that no one has yet established a definite meaning of outback. The sense is that the outback is what it is. They also refer to “the semi-arid and arid lands of Australia, popularly known as ‘the outback’” (73), basing an approximate definition of outback on land arability, or its lack of value as a producing artefact. This ability to draw value from the land is, as Pascoe and others have clearly noted, vastly different for white settlers than it was for the original, Aboriginal inhabitants. This raises the probability that for the Aboriginal farmers displaced by European agriculture, there was no such thing as ‘the outback’. There was no land that was not supportive.

The outback becomes a myth that allows for the exclusion of prior history and provides a container within which fears, doubts and historical guilt can be sealed and left. It is a mythical land that is also real: a place far distant from the vast majority of the Australian population but one which, thanks to the growing literary impact of the Lawsonian story, became vital to the formation of an Australian identity. It is an identity based in the rural distance that has a unique voice. The Australian accent became, and remains to this day, incredibly uniform. More so than that of any other nation (B. Moore, 69). It is a singular accent used across the massive distances, with very little region differentiation. As Kel Richards notes:

> Australian accent is often said to be a spectrum of sound from “broad Australian” at one end to “cultivated Australian” at the other. But it’s one spectrum, with a unifying vocal quality (especially in vowels) unlike any other place on the planet. Perhaps that sums up the Aussie accent: irritable vowel syndrome. We have our own distinctive

> way of sliding sounds over the larynx, and it's part of what makes our language our own. (7)

The accent of Australians is, as Bruce Moore points out, developed and formed "in the agricultural country and the outback". It is an accent that flows directly from "the language of the bushman ethos" (110). It is this ethos that Lawson's writing instils as being at the heart of Australia, and the accent is its signifier. This may explain the ubiquity of the accent even today, and the pride so commonly taken in it. Moore notes that "[o]ne of the difficulties with any theory about the development of the Australian accent is the fact that the accent is so homogenous across the vast continent" (69-70). It is this homogenised accent that allows Australian identity to sustain the semblance of unity across the white landscape. This common way of speaking internalises the myth.

There are many textual occasions where Lawson deliberately utilises the accent to differentiate Australians from others, driving home the value of the myth in consolidating the identity of the emerging nation. Lawson's stories can be seen to carry within them a distinct prescription of the accent of the nation, which he presents in stories that deliberately speak of the hardship of life in the outback and even, in the case of "A Visit of Condolence" *(While the Billy* 209), the hardness of city life. The accent in Lawson's stories is a powerful indicator of attachment to the outback. It becomes iconic of Australian identity, of the myth of the outback. His writing was embedding the sound of the language spoken in Australia. As Bruce Moore describes it, the nation is identified by "these features – nasality: a flatness arising from a lack of variation in intonation; a drawl; elision of syllables –[that] become the stereotype of Australian English in the first half of the twentieth century" (73).

Sometimes Lawson uses the deliberate demarcation of the accent mildly, as in "An Echo from the Old Bark School": "Dan was a young immigrant, just out from the sod, and rolled his "r's" like a cock-dove. His brogue was rich enough to make an Irishman laugh" *(While the Billy* 61). Elsewhere he is more direct, as in Brummy Usen, the title itself an accent-driven play on "Hughison I think they spelled it" *(While the Billy* 293), as he jestingly references Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1882). Lawson clearly sets the Australians apart from the British: "They was mostly English country people from Kent and Yorkshire and those places: and the most self-opinionated and obstinate people that ever lived when they got a thing into their heads" *(While the Billy* 293). In "A Visit of

Condolence", as in most other Lawson stories, the accent, along with uniquely Australian dialect, is central to the characterisations:

> "Blarst the cops! D'yer think I cares for 'em? Fur two pins I'd fetch a push an' smash yer ole shanty about yer ears – y'ole cow! *I only arsked if Arvie lived here!* Holy Mosis! Carn't a feller ask a civil queschin?". *(While the Billy* 209)

The accent of the bushman connects white, urban Australia to the myth of outback. Kel Richards highlights the very deliberate actions taken to instil an Australian accent, particularly utilising the works of Lawson, as he points to the editor of *The Bulletin:*

> Archibald [who paid Lawson's ticket to Hungerford] seemed intent on developing verse (and prose) written in the Australian dialect. The point of this…is that Aussie English was now showing its vigour, its colour and its inventive turn of phrase in print – and ordinary Australian readers were loving it. It quickly became clear that they were very keen about a popular literature that spoke the same language they did. (114)

If the outback is a fictional creation, as I am suggesting; if the outback doesn't actually exist as a physical place; if it is no more than the myth of an 'imagined community' (Anderson): why is it necessary? Because the formulation of the new nation, as Benedict Anderson claims, was "conceived in language" *(Imagined Communities* 145). The nation forms through images that are replicated in language and accepted by the people. This process was accelerating at the time that Lawson was writing due to the technologies of printing and communication. The emergence of print-capitalism, Anderson writes, "gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (44). The solid presence of the word on the written page allowed the concepts and images presented by Lawson and his cohort to be uniformly shared and made permanent in ink. The hardness that underpinned the concept of the white outback was available to be handed on and utilised. It was made permanent and imbued with a sense of eternal truth. Finally, in the formulation of the 'imagined community' of Australia as a land with an outback, Anderson notes that "print-capitalism created languages-of-power" (*Imagined Communities* 45). The power of the language here was to facilitate a national construct, the myth of outback, with a national accent, that allowed for the excising of unpalatable truths. Lawson's fiction lent itself to being used to shape this community and stripped it of the problem of history. White history, though short, was epitomised by the destruction of black lives and the annexation of Indigenous lands as the Aboriginal

inhabitants were denied any valid claim to their land. In this context, the bush legend became presented in fiction as one of whites fighting land, not whites fighting blacks. As Ann Curthoys noted, "[i]n the pioneer legend, the obstacles the settler-hero must fight are mainly the land itself. The desert and the bush become powerful adversaries…the land as antagonist" (8). Lawson's fiction provided an effective and easily understood voice for this antagonist land. His images of the bush were simple, powerful and devoid of the truth of colonial oppression. His conception of history begins with the first white explorers. When describing the town of "Hungerford", for example, he writes that, "I believe Burke and Wills found Hungerford, and it's a pity they did… There were brave men in the land in those days" *(While the Billy* 42). This is the history that he hands to the emerging imagined community of Australia. It is a history only of white explorers.

The rare hint of black presence in Lawson's writing is limited to a few instances such as the note in "Hungerford" that "Presently a black tracker went past and looked at us, and returned to the pub" *(While the Billy* 44). And that is all. A similar blindness is glimpsed in the deeply gothic "The Bush Undertaker", where the 'Old Man' digs up a 'blackfellow's' grave. It is never established if the bones are indeed black or white, but in the process of carrying these bones, he finds the body of a white friend (*Camp-fire* 243). From this point in the story the first man's bones, the possible black man's remains, are never mentioned again. The 'blackfellow' simply fails to appear in the story anymore. Lawson wrote of an Australia that was all but devoid of Indigenous people.

Lawson's short stories and poems were his means of income, and his survival largely relied on writing works that the people wanted to read and pay for. His stories and poems were written for a primarily city-based readership looking for stories that helped them understand their new homeland. Lawson depended upon the editors of newspapers and magazines for his income and, as Christopher Lee points out, he was dependent on "a dispersed national audience, he had to show some respect for the ideas which were current" ("Status of the Aborigine" 74). Therefore, what he wrote (and perhaps all he saw) was a hard land of white people, white lives and white toil that would appeal to his white, urban, readership. The 'bush' was popular fodder with which to earn his living. Lawson didn't create the 'bush', but he certainly helped it be perceived as simple and iconic. It also became suitable as a place to cauterise the history of slaughter and dispossession. It allowed the greater number of the settler population, those living in the coastal fringes, those readers of Lawson, to separate

themselves from the history of what actually happened to install Australia as a white nation. To put it simply, bad things had been done, but the myth said they had been done in the 'bush' because that was what life was like out back. The bad things of the past could be forgotten in the outback. The myth of the outback became, as Lawson described it in "The Bush Undertaker", "the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands" (*Camp-fire* 248). The simple bush became the simple myth named 'outback'. But it is not an object, or a place, but rather the explanation of white struggles. The settlers and swaggies of Lawson's fictional world struggled with a land that seemed impossibly intractable. It is a land that has now become a saleable product. The same mythological construct that hides Aboriginal displacement is now the powerful image for selling Stratco™ Outback verandahs or Subaru™ Outback station wagons to suburban homeowners. It is endlessly flexible and yet, being a myth, is also indelibly precise. Everyone 'knows' what the 'outback' is, what it means and what it represents. The myth is not in place to provide an indication for behavioural practices, however, so nothing is expected of it. As Isobel White states in her exploration of "Sexual Conquest and Submission", myth is about establishing *values* for society (138), ideas rather than proscriptive action plans. Myth doesn't require action or consideration; it just 'is'. Outback is a powerful construct, a concept rather than a contestable, tangible entity. This is what John Tosh describes as:

> 'social memory', [that which] accurately reflects the rationale of popular knowledge about the past. Social groupings need a record of prior experience, but they also require a picture of the past that serves to explain or justify the present, often at the cost of historical accuracy. (3)

The Australian accent became the container in which Australians carried this iconic outback myth into the everyday life of the nation. At the time in history when the nation was pursuing its nationalist growth, what Anderson refers to as "'official nationalism' [that] was from the start a conscious, self-protective policy, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests" *(Imagined Communities* 159), there was, growing alongside it, the power of the literary image. The stories that Australia was telling itself about itself. These stories, positioned as we have seen in the developing accent and the developing outback myth, became more powerful than the 'imperial-dynastic interests'. Kel Richards pinpoints the mid-twentieth century as the time when the accent finally became truly Australian. As the

Imperial power sought to make Australian language more British, the colonials revolted. He notes that "some Aussies joined the Elocution Movement and tried to improve their speech, while others thumbed their noses and made their speech even more ocker than before" (232). To become more ocker, to thumb their noses at the British, Australians took up the vernacular and accent that Lawson and his fellow bush writers had used to frame the outback. The Australian accent became a form of verbal revolt against British rule. As Bruce Moore notes, "In the second half of the nineteenth century there is an increasing awareness that the distinctive vocabulary used in Australia sets Australia apart from other English speaking countries" (101). As Australia's politicians and policy makers were steering towards Federation, the people were gathering around the stories of the outback and taking on their language and speech as their own, uniquely Australian way of speaking. As Kel Richards notes, it was also a way of making all white Australians included. He says of the developing Australian accent:

> In part it is a move towards making our language more informal. But it's also a matter of 'solidarity' – the way Aussies talk to each [other] about the things we know, like and share. This makes diminutives 'identifiers' – small verbal signals that we all belong to the same mob. (209)

This means that the accent was developing as a means of communicating *against* a particular social framework, the English past, as well as *with* one, the emerging Australia. It was used to differentiate who was Australian and who wasn't. The accent became a powerful device that speaks with the voice of the outback. Just as it was literature and fictional geographies that had been developing and supporting the myth of outback, the literature throughout the same period popularised an accent that expressed this mythology. The Australian accent became the vocalised, internalised rendering of the same appeal to nationalism and national identity that attends on the outback. This became clear when a number of Australia's current writers were recently asked by Kim Wilkins and colleagues what they believed were the factors that identified a uniquely Australian mode of existence. The study, "What is Australian Popular Fiction?" (2018), found that "surprisingly similar answers emerged from our interviews about what constitutes an Australian voice or attitude in popular fiction: egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, humour and casual language are chief among the traits cited" (4). It is no surprise, in light of the present exegesis, that these factors are all commonly associated with the myth of outback in general and with the legacy of Henry Lawson in particular. Jean-

François Vernay, looking at Australian literature through French eyes, talks of "the Australian novel … praising nationalistic values of egalitarianism, mateship, democracy, independence and endurance in the bush" (166). Vernay points out how this literary construction originally "would serve as the basis for establishing a federated nation at the turn of the century. Thus, the bush became the nation's mythical cradle" (166). In the next chapter I turn to the question of what emerged from this cradle? In his exploration of in-group and out-group differences and their role in establishing racial groups, Henry Tajfel states that "[s]tereotypes arise from a process of categorization. They introduce simplicity and order where there is complexity and nearly random variation" (132). Over the decades since Lawson, the outback as myth and the stereotypical accent have continued to embody simplicity and uniformity, and to thrive in literature and in the national culture. By exploring the work of Randolph Stow (1935-2010) and Shaun Prescott (1966-), I will show how innate and assumed these stereotypes have become in the Australian psyche. This formulation is questioned and its effects highlighted by Stow's parodying of the national psyche in *Tourmaline (1963)* and other works. I will then show how the myth has changed and yet remained powerful, by examining Prescott's twenty-first century novel *The Town (2017).*

Chapter Two:

The Myth from *Tourmaline* to *The Town*

Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963) examines the life of a chronically isolated Australian settlement that is captive to its own failing. Tourmaline is a town where "[t]here is ease in dereliction. Action becomes irrelevant" (232). A once fruitful place, it exists in a seemingly postapocalyptic landscape, cut off from the rest of the world in the lethally dry Australian desert. This chapter will explore how Stow utilises *Tourmaline* to examine the negative impacts of racial segregation and white ignorance embodied in the myth of Australia's outback.

There is only one way in and out of Tourmaline: "The road ends here" (6). The town's connection with the world beyond is limited to the monthly visit from the supply truck and its silent driver. A stranger, Random, arrives in Tourmaline unconscious and near death. The stranger is soon hailed as a potential saviour when he is found to be a diviner of water, bringing the promise of new life at many levels. As he recovers, his interactions with the townsfolk initiate the drama of a township aching for meaning. Recovering from what is revealed to be a suicide attempt (218), Random discovers that Tourmaline is fertile ground for his own need to be needed. He begins to take on the imposed role of saviour, provider and prophet. Many of the townsfolk fall under the spell of his burgeoning charisma. Even the ancient narrator of the novel, the Law, finds himself not just observing and recording events, but becoming drawn into the thrall of the diviner.

The novel revolves primarily around the story of the whites in the town. The Indigenous presence is negated as the story begins. The arrival of the diviner occurs on the same day that "Billy Bogada, in the native camp" dies: "But it was of no importance" (8), the Law states, clearly placing the events of white town life and Indigenous life at opposite ends of the town's spectrum of relevance. Deborah, the 'half-caste' proxy wife of pub owner Kestrel, and adopted daughter of store owners Tom and Mary Spring, occupies a mid-point in this spectrum. Like most of the characters of the town, she is a paradox. She is "very tall, very straight; her back uncompromising and austere" (10). However, "[t]hat tallness had entered into her character, making her remote; almost, at times… invisible" (11). She is both black and white, but not fully identified as either. She has a 'tallness' within her and yet she fails to

stand up for herself. Even her living arrangements are a constant vacillation between the unconditional support of her adoptive parents and the violent and demeaning Kestrel. The Law, the writer of the "testament of Tourmaline" (168), states that she is "wrapped in her clouds of exile" (11). Called 'half-caste' by the Law, she is a personification of the dual nature of the town, its competing realities residing within her.

The Law also bears a duality within himself. He introduces himself as living in the old, roofless gaol and old police station. He talks on a radio every morning with no response. When the truck arrives, he describes himself as "I myself appearing, pacing the road from my prison with long authoritative strides" (14). Thus the Law is identified as both the one who presides over the now defunct and useless prison, and at the same time its inmate. He refers to "my gaol, to which I am constantly returning, the shrine and the museum of law in Tourmaline" (55). He is captive within Tourmaline, entirely cut off from the world represented by his two-way radio. "Yet I live on", he states, "prisoner of my ruined tower; my keys turned on myself now all the locks are gone" (10). Through this imagery of self-imposed exile, the Law personifies the white myth of the outback. In Stow's vision, this is a simplified, passionate, self-indulgent place that is constantly re-writing history to maintain the comfort of the present and the status quo. The Law can be perceived as the personification of the outback myth, as Lévi-Strauss presents it in "The Structural Study of Myth". He claims that myth operates so well, and so efficiently across time, because the "specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future" (430). Tourmaline is a place and time adrift in itself, unchanging and reliant on itself for its sense of self.

Tourmaline exposes the Australian outback that Lawson enshrined. Stow's characters, and much of the imagery in the work, set about creating an "islandness" (F. Richards 104). Fiona Richards points to how Stow creates constant images of isolation. The entire town of *Tourmaline* is an isolated, islanded outpost. She writes that "[Tourmaline] is an oasis located where the road into the desert ends… turning the town into another metaphorical island" (11). The Law notes of the diviner, "[f]or him, the world was a desert Island, and it was up to him to make what he could of it" (*Tourmaline*, 243). Gerald Moore points to this as an insulating effect in Stow's work, noting how the 'timelag' and 'spacelag' that he perceives in *Tourmaline* are used to concentrate the power of the story, both "in plot and in characterisation" (70). This concentration of effect, described by Fiona Richards as the

novel's 'islandness', exemplifies Barthes' assertion that myths are constructed of "yielding, shapeless associations" (119). The concentrated, isolating landscape of *Tourmaline* creates a context for myth to be enacted without external pressure. Myth itself becomes the focus for an exploration of the national psyche. As John Tosh notes, nostalgic, mythical nationalism "rests on the assertion of tradition, rather than an interpretation of history. It suppresses difference and change in order to uphold identity" (15). In this sense, *Tourmaline* is not just a story of Australia. It is a story of the Australian myth of the outback, and a novel that shines a light on myth-making and its assumed and unquestioning qualities. In *Tourmaline,* there is nothing *but* the elements of myth at play. Everything and everyone within the space of the novel is homogenised into a mythical oneness. *Tourmaline* can be read as a simulacrum for the whole, simplified image of outback Australia. The township represents a social identity forged through stereotypical forms of identification, collapsing the individual into a collective self. Social psychologist Henry Tajfel writes of this kind of identity formation:

> [An] individual uses stereotypes as an aid in the cognitive structuring of his social environment (and thus as a guide for action in appropriate circumstances) and also for the protection of his system of values… a stereotype does not become a *social* stereotype until and unless it is widely shared within a social entity. (158)

This loss of the individual to the stereotypical is made apparent in the words of the Law: "Ah, Tourmaline is a great leveller. Their clothes, their bark faces, their attitudes were identical; their lassitude was a communal affair" (*Tourmaline,* 13).

The diviner's arrival disrupts this social cohesion. Initially unmarked by any religious motivation, he has come to Tourmaline simply because "[i]t was here" (43). But as he recovers, his presence unleashes a spiritual revival, uniting and exciting the residents through his successful divination of a gold seam. Excitement builds as he appears able to find the water for which the town so desperately longs. Not everyone in the town, however, is engaged with the diviner's blossoming religious identity. The pub owner, Kestrel, is framed as the antithesis of the diviner, a dark and brooding presence in the town. Deb describes Kestrel as "not a man. He's a baby, and the rest of him's a wild animal" (141). The Law describes him as, "trapped in his selfhood as the flies in the bar were trapped in their small cages" (155). Physically, "his face suggesting experience of every bitterness the world had to offer" (11), Kestrel is selfish and impulsive. Both powerful and immature, he claims, "I can't breathe here. I want to bash the walls down and get some air" (146). He is self-serving, while

the diviner seems to be serving the community. Kestrel is seen as selfish whilst the diviner is held up by the Law as "our captain, our delegate, the son of Tourmaline" (222).

The Law provides a commentary on these events with descriptions steeped in Christian iconography. Of the diviner's recovery, for example, he notes that "[o]n the third day, he shaved himself" (37). This actually occurs five days after his arrival, but the Law prefers the resurrection reference of rising on the third day. Although the stranger is said to be a gifted dowser, the Law almost always imbues him with divinity, calling him 'the diviner' not 'the dowser'. Even in simple events, the Law leans toward religious description. When Byrne is ejected from the pub, he says "Kestrel and Rock laid hands on him" (38). When unfolding the town's history for the diviner, he begins, "[l]ike unto those of fabled Ophir" (45), not only using biblical syntax but also referencing the ancient gold centre from which the Old Testament King Solomon elicited a regular payment of gold (1 Kings 9:28). The dominant Christian context expressed by the Law is counter-posed by other beliefs within *Tourmaline*. Helen Tiffin suggests that "*Tourmaline* is a novel of metaphysical debate between two very different religious 'systems', Christian millenarianism and the Taoist philosophy of Lao Tzu" (110). Shop owner Tom Spring is the novel's personification of Taoism. Like Kestrel, he fails to be drawn into the diviner's "barbaric séances" (*Tourmaline* 215). Taoism is a philosophy based on the pursuit of non-action "that aims at letting processes evolve by themselves either without or with only minimal external interference" (Moeller 298). While the diviner's growing religious presence seems familiar to the Law, Tom's Taoism confuses him. As a philosophy in which natural activity is allowed to unfold, Taoism is the antithesis of the town's selfish pursuits. Antonella Riem notes that Taoism is "to a certain extent quite similar to Aboriginal lore, is wholly in tune with" (519) the Indigenous land. Thus, a Taoist naturalism similar to Aboriginal lore is seen to exist in the town, but the people of Tourmaline ignore it. Stow uses the competing religious philosophies in *Tourmaline* to expose a dissonance between the traditional, Indigenous existence of harmony with the land and the white, colonialist necessity to impose will and order upon it. Martin Leer sees the use of Taoism in *Tourmaline* as "an attempt to recreate in words, the great Australian emptiness" (Mal du pays, 22). He suggests that the prominence of Taoism is designed to draw attention to the oppositional nature of the whites' relationship with the land. When Tom describes Taoism as the "unity of opposites, and of the overwhelming power of inaction" (*Tourmaline* 212), the Law replies, "I understood nothing, nothing at all" (213). The Law, as an ex-policeman and thus a symbol of colonial power, is intent on maintaining a white colonialist's

view of the land as that which must be owned. Likewise, most of the white townsfolk don't countenance any connection with Tom's Taoist beliefs, and there is little regard for the Indigenous understanding of the land. Riem points to "symbolic resonances in the two different symbolic patterns, with Aboriginal lore as a sort of 'complement' to Taoism" (510). *Tourmaline* highlights the subjugation of the land under white control as a reason for the failure of the white settlement, as it has cut itself off from the Indigenous understanding of the land. Tom Spring mentions "the white men coming. The [native] blokes reckoned they couldn't find the spirits of the children. So they stopped breeding" (96). It is this lost connection with the land that Richard Carr highlights when he speaks of "the potential human costs in failing to address spiritual needs and the enduring cultural costs resulting from that failure" (15). Helen Tiffen understands the novel as addressing "the extreme form of cultural malaise for Europeans from a greener world stranded on the shores of a bitterly dry 'New Holland'" (117). The ignorance of the town's Indigenous past, and the terrible impact of that ignorance, is held by many critics to be central to the novel. David Fonteyn reads *Tourmaline* as an ecological allegory, suggesting that "the natural environment surrounding Tourmaline becomes an allegorical embodiment of the death drive in nature" (4). Tiffin points to the "religions of the Aboriginal inhabitants whose intimate understanding of the land might provide the European interloper with a key to its metaphysical rhythms" (109). John McLaren notes that the land, "which had been the enemy, an object to be subjugated to human will, reveals itself as the continuing subject which ultimately controls all human activity" (76). *Tourmaline* can be seen as the story of white colonialism overwriting and ignoring Indigenous truth to its own detriment.

At the outset, Tourmaline's inhabitants are suspended, in waiting for something to come and bring relevance to them and their town. At the end of the novel, as the town reverts to its 'ease in dereliction', Byrne, the town drunk and cousin of Kestrel, notes that "it's like old times" (241), suggesting that the action of the novel has brought no change, no improvement, only the continuance of stagnation. Many critics have noted this cyclical nature of the novel. Riem understands this as a cycle of binary oppositions: "the cycle of duality, power/dependence, ambition/humiliation, morality/shame" (513). It is expressed in constant themes of contradiction and circling back, such as Deb constantly returning to Kestrel, the truck rolling into town every month and the Law trying to converse on his silent radio every morning. Tourmaline's folk are not changing or moving forward. This underpins the statement made in the opening paragraph of the novel. For these "tenants of the sunstruck

miles… even here, there is something to be learned" (*Tourmaline* 5). The constant returning to previous behaviours establishes that this lesson remains obscure and unlearned. It is this circling that enables myth to remain constant as an allegory of the colonial understanding of the outback. Ross Gibson notes that "myth can be understood as a neatly resolved story that we tell ourselves so that we are not paralysed by the contradictions in actual experience" (91). The 'islandness' of Tourmaline in the present of the novel can be seen as an allegory of the national identity. Ignoring the past is vital to maintaining the assumed present. As Dennis Altman notes:

> The very idea of 'national identity' presupposes a fixed sense of purpose around certain unchanging, shared national symbols, based on ethnic and religious identity or through a common ideology. (87)

National identity, as noted earlier, requires an opaque history and a powerful present. The outback myth enacts this, keeping the past obscured and irrelevant. As Stow questions this myth, McLaren argues that he "has left us with his novels, which offer hope that, as we learn to assimilate our past to the landscape, we may find the vision that eluded… the people of Tourmaline" (81). Tourmaline is a town in which this past, albeit present in the psyche of its residents, is stripped of its power. This recalls Barthes' suggestion that myth "transforms history into nature" (129.) Jack Speed and the Law view their history thus:

> ' … the present's the same. Only more so.'
> 'I dunno' Jack said, with his blue eyes earnest and disconcerted. 'If you take the past away, it makes the future kind of mysterious'. (*Tourmaline* 201)

The present of *Tourmaline* – the drought-stricken now – is more powerful than the rich, fecund past. The past, described as "containing all the comforts and facilities of a city" (45), has become nothing more than a picture book memory. Within *Tourmaline*, the loss of the past is personalised and internalised. The Law, for example, describes Dave Speed as *"*a hopeless case… a born pessimist, a true old timer who wanted to keep even the worst things exactly as he was used to knowing them" (99). This desire for the status quo speaks of a need for the town to remain in a simplified present. The Law even acknowledges that "silence is a habit as enslaving as the most delicate vice" (9). Silence in *Tourmaline* stops any questioning of the white, colonial past. The past has simply gone. In the words of the Law, "It is not a ghost town. It simply lies in a coma. This may never end" (8).

White and non-white lives in *Tourmaline* are starkly different, representing a clear racial segregation. This separation of white and 'native' lives is driven home when the Law states that he never goes to the native camp and Deb tells him, "'You should.' She sounded annoyed with me. 'They're people too' " (124). 'The native camp' is separate, further down the road than the town that is, itself, at the end of the road (8). The people in it are held out as different. In *Tourmaline's* exposition of this racial divide, the whites can only have knowledge of the blacks if they are married to them. The legal relationship allows the whites to have the right to speak as authorities on Aboriginal behaviour. "'They get like that' said Pete, who was married to Darleen Bogada: 'It's in their blood'" (139). The Indigenous characters are presented as living out a subservient role when in the white town. This speaks to what Richard Trudgen noted in his examination of Indigenous communities in Arnhem land. He states that "it seemed the Balanda [Whites], including the missionaries, respected no one's private possessions. Maybe the old way, the way of honour, respect, production and trade and the rule of law, was a thing of the past" (41). Trudgen finds that the white control of the land and ignorance of Indigenous beliefs left the Indigenous people confused, adrift and powerless in their own land. It is this that *Tourmaline* portrays in the Indigenous community of the town. The Law states his colonialist understanding of Jimmy Bogada, who waits outside the shop, stripped of his individuality and humanity:

> And he was so featureless, old Jimmy, so much a part of any landscape whatsoever, that I doubt whether anyone (supposing anyone had passed) would have remarked to himself: "Jimmy Bogada" or looked about for Dave. He simply was; a dark human shape, wriggling its toes in the velvety dust. (94)

The out-group place of the Indigenous people in this mythical Tourmaline is also represented when they are observed during the bonfire celebration in the town, singing their own songs in their own language. The Law places them outside of the normal town behaviour: "In the red light there was something ancient, pathetic, ludicrous, about those black shapes, those traditional words" (163). The town of *Tourmaline* is a homogenised, white place where there is little that is foreign and even the original, Indigenous inhabitants of the land are seen by the white narrator to be outsiders. Indigenous Australians in *Tourmaline* are represented as a deliberately isolated 'out-group'. Tajfel understands the social mechanism of out-grouping as involving "social stereotypes" that are "created and widely diffused" (156). He suggests that these groups are formed particularly around traumatic and large-scale social events such as

the usurping of Aboriginal land during colonial settlement. Furthermore, Tajfel notes that these out-groups will be formulated by the in-group as "justification of actions, committed or planned, against outgroups" (156). Carter finds this to be instrumental in colonial writing, noting that "the Aborigines, for instance, were not physically invisible, but they were culturally so, for they eluded the cause and effect logic that made the workings of history plain to see" *(Road* xx). This can be seen in the previously discussed formation of the outback myth and in understanding the in-group/out-group identification of the Australian accent. The act of displacing a resident people requires intellectualising them as something other than the rightful owners of the land. This is part of the task of out-grouping. By making the Indigenous peoples 'other', white Australians, with their nation-spanning Australian accent, are conceived of as the in-group. Indigenous Australians, the British, and 'new' Australians, with their un-Australian accents, become the out-group. Tourmaline's white townsfolk are assumed by the Law to be the true Australians, natural inheritors of the outback myth, speaking their natural, true Australian. Gabrielle Carey notes in the introduction to the 2015 reprint of *Tourmaline* that:

> There is something quintessentially Australian about *Tourmaline*. The outback town could be any outback town, the pub any rural pub at the end of 'the raw red streak of the road'. The landscape of dust and flies is instantly recognisable. (vii)

The concept of outback is assumed as Stow holds it up and critiques it. It is this encapsulation of the outback identity, the 'any-town-ness' of Tourmaline that is particularly potent. Australian writers, as Helen Tiffin points out, have felt the need to come to terms with a spirit of place which remains unappeased by an "imported Christianity attuned over the centuries to a very different physical and social environment" (109). She suggests that mythology is re-enacted to legitimise and enable white Australians and white religion to remain on the land. It is the detrimental effects of this 'imported Christianity' and white colonialism that Stow calls attention to in *Tourmaline.*

As the town's fervour for the diviner grows, the "terrible danger… from behind those blue hills" (16), that gives the novel its post-apocalyptic feel, emerges as potentially nothing more than the internal assumptions of the Law. Anthony Hassall notes that Tourmaline is "cut off from an outside world by a nuclear war-like disaster, which appears to have destroyed all but a few mutated remnants of human life" (*Randolph Stow* xx-xxi). However, when asked about this reading of *Tourmaline* in an interview, Stow replied, "It's not important but it can be

there" (350). It is also possible that this post-apocalyptic view represents the Law's inner environment rather than any external reality. Just as the Law controls and accentuates the religious narrative of the story, and he alone presents the Indigenous characters as an out-group, it is only he who speaks of "the terrible danger – that danger of which I know nothing, but which drives me night and morning to prayer and fills my sleep with images of wind and annihilation" (*Tourmaline* 47-48) As the relationships in the town are tested, this sense of the world beyond being a postapocalyptic hell emerges as the Law's excuse for remaining in a dying town. It demarcates his Tourmaline as a safe haven. He states, whilst wandering the town at night: "it occurred to me that now, in this country, in this drought, there is nothing whatsoever to fear" (119). The town of Tourmaline is comfortable in its failure and is doing nothing to bring about change. This further enhances the formation of the historical myth. Anne Curthoys notes that "Australian popular historical mythology stresses struggle, courage, and survival, amidst pain, tragedy, and loss" (2-3). It is this image that the Law's post-apocalyptic belief is embracing. He is not alone in seeing the desolate town as comfortable. Despite many references to Tourmaline's green and golden past, miner and resident Dave Speed believes that "the place is better now than it ever was then" (98). The residents are shown to be victims of their own choosing. When the diviner states that he could save the town, the Law replies: "'[f]rom what?' I said. 'Save it from what?'"(82) Despite the town's dilapidated state, it is seen by its residents as being satisfactory. Only the diviner seeks to actively bring change.

As well as being central to the wit and humour in *Tourmaline*, the use of vernacular dialogue is a profound element in situating its characters in a mythic Australian landscape. Stow rarely uses the written word to specifically highlight the particular sound of the Australian accent. I would suggest that this is unnecessary, as by the time of writing, in the 1960s, the accent was, like the outback myth, assumed and innate. Bruce Moore suggests this had occurred "to a large measure in the period 1850-1900" (xi). However, Stow draws out the traditional Australian 'yes'. Even in later Australian works the accented Australian 'yes' has often been presented as 'yeah' (Foster 1996; Winton 2002). This, however, leads to the possibility that those reading with a different accent may pronounce the word as 'yay' or even 'ye ear'. Stow makes the languorous Australian accent prominent when his white characters say 'yair'. This highlights what Bruce Moore notes as the "nasality: a flatness arising from a lack of variation in intonation: a drawl: elision of syllables" (73), of the white Australian accent.

Lynda Mugglestone, in her book *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*, notes how "Within the frameworks of much prescriptive writing, and the attitudes to the language which they encode, each utterance becomes in effect an act of identity, locating the user within social space by means of the variables employed" (57). It is this constant reiteration of these encoded elements of the outback myth that *Tourmaline* exposes. The novel attends to the 'social space' and the 'variables' that construct the myth and how the people, events and landscape of *Tourmaline* show it to be lifeless and infertile. Tourmaline is "blunt and red and barren, littered with the fragments of broken mountains, flat, waterless" (5). *Tourmaline* ridicules the power and vibrant life-force assumed to be encapsulated in the Australian identity. It is a mockery of the land that authors such as Nikki Gemmell speak of as "Where you learn… to smile when you talk; where you learn confidence and optimism and enthusiasm and reach" (11). As Bruce Moore says, across all social classes, the native-born white Australians all speak with the same accent (74). However, whilst the accent of the nation is unusually consistent across the whole land and applies across all social classes, it becomes not a tool for unifying, but a powerful tool joining the outback myth as a device of exclusion. This highlighting of the white Australian accent takes on enormous power in *Tourmaline* as it is shown to promote the out-grouping of the Aboriginal characters. Charlie Yandana is given an accent both explicit and different from the whites', whose dialogue is grammatically presented as that of the Law. The narration and the dialogue in the story are similar until the blacks speak, for example: "'Byrnie went up the mine 's morning' he informed me, as his next item of interest. 'New fella went with him. Gunna make something'" (74). The differentiating Aboriginal accent is presented in the disjointed grammar of their speech. Charlie Yandana is made to sound simple, saying: "'Sorry,' he said, waiting. 'You old man. I forgetting'" (92). The Law presents the Indigenous characters as having accents through this grammatical difference, while the whites don't, thus accentuating the Indigenous out-group status and making apparent their exclusion from the Australian identity. As Bruce Moore states in his exploration, S*peaking Our Language*, "broad Australian, in its embrace of the Australian accent and Australian vocabulary gave voice to the Australian nationalist myth" (134). In *Tourmaline* the Indigenous people are stripped of this identity by the Law. He narrates the story with rich information and history about the townsfolk, especially the whites, and yet he has trouble with the Indigenous identities, saying "I tried to remember something of Gloria – but what was there to know? A nondescript old woman, whose name I would never have noted if she had not been Agnes Day's mother"

(80). The Law's presentation of the Indigenous characters of *Tourmaline* separates them through both what he says or doesn't say about them, and how they speak. In his exploration of *Imagined Communities*, it is this role of language that Benedict Anderson highlights as being of particular importance, when he states that "[m]uch the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities"* (133). Language and the accent that expresses it become a powerful force for creating, and maintaining, this "Australian Nationalist myth" (B. Moore 134). The vernacular of the narrator is the language of the named and dominant white characters. It is the language of power in *Tourmaline*. Stow exposes how the myth of the outback now lives in the speech of the white people. The novel shows how this mythology carries on unabated and has powerful consequences. It speaks to the consideration of what W.E.H. Stanner referred to as "…our folklore about the [A]borigines" and how this folklore, this mythology, "had a lot to do with the making of our racial difficulties and it still has a lot to do with maintaining them" (29). The creation of the outback myth and the national accent are prominent in allowing the forgetting of the nation's colonial past. Grimmer's finding, that to "speak English with an accent that is not Australian" means "the person will be marked… as someone who is not Australian" (282), is especially potent in examining *Tourmaline.* The national accent that is now held up as a primary indicator of national identity becomes particularly poignant as Grimmer's paper also notes that "the nation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are the nation's traditional owners, are ostracised for their perceived reluctance or inability to learn and use English" (282). The sound of the Indigenous voice, if it is not bearing an Australian accent, can be seen as not Australian. Stow makes a feature of the Indigenous voices in *Tourmaline*. They are given deliberately not-Australian accents and grammar. This makes evident the racial separation. This is particularly relevant in light of Bruce Moore's contention that:

> Of all the markers of identity, language is by far the most significant… Australian English is central to the process of giving voice to our Australian identity: in important ways, we are *what* we speak, and we are *how* we speak. (ix)

In *Tourmaline*, the Law establishes Indigenous characters who don't speak Australian with an Australian accent whilst also diminishing their validity within the town. *Tourmaline* therefore highlights the suggestion that if the characters speak with an Indigenous accent, they are not, in the eyes of white Australia, Australian.

In his examination of why Indigenous communities in Arnhem Land have found such difficulty interacting with whites, Richard Trudgen makes a powerful argument about the communication failures between Yolŋu [Indigenous] and Balanda [White] people. He states that much of the problem is based on entirely different cultural foundations, held separate by entirely different language and communication frameworks, including syntax, grammar and even the actual sounds required to be spoken and heard (83). Most important, however, is his observation that for the dominant culture, the ability to speak in cross-cultural contexts is vastly misjudged because their speech is dominant. The minor culture is, therefore, misunderstood or completely ignored. Trudgen states that in these cross-cultural communications, "[l]anguage is not taken seriously" (83) by the white speakers, as these dominant-culture speakers believe they are heard and understood by the Indigenous people, even if they are not. They are the voice of authority, the dominant voice, and are thus 'right'. And their voice is differentiated by the accent of the outback. In *Tourmaline* the voice of the Law is dominant and the voices of the Indigenous people are not taken seriously.

Ultimately, the diviner's quest to find water fails. Carried out in the shadow of a parody of a Christian charismatic revival, the quest is seen as a failing of faith. Faith in the diviner, in the god he claims to be representing and in the dreams of a revitalised Tourmaline. The diviner walks out of the town in what seems like a successful bid to finally end his own life. Earlier, he had knelt, anguished, in the church and prayed for understanding: "'I am' [praying], he cried. 'I have, for days, for weeks, why am I here? Am I meant to stay? Or can I go on?... God, God. Tell me where I stand'" (113). Only the diviner asks such questions, marking him as unfit to be part of Tourmaline. He is a man actively seeking answers and deliverance, so he is antithetic to a town that "simply lies in a coma" (8) by choice. The Law notes that "there was nothing to him but his ferocious pride" (220). The diviner questions the myth, making him unsuitable, even unworthy, of the outback.

As the novel closes, there has been nothing of what the Law had hoped for: "[t]he soul of Tourmaline, tingling and yearning; whispering: A beginning" (198). Instead, the town has returned to its comatose state. The events that have shaken it can be seen as just the cyclical, unchanging nature of a town that doesn't really want change. The diviner has gone. There has been no great find of water, so the drought conditions remain. The Law is still the official voice of the town. However, Tom Spring, the Taoist voice of balance and calm, the representative of an alternative belief system, has died peacefully at his shop counter. And

Kestrel has returned from beyond the hills. He has returned bearing technology for finding water rather than relying on faith. Tiffin notes that the "dream remains, ready for the advent of the next messiah" (113). Most of the relationships have returned to their previous states; the cycle is repeating again. The myth remains undisturbed and unshaken and the whites of the town remain in their position of ignorant, destructive prominence. But now there is a difference. As Kestrel returns, Deb tells him, "'I'm having a baby'" (240). Fertility, and possibly hope, may have returned to Tourmaline. The cycle is starting again and hope will once again prove futile, but the myth will remain.

From *Tourmaline*, written in 1963, the myth of the outback arrives in the twenty-first century by a circuitous route. Paul Carter writes that "[m]ythic thinking doesn't advance lineally as a logical argument. It advances in a zig zag way (like discourse) by way of analogy" (*Mythform* 12). Exploring the symbol in mythology, Nicholas Halmi suggests that "the symbol can exist because it has existed (and may even now be recognized as such). But the procedure is suspect" (134). In this understanding, the myth of the outback may have undergone changes and reconstructions over the decades, yet it can still be perceived because 'it has existed', and thus it continues to be. In order to understand the journey of the outback myth, from Lawson through Stow's *Tourmaline* to the present, one must also attend to the nature of myth formation as understood by Lewis Hyde. In his recent exploration of mythology, *A Primer for Forgetting* (2019), Hyde investigates the essential role of forgetting in the creation of myth, stating: "to secure a lie, surround it with a moat of forgetfulness" (21). The continuation of the outback myth into the twenty-first century relies on forgetfulness, to enable the lie of uncontested white colonisation to be replaced by the idealised outback identity at the heart of white Australia. There is much missing from the myth – much has been 'forgotten' – to allow this to remain effective. To explore the formulation and continuance of the outback myth into the twenty-first century I now turn to Shaun Prescott's 2017 novel *The Town*, a work that powerfully satirises Australia's outback identity. In *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen puts forward an understanding of intertextuality that integrates Gérard Genette's conception of hypertextuality, presenting it as "any relationship uniting a text B … to an earlier text A … upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (107-108). By analysing Prescott's novel from the perspective of the earlier works of Lawson and Stow, it can be seen how Prescott is able to present an outback town that intertextually (or hypertextually, as Genette also calls it), illuminates and reflects the mythic systems of earlier outback works. *The Town* reflects *Tourmaline*, written fifty years earlier, and interrogates the earlier

representation of the outback myth. It also excises much from the earlier representation of the outback, providing insight into what has been 'forgotten' to maintain the myth.

The Town tells the story of an unnamed narrator who arrives in an unnamed town in central western New South Wales to write a book about towns that have disappeared. The narrator himself has no identified past and arrives in the town as an outsider and observer. This allows him to view and comment on things within the town that are taken to be quite natural but are often absurd, such as a bus route with no passengers, a pub with no patrons, and a town with little history. Other elements of the novel are fantastical. Ciara, a girl from the town befriended by the narrator, is constantly redistributing musical cassettes that arrive mysteriously in a constant flow. Holes of invisibility and void begin to appear and engulf the town. The novel is episodic in nature, almost a collection of vignettes that unfold as the narrator meets various characters in the town and observes numerous events and rites of the town's life. This creates the impression of a town that is adrift in myth, with no past, no future and barely any present. This is expressed in the narrator's contention that:

> The town had appeared for no apparent or recorded reason, and so it would disappear for no apparent or anticipated reason. Yet despite the town having no reason, somewhere along the way it established a notion of itself, and this endured without resistance. That is why the town is a town. (90)

This image is redolent of the outback myth as it exists in the twenty-first century. The town can be seen as resting upon an unsupported, historyless and ultimately futile self-image. Like the outback myth, Prescott's town is held within a shimmer. More than a mere heat haze, this shimmer prevents the narrator from remembering anything beyond it (76). The fantastical appearance of holes in the town, with no internal dimensions, analogously portrays the town as having no supporting structure. "It was more of an absence than a hole" (86), the narrator concedes. These elements bring us to what Tzvetan Todorov claims as "the very heart of the fantastic ... In a world which is indeed our world … there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" (25). As the novel progresses, the reality of the town is challenged by events that are impossible, thus disturbing the reader's assumption of normality. This is a town which has forgotten its past and is comfortable with this forgetfulness, where "there was nothing noble about the town anymore" (Prescott 73). In this constructed reality, fantastic elements are used to parody the mythical heart of Australia.

If “Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush and the bush is the heart of Australia” (Eggert, “Convergence” 85), Prescott presents an Australia that is devoid of the Lawsonian outback. There is no sense of the swagman, the shearer or the hard land in the novel’s construction of an urbanised, rural township. The outback as Lawson originally presented it has been largely forgotten. And yet, in Prescott’s representation, the town conjures up many aspects of the outback myth previously represented in *Tourmaline. The Town’s* locus is vastly more urbanised than that of Stow’s outback in *Tourmaline.* Prescott anchors his rural town with contemporary brands and business names. His narrator works at Woolworths, meets friends at Michel’s Patisserie for coffee, and drinks Tooheys New. Jennifer Mills argues that this better allows Prescott’s town to encapsulate modern cultural mythologies: “His decision to name these tired brands also situates the novel in a contemporary capitalist realm where meaning and identity are corralled by labels that are ultimately empty of meaning and identity” (2). Despite this modern rendering of Australian identity, *The Town* intimately echoes *Tourmaline*. Signs of outback myth, previously explored in *Tourmaline,* return as themes in *The Town.* For example, Prescott describes the region of the town as where “the west was just a vision of flat brown paddocks and dirt roads. The town was somewhere in between” (17). This compares with Stow’s description of Tourmaline: “Ahead, the red road ran straight as a fence, through the wilderness, towards the blue hills piled on the horizon like storm-clouds” (166). Similarly, Tourmaline is a town in which history has been stripped away or made irrelevant, enabling the persistence of mythology. Jack Speed and Rock, for example, ponder an elusive past: “‘I can only remember the dry stumps of orange trees,’ Rock said. ‘Over there, against the fence.’ ‘I can’t remember anything,’ Jack said, ‘except what I can see all around’” (201). This loss of the past is presented far more deliberately in *The Town,* as Prescott constantly notes the irrelevance of the town’s history and its inability to give itself any reason to exist: “Nothing of note has ever happened in this town, and by the time it does there will no longer be any point in remembering it” (8). Later, the effect of this lack of history is made prominent:

> The people in the town lived as if they would never die, but they were not heroic or foolish like in books and songs. They were only there. They seemed to understand better than anyone else that they were only there. (85)

In *The Town,* this lack of a clear history is seen by the Librarian to be ultimately a failure of language, as he states, “[t]his town is just here though. No one remembers how it got here, or

why the presumed founders built it, except maybe the really old people, who are too addled by age to speak in complete sentences" (9). This echoes Stow's depiction of Tourmaline's mythology in the Law's narration: "And such desolation everywhere… [s]uch ruin I could not well describe in a language that has not, as yet, lost hope" (75). In both novels, the forgetting of past and history are depicted as reasons for the town's parlous state. Both novels also ridicule the perceived right of the outback town to feel pride in itself. In conversation with Ciara, the narrator of *The Town* states, "your town has no history or basis for its pride at all. It's why the town culture is, in truth, nothing at all, or everything at once" (78). In *Tourmaline*, the diviner states that the people of Tourmaline do not see themselves as the world outside does:

> I'd heard of towns that were supposed to be – well, relics. And Tourmaline was one of them. I don't suppose it'd hurt your feelings if I said that no one cares a cracker whether the place is still here or not. In fact, most people think it's been dead for years. (44)

Both towns feature many abandoned homes that are available for living in. In *The Town*, the narrator finds a home: "After an afternoon spent inspecting the abandoned houses Tom had pointed out, I opted for the least vandalised one" (136). In *Tourmaline*, the newly arrived diviner is similarly invited to find a home of his choice:

> 'Where you going to live?' Jack asked the diviner. 'At Tom's?'
> 'Don't think so,' the diviner said. 'Couldn't do that to them. I'll move in elsewhere.'
> 'Plenty of empty houses,' Kestrel said. 'Something Tourmaline has got.' (65)

In both novels, the availability of housing does not point to a welcoming environment or even suggest wealth, but highlights the run-down, unliveable, degraded nature of both towns. Neither is a place where many people want to live anymore. This simple device also draws attention to the fact that once, in the forgotten history of both towns, there had been a time when many more people had chosen to live there, but that time has passed. Both *Tourmaline* and *The Town* draw the image of failing towns, falling from a forgettable past to a vastly uncertain future. As a metaphor for the outback, this is a powerful device made even more profound as both stories highlight not only the dying nature of the towns and the people's inability to acknowledge this, but also their seeming inescapability. When the diviner seeks to leave Tourmaline, he speaks with Byrnie:

> ‘I’m not going that way,’ the diviner said.
> ‘You flying or something?’
> ‘I’m not going to the hut,’ the diviner said. ‘I’m going home.’
> And Byrne stared up at him, out of a dark face pitted with shadows.
> ‘You’ll never make it,’ he said. ‘Mike – ’
> ‘Home,’ said the diviner, in a dream.
> ‘Don’t be stupid. You’ll die.’ (245)

In *The Town*, Prescott writes, “[t]here was no way out of these winding streets except back the way you came” (24). This aspect of inescapability in both novels drives home the tenacity of the myth supporting the outback. The potential of thinking beyond the myth and the town is presented as having been stripped away in these stories. As noted earlier, they are islands. This has been presented by Barthes (1973), Gerald Moore (1987) and Fiona Richards (2013) as a foundational aspect of myth.

Lévi-Strauss states that:

> myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. However, it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion. (*Myth and Meaning* 6)

The myth does not function to give those who believe it any actual control, but simply to instil the *belief* that they have control, the idea that they understand a truth they can act upon. This belief remains islanded, isolated from reality by the myth itself. The sense that this is how things are and how things always have been and will be strips the characters in both novels of any sense of agency, and perhaps even more importantly, any sense of responsibility. Prescott makes this mythical emptying of history implicit as the narrator is told, “[t]he best way to plug memories is to distort them with the present, Rick told me, in the same way it’s possible to erase meaning from a song by repeatedly listening to it” (143). This is a potent observation for the persistence of the outback myth. The assumed, repeated inevitability and inescapability of the outback allows contemporary Australians to continue to abdicate responsibility in the face of the history it obscures. Prescott points to this obscuring as a fading of truth. History becomes irrelevant and thus understanding evaporates. As the narrator sees the Town disappearing before his eyes, he states “[a]s the town disappeared, so did my grip on any particular town truth” (147). The narrator also notes that “[n]o one wanted

to learn new things about the town. No one wanted to learn old things either" (135). Any essential drive to grow or better themselves has been abandoned by the residents of the town, as it was by the people of Tourmaline.

Both Prescott and Stow direct our attention to the Australian accent as a marker of a mythical heritage. In *The Town,* Ciara loves listening to the broadcaster on the radio: "He'd just sounded like a regular town man with a regular nasal local accent … He'd had the same lazy, benevolent air of all the other elderly broadcasters" (61). It is this accent, this sound of the accepted Australian national voice, that Prescott's narrator hopes will provide him with the truth of *The Town*: "I supposed the essence might be in the language of the townspeople: not what they said, but the way they said it" (162). Yet he finds no such essence.

While there are numerous similarities between Stow's and Prescott's towns, it is the points of divergence that make *The Town* such a powerful exploration of contemporary Australia and of the transformation of the outback mythos. Comparing the texts, it is possible to see that in both, the outback myth maintains many of its foundational elements. The outback remains an isolating, islanded place which obscures the truth of history and leans entirely on white understandings. It is still an outback that speaks of white history with a dominant white voice. However, *The Town,* unlike *Tourmaline,* is devoid of Indigenous presence. This is an outback town that is all white and only white. W.E.H. Stanner claims that "[w]e have been able for so long to disremember the [A]borigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so" ("Dreaming" 25). Their absence from the fictional outback town suggests that the myth no longer requires any Indigenous presence, that Aboriginal Australia can be ignored in the outback myth without the myth collapsing. The religious and spiritual themes found in *Tourmaline* are also absent from *The Town,* suggesting that these elements also no longer adhere to the deeper myth of Australian nationality that the novel questions. Stow's interrogation of the Indigenous spiritual presence and the potential failure to acknowledge this, has arrived in the contemporary town as another absence. In *The Town,* Indigenous presence and spirituality of any form are no longer salient elements of the modern Australia in the way Stow presented them in *Tourmaline*. Stow utilised spiritual aspects to highlight the loss of connection with the land resulting from colonialisation. For Prescott, any suggestion of Indigenous presence or Indigenous spirituality is completely absent, completely forgotten. Like Lawson, Prescott presents the contemporary white Australia as paying no heed to an Indigenous presence or spirituality.

Unlike Tourmaline, Prescott's town does not see itself as a relic. The Law says of Tourmaline, "[i]t is not a ghost town. It simply lies in a coma" (8). But in *The Town*, there is no such negative view of the failing town. It is seen as being worthwhile simply because it exists. As Prescott writes, "[a]nd yet, the more remote the town's legacy became, the more passionate the townspeople were to protect and evangelise it" (73). *The Town* is full of people who believe the town is actually the best town. The gang of Steve Sanders (a group of townsmen all known as Steve Sanders), when arguing with the newcomer narrator, point to their town as the pinnacle of Australian achievement:

> Nothing that happens now here is historical. History is in the past. He pointed to the floor and said, this is what history worked towards. This is the result of it. This is what people worked for. Farmers, builders, Anzacs, the lot. This is how things are going to be from now on. This is how they're going to stay. History can end, you know. It doesn't need to keep going. We have everything set perfectly in place and so nothing needs to happen anymore. (173)

The Steve Sanders are the voice of contemporary Australia. They embrace the myth and passionately believe it to be the true national identity. This attitude, while not prominent in *Tourmaline*, is perhaps what Stow is identifying in *Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965) when Rick Cobram states the belief that Australian towns feature:

> this arrogant mediocrity. The shoddiness and the wowserism and the smug wild-boyos in the bars. And the unspeakable bloody boredom of belonging to a country that keeps up a sort of chorus: Relax, mate, relax, don't make the pace too hot. Relax, you bastard, before you get clobbered. (273)

Prescott makes this 'shoddiness and wowserism' a feature of *The Town*. He defines the pride of the town and then exposes the ludicrousness of it. As the town begins to disappear, it draws attention to the frailty of this belief. He represents a town that is disappearing both physically and philosophically, saying that "All of these absences, the cavities, are the empty spaces where important structural elements would normally exist in order to support the ongoing truth of anything. It is the same for a town" (175). Lucy Cosslet suggests that this aspect of *The Town* targets the country's white nationalists, who, she argues, are:

> very violently opposed to the idea that Australia could be anything but great. Potentially the frustration is born of the understanding deep down that none of that is

> actually true. We were born of colonial violence and genocide and there is nothing that we can really do to ever erase that. (2018)

Toward the conclusion of *The Town*, the narrator and Ciara run away to the city. Here *The Town* moves beyond the islanded outback and views the town in contrast to the nature of the city. The novel finds the antithesis of the outback myth. The city is not held up as an example of the simple Australian life, but as something complex and confusing:

> Only during those listless train trips [across the suburbs and city] was I able to discern a truth about the city. It was only one truth among millions, but it was a certain one: the truth of the city was that its dimensions forbade ever knowing it. (218)

This is a vital observation, considering the same is not applied by Prescott, Stow or even Lawson to the massive and ancient land. The narrator believes the town to be simple and understandable. He expects that "[t]he town would be there forever. The future of the town is that it will just continue to be a town" (Prescott 74). It is the city that is seen by the narrator as unknowable. The town is seen by its residents and the narrator as simple and devoid of history. Now Prescott holds this up in opposition to the city. The narrator makes the point that "[t]he city had a deep affection for its own history" (223). The same is not said of the town or the outback, whose histories have been deliberately denied and made simple. Australia as the outback myth of simple, hard land, islanded and historyless, as founded in Lawson and questioned in *Tourmaline* and *The Town,* is able to remain at the heart of Australia's identity because it remains unquestioned.

My own fictional work, *The Willton Tales*, seeks to question this construct. The entrenched and yet unsupported belief in the rural outback as a simple, isolated receptacle of harsh white struggle is held up for examination. The next chapter explores *The Willton Tales*, as these elements are seen to be false beliefs. The town of Willton is a recognisably Australian farming town, but it is neither simple and isolated nor irredeemably harsh and hostile. And yet, without these entrenched elements that support the outback mythology, it remains undeniably Australian.

Chapter Three:

Myth and *The Willton Tales*

Having explored the creation, development and formulation of the outback myth and the attendant Australian accent, from the late 1800s to the early twenty-first century, I will now turn to the creative component of this thesis to explore how *The Willton Tales* seeks to question the outback myth and ask; what may have been culturally 'forgotten'? It will also explore how the myth may be questioned and exposed through this work.

The Willton Tales takes the form of a collection of short stories. As Leon Cantrell noted in 1977, "[t]he short story or sketch has come to be regarded as the [eighteen] nineties' most characteristic literary product" (xiii). I have returned to this form, so much favoured by Henry Lawson, in an attempt to write beyond the outback myth as it exists today. *The Willton Tales* incorporate fantastical elements and a number of popular mythic monsters in order to disturb the realist 'outback' setting. They present as traditional outback short stories and yet contain within them startling elements that parody and unsettle traditional expectations, seeking to make light of the outback mythos. They reframe the recognisable stereotypes of the small country town, speaking to the understanding proposed by Stuart Hall that:

> identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. (2)

In this exegesis, I have examined this common origin in the works of Lawson, Stow and Prescott, and its articulation of a homogenised and simplified outback myth. In the latter works, I highlighted how this myth, and the Australian identity that rests upon it, are susceptible to dissolution through a critical fictionality. I have argued that the outback myth developed through white colonial storytelling that allowed a collection of 'shared characteristics' to be formed as fiction-based beliefs of a common origin. The interconnected nature of *The Willton Tales* exposes this common origin, exploring the way in which a small town forms its identity from the interactions that occur within it. The 'outback', devoid as it is of essential historical veracity, can be exposed by exploring the contradictions and complexities inherent in a rural community and its history. *The Willton Tales* conjures a town that exists as a typically Australian outback town, but one in which fantastic occurrences call into question the assumptions of Australia's outback identity. It utilises, in Hall's terms, "the

discursive approach [which] sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always 'in process' " (2). The stories uphold the 'normal' and find within it the abnormal, unsettling the assumptions of the constructed outback identity, reframing it to find other ways of perceiving the construction. They refer to aspects of rural life that must be ignored in order to maintain the outback myth. As we saw in the discussion of *The Town,* as myth becomes less stable, it becomes less logical. There is much about Willton that contradicts mythical understanding. It is not a simple place, nor a place forged exclusively from white struggle, nor is it devoid of Indigenous or spiritual presence.

The opening story, "Willton Dogs", portrays mysterious cloud dogs appearing in the town overnight and killing two of the town's youths. The unseen dogs, which are known but never spoken of, hark back to the early European mythology of wolves and werewolves. (Allen 2000; Arnds 2015) The wolf myth is a powerful form to infuse into the Australian mythos. In his exploration of the foundations and functions of the wolf myth, *Lycanthropy in German Literature,* Peter Arnds sees the werewolf as "a cursed Human" (1). He presents the wolf as "a metaphor for greed and foolishness, for despotic rulers, sexual predators, persecuted minorities, traumatized individuals, and those practising resistance against institutions of power, the Church and the State" (1-2). The wolf has historically worn the metaphoric mantle of the rootless and threatening foreigner (70). In a number of *The Willton Tales,* I therefore incorporate aspects of wolf mythology to evoke a white Australia that arrived as rootless, foreign and threatening to the existing Indigenous communities. Wolves are not indigenous to the land, so their presence as a foreign threat creates a subtext throughout *The Willton Tales.* These mysterious beasts also feature in the "The Long View". In this story Keelty, an outcast and a cripple, has a strange dog as his protector. Keelty is a man who sleeps for six months at a time, due to overdosing on night repair cream, and then stays awake for six months at a time. A mysterious black dog, one of the cloud dogs from the earlier story, defends him as he sleeps. Here again, Arnds's comments on ancient Greek myths and the subsequent German wolf mythologies are relevant: "In both cultures (classical and medieval) to be a wolf signifies that one has forfeited humanity and is obliged to lead an 'outside' existence" (15). Living in the dunes beyond the town, living outside of the conventional timescale of the town and having the ability to see a day into the future, the crippled Keelty lives an 'outside' existence, protected by his fantastic hound. In an Australia that has portioned off the entire outback as a site of 'outside' existence, the lives of the wolf and the outcast human present a striking correlation as ancient wolf mythology merges with the story of the outback. In this

story, it is Keelty's mysterious dog that maintains the old man's outcast status, protecting his guilt-induced exile.

In "A Man on The Run", the werewolf myth becomes central. Baker, the town butcher, is a werewolf and a vegan. He is also an outsider, out of place in his profession and in rebellion against a meat-eating humanity. As a loving, compassionate, carer for animals he is both unexpected and impossible. Matthew Beresford defines the werewolf of myth as emerging from a history of being an outcast, a soldier, a creature of " 'shaman magic', rituals, sacrifices" (39). This is true of Baker the butcher. He speaks compassionately to the sheep he slaughters. He is isolated, but central to the community that relies on him for meat. He bridges binaries of slaughter and love, slaughtering because he loves the animals too much to allow anyone else to do it. He both expresses human desires and has a compulsion to express frightening, inhuman desires. And rather than being excluded by a frightened society, like the werewolf of old (Arnds 15), the butcher of Willton is exiled to aloneness of his own volition. He is an outcast by choice, pushing away the woman who enjoys his company as he approaches the time of the full moon, afraid of the exclusion that may become formal if his truth is discovered. This tale upends the werewolf myth, presenting him as caring and sacrificially compassionate.

Dogs in many forms recur thematically in *The Willton Tales*, not just as an unsettling mythical element but also because the dog, as worker and companion, is emblematic of Australian rural life. This relationship is central to "Something About Dogs", in which three farm pups, initially seen as a burden and a waste, are found to be magical and incredible, further unsettling an expected paradigm of rural life. *The Willton Tales* opens the possibility that the outback myth of tough, simple people in a hard, simple place is simply a misconception. Human lives are far more complex.

Another of *The Willton Tales*, "The Coming Storm", places the vampire myth in the quiet Australian town. It takes the idea of the vampire as a metaphor for death, "for the darkness in humanity – [that] acted as a talisman for society's fear and fascination with death" (Beresford 15), and upends it to present the story of Amorlita finding a life beyond her vampirism. The city-girl vampire in the story leaves behind her centuries of power and fearful city life to lead a simple, human life with a mortal man. But she finds this life is becoming predictable. She is an out-of-place vampire, constantly choosing to remain human, and thereby presenting an

alternative view of the Australian town as a site, not of harsh simplicity, but of joyful choice and the possibility of a positive life.

"Brian's Night Out" is a zombie story, again deliberately upending a known myth to explore life on the Australian land. In her exploration of *Zombies*, (2013) Jennifer Rutherford notes that "[f]amilies are the first to disintegrate in the zombie apocalypse" (6). This tale, however, sees the 'return' of a dead farmer who wanders the town and ponders the disintegration of his rural family under the weight of history and his own emotionless, confused existence. In representing the disintegration of the family *prior* to 'zombification', the narrative reframes the iconic zombie genre theme of post-apocalyptic disintegration. It is the opposite of the zombie trope of "smashing in the head of the one you love" (Rutherford 5). In "Brian's Night Out", the disintegration has already occurred: a simple family failure, leading to Brian's personal sacrifice, his life for his daughter's, and his subsequent 'zombification'. This inverted story of the undead allows *The Willton Tales* to explore forms of joy and goodness by subverting the traditionally apocalyptic myth. The story of 'Brian's Night Out' ends with an allusion to the ultimate zombie story of Christ coming back from the dead and walking the earth, a positive zombie image and a peaceful zombie ending for Brian, who is happy to return to his grave.

As well as these more traditional and recognisable mythical constructs, *The Willton Tales* incorporates elements of fantasy and magical realism. They operate as powerful devices to explore the fictional outback myth. As Melissa Stewart notes:

> The potency of magical realism lies in its capacity to explore the protean relationship between what we consider rational (what is knowable, predictable, and controllable) and irrational (what is beyond our complete understanding and control). (477)

Walter Sokel notes the specific case of "the fantastic in Kafka's work [which] continues to counterbalance the tragic effect of mimetic identification" (37). Whilst the characters and places may be recognisable, even 'normal', they are placed in a different light by the fantastic events or elements that appear with them, causing the representation to take on new aspects. Another Willton tale, "The Girl Who Went Away", deliberately plays on Kafka's *The* M*etamorphosis* (1915) in a bid to disrupt mimetic, representative and replicated assumptions. It presents Transyta, a young girl growing up in Willton as an outsider, and her mother who is transforming into an insect to protect herself emotionally. The tragic outcome of the story reflects Ciaran O'Connor's interpretation of *The Metamorphosis.* She suggests that, "It would

appear that the truly deformed characters are the supporting cast of *Metamorphosis*" (2012). In "The Girl Who Went Away", the supporting cast are similarly transformed, either by death or by fantastic change. The girl, after killing her insectoid mother, finds herself freed and becoming completely invisible. The irrational is presented as the entirely rational outcome and explanation of an otherwise irrational presence in the town.

The presence of Indigenous people and of the spiritual dimension that was absent from Prescott's *The Town* feature in my own work. However, unlike Stow's use of these elements in *Tourmaline,* they do not represent a foundational presence, but rather act as further indications of the unusual. The only Indigenous character to have a recurring presence in the stories is the Aboriginal youth, Danny. He lives somewhere outside of the town and is only ever found at the muddy lake, standing in the water, fishing with a hand line. He is, quite literally, out, casting. He talks with Transyta in "The Girl Who Went Away" and unfolds a simplified history of the Indigenous absence from the town, explaining that his family had thrown all their goods in an old car and driven to the city. It is a moment that speaks to the historical tragedy pointed to by Trudgen, who states that many of the Yolŋu people, after missions took over their land and made the Aboriginal clans live on the land of other clans, "moved away, insulted by the fact that they could not control what happened on their own land" (40). In *The Willton Tale*s, overt Indigenous presence has been historically excluded from the town. The remaining understanding of the Indigenous belief is represented by this one boy with an unreliable memory and only a partial understanding of the reality that has been lost. He is the lone presence that makes the wider Indigenous absence more obvious. Other stories, however, allude to the reality of a lost connection with the land. The story of "A Very Willton War" frames a battle between two tribes of possums displaced by scrub clearing. A human, Josh, wakes every morning battered and injured. He is unaware that events playing out in the natural environment are directly, and very physically, affecting him. The white townsfolk have lost the connection with the land that was once available through Indigenous practices. In the story of "The Haunting Shed", this loss becomes central as the mysterious death of a young girl is presented as only being explicable through the story told by this one surviving Indigenous person. But Danny's memory of his own spiritual past is so forgotten and fractured, and so foreign to white reality, that it is ignored.

Religion plays only a minor role in *The Willton Tales*, alluded to for its official role in weddings and funerals. Spirituality, however, becomes central to the story "Pets". Here Ben,

the baker and owner of *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery,* accidentally bakes a muffin that seems to be the head of Jesus Christ. This muffin then appears to take on miraculous properties, healing an old woman of her chronic arthritic condition. The resulting uproar leads to questioning amongst the townsfolk, of faith and religion and finally the observation that yes, this is a miracle and yes, it is just a muffin. The questions of spirituality remain unresolved within the town. Thus, Indigenous presence and spiritual presence are both held up as unusual and beyond the understanding of the town. There is seen to be no responsibility to a 'higher power', no attending to a greater force beyond the small and selfish lives of the townsfolk.

The Australian accent is featured as a situating element in *The Willton Tales,* as a means of demarcating those not born in Australia. The character of Doc Posthuma, the town doctor, is what might be called a 'new Australian', in spite of his long residency. In "A Sensitive Man" his past is introduced:

> Forty-six years ago he left a dank mildew closet full of European tragedies. The rasping of infant lungs and the stomp of polished boots, parents carved from boiled potato and a home built on the tangled roots of feuding ideologies (53)

This foreign history is borne out in the way he speaks, such as in "The Willton Dogs", in conversation with the police sergeant:

> – Und ze other vun?
> – Same. Wanna see?
> – No! I mean, no, zat's fine, sank you Sergeant. (11)

Other, 'local' characters also speak with grammatically differentiated speech, but since they are Australian, their speech sits upon that continuum suggested by Kel Richards, from 'broad Australian' at one end to 'cultivated Australian' at the other (7). This includes Brian Blight, the zombie farmer of "Brian's Night Out", who narrates his story saying, "As far as funerals goes, I don't reckon mine were a bad one or nothin'. Not like I got to lots of 'em in me time" (23). At the other, more cultivated, end of the spectrum is Father Portcullis, who still speaks as an Australian. He explains his role to Ben in the story "Pets":

> Mate, I have been the priest in this district for over twenty-five years and the only times people have spoken to me about the things that matter is when there is one of

> our biannual truck smashes, when those two girls were killed in the paddock or when they turn up for an unexpected funeral. Or a haunting. (94)

The generic Australian accent is further accentuated throughout *The Willton Tales* by the ubiquity of phrases that Kel Richards highlights as the Australian penchant for "muckin' around with words" (5). These include phrases such as:

> Don't be so bloody melodramatic! You're talking crazy like a three-wheeled ute. (5)
> Bloomin' eck, her little voice wheezes. I'll be ridin' a legless pig. (90)
> Ya talking a lot of weeds woman. (33)

These phrases and the broad range of Australian speech draw attention to the unique sound and grammar of the identifying and defining Australian voice.

The stories all work together to evoke the unknown beneath the assumed, unsettling the existing mythology. In her *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond,* Yasmine Musharbash claims that "[m]onsters [which] lurked at the borderlands between the known and the unknown, heralded peril through their very presence, and signified jeopardy through their abnormal bodies" (4). It is the presence of these monsters, mythical creatures and fantastic happenings that makes Willton a typical Australian town with an unsettling reality. The peril they herald is the loss of the important and foundational historical veracity. Rather than stories of shock or horror, however, *The Willton Tales* seeks to utilise these themes in the service of engagement, providing accessibility rather than offense, enjoyment rather than angst. And yet, the unsettling themes allow the stories to expose the mythology, to disturb the veneer of the assumed identity of the outback farming town of Willton.

Conclusion

In Australia, starting in the 1880s, as the collection of settlements moved towards federation and a hopeful future as a new nation, the national identity began to emerge. However, this thesis proposes that the unique characteristics of this Australian identity emerged largely from a false history created by works of popular fiction. It was a mythology of the nation that would allow it to shelter white colonisation from its true history and thus obscure the acts that had been carried out in its name. At this time, three factors concurrently engaged with the nation to allow this mythical identity to develop:

First; globally, the concept of nation was emerging and being spread through the newly developing print and communications technologies. This 'print capitalism' (Anderson *Imagined Communities*) enhanced the power of the fictional representations that fed the desire across Australia for a sense of self. Fiction became a tool for the nation to understand itself.

Second; as part of this search for national identity, Australia was actively expressing its own unique accent. It became an act of separation from the founding empire and a connection within the new nation. The spoken accent was being presented, transcribed and transmitted through powerful fictional tales that also encapsulated the outback myth, that the settlers were able to internalise. (B. Moore; K. Richards)

Third; this creation of the Australian identity through works of fiction was occurring at a time when the violent oppression of the Indigenous population was at its most volatile (Stanner, "After the Dreaming"), thus providing a powerful and palatable, though fictional, alternative white history.

This exegesis has proposed that the most consistent and prominent voice of the emerging nationalism at this time was Henry Lawson, a man who presented Australia in his fictions as a place of hardship, horror and great struggle, peopled almost exclusively by whites who fought the land at great personal cost, to control that which seemed untameable. The result of these factors was the creation, within the national psyche, of an image at the heart of the nation of a hard, fraught, land that must be tamed by tough, sacrificial, people. This place became known as 'the outback'. Thus, the outback didn't initially exist beyond the fictional page. Certainly the Australian land was different, and for white Europeans this difference presented as difficulty. But the land itself was actually, in the hands of the Indigenous inhabitants, a well-tended, fecund place able to provide easily and richly for the people who understood it and nurtured it. However, the indigenous voice and wisdom was rarely taken seriously by the new, white, culture.

The outback myth provided a clear distinction for white Australia. Those who fought against the land and conquered it spoke with the outback bush accent that, to this day, remains the most consistent and widely dispersed accent of any accent in any nation. This accent has become the marker by which white Australians are known. The demarcation means that not only are those from other nations separated from the ranks of these Australians, but even

Indigenous peoples, resident in the land since before white history was written, are excluded from this Australia, if they also lack this outback accent.

While works of fiction created this outback myth, they have also been a method for exploring its veracity and exposing it to questioning. *Tourmaline* and *The Town* have been examined to understand how they have highlighted the propensity of the outback myth to be an islanding, separating narrative, leaving out of the national history those things that are unpalatable. The works have attended to the creation of the myopic colonial focus of the myth and to what has been 'forgotten', allowing the myth to continue, thereby upholding white comfort by ignoring the truths of history. This has included:

The deliberate out-grouping of Indigenous people, excluding them from Australian history and devaluing their culture, understandings, and wisdom.

The constant desire to re-write or ignore past beliefs in favour of current beliefs, to accept that 'now' is how it has always been.

The acceptance of white dominance as natural and the idea that there is nothing from the Indigenous past that need be attended to as the dominant culture, speaking with its dominant voice, speaks the only necessary truth.

The idea that anything 'bad' that happens in the land because of this ignorance is because the land itself is tough and brutal, not because of white ignorance.

I have argued that this outback myth, as it has arrived in the twenty-first century, remains powerful. So much so that it is has now become a saleable product. It is still achieving its work of 'forgetting' the reality of history through the repetition of the aforementioned long-standing, false beliefs about the nature of Australia. It is still working, along with the powerful national accent, to separate and segregate. But these beliefs are being questioned by these and other fictional works and as the 'other' story of Indigenous Australia begins to be heard. The cost of ignoring the contested history of the nation is found to be leaving damaging holes in the present. What was hidden by white history remains however, and remains valuable, should it be allowed to emerge from the obfuscation of the outback myth.

Questioning this mythical outback is part of the aim of my own fictional work, *The Willton Tales.* These are stories that use the strange and fantastic to deliberately set aside the image of the outback as a simple place, a place that we believe we know and understand. It seeks to open up the outback town as a site where that which has been obscured and hidden may be

glimpsed, and what has been forgotten may be opened to investigation. Since it lacks the requirement for factual truth, fiction, like the myth itself, is able to peel away aspects of the myth and expose the lack of supporting veracity. A fictional story allows the reader to see that which they might otherwise seek to turn away from. The outback myth remains powerful because it makes Australians seem like strong, tough, hardy controllers of a hard, tough land. It is an image that few would deliberately trade for the truth; that white Australia may be a confused, selfish usurper bearing a significant misunderstanding of the land and a dangerous disregard for the reality that existed before white arrival. While works of non-fiction and research present information and valuable explanation, the role of fiction can be to provide understanding. Fiction can prepare the imagination to accept the rediscovered truths that might otherwise be rejected in the face of the resilient outback myth.

The accent of the outback, held so tightly in the mouth of white Australia, will be difficult to reframe as it continues to feature as a personifying element of the myth, and of the national identity. The accent, now so popular in movies, music and advertising, is a vital aspect of how white Australians see themselves. And how the world sees Australia. It is therefore essential that what this accent is obscuring becomes known. The accent needs to be understood as a receptacle for the myth that hides the truth of Australia's history of violence and dispossession.

Only with the more balanced and inclusive view of history that is beginning to emerge, will it be possible to attend to questions that could beneficially re-shape the national image and self-understanding into the future, such as: what might happen if the dominant culture did as Richard Trudgen insists and take Indigenous language seriously (226), so that conversations about Australian land and identity could become disentangled from the ingrained falsehood of the outback myth? What might white Australia learn, and gain, if it were to understand what has been forgotten in the emptying of history; for the wider, dominant, culture to hear what has not been heard from beyond the "coastal districts" (Murnane 34)? What can the forgotten Australia, hidden by the outback myth, say about things such as land and water care, families and ecological thriving for example, that are currently still being drowned by the white rhetoric of the outback myth? And how can white Australia begin to hear these essential voices if they remain hidden by the outback myth?

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Six Months Before the Harvest.

The Willton Tales

PH Court

Method:

There have been things said, in the press, on the ‘web, there was even a mention in the *The National Review of Written Artefacts*. One old woman ‘phoned the ABC and had a right old whinge, blah blah, like it’s some national disgrace. I mean, really, go dig your own grave. No one is disputing the actual events. No one has said, ‘no, it’s not like that.’ It’s just the details. The stupid little details. They told their stories as accurately as possible. If Ben says he wore a brown jumper but in actual fact it was a beige cardigan, so what? Does it really matter? Was it a cockatoo wrecking the morning air or a long billed Burke’s lorikeet? Who cares? Except the bird. As long as the story is true and good. Don’t go spittin’ gravel in my head! So what if we all forget what some tourist’s name was and instead of calling her, say, Helen Smith, she is named in the story as, let’s say, Seaton? Does it make the story wrong? Or untrue? Or less curious?

And stop scraping the fat off *my* teeth. I didn’t even write the stories. I just gave folks a place. Somewhere to tell it themselves. I opened the door and said, ‘come on in.’ If they choose to make themselves look smarter, or a bit taller, or more right, that’s their good luck, right? It’s their story so it’s their story to tell. Their way. I’m not their judge, just the guy who drives the library truck into town every month. Which is how the whole thing came to be. A bloke gets to talking, right?

“Hello Mrs Tiny-town, here’s that Agatha Christie you ordered last month, and how’s the kids?

“Oh, don’t get me started, she might say, but, of course, she’s already started so off she goes.

I was always fascinated by these tiny little stories from these tiny little people. People clinging to the edge of life in these towns that always feel like they’re about to slip under the ghosts and stones and just vanish, overgrown by their own crops. So, a couple of years ago I was parked outside the tiny town of Parrot-hack, in the shadow of the James Ranges, listening to an old *Aussie Crawl* cassette, and I thought ‘hey, I

have a Bedford truck full of stories. Two and half thousand books on board. I reckon there are probably just as many stories *outside* my mobile library.' I was wrong of course, but the idea stuck with me. I started handing out little notebooks and pens to people in these towns. I'd say 'Hey, why don'tcha write it down for me?' Lots of folk just handed them back with a quiet grin, picked up their copy of *The Turning* and walked away. Some pointed out that their hands were too hard and earthy to properly operate the pen. 'No, I can't write. I just farm,' they'd say. But some took my note pad and pen. For some reason, most of the stories that came back came from one tiny town, possibly the tiniest town, the furthest from civilized curb sides. One town clinging to itself with cracked and bloodied finger nails. A town so small it rarely appears on a tourist map. Every month I would pull on the handbrake in the shadow of the wonky silos at Willton and be surprised by the trickle of envelopes, packets, even a box or two, with stories tucked inside. So now, after a little spell-checking and a bit of editing, we can all gather around and look through the ordinary windows of a typical little town and glimpse the insignificant little lives that scurry about in there. And if you don't want to believe them, that's entirely up to you, it's not a bug in my boot. All the stories seem to be from different times, maybe even years apart. Lives lived close but different. But most of them seem to occur during the six months before the harvest.

The Willton Tales

The Willton Dogs

Do you know how clouds form?
In Willton they form the normal way. In a town that exists purely for the soil, for a community of farmers, clouds are very important. But there is more to Willton.
Do you know how nightmares form?

"My father is a soul stealer." The girl pauses. Breathes. "He steals souls for a living. Right here, in town."
Afternoon sunlight slants through the windows, bringing gold from millions of miles away.

"Don't be so bloody melodramatic! You're talking crazy like a three-wheeled ute." The fat woman dressed in a flowery blouse, places a coffee cup before the visitor and sniffs at her daughter. "Really Alisha."
The visitor looks between the little girl and her dirigible mother.

"A soul stealer?" He asks the space between the two females.

"I'm sorry Mr Vale, my husband is a salesman. For Rural Media. He sells advertising."

"Which steals souls!" The girl hisses, triumphant.

"Alisha Joy!" The mother frowns over at her little girl.

"Look Mum, who's telling the story? I am right?! So let me tell it."
The big woman shrugs her flowery blouse in a way that asks the confused visitor 'what can you do eh?'

"So what does your father have to do with the two girls who were killed?" The visitor places a recorder on the table, a silver box to suck in all the words and sounds from the room. It sits in the beam of molten sunlight.

"Ah, Dad, yes." The little girl ponders. "Maybe he's the next one eh? The next victim? I mean, why not? He's not... around anymore."
The visitor is looking shocked.

"Is your father missing?"

"I haven't seen him allllll day!" The girl whispers as she leans forward.

Mother's voice raises itself from across the kitchen.

"He's in Yorketon for the day, working on a two page spread for the farmers market. He'll be back about six."

"Or will he?" The little girl adds as she raises questioning eyebrows.

"Yes he will," the mother states. "Stop being a paddy melon and get on with your story, before the poor man dies of boredom."

"Yes Mum," she sits back. "There's already been enough death out here hasn't there Mr Vale?"

Outside, through the window, premature wheat waves in a breeze like rolling tidal seas, thousands of acres of tiny seeds that would feed millions. Peaceful, silent, growing at the speed of soil. Across the plains in houses and sheds, humans toil through the day at their various tasks. But at night, maybe tonight, the dogs could come again and suddenly this land will be a very different place.

The night was clear. All but cloudless. This was the first thing everyone said about that night. It was the first line of the police report. It was the first clue. There had been a little rain. This was also worth mentioning. The rain had skipped through early in the evening, a hit and run sprinkle leaving the smell of soil hovering above the ground at nostril height. Out here rain only occurs regularly in conversation. 'Not much rain this year', 'Might get some rain by end of March eh?' Rain is erratic here. Rain is vital here. Without it there is no wheat. Without wheat there is no point. So the cockies were pretty chuffed. A spot of rain, 'more a tease than an event,' but 'enough to give hope', had visited early in the evening. Through the belly of that night Jane and Louise were walking home. They had real names, country names, names with dirt and soil and grease from the tractor on them. Alisha had been jealous of Jane and Louise. She was stuck behind a glaring, city name that was the wrong shape to sit comfortably beneath the huge open sky. Also, Jane and Louise had long hair, girl hair, held by simple elastic, patting them on the back when they walked. Alisha had been cursed with red springs, tight, self-conscious, foreign hair. Alisha didn't like Jane and Louise. She had no problem admitting that. But she was just as stunned as everyone when Johno Junior's ute had found their bodies, four metres apart, face down in the exhausted soil and shoots of the paddock.

The two girls had been cutting home from the evening movie at the town hall. *ET* was screening, a happy alien descending into an ancient sandstone hall on the other side of the world. The big old Devry 3500 projector threw nervous milky images onto a white-washed wall. Made some forty five years ago, the rickety old machine was profoundly surprised to find that its life had led itself to this place. Plastic seats screeched and scraped on the wooden floor as the people of Willton watched the little movie alien with varying degrees of awe and distraction. None of the movie goers, thirty or so, had noticed the rattle and chatter of the old projector. They noticed the girls. A country town will do that, make you aware of who shares your boundless air, who is at your elbow. The girls left as everyone else did, happy, distracted and deep in their own conversations, flicking off a ‘goodbye’ or a ‘seeya’ as required. Then they were past the darkened windows of *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery* and across the main road. They stepped over the dark cool of the railway line and ducked beneath a single strand of wire as the field opened up before them. Tiny green shoots were beginning to look about, but in the dark, the field seemed to be just a roughly furred blanket. The land out here has a strange accent. It has an odd, ancient lilt to it, like it is from somewhere long ago. None of the farmers here speak its ancient tongue so their conversation with the land is always at odds. Beneath the weak and scrappy crop, it is now a foreign land for these people with their soapy names and English humour. Star light preceded the moon and the darkness held both girls like an old friend as they swung their arms and let their ankles roll them across the uneven softness of the field. Jane laughed as Louise tried to sing her idea of Michael Jackson. The earth beneath their feet smiled at their innocent joy. Silently, in the air around them, the terrifying dogs gathered.

Many have seen the dogs. Or at least seen something. No one will speak of them though. That’s the nature of things. That’s how things go. Alisha would never have mentioned it either, but she had no friends to lose and perhaps something to gain. Her father shook his head when she had told him of the horrible hounds that had risen from the ground on that same night. She had not been at the movies. Alisha had been taking scraps to the chooks when she heard a sad and soulless keening. She had walked into the wheat, it’s baby stalks at her feet, the empty bucket swinging in her hand, expecting to find a wounded sheep, laying out of place and

harmless, mourning its own misfortune. Woe is me, fallen ovine, dumb and down. What she had found that night turned her heels, shattered her foot steps and terrified her face. The beast was as tall as her, empty eyes in a face of obviously dog shaped teeth, its body seemed to coil about itself. She didn't see its feet or tail as that snarling, open-faced maw sent her running. The horrible moan became a roar, pounding on her back as she ran, tumbled, fell across the jumbled surface of the paddock, grit on her hands, dirt through her shoes, her hair. The bucket was gone. The back door loomed and the roaring of deep hurt faded. Her lungs thundered within her as she slumped against the back door. The massive dog was nowhere to be seen. The cooling silence of the rural night held out its hand. Nothing to see here. Move along. All good here. At the cuff of her jeans was a single triangular tear. The shape of a tooth. Or a snare of fence wire. Who knew for sure?

Keelty lumbers. Along the soft sand and dirt path, his rolling gait sends his belly back and forth. His hips, brutalised by a tractor when he was a young man, don't agree on how to best move, so his step is a scuff scuff HUP scuff scuff HUP, a definite hitch as his upper body lifts his lower body. Regular as broken clockwork. Keelty loves to sit at the crest of this path, the murmuring silver sand of the beach they call 'The Shells' spread out at his feet, hissing at the sea. The deep green blanket of the wheat fields spreads out behind him. He sits as night creeps across the land and the empty within him takes shape. Sometimes his memory is of love, of soft touch, that grin with sugar at the corner, laughing. Other times the night brings bitterness, like the empty anger and uselessness of being alone on the shore. There is no way of knowing what kind of empty he will feel. The grin of happy, the stab of irrelevance, the ache of being left behind. The moan of punctured deep self. Or all of them at once. You never know what you'll get, but wakefulness drives him to this hill by the sea, the empty with no name leads him on.
He loves to sit at the point where the wild ocean and the tamed land converge, the point at which what is controlled meets that which is uncontrollable. On a night like this, when clouds have fled and the air is pressing down cool from a cloudless sky, this is the time he loves best. This is when the dogs run. He shuffles his ample backside on a hummock of dune grass and the dull throbbing in his hip settles a little, like a wary hound.

That's better.

From a distant land, deep within his hefty grey coat, Keelty pulls a bottle of Scotland's fine whisky. Not it's finest. But not bad. Distilled in Scotland, bottled in Japan and sold on this dry finger of Australian coastline. It sears his throat like golden sand paper and rests amongst hot coals in his stomach.

"Ahhh. Tha's it oright," he tells the darkness around him.

A warm breeze presses against his face and he freezes, the bottle prepares to enter his mouth.

Nice.

And he chugs another mouthful of searing heat from the bottle. He turns so one shoulder faces the sea and the other faces the land. The breeze from the sea is warm, the air on the land is cold, hard, a stainless-steel chill. Beside him, around him, the breeze pushes up the beach, up the dunes and there, at his side, meets the slab-cold land. Moisture, carried in from the sea, returns to its liquid state. Clouds form. Tiny, moving banks of wispy vapour, they emerge from the air as if through a rip in the fabric of space. Suddenly the fog is there, falling over itself slowly, gently coiling. Keelty watches and tips more warming whisky across his sensitive teeth.

"'Ello me beauties."

And the fog forms round curls, tightening on themselves, becoming more solid, less fog. The breeze gives a shove and the clouds break out into clumps. Tight, coiling clumps. And the bottle gurgles again as Keelty watches the terrible snouts emerge. Strong now, soft grey like some kind of panther or a dingo perhaps, their shapes constantly rolling within themselves. A snarl emerges. Then another. Then a long low moan rips the air. Another joins it, then more, as the dogs take to their legs, powerful haunches churn and shudder. The dogs turn to stare at the old man with the bottle clutched in his chilly fist.

"There ya is me lovelies."

They turn and the pack launches itself into the night. Keelty can see the blurs of grey as they stream across the vast open plain. Long after they have disappeared behind the veil of darkness their moaning, keening howl still shakes the air around him

"Ah, so pretty."

He shuffles his buttock again to prevent his legs going numb. The scotch has set fire to his fingers and his gums are pleasantly sleepy. He stares at the empty dark where

the incredible beasts have gone. To run, to roam, to glide across the earth on legs of pure energy. Sometimes he sheds a tear for their incredible beauty. Sometimes his heart thuds out of time, stunned at the miracle of these ghostly beasts. He belches and heaves himself up to lumber back down the path to his little tin shack. A man who can do nothing. Keelty knows what will happen tonight, he has seen it. That is his curse. Scuff scuff HUP scuff scuff HUP.

The sun has risen over T*he Fiery Buns Café and Bakery.* Flannelette shirts and jeans fill the space between the rich scent of warm yeast and the power of hot coffee. Across tables, elbows and lips are forcing their opinions on each other.

A stranger? Nar, not until Harvest, no one new in town now!

I'm sure that Barnes kid ain't right in the head, they talking to him?

They had their heads bitten... what, off?!

That's what I heard.

That Schneider girl, she's always been off the rails.

But if it's a suicide pact, how come there's no note?!

And on it went as coffees were served, bacon and egg sandwiches were passed across the high counter and the town collected its thoughts, an organism seeking to scratch an impossible itch. Jimmy Barnes filtered down from the ceiling, providing little town angst while '*running like a cyclone across the wild mid western sky.'* The barbecue sun has cooked the faces of these folks, browned and seared their skin for generations, burning away their youth to leave even the children wearing the skin of old people. Eyes peer out of wrinkles, teeth are missing and mouths are set in arid river deltas. Ben, behind the counter, was as shocked as anyone by the terrible news. His son, Marco, caught the school bus with the girls, often bearing their wrath for having Mediterranean skin and a name that smelled of pizza. The girls may not have been perfect but they were locals. They were us. They should be teasing his boy, not lying dead in Johno Junior's scrappy paddock. It was a shock. But for now he had pies to create. The bell above the door rang again, cutting across the leaf swirl of conversations as more folk turned up to hear the news, discuss the options, be the town. The two girls, teens in the clothes of adults, would have been thrilled to know that they were the centre of so much passionate attention. If only they weren't so dead.

The Wheat grows around Willton because the air is pure. The rain that falls here is also pure. Toward the city, nearer civilization, the air is filled with signal and noise, sparkling electricity and chattering data, spraying and spreading, so the air becomes charged. As rain falls through this digitised maelstrom it becomes electronically charged, biased, so it sticks together, magnetically attracted to itself. The tiny rain clumps, forms big, wet, lumps that hit the concreted earth like fists. That rain is no good for growing things. That rain is only good for slamming. That rain would kill Willton. Willton rain is softer, smaller, anxious. Slipping through gaps in the air to touch the gasping soil and feed the precious grain as it begins to emerge. The two bodies are arranged on the stubbled earth as if for a photographic display. '*This year's fashion: Misplaced Youth.'* Jane and Louise clearly died in flight, their legs are uncomfortably bent and their arms and hair tangled, two girl-shaped piles of linguine. They are cold now, even though sunlight is popping in and out behind the passing traffic of aimless clouds.

Doc Posthuma is looking down over the little bodies from no great height, his hands in his pockets to hide their nervous fidgeting. A little pear-shaped man, he has hair that sits atop his head like a child's bicycle helmet. Too small, exposing the doctors' wise old ears to ridicule.

"Und zis is how ya found 'em?"

"Yep." Sergeant Cooper is standing away a bit trying to see everything in the paddock except the dead bodies of two families he has shared football games with.

"So, how'd ya know zey ver dead?"

"Oh well, Yair, when Johno Junior found 'em he rolled 'em over and, well, that's how he knew. I rolled 'em back over when I got 'ere, so's everything 'ud be like... like it was."

"Und how'd he know zey ver dead just by rollink dem over?" The old doctor asks, curious and, could it be, a little superior?

By way of an answer the big sergeant takes an unwelcome breath and steps over to the nearest body, the little girl Jane Schneider, whose brother is a panel beater in town and had knocked out a dent in the sergeants' rear quarter panel just three weeks ago. He holds his breath as he leans over and gently moves the blue skinned

dummy that had once been little Jane. She rests on her back with a rubberised finality and the sergeant turns away.

"Holy Crap!" The doctor's hands fly from his pockets and clutch his mouth to prevent any more terror speaking out. Jane's face is screaming, her eyes, dull, satin-sheened in death, are so wide open the roundness of her eyeballs is unavoidable. Her jaw is so wide open it has disfigured her nose, and her throat is stretched so tight that, even in death, the breeze can be heard hissing across it like a drum skin. The doctor's knees are suddenly twice as old and his hands tremble.

"Und ze other vun?"

"Same. Wanna see?"

"No! I mean, no, zat's fine, sank you Sergeant."

It felt odd calling him 'Sergeant.' The cars are parked at irrelevant angles, their light lazily snapping the morning with red and blue. The other police standing around are trying not to fear the corpses. It was all very odd. Nick was the town sergeant, the man in charge. But to Doc Posthuma, he was always 'Nick', even now, when he was obviously 'Sergeant'. It's probably difficult to see another man's rank once you've had your finger up his sphincter, palpating his prostate.

Doc Posthuma wasn't officially a police medical examiner of course but being five hours drive from the nearest large medical precinct left the local GP holding a lot of odd responsibilities. He was the only local with any kind of skills in this area. Plus he had his own thin rubber gloves, which he is pulling from his pocket now and trying to fit over his trembling sausages. As he hunched down next to Jane's useless body, experience swept in like a summer breeze and the world left him alone to be a doctor, servicing human machinery.

"Zere seems to be no kind of puncture vounds. No bleedink." He mutters to the air in front of him

He fusses about the body delicately, like a bag of butterflies, touching gently, shifting, peering. He finds nothing he is looking for. A frustrated prospector, he begins again and suddenly stops. Staring.

"Oh!"

A single grunt and the sudden quieting of his movement draws every eye to the hunched doctor.

"Zat can't be good." He tells the earth.

All eyes follow the doctor's glare and find, in the soft chocolate-red earth, a single, huge, canine paw print.
Every eye now sees the obvious, and stillness holds steel bands around the group in the middle of the path.

"There's one here, nar, two." A voice to the left calls and suddenly a frenzy of head turning erupts as the five men in the field search frantically and find, at their very feet, a whirling tapestry of massive, heavy, terrible paw prints, pressed heavily into the earth. The Doc looks up at the Sergeant and they both decide they would not be the first to mention the obvious. No one does. It's not done. There's no such thing. And besides, they both know, the ghost dogs never harmed anybody. That's why no one in Willton ever talks of them.

The Girl who went away

Transyta was born in Willton as a fully formed child of another place. Her father had met her mother on the long-haul bus from the city, which is where her name came from. It's not a Willton name. Not made in this little town. It was installed in-utero with the semen of a man from a long way away. Transyta was born in the little unit on Shulze Street that was once a shearer's cottage housing a dozen lanolin soaked tank tops. Thirty or forty years ago, when the shire had pasted the streets with tarmac, the shearer's house was reborn as a pair of side by side units. Blue stone, roof line like a wide brimmed hat, low and muttering.
In grabs and rare flashes, Transyta remembers warm soft evenings sat on her Mother's lap, curled and cuddled as they both ignored the television, preferring to just be together. Just being. The little girl had a good start in life. Transyta was born, bred and raised in Willton. But she was never from here. Even though she had been here all her life, people still found themselves drawn to ask her 'so, where're you from?' and she'd just shrug.

"You're from here," her mother would say at the supermarket or when they met the Lutheran minister at a funeral for someone.

"Yes, she was born right here. Twelve hours of labour and then she ripped me open on the way out," she'd told the man of God as Transyta stood a step behind her mother imagining she was someone else. Transyta's mother had a way of addressing people that made them seem to not be there. The way an insect will walk across a dinner plate, making everything else on the plate irrelevant.

It is the nature of towns like Willton that it has one crammed and bustling pub, bulging with the smell of hot chips and last year's beer, but two churches, tiny, cold and empty. St Tezza's Catholic church is the older of the two. It has a high peak, as it had been built assuming great things. Within its chalk walls a plaster audience of painted virgins and Christs bleed with grey brown lacquer. The smell of grandmothers and stale talc floats in the light. Paintings of past sufferings line the walls like a serial killer's calendar of choice, a gallery of guilt. Long before he has his faith restored by a muffin, Father Portcullis stands before the old wooden altar, the dusty golden-threaded chasuble choking him. Tiny moth holes pock the shoulder. As

he begins the invocation for the three old women scattered amongst the tiny pews, he sees the note. There has been talk of the notes. In the confessional. He, of all the town, knows more about the notes. The notes that appear.

"I… I don't know how anyone could know…" had been a common thread.

"If my wife/ business partner/ hairdresser finds out…" was usually the second line in the little box of guilty secrets. It was the one thing that kept the Catholic Church viable here in the town. Confession. The offering of guilt for the promise of release. In the past, Father Portcullis had realised that his calling was like any other in the town. Purely an act of commerce. His most popular product was 'You are forgiven, go and sin no more'; knowing full well that everyone would go and sin some more and they would need his services again. He thinks of his role as a sort of lawn-mowing service of the soul. When the guilt grew too luscious in the rich, deceitful, small-town soil, he would trim it down with his scything absolutions and compost the guilt down to grow again.

The notes had begun appearing a month or so ago. Now one has appeared on his altar, slipped between the pages of the lectionary, the breath of religion disturbed by these hand-written words, a book mark that explodes on impact.

'You and your hand have sinned. Naughty Father. In your little room.'

Instantly the aging priest knows what it means. He also knows instantly that whoever wrote the note doesn't know what the confessional booth is called. That fact gives him a sense of superiority. It is all he can cling to as he raises his grey voice to utter shaky Latin into the tomb dry church.

Later in the service, as he repeats phrases that lost their meaning decades earlier, he notices his hands are still shaking, the shock still coursing through him.

I wonder, his mind asks, Is Parkinson's disease a spiritual disorder?

Coming home to the little cottage on Schulze Street is an act of will for the cumbersome Transyta. School made her put on weight, home stripped her back.

"Why are you home early?!"

"Sorry mother, I'm not. It's the normal time."

The television in the lounge is preaching self-help with an American screech.

"*Change is gonna happen*, it is saying*. If you don't make the change, the change is gonna make you!'* Then a crackling snort as Mother punctuates her

viewing. Transyta slings her school bag into her room. Sits on her bed, inhales the smell of cats not being there, the absence of flowers, the unperfumed rawness. The lingering smell of insects. She makes her way back to the kitchen.

"Don't you make a mess." Mother growls from the lounge. Smoke and TV filtering her voice. "I've spent all day cleaning up in there."

Transyta moves a cracked side plate, melted cheese on it like pus, making room for the toaster. She opens the high cupboard. The lure of thick, buttery toast with a goodly splatter of strawberry jam is the thing that hauls her back into the house. That and the fact that she really has nowhere else to go. Hot toast and jam. The good things in her life.

"Where's the toaster?"

"The what?"

"The toaster. Where is it?"

"In the cupboard, where it lives."

"It's a toaster Mother," she mutters, "it doesn't live."

"Don't get feisty with me girl. The toaster is right here. I've been using it. You can come and get it."

Transyta decides she doesn't really want toast.

Later, Father Portcullis knows he won't take the note to Sergeant Cooper, the new cop. It's not a matter for the police. It's a matter for the priesthood. For him. Sin of his own hands. By his own hands. He grimaces at the crudity, sees himself in the confessional, the box of guilt and sin, all alone. But obviously not unobserved. And this is the nature of sin. That it cannot be shared, shed or shucked. It can only be borne, for who has he to confess this too? To whom can he go? He wants to fall on his face and cry out at the foot of his plaster Jesus, but the guilt is too big. It holds him on his feet. The deep shame won't let him stand before a perfect God. Oh God, he mutters, what have I done? He takes the blame and in that moment the priest rises above his townsfolk, he is different to them.

In a small store room behind the mechanics works shop, Carl Pettigrew is cursing the evil soul who has left a note saying, *'Is that $1,400 ever going back in the till?'*

Margaret Post is at her sewing machine calling scorn and hate upon the writer of the note: *'Someone loved that dog you killed.'*

Bea has a note too. She hates the writer. *'Does Brian know how you talk about him with your friends?'* Her heart is clutching as if rusted. Damn this note, damn this nosey bastard.
Only the priest sees the note as the result of his own hands. And that turn of phrase makes him grimace again.

Cheryl never married Malcolm. Didn't need to and it never seemed like a good idea. Having met on the bus from the city they fell in lust which carried them to bed for a few months and then there were small burrs and tiny spikes appearing in their sheets. 'Get a job' 'I've got a job, YOU get a job', 'you're the man, make a living to support us' and here Cheryl would rub the bloating that was becoming Transyta. Within hours they would cool, like coffee left standing, and they would fall into the habit of bed again. 'You never say nice things' 'I do, you don't hear. Besides, you ain't a child.' And again they would break their clinch, recover and return to each other. They were always able to fight. Even about nothing, Cheryl and Malcolm could let loose on each other. 'I dread to think what kind of father you're gonna be,' 'The kind that has to do everything, that's the kind.' They were good at fighting. They were never any good at making up afterwards. There was only layer upon layer of thin hurt and fear. Never did they get back to 'normal' or move on and grow. After every little scratch, every major blow up, after each slammed door and thrown plate, Cheryl would calm and smooth, but always she hung on to one tiny bit. They would lay 'sorry' at each other's feet but never completely, never unconditionally. Always she added a tiny bit of protection, a little scale of self-defence. Every single time, another little piece of hard carapace was added to her. Soon she began to have skin like a slater bug, an armoured insect shell covering her once soft flesh. When Transyta arrived, the fights grew more frequent, the tiny bits of armour gathered faster and Cheryl was soon encased in a hard, thin layer of chitinous protection. Malcolm hated the feel her now, the skin that was cruel and defensive, the crackle and scrape when he tried to hold her close. It drove him crazy. It drove him away. He lunged for the bus that had brought him to Willton and left his daughter and her mother. Cheryl sat with the baby Transyta on her lap, not crying, just sitting.

“I knew he would leave. I just knew it.” She looked into the soft face of her daughter. “Just bloody lucky I protected myself.” Her voice began to crackle and hiss.

Over the years, as Transyta grew from a fat faced baby to a milk fed child and then on into a round limbed teenager, her mother had lived trapped inside her insect armour. From a distance it was hard to tell at first. But in later years the protective carapace had lost its transparency and taken on a dark, greyish hue, making her look like a mannequin corpse. Transyta’s mother never left the house after that. The people from the government came by on rare occasions to see her in her dark room within the little old cottage. Like a child lifting a garden stone to see scurrying bugs. Transyta never had friends come and visit which, in this town, meant she had little in the way of friends.

“Look, Transyta, I don’t have time for this.”

Sunlight was focussed outside the window, searing the black asphalt. Ms Brecknock was wearing a pale white ghost of a shirt so that she didn’t overheat. Her spine hunched where it connected with her neck, kinked by the rucksack of hefty gravel that she must carry. The girl before her was just one more rock. She sighed, hot dust and children’s sweat choked the classroom air.

“So anyway, let’s be honest…”

Transyta tried to look at the beak faced woman but her eyes kept falling from her. The young girl had been kept awake last night by the harsh sounds of insect shell, the rasp of hard casing as her mother chittered about the house. Now her grey eyes were tired, hung like over ripe fruit, wet, full, ready to drop and splatter. Precariously weary. At school she had been absent, anywhere but here. Mrs Brecknock had noticed.

“The fact is Transyta, you’re a bit, well, slow. Not stupid. (Sigh) I think it’s time we realised you are just not made to be a thinker yes?”

Transyta blinked, tried to lift her concrete eyes.

“You’re just less capable. I’m right aren’t I?”

So that was what Transyta became. That’s what her teacher said so, of course, that is what she has become. That is, after all, education at work.

There are no hills around Willton. Not hills like other places have. There's the sort of undulating land made from centuries of lacklustre erosion, the wind and occasional rain buffing over anything out-standing. The only ones who notice the rise and fall are the occasional cyclists. And water. Water is even lazier than land. It dribbles its way to the lowest point and then just lies there, exhausted. This was once a billabong. Now it's called a lake. It is 'The Lake' since there is only one plot of land in the district where water is allowed to gather uninhibited by man and his wants. The lake is rimmed with remnants of native vegetation and empty beer bottles. The shallow waters host a handful of hardy fish and wild swimming condoms. It is some kind of miracle that the little lake never fully evaporates, even during the most insistent of droughts. The land is so in love with this little puddle that it never lets it go. It has always been like this. Danny knows. It's written in his thin bones and sketched beneath his dark skin, with his real name. He has a yabbie dreaming. He doesn't really know what that means because all his elders, the rest of his family and everyone else who has a yabbie dreaming, they've all gone. Moved closer to the roads and supermarkets, terrified away by the roar of the tractors that tore up the tracks of their songs. When Danny's mob threw their bag of clothes and their bodies into a fourth-hand Land Rover and left this bit of land for good, Danny stayed. Not so much because he loved the land or felt at home by the lake, he just knew that if he stayed near his old man too much longer, one of them would end up dead. Transyta saw Danny by the lake, his feet shod in the grey black mud, a fishing line extending into the ruffled water. He looked weird, a thin black boy in football shorts, all alone at the lake. The wind moved around him politely and the sun lay on his dark skin like a sleeping cat. Since farming took over the land, the blacks were long gone. He was odd, out of place. Transyta was drawn to him.

"There's no fish in there ya know." She stood on the pale grass further up the bank, lobbing her words at his sinewy spine. Danny jumped. Turned and looked at the voice over there. He shrugged.

"Not for you, nar."

"No one catches anything here. 'Cept herpes maybe."

He frowned at her, half smiled and turned back to the water. The mud smelled of rot and bad breath. Transyta sat and watched the odd boy fishing. There was nothing

else to do. She was only here so she wasn't at home. She raised her voice at him again.

"I never seen you here before."

"I'm here lots."

"You weren't here yesterday."

He looked at her. Looked at the lake. Shrugged.

"I wasn't hungry yesterday."

"You ain't gonna get a feed here. Looks like you ain't had a feed in forever."

The thin shoulders gave a chuckle and then a sudden jerk. His hands became a whirling blur as he pulled the flashing thread of fishing line in, wrapping it around the old lump of wood in his other hand. The line swerved about in the water and Transyta found her mouth open. Then the wisp of black boy held up a gasping fish, securely snagged, dripping as it flipped and spasmed.

"Wow," Transyta had a hand up to shield her eyes. "What is it?"

The boy looked at her.

"It's a fish."

"I mean what sort?"

"A good one, these are nice. Got this bit here that'll cut ya finger, but."

The boy pulled his feet from the greying mud and moved like a cat, up the bank.

"No one catches fish in here." She told him.

He lifted the Callop, the sun catching glints of sliver and daffodil yellow.

"Yair, I'm allowed to." He stopped and looked down at her.

"What, the police let you?"

"Nar," he chuckled, "the lake, she lets me."

"The lake? Lets you catch fish?"

He shrugged.

"Some people, they gone away. Then they come back." He looked over his shoulder at the blue water. "The lake don't remember them. They not allowed to anymore."

"The lake stops them catching fish?"

"Yair," he tilted his head. "I reckon."

"How?" She frowned.

"Pretty bloody good."

Getting to the lake was a long walk. For Transyta it was nothing. She would walk. Just walk. At the lake, finally, she would sit. Just sit. Sometimes he turned up, or he was already there. Sometimes he wasn't part of the place.

"It's called *Allawah*," the boy told her once, as he waited for the lake to offer him a fish.

"Allah wah? What's that mean?"

"I don't know. I think it's something like 'place of rest' or 'good place to do nothing' or something."

"Huh. I like that."

One day, under a rare scatter of flaccid cloud, as she watched his back from the shore she asked him;

"Where do ya live?"

He waited for the fish for a moment, then nodded at the distant horizon line.

"Out there. Where do you live?"

Transyta nodded back over her shoulder at the houses and roofs piled away down the track.

"I live in there." She looked at the far away trees smudged against the sky.

"So, you got a home?"

He turned and grinned at her.

"You're in it."

She grinned back at him.

"Nice."

Years ago the school teacher, Ms Brecknock, the wife of the baker, had asked little Transyta a question that was never answered.

"Tsk, what is it with you?" And her eyes had rolled. It was one of those hot summer days. The usual. Ms Brecknock was sweating through her pale blue shirt, draining and becoming even thinner.

"So Transyta," she had started out, and then began to read from the embattled piece of paper in her hands; "*On my Holidays I ate a whole dog. I killed it and ate it because I'm fat and I eat everything. When I was a baby, I ate my twin sister. Also I'm very stupid."*

Ms Brecknock laid the paper on the desk before them, sighed and continued.

"Transyta, dear. S. t o. o. p. I .d? That's not how we spell it. And how can you kill a dog?! That's terrible."

All colour had drained from Transytas face.

"Th. That's not me."

"You didn't kill and eat a dog?"

"No. That's not mine."

"Not your homework."

"No!"

"It's got your name on it."

"I didn't write that."

"Ah." Ms Brecknock paused, frowned. "Right. But you DID eat a dog?"

"What? No! That's… horrible."

"Well, who did write this then?"

"Not me. I didn't do my homework."

"So you admit that you haven't handed in your homework?" Ms Brecknock scowled. Now she was on solid ground. She stared at the butterball of disappointment before her.

"No Ms Brecknock, I… no."

"Well, that's not acceptable girl. Not acceptable at all." And she shook her head. "What is it with you?"

Transyta didn't really know who had written the essay and handed it in with her name on it, but she muttered that she would find out. She would have her revenge. But she never did.

A year or so later the 2 girls responsible died of shock in a burgeoning wheat field, their heels fleeing from the terror of invisible, impossible hounds. But starting then, from that moment on, little Tranysta made sure she watched everyone, just in case it was them.

There is something strange in the house when Transyta drops her schoolbag. He wasn't at the lake. The sound of mother is chittering from the lounge room in the glare of the TV. It is the usual agitation of her five o'clock quiz show angst. Mother now finds that her limbs and her spine no longer fit comfortably into the big heavy

recliner, so she prefers to lie on the floor, twitching and crackling as the TV bathes her in its narcotic. There feels to be pepper in the air. But freshness too, as if someone has opened a window or brought in a house plant. Also, there is a smell of fresh water in the kitchen.

"You better 'splain!" Her Mother's shout is almost indecipherable, a high-pitched squeal of wind through a bad window seal.

"Explain what?"

"The boy. Came here. Black toooo. Sssssslut."

"He came here!?" Transyta shouted to the lounge. She hated to go in there, to see the black and grey shining shell of her mother, hated the insect sounds and the scratch and twitch of her mother's hard face. She saw the fish on the table. Big. Fresh. A Callop. Good eating that.

"He came here?"

The laugh was a cackle, a sound of wet twigs snapped and crushed.

"Yair, he came here."

Cold dread filled Transyta, that horrible moment when you know it's too late. She could actually feel the blood drain from her head, leaving her light and terrified. She pushed herself past the kitchen table, pushed open the sliding door that formed the barrier between her mother and herself.

"What did you do!?"

On the floor, in the blue wash of the quiz show, her mother was lying on her back, legs crooked and stiff, as she chewed on a dark stick.

"I enjoyed his company." She cackled as she ripped a piece of muscle from the thin bone.

Transyta used the knife from the drawer. The blade was broad and experienced, the edge honed sharp but slightly nicked by time. Its handle was wood. Warm. The good knife. It took six, seven, then eight strikes for the girl to find a gap, a soft place between the armoured scales that covered her mother. Ten, eleven, twelve. Transyta grinned. She found the core, the way into her mother's unprotected being. But that is, of course, the curse. That a daughter can always find a way to strike a most fatal blow against her mother.

The rounded girl sits at the kitchen table. Through the doorway she can see the still corpse. The lack of chittering, the silence of rasping breath, makes the house almost

homely. But the girl is now less than she was. Her skin, her bones, feel lighter, uplifted on the wings of release. She is free now and her body is becoming what it truly always wanted to be. Unseen. Unknown. Invisible. She sighs. Tells herself;

"This must be what peace feels like."

Transyta usually only goes out at night, when she casts no shadow. In the hard crystal sun of Willton her shadow is black, whipping across the pavement, slapping against a wall, juddering against a picket fence. It is all that can be seen of her now. Without the smudge of a shadow there is no evidence that Transyta exists. The diamond sunlight cuts through her, the drooping wind passes straight on, untouched. She can be at your elbow. You won't see her. She can be seated in your car as you drive the empty plains. She can stand at the end of your bed and watch you sleep. Or not sleep. She is there. Taking notes. But you will never know. Until she lets you know.

Brian's Night Out

As far as funerals goes, I don't reckon mine were a bad one or nothin'. Not like I got to lots of 'em in me time, cos there's more important thin's in livin' than diggin' the dead in, yair? I din't really see me own funeral. I was, like, in the box, just listenin' in. That Lutherist bloke, Schnuaser I reckon 'is name is, long string of pelican crap he is, he was the one what said the things, then there was the thump on the wood when people chucked dirt on the box. I counted five people thrownin' dirt on me. Dunno who they all was but. Priscilla would'a been one I hope. Me girl. Bless 'er. The others, makes me wonder. As they was rainin' dirt on me I realised I was in me box and gettin' buried and I noticed I weren't in a panic or nothin' but maybe I should and then I thought nar, stuff it, I know I'm dead, I'm all right. In fact, more than right, I got this warm, happy glowin' in me. And I know I ain't panickin' cos you would only panic if you knew what the future was for you, dyin' like this, but I don't care, not just cos I'm already dead, but also cos I don't care what happens next. Nar, nar, more than that. There ain't no next, no more. Just now. So I'm happy just bein' here in me deadness.

There's one mornin' every year, it's the one that drives everythin' else. Normally it's warmish, the first edge of spring rubbin' itself against the ground. The air's like an old photograph and you can smell how the rain and the soil have been dancin' all night. And as the light slips across the paddock, it's like truck lights comin' up over a hill. On this one mornin' every year, the earth ain't ploughed and furrowed no more. It's soft and fluffy like. There's a green whisper to it and you gotta look close but there it is. Millions and millions of tiny little shoots, pokin' their heads up. Awesome. Real awesome. Once a year, every year, it's enough to stop your heart with joy. That's what I'm thinkin' about. What it feels like.

The coffin lid is pretty flimsy, not your good sturdy jarrah or even pine. It's like some chip board or ply, like the back of an old wardrobe. It's what I wanted. Does the job and nothin' more. I push on it and it's bendy and that, so I keep pushin' and there's a tree limb sound and suddenly dirt's pourin' on me. Great. Just great. I never done a lot of laughin', but I have a chuckle now. Ironical I guess you'd call it.

I'm spittin' dirt but there's air all around me now. It must be one bastard night cos there ain't no light of any kind. Oh, I got me eyes shut. I musta shut 'em when I were

in me box and just got used to always havin' 'em shut. Another weird dead thing I s'pose. There's this powerful slurry stink in me nose, like stagnant frogs splatterin' in wet mud. You know, that smell. Maybe all them years on the land gives me some kinda smell superpower, cos I can tell that this soil, she's good stuff. You'd get a good crop out of it. Bit of clay, but you could tone that down, plough it under, but the top soil's in good nick. That's why they plant people here I guess. Bury down to about the clay line. In the good soil. Which tastes real bland by the way. I remember people sayin' 'Oh this tastes like dirt' but dirt don't really taste like much. It feels weird, sure, all sorts of different textures in there, but other than that, it's nothin'. I spit some more out. Grit is sittin' on me gums like crows on a powerline, peckin' and scratchin'. This is where I am. Everythin' is now. But I still know about back. Before.

"She bloody quit!" I were shoutin' at me lovely Priscilla. She were standin' by the sink, the old tin and porcelain, cracks and white flowers of rust.

"She was your WIFE! When are you going to just forgive her?"
Priscilla were pleadin', but she's angry too. I get it. But she don't know everythin'.

"She quit, that's why! Quit on me, on you, on life! I hates that."

"But she's gone now and…"

"I know, I bloody loved her. Still does. She were the most beautiful, wonderful, loveable person what I ever met. But she were a quitter! She quit."
There was tears on me face and Priscilla is the only one what would ever see me like this. But she were like this too. For three months we was just keepin' it in. Now it were out.

"She coulda gone on, been with us, even now. Today! But she quit, took all them pills and just… bloody quit."
We both sucked tears into our noses, wet, salty, sniffin' like wet pumps. Takin' time to just inhale.

"So what? You love her so much or you hate her completely?"

"Yair, I reckon that's about right."
But now I don't got any tears, none of that hurt from back then. I feel sad for Priscilla cos she's left alone now. But I left her alive and better for it. I'm glad I did what I done. In fact, I'm pretty bloody ecstatic. Is that weird? I'm sittin' on the edge of me grave, me feet are still draggin' in the loose hole like a kid at the beach, it's cold and

dark and there's tiny gravel in me ears. But I feel absolutely bloody fantastic. I spit out some more crusty dirt. Dead is good.

It's gonna be one of them days when even the busiest person is gonna stop and say 'Gees, what a bloody nice day.' It's gonna be the kind of day people take photos of. I never did though. Never had a camera. Didn't never need one I s'pose. And when would I look at the photos anyhow? Bea took lots of 'em. Always little brown packages comin' back from the 'smoke with glossy prints of Priscilla, friends, birthd'y parties. You name it, she shot it. The trophies still hang on the wall and pile up on the sideboard in little clay frames, tin or aluminium, a kind of junk yard of trophy memories. Bea would be about on a day like this, capturin' it for posterity. 'cept she's dead now. And it's not even day yet. I thought it was late night, but Sarah set me right. I'm shakin' the last of the chocolate cake soil out of me thick socks as I walk down Main and she comes 'round the corner, across the road from *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery.* I don't remember walkin' here but it's a lovely evenin'

"Good evenin'," I tell Sarah. "Lovely evenin'."

"Oh, hey. Yair. But it's actually morning, good morning."

"Mornin'? "

"Yep. Been a big night has it?" Sarah is tryin' to peer at me in the dark and as she leans forward I can see that the dark has stripped the tangy edge from her bright pink hair. Never liked pink hair so this is a good look.

"Yair, been a big night I guess. The biggest." I tells 'er.

I can't help the beamin' smile that's blastin' across me face. Sarah is frownin'. Everyone knows everyone 'ere so the fact that she can't quite place me is probably messin' with her a bit.

"Well, I hope you get home okay."

"Yair, Home." I kind of sigh, but there's no air inside me.

Suddenly Sarah steps back, a squeak escapes her before she notices it.

"Oh Crap! You're Mr Blight. You're…" She leans her drained pink head toward me again. "You're dead!"

"Yair, That's right. But it were such a lovely night, I kind of, well, I dunno actually."

Sarah's hands leap up between us creatin' a fence.

"You're dead! Are you going to eat my brain?!"

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“You’re a… a zombie! That’s what zombies do!”

“Nar. Me ma tried to make me eat brains once. Bloody disgustin’. Like snot but without the salty taste.”

“But Mr Blight, you’re dead! Shouldn’t you be in your grave? Or…somewhere else?”

“On a night like this? Look at them stars Sarah. You don’t see stars like that when you’re buried under ground. Or asleep. Or when you is just lookin’ at the soil. Now I can seem ‘em all. Majestic.”

And we both stare up at the huge sky and feel the radiant power streamin’ into us.

“Huh, yair,” Sarah shrugs. “Wouldn’t be dead for quids. Ooh sorry, my Dad used to say that. Probably inappropriate eh?”

“Not at all girl. I think it’s perfect.”

In the distance a magpie shrieks to let everyone know it’s wakin’ up. Obnoxious bird.

“So where are you going?” Sarah asks.

“Dunno. Haven’t got a plan. What about you?”

“Work. Today, it’s all about the hot cross buns. ‘Tons of buns’ as we say.”

I look at her and notice what I ain’t noticed before. It’s like she can’t stop, like the majestic sky, the velvet night, it don’t even register, she ain’t part of it. It makes me a bit sad.

“You know what it’s like, right, when ya whole day is all filled up before it even starts?” I ask her.

“Yes indeed, that’s the one.” She sighs.

“And there’s so much to do and not enough time and everyone is pushin’ you to get it done?”

“Exactly. This is a Sunday I am looking forward to the end of!”

“Well, girl, that’s crap.”

“Yes, she shrugs, what’re you going to do though?”

“Today, I got nothin’ to do. For the first time ever in me life. Nothin’. I love it.”

“Well,” Sarah looks around at the dark empty street, the tentative almost light of the dawn horizon. “I better get to work. Those buns need to be told what to do.”

“Sure, ‘course. But you remember to have yaself a lovely day.”

“You too Mr Blight. Good luck with that, um, being dead.”

She turns at the corner of the café and looks back at me. I wave and put my hands into my pockets and try to whistle. My lips are too dry. So I hum a tune that doesn't actually exist.

I'm pretty much near the heart of town now. There's the Commercial. I been to this pub every year. Out of harvest, the whole town arrives. One day a year. Now, I can stay here forever if I wanna. I don't drink so I don't want to stay. Me arms are cool and movin' smoothly, legs feel robust. Not like they have been. I think losin' a kidney makes everythin' turn to pain and tight cables so this is nice now. Will used to spend a lot of time at the Commercial, 'specially when he had his trouble. Or when his trouble left him, ha. We got Will Evans to work for us because he was a machine neurologist, a cardiology doc for engines. He was a freak with engineerin'. When the baler went down he'd operate, he could diagnose a sniffle in the header just by sittin' in it and listenin'. Genius with engines he were. A machine magician. Couldn't understand his wife but. One day she just left, ran to a town with more roofs and less space. Seems she were terrified of wheat and the horrible weight of the sky over Willton. Never told Will though, she carried on all stoic like, until she was just gone. That's when Will started hangin' out at the Commercial. Often under a table. Everythin' seems to be about the good and the bad or the comin's and goin's don't it?

"You gotta sack him love," Bea had said, "'E's becomin' a danger to hisself and t'others," she insisted. "'E's drinkin' every cent 'e earns."

"It's a bad patch, 'e isn't a bad bloke."

"But he's becomin' a drunk and you're payin' for his journey!"

"So we just desert 'im? Like she done?!"

It had been a pretty rough discussion. We was both right. And we both really wanted Will to be better. In the end we compromised. I halved his wage and told him why. Told him if he didn't like it he could leave. Or sober up. He didn't like it.

"Bloody 'ell Brian!" Bea snarled at me as she watched Will throw daggers at me across the yard.

"It 'ad to be done Bea."

"An' I thought you was a good bloke Brian Blight. Turns out you're bit of a prick!"

"I bloody *am* a good bloke Bea. That don't mean I'm a *nice* bloke."

I looked back over me shoulder at the two story bulk of the Commercial with its bull nose drive-thru and glowin' beer signs. The sky is grey now, that wannabe blue that is crouchin' to explode into daylight. The air smells like fresh soil. Or at least, that's what I can smell. It's beautiful. Will stayed six months more. When the harvest were in that year he left to go to a bigger town. I never asked which one but I like to think he found his wife again. He left sober and he cried when I handed him the other half of his wages. He earned 'em. Bea kissed me cheek. She cried a bit too I think. Maybe I just imagined that.

I'm leanin' on the lamp post opposite the Pub. The light flicks off as the daylight muscles up. It's gonna be a warm one and it seems to be drainin me. Like it's nap time and I don't feel like I can make it to bed. Snooze in a chair kinda feelin' is what it is. Must be gettin' old. I smile. Not like when I were young and I could work like twelve hours a day and then work in the machine shed with me old man under the bare globes and moths. Back then all the other guys were young enough to drive cars powered by angry music, blown by beats and chords instead of engines and pedals. They'd thrash out on the big long roads out of Willton, always on their way somewhere. Most of 'em never went anywhere. We pretty much all died here. It's like they was screamin' along tryin' to capture some joy, racin' after some life, instead of embracin' the joy already here, waitin'. I used to listen to the roar of their 351's poundin' past on the highway, two clicks out from the shed. Grease on me hands, me and me dad and a combine harvester or a re-con'd ute. I loved bein' there. With him. Every year, when harvest was done, he'd bring me to the Commercial and, even before I was eighteen, he'd buy me a schooner of Coopers.

"Real beer Brian," he'd tell me. We'd clink our glasses together because that's what people do. We'd slip the beer down amongst the noisy release of the harvest crowd, swap a few stories, exchangin' like for like, numbers and weights, tales of moistures and yields. We never had a second beer.

"After two," me Dad said, "you start talkin' myths and legends. Once ya first beer's in ya, all the useful stuff's been talked. Time to eat." And we'd take the ute home, complete and together. I nodded goodbye to the Commercial Hotel and decided it was time to take me weary bones back to me restin' place. Boy, I can use the rest.

The first grey of today is punchin' into the soft grass of the memorial gardens. The only well-watered lawn in the whole town. A giant stone cross rises above the skirt of rose bushes. Names of brass and their ranks and duties are listed on it. *Our townsfolk who made the ultimate sacrifice* is gouged into the cross beam of the primitive granite. I'm here now, in this golden place and this is all. Priscilla, me darlin' child, is probably still asleep, in her bed. When I saw her last, the black eyes and white skin were propped in her hospital bed as plastic veins and electric arteries ran in and out of her. She were still asleep when I died. The slash in her side stitched up, me kidney in its new home. She were alive this mornin', when I were pushin' out of me grave, me beautiful girl were still livin' large on the wide road to recovery. Lest we forget. Tiny insects are emergin' from the warmin' grass and dancin' in the air and I wonder if me girl got back to town for the funeral. A truck with me coffin in and followin', maybe an ambulance with me recoverin' girl in it, gettin' back home for the funeral. I hope so. I needed someone to chuck dirt on me coffin and Priscilla is a good girl. Now that I'm dead and buried, I wonder if me beautiful daughter will go to the Commercial. You know, drown her sorrows, celebrate her new freedom, whatever. I hope so. I never gave me kidney much to do. Never had the time to. I hope she won't make the same mistake. It'd be a shame if we both wasted the same kidney.

No man wants to bury his wife. That's what I feel anyway. I know there's them murders and crimes of passion and that, where a bloke murders his wife, but we was never like that. Sure, there was times when I wanted to strangle her but they was rare and fleetin'. Normally I just wanted to watch her move, hear her voice, make her smile. Bea came into our home like it was meant to be. Me Dad had worked this place and his Dad before him. The house was always a home. Grandma and Grandpa got those bone handled knives for their weddin'. We still use 'em. The handles have turned into hard, yellow teeth but they's still as much a part of the old kitchen as the air, the sunlight, the smell of cookin' onions and roast on Sundays, when you smell the rosemary that Grandma planted along the driveway back when horses brought the knife sharpenin' guy. Every mornin' I made Bea a cup of coffee with the grinnin' copper kettle. The cup is a stone and glaze of chocolatey brown. It belonged to me Mum and to Grandma before her. It's like that. Bea was part of it,

another swirl in the flow of time what passed through the old house, part of the history. But she couldn't handle it.

I were out that night, ploughin'. In me 503. The big spot lights slicin' a wedge of workable light out of the massive darkness. It needed doin' and it needed doin' that night. So I was doin' it. Guess it were the culmination of years of things but the ploughin' waits for no man so when I got in that night Bea was motionless. She were a beautiful woman. Not like Hollywood beautiful, she didn't have that desperate pleadin' in the eyes like they do in the magazines. Her loveliness didn't shout 'look at me', she were humbly gorgeous. People noticed her because you couldn't help it, not because she demanded it. Priscilla too, she got that from 'er mum. Got her beauty. Got her beautiful. And now she's got my kidney. She's worth it, whatever went wrong, I'm happy. Priscilla's alive. I'm not. Fair enough. And I'm totally buggered now, I could just sit down here and sleep. Maybe not a good idea. I'm back at the church now. Sund'y mornin' is fussin' about, gettin' ready for them what comes here, but for now it's just busy insects, happy light and the grass. Has it always been so green? It's like it's lit up from inside. Beautiful. I wish I'd spent more time noticin'. The buildin' is a typical church shape, like it was ordered from a catalogue a hundred years ago. 'Church: Standard: One: small.'

Last time I were here we was buryin' Bea. Her body stopped dead by her own hand. That were a horrible day. I turn away. I'm not in the mood for horrible. I'm happily exhausted, like a child after a day at the beach. I take a deep breath without lungs or air or breath. There's a big board in front of the old blue stone buildin'. Letters that can be shuffled to make sense. This mornin' they are tellin' the town:

He is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Yes, yes I am. I grin and head through the mornin' shadow to the grave-yard beyond the church. I feel like givin' someone a hug.

Happy Easter Bea. I'm comin' home.

Bad Breath.

In the drawer beside her bed Bea Kraus kept a disgusting jar. She was a kid. Her life was spent up trees and down creek beds. Knees of mud and hair of nettles, she made every inch of the farm her home, her playground. She had four older brothers, so she had to fight for chores that didn't involve mops or folding.

"I wanna cut their dangles off too!"

"That's 'zactly why you can't Bea, her brother had scolded her. You don't cut off their dangles, you cut off their balls! Only a man can know that."

"You in't a man, you in't even twelve yet."

" Hah, but I'm more man than you is ever gonna be."

"Well, now I know you don't cut off their dangles, so lemme come along! Dad said I could."

"No he din't." Her big brother had smiled down at her.

"He did too."

"Did not. Geez Bea, you could talk crap with ya mouth nailed shut!"

"He did too."

"Did not."

"Did too,"

"Did not."

"Did did did."

"D.I.D.N.O.T!"

"Okay, he din't, but if I asks him he woulda."

The four boys in their shorts and hefty boots, sinewy and tanned by a labourer's sun, even before they were old enough to drink, looked at each other. They looked at their sister. Her overalls two sizes too big, her eyes alight, pleading. They all shrugged.

"Whatever. It's only crutchin'."

Little Bea was a surprise. Five years after the family breeding season was planned to end Little Bea had arrived. A surprise. In a family of Teutonic blondes and caramel tanned flesh, her bright spray of flame red hair and glass thin skin was another surprise.

"Must be a throwback."

"Yair, they all agreed. A throwback to some genetic ancestor."

As little Bea grew more and more surprising, taller, thinner, faster, paler, fearless, no one thought to question the red hair. This is a pity because a town like Willton does love its theories and gossip, and this one was a beauty. A flame haired, energetic beauty. Like the Police Sergeant who left town two weeks after Bea's thirteenth birthday. It was just the sort of thing that fuels coffee and cakes, but people forgot to notice that coincidence.

Bea grew very efficiently to gazelle-like womanhood and finally threw out her jar of disgusting things. The scabs and teeth that she had collected from years of scraping tree bark and falling from home made vehicles at the sort of speed that makes mothers cry out and clasp their own mouths. These things had to go because now Bea was getting married.

Little Bea married a farmer who was two inches taller than her and five years older. He was a solid man, reliable. A good man. He grew crops in his veins and was made entirely of lumber and rock. He was a firm foundation and it surprised Bea to wake up next to him and find she had married Brian.

In a more aware place she may well have been labelled an addict. Little Bea loved Honey bugs. As a child she would ride her bike from the Kraus family home into the dusty town every Saturday. The road had been lined with white and red marker posts, every five hundred or so meters. The posts had been meant to alert weary drivers of the encroaching edge of the road, that here be danger, soft edges, loose rock. Unfortunately, the idea of making a safe fence had tripped on the reality of the massive distance, so two things happened. First; the posts appeared only every half kilometre instead of every hundred meters, making them a surprise rather than a service. The second problem was cost. Out on the open road they tended to become targets. Hooligan shot guns or rough-head kids swinging open the passenger door with precision, even kids on dirt bikes stretching their adolescent nerves. All would wipe out the slender white plastic posts with the red tops of winking reflectors. The posts had to be made and made again, so they were made cheap, with a central strip of the post missing, thereby shaving about twenty two percent off the polypropylene needed to manufacture each post. The design called for the posts to be concave, for strength, which also funnelled any breeze through the slot in the middle, like organ pipes. Also, as a money saving solution, the posts had been made

of plastic recycled from record shops and factories, the rejected or damaged stock of cassettes and singles, LPs and eight track tapes. So it was that as the breeze would whistle through the road side marker posts, forms of music would emerge. Hums or single notes, riffs and sustains. Often, when a truck went past at speed, pushing a fat envelope of hot air before it, the post might throw out a surprised fanfare or a strident sting. Little Bea would ride her bicycle into town, a ride of about five flat kilometres, past twelve of the musical posts. Often, as the wind of her transit swirled her summer blue shirts, the posts would gliss like a harp or give a cheery hornpipe to carry her on her way. Finally, she would arrive at Beakman's store, on the corner of Hardman Street. Pushing through the waterfall of plastic across the door, past the boot polish and cans of rat poison, she would arrive at the front counter. Behind the fibrous frame of Mr Beakman and his ancient apron, was the jar. Shaped like an ancient bell of glass, it was a shelf up, so Mr Beakman had to reach up and lift it down with a grunt and 'oh the old bones ain't good for this no more Little Bea.'

"Six please sir."

"Half a dozen Honey bugs? Must be Saturday."

And as he chuffed and chortled, picking each of the fat golden globs from the jar, Bea would count out the change from her pocket money one more time. It had been counted every day since Thursday, or sometimes on Wednesday, whichever day it was when she finally succumbed and ate the last of the gorgeous beasts. Then anxiety would build like a red winter rash around the mouth, it would start small, a little sore roughness that must be licked, causing more red soreness that must be licked, building, building, a coiled creature inside, moving, stirring, growing, becoming more and more painful. And then it's Saturday. The Honey bugs fell into the brown paper bag with a rustled thump of such importance that they seemed to weigh more than they possibly could. Made from a sweet plum, dried in brine to the consistency of a leathery scrotum which was then coated in a hard carapace of honey toffee, the Honey bugs seemed to defy physics, containing so much sweet, salt and sour that it extended beyond the present and with a gravity that weighed on Bea until every last one had been lovingly devoured. When the bag was empty, later that week, the void left would be visible from space and Bea would slump into a bland melancholy that, until she was a teenager, seemed to have no explanation. (As a teenager, inexplicable melancholy is part of the job description and seemingly

needs no explanation.) Mr Beakman at the store never knew Bea as a child of melancholy as he usually only saw her on Saturdays when she jumped off her bicycle, followed by the soundtrack of the road. For Little Bea the weekend took on the aspect of Christmas and Mr Beakman was her own personal Santa. Her love of the honey bugs was a wonderful thing. And a terrible thing. Such passion is the core of a life well lived. It's also the heart of great sadness. You must know that the company that made the delicious Honey bugs eventually went broke and Honey bugs vanished from the shelf. However, it was not this that made Little Bea feel she needed to kill herself.

Even as Little Bea was first attaching her rose bud lips to her mother's swollen nipple, it became clear that something wasn't quite right with little Bea. She had the worst breath. All her brothers, having suckled a little belly full of sweet mother's milk would effortlessly belch up a gobbet of rich yogurt and it would be sweet. Mother would cringe as it marked dark clothing but, hey, it was just baby vomit. But Little Bea belched like a dragon. Her breath came from a sulphurous swamp of dead animals. As she fed, mother would turn away.

"Oh my giddy aunt, what the hell!? she must have been eating pig swill!"

"Come on, it's not that bad," Little Bea's father would call from the next room.

"Me bloody nipples are turnin' green with the stink of it."

"Ya talking a lot of weeds woman."

But she wasn't. Little Bea's toxic breath was, in fact, changing the colour of her mother's nipples.

At school the boys liked Little Bea because she would poke sticks at snakes. She was like one of them. At lunch, as the sun glared down on the tin and tarmac school, and children scattered like seeds, the rough-edged ones would find themselves at 'The Shed'. This was a place of great mystery. It was said to be home to the equipment needed for grounds keeping but even the youngest child could see the school had no 'grounds' and what dirt there was wasn't 'kept' at all. There were tales of children being murdered in the little tin shed, others swore it covered an old mine shaft so deep you could see the red-hot bowels of the earth. Whatever role the shed had been designed for, over the years the shed had given rise to myth and legend and a burgeoning nest of coiled and sleek brown snakes. Despite being bland and

boring, even in their name, the brown snake is one of the deadliest snakes in existence. The school tolerated the nest of snakes for legal reasons. The snakes controlled the mice who came to feed on the discarded fritz and sauce sandwiches, the spilled vegemite on white, the unwanted half of the apples. Children attracted mice and they were terrible pests. So were the mice. The plague of mice had become a point of contention early in the school's life.

"Then we need to bait, chuck some rat poison down, that'll sort 'em."
The headmaster had looked at the parent with shock.

"We can't leave poison just sitting about where children play!"

"Why not, surely the kids ain't gonna eat it? That's dumb as a chaff bag. I mean, hell, the problem is that the little buggers DON'T eat all their lunch isn't it? So if they won't eat food what their mum's has made for 'em, why would they pick up rat bait and eat that?"

"Because they are children!" The headmaster had stated, exasperated.

"Yair but the snakes, they could bite the kids," another parent objected, "so either way, some kid could end up dead, right?"

"Ah, yes, but," the headmaster had addressed the gathered parent group, "the difference is a snake is natural causes. Accidental poisoning makes the school liable."

So the snake nest had been allowed to stay beneath the little tin shed at the back corner of the hard-packed dirt school-yard. Under the force of the scarifying sun, the snakes would wriggle free of their burrow to rest in the sun, absorbing the energy their bodies couldn't create. Like discarded hose bits or dark, fallen, twigs. And they were fast, always alert. Energised by a heat that sucked the life out of every other living thing, the snakes were kings of the high heat so naturally the children with the issues, the frayed ends, the loosely flapping realities, they would gather to challenge the kings. And Little Bea gleefully joined them as the boys with broken parents and weakened teeth poked at the snakes out of cruelty. In a school of just thirty students, everyone knew what everyone else was up to so Little Bea bore the same label as the broken boys who teased the snakes. She was like that. She was one of them. Cruel. A tomboy. One of the not quite rights. Bea wasn't cruel though. She picked up a stick and jousted at sleeping snakes out of curiosity. How quickly can they strike? How often will they strike in a row? Will they pursue once the threat ends? What

sound did they make? Once she had answered these questions to her satisfaction, she was done. The boys were cruel. She was curious. So when she had finished tormenting the deadly snakes, they had just started. But her reputation was set. When some of the other kids, the not so broken ones like David Partridge or that Jenny Westerhaus girl who had freckles coming out of her nose, when they started putting dead mice in her school bag, Bea was stunned. Why do that? It made no sense. Twelve years old with a bag full of book and dead mice. (One book, three mice.) She sat by the back door after pulling out her house key and finding the mutilated rodents, staring dumbfounded at their little squashed bodies, stiff and dry in the hot afternoon. They had begun to stink so much that it overwhelmed the terrible sulphur stink of her own breath. It would take a long time for her reputation to turn around, to no longer be stinky snake girl. This early bullying is not why Bea would eventually end her own life.

To fill the holes in her last years at high school, she spent her long summer holidays at the Willton Silos, paid to fill in the paper work and enumerate the grain leaving the little town. All the time she dreamed of following the golden trail of seed out of Town and on down the track to the city.

"'Coz I wanna go ta university," she had told her bemused brothers.

"Ya can't go ta Uni, you're a girl."

"Girls can go ta Uni, Ms Brecknock did." In fact, both of their teachers had attended a university at some stage. With the exception of the doctor, they were the only people in town who had.

"An' whatya gonna do?" Her little brother smirked.

"Whatever the heck I want."

"Uni's as good as a brass dunny roll."

"And anyway, what would ya study at," another brother sneered. "Girl studies?"

"Oh, maybe accountering, like I do at the silo."

"Book keeping?" Her big brother had smirked.

"Sure, I can do that."

This wasn't real work, her brothers told her. It was what you did while waiting for the crops, waiting for the real stuff to begin.

“Yair, well maybe I’ll do somethin’ different.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno, maybe…” But the problem was she was born under a Willton sky, a sky that was vast, massive, endless. And completely empty. She could not imagine what a girl like her might choose to do with her future. So it was not her imagination that finally got Little Bea out of Willton, if only for a day. It was her breath. Upon peering down at a bloated tonsil one afternoon old Doc Posthuma had nearly fainted, having to sit heavily after taking a beating from her throat.

“Whoa! Zat eesn’t right!” The doctor exclaimed. The more he was shaken the more European he tended to become.

“Yair, her mother had said, she does have a little bit of bad breath.”

“You are right zere Mrs Kraus.” Doc Posthuma had long ago become comfortable with the rural art of the massive understatement, but the girl clearly had a problem. It was another two weeks before he convinced himself that he had no idea why a perfectly normal girl should have breath that came from the very depths of a long drop dunny. None of his questions about diet, additions of antibiotics or application of antacids did anything to alleviate the raucous stench that emanated from the willowy girl’s pretty little mouth. So, as a last resort, he sent her five hundred and twenty miles down highway one to the big town with the proper little hospital. She came back with the X-rays and Doc Posthuma held them up in front of the office window that peered across the carpark.

“Hm. Vell, zat doesn’t really tell us… Huh?!” And he sat upright, drew the big blue sheet closer to his face. “Vat is zat!?”

“What is what?” Bea’s mother clutched at her coiling hands, waiting for a translation of this language she didn’t understand. The language of medicine.
Doc Posthuma pulled another big picture from the envelope, then, hurriedly, another.

“Zis is not right. Impossible!”

Bea married Brian because he knew she would. He had been bought up in a traditional home. Mother, father and two point three children. The entire family life operated on traditions. Prayers at night time, breakfast made by mother, served at the table to all the family together. Father in his overalls, the two children, Brain and his younger sister Anna in their pressed clean school uniforms. They were a picture.

‘Australian farming family’. Grey pants school days, check-shirt shed work afternoons, sheep and wheat on their skin, soil and prayers in their mouths. Brian was a traditional boy from a traditional home with a traditional life. As a married man his ideas of lovemaking were traditionally missionary and his gift to his bride was tradition. Little Bea had been raised amongst brothers and sheep so her ideas about lovemaking were substantially different. Brian would never know this. Soon enough, however, young lust enabled them to establish a sort of missionary/animal hybrid that satisfied them both well enough and proved foetally fruitful. Impregnation was successful. Gestation less so. Four little children failed to be born before Bea was able to hand their daughter into the world. After all that loss, the wonderful gain was so overwhelming, she never wanted to have a child grow within her ever again. Now that she knew the great joy, the great loss was too overwhelming. The light had just made the dark all the more terrible, as is its want.

In the chest of Little Bea, just beneath the juncture of her large bronchi, where the tubing inside sends air one way or the other, just below that, tucked in the space between the lungs, was a tiny pilot light, a little flame that constantly burned. It did no harm and seemed to serve no purpose. And yet it burned, day and night, always. It flickered when she coughed and grew noticeably when she was excited, but other than that, it just… was. Her mother hoped that the flame might in some way explain the presence of her impossibly red hair, but no, that’s still an entirely different story.

The last time Bea and Brian spoke, they didn’t really. That’s the way with a long-married couple. Drought conditions had prevailed for many years. That which was once fertile and fecund had subtly dried and greyed. The ground was hard labour. Even the idea of raising something valuable had been bleached and crusted by relentless ongoing drought.

“Brian, can we talk?” Pass the milk please.

“Yair, yair I reckon. Paper reckons no let up in the ‘ninio.”

“Brian…”

But she couldn’t find the words she needed. They had evaporated long ago. He didn’t look up so he didn’t see her puzzled look. He didn’t look up from the paper so he didn’t notice her open mouth, that void of meaning. Brian didn’t pay attention to

his wife so he didn't see the tiny cloud of yellow smoke, a puff ball really, that floated from her open, unneeded mouth. The flame inside her had finally died. Her husband didn't notice.

All she felt was a strange cooling emptiness. So there was no way she could tell him what she wanted to.

"Brian, I'm living at the bottom of a well. An inescapable, impossible hole. I can't see any way out. It's too deep to climb out."

Is what she didn't say.

That night when Brian returned to the house he shared with Bea, he found her cold. Dead. The note on the bedside table was held down by the ball point pen. Her hand writing was soft and neat.

All I needed was a hug.

A Man on The Run

Old Mrs Mankey is in a fury. She stands in her floral frock, feet in the big rubber boots, and stares down at the wreckage of the soil.

"Not a bloody 'gain!"

Mrs Mankey wears stockings of dark brown skin and a hat that is legally only allowed to be worn by people over eighty. Her hands pulse at her sides, snapping shut, open, shut, open, like furious heart beats. Her mouth gapes. Who would tear out her cucurbits! And over there, her courgettes too! No! Ruined! The bold green spreads of leaves are in tatters, the vegetables themselves are splayed like slaughtered horses, their milky white entrails oozing into the dusty soil, the pith-yellow seeds are broken teeth across the dirt. Who would do such a thing!

"Sergeant! Her voice snaps down the 'phone, shaking with the Parkinson's disease of rage. They've uprooted me courgettes! Again!"

"Your wha?"

"Courgettes, me courgettes, they shredded 'em, torn out of the ground. It's… it's… it's vicious! That's what it is!"

"Courgettes?"

"Me Courgettes, Yes. Zucchinis."

"Oh right, why didn't you just say zucchinis?"

"Because," A deep breath, "Italians grow Zucchinis. Ladies grow courgettes. And now some bastard has effed up me courgettes!"

"Was anything taken Mrs Mankey?"

"I should think so! They was near ready to pick and now they been mauled and muti-lated!"

"Very well Mrs Mankey." The Police Sergeant took a deep, calming, public service breath. "Would you like to report a crime Mrs Mankey?"

"Too Bloody right. I want to report a slaughter!"

"Um, maybe let's just go with Vandalism to start with shall we?"

"It was bloody slaughter! Even me cucurbits have been torn to pieces! Torn to Pieces Sergeant!"

"Kew cur buts?"

“Cucumbers is what common people calls ‘em. A lady calls ‘em Cucurbits. And they been bloody slaughtered!”

“Mrs Mankey, a lady may call destruction of vegetables a slaughter, a police officer calls it vandalism.”

There is a huffy silence, puffed up in baby powder and varicose legs.

“Well, perhaps sergeant, you’d be good enough to come and examine this act of ‘Vandalism’.”

“All right Mrs Mankey.”

“Then you can see how much of a bloody slaughter it is!”

Dave wakes early to slaughter lambs. No beef at the moment because the land has been recalcitrant giving up its bounty of grains so the farmers have not had beef cattle available for him to lay his blade over. Dave Baker has been a butcher since leaving high school and going to work for Mr Plumber, the butcher who dismembered the animals of Willton before him, the young man taking on the nutrient from the old, learning the trade to replace the old man when he passed on.

Dave now slaughters alone.

“Settle there, my little one,” as he holds the trembling little body and lifts it to the cradle. The smell of soft lanolin and lamb sweat are a heady mix, the song of life.

“There, there my precious one,” he coos and whispers to the lamb. Its bulging brown eyes, soft fudge and fear, find him, fix on him as he speaks gently, lifts it onto the steel table, like putting a child to bed.

“I’ll try not to hurt you my darling one, but it’s what we have to do. I know you won’t understand,” Dave smooths his big, soft hands along the flank of the little lamb, feeling the quivering pulse and the tremble of fear, the other hand is reassuringly under the little creature’s chin.

“Shhh, you are very special little one, beautiful and unique and this is what your life has been for my darling.” Dave smiles softly into the eyes of the little lamb as he reaches for the Captive-bolt gun, an ugly little pneumatic tool of stubby power.

“I won’t let you suffer my precious, just know that you are very important and your life has been worth…” Dave presses the trigger and 600 pounds of steel pressure slams into the tiny skull, instantly ending the nervous lamb’s life. The brain is splattered within the skull but the piercing steel leaves the brain stem active so the

little lamb's heart keeps beating, allowing Dave to properly bleed the carcass. The little lamb's life has ended before it even has time to be startled.

"There you are. I'm sorry." He whispers, just as he does every single time he slaughters another animal. Every day, every time, for twenty-eight years now, Dave Baker butchers with compassion. He lays the hefty gun aside and picks up the blade. It is a classic. Well used, sharp as acid, impossibly razor fine. The loving tool of a master craftsman. Dave begins to quietly, carefully, honour the little body as he hoists it, bleeds it and sets about surgically disassembling it.

Why does he waste so much time in the slaughter? Is it because he loves it so much? Savours it, relishes the slicing, slashing, gushing? No. Dave hates to slaughter, so he has become very good at it. Dave loves animals, deeply. At his core, he believes that animals are no less precious than his own self. So he will not leave their death to just anybody. Dave Baker is a Vegetarian. He kills animals that he will never eat so that the animals may die with peace and respect. The curious side effect is that when Dave slaughters an animal it dies with love, compassion, some would say joy, flowing through its veins. And this makes the meat uniquely delicious. No one could tell you why Dave Baker's meat is the best they will ever taste, but they can't get enough. Some even say Dave's meat has an aphrodisiac effect. So Dave Baker, the vegetarian Butcher, slaughters with love, making his meat so much more attractive to those he slaughters for. The terrible truth is that if Dave was a ruthless, carnivorous, angry butcher, people would eat less of his meat and therefore he would have to kill less of these precious animals. So what's a man to do? He once thought of quitting, becoming something nicer, like a lawyer, but then, he knows, he would always be aware that the lambs were being slaughtered by someone who didn't care. And that didn't taste right. It is such a wrenching dilemma. But this is not what saw Dave Baker having a terrible, sleepless night, it is not this mental trauma that filled last night with horror and violent dreams. No, it was the moon. Again.

The morning has put on its work clothes as David finishes his butchery. He steps out of his slaughter house and closes the door, keeping the sterile cool imprisoned. Massive sheep-white castles have exploded from the distant sea in thunderous nuclear piles, driving billows of silk higher and higher as they prepare to invade the

land, storming the coast with impossible power. Dave looks up at the impressive clouds and runs a hand through his fleeting mortality. God he needs a sleep. Later, he knows, he will sleep. Tonight he will be fine. The danger has passed. Again. And yet the woman in the khaki shorts, the back pack, the sturdy boots that redefine gender, she looks at him with terror in her eyes.

He rattles the door behind him, ensuring his little abattoir is shut and nods at the terrified tourist. Her hand flies to her mouth to keep the fear from breaking into a scream.

Dave frowns at her. Tourists on the sidewalk are rare in Willton, but not unheard of. The look on her face is, however, something he has never seen before and suddenly he is afraid. Perhaps she knows?

"Hello?"

She takes a step back and a luxuriously tanned hand points shaky fingers at his chest.

He looks down. His chest is a mass of deep red and shallow black, the blood of the lambs. He looks at the terrified tourist, down at his chest, at the fearful eyes.

He laughs.

"Oh, right. No, it's okay. I'm the butcher, I was butchering…"

"Du bist ein Serienmörder!?"

"You what?"

"du, du, du bist, Killer!" A terrified near whisper.

Her voice is soft with smoked meats and the flow of rivers made from snowmelt. Dave has to pause to allow her words to make sense.

"Killer? No! No! Well, yes, but animals… um. Meat."

The tourist woman is shaking her head, her eyes are trying to squash together, as if that might bring clarity.

"I make meat! Um…. Mettwurst? Schnitzel?"

"Ah! Hah, oh yah! ein Metzger! Ha."

The tourist shakes with relief and her laughter causes tiny white and blue flowers to break through the hard gravel of the sidewalk. Her hair flows and waves as the sound embraces her.

"Du bist kein Serienmörder. Es tut mir so leid."

"Wha?"

“Not un serial killer nien? You do not kill people?”

“Ha, nar! Not at all. To be honest, I even hate killing animals. It’s a terrible thing to do.”

“You hate to be butcher?”

“Well, Yes and no. I… it’s complicated.”

“You not like animals?”

“No, I LOVE animals. I hate meat.”

“I do not understand.” Her frown makes the sunshine happy.

“Animals are made of meat. So it’s a love hate thing.”

“Nein, I do not understand.”

Dave Baker, the Vegetarian butcher, shrugged.

“Me neither.”

They stand in the morning, two pretty young mortals beneath a sky of eternal blue, and look at each other.

“So, um, where are you from?” He finally asks.

“Hamburg, in Germany.”

“Ha, so you’re a hamburger.”

As she rolls her eyes at him he notices the way the blue of the sky has been held captive there. When she smiles at him it smells of cinnamon, apples and snow.

“Yah, I am Hamburger. And you are Butcher.”

He grins and holds out his immaculately cleaned hand

“Hello, I’m Dave, welcome to Willton.”

“Agnetha,” she says with her slender hand soothing his. “It is lovely to meet you.”

They stand there for a moment. She grins.

“Meet you. Yah. Is that joke?”

“Not really, but it’s a start.”

So begins another typical Willton morning. Agnetha won’t stay in town for long. Not because she is a foreigner, not because she was planning on passing through. She will leave soon because this is Willton. Not many people are able to stay in Willton. But she is learning to enjoy the butcher and his gentle ways.

-Vat ist, Foxes have killt zem?”

“Nar,” Dave tells her over their breakfast coffee, “the bats.”

“Cats?” The German girl is confused.

“Nar, Bats. We got Vampire bats ‘round here. They pretend to be little baby chickens right? Like chicks.”

“Yah, so zen?”

“So the chook sits on ‘em and the vampire bats just sink their hopeless little fangs into the mum chicken’s breast and slowly sucks all the blood out of the chook.”

“Mein Gott!” She giggles within her own disgust.

“Too right. The Chook don’t do a thing ‘coz she figures it’s her baby she’s protecting so she’ll put up with a bit of pain. Then she’s dead.”

“Animals are so, how you say, grausam? Er, nasty? Yes?”

“Ha, Yair, I suppose. But if the mummy bat don’t eat the mummy chicken, no cute little baby bats.”

“Bats ist not cute!” She laughs, her head tosses sunshine over her shoulders. Tiny blue flowers spring out of the top of the breakfast table.

“Depends how you look at it. I look at it like my eggs cost more, so maybe I’m not the best judge.”

Agnetha slices more toast, releasing the cheesy steam of omelette. She chews it whilst looking into the handsome bristles of the butcher. It is a nice place, here in his little kitchen. Sunlight has begun to caress the edges of the window and magpies are outside warbling their calls of bad jazz. He grins at her. He is really starting to feel something for this thin golden girl. The language barrier has forced them to relate more by deed than word and he finds he blossoms inside when he smiles at her. He doesn’t say he loves her because he doesn’t love her but, this morning, a weekend of buttery smells and sleep wrinkled eyes, he wonders if he soon could say, whatever it is they say in German. He feels it deeply. Inside. He feels it like a hunger. But, although he hasn’t eaten breakfast, he has no hunger. Then he frowns.

“Ah crap.” The dawning of realisation drops his face. Colour drains, the emptiness swells and he realises he cannot grow closer. He knows he must not fall for this girl. He is not right. Not right for her. Not right for this world. He is cursed and tomorrow the curse will bite. Deeply.

They are still at that awkward stage. She doesn’t know how he folds his towels or how often he sweeps his floor. He doesn’t know why her hair has changed shape some mornings, and what to say about it. She wants to ask about opening a window

but feels she can't. It's that stage. They are two people in the same place for a few weeks but they aren't living together. Which makes the difficult easier. Dave stabs a deep green leaf of fried spinach, his jaw dances about on it as he asks her.

"So, you missing home?"

"No," her eyes become curious. "Not really, I vould not say I am lovink ze hotness here but is okay."

"Right, right." Steam billows from the fried tomato. As it bursts, seeds and juice stream across Dave's knife. "Right, Yair. So," he looks into the heart of the tomato. "So are you thinking of moving on?" The tomatoed air holds its breath over his plate. The shining German woman looks up from her cheesey eggs.

"Oh, Right. Yah." She breathes in. Cheese, tomato, the past three weeks. "Yah, okay, I move on. Soon."

"Sure, Yair, probably be good to get back on the road, see that crazy old world out there?"

"Hah, yah. Hit ze road as you say here."

"Cool, Yair." Tomato grinds in Dave's mouth, juice dribbles over his lips. "I kind of figured you'd need to get out soon. Find some where a bit more… noisy?"

"Hah, no no, I love ze quiet. People make me, how you say, tvitchy?"

"um, twitchy? Nervous?"

"Yah, on edge. People are not fun too oftenly. Zat is vy I love to travel. People are okay. Until you get to know zem."

Dave Baker, the vegetarian butcher, and Agnetha the German tourist, look at each other and everything they want to say shrivels up between them and dies. Dave grins.

"Yair, It's probs for the best."

"Yah."

The night air whistles past his ears as they flick flat against the racing fur. It actually whistles. His speed is incredible, paws blurring the corrugated land of furrows as he flies like a massive ghost across the dark field. This is a big beast. A huge, incredibly finely tuned animal. Fluid, powerful, blazing a dark shadow through the bottomless night. Almost silent. Power, speed, silence, the indicators of near perfection. So bursting with life, he can do nothing but run. The whistle in his ears is the shriek of

unrestrained delight. The beast's breath is short, fast, almost aggressive. Fat, furred, paws bound off the dry soil, hammering passion into the earth. Its huge head is split at the mouth by a grin. Pure white teeth the size of fingers, the concept of steak knives, sparkle as lethal diamonds. The mouth of a flesh tearing beast. It is his time. His joy. His night. The beast is free. The full moon stares down at the warm night and the blanket of dry irrelevant fields, the useless work of man. The moon watches the beast it has unleashed. The full moon gives a little grin

"Hello David, still running low on the chuck I see?"
Mrs Mankey peers into the glass cases from beneath the garden brim of a hat made of flowers and plastic. A cardigan shaded with mustard gas entombs her rounded form and the peg thin stockinged legs stick out from her beige skirt like a bad hair-cut.

"Yep, sorry Mrs Mankey, not much beef about at the moment. Nothing local anyhow."

"Maybe if you weren't doing other things you might find some?" Her crow eyes latch onto the tall butcher who shuffles slightly.

"No Mrs Mankey, it's just the crops, you know, no beef at the moment because…"

"Yes, yes, I know, not my first year here is it boy?" Mrs Mankey wants to know how long the foreign girl will be polluting her town but she's not so rude as to actually come out and ask. "So, you think you might be able to get more work done soon?"

"Gee I don't know Mrs Mankey, what, with the baby coming and all that…"
Mrs Mankey gasped.
The news would reach her before the end of the street, that the thin, golden, German had left town, but the butcher felt his lie was worth it to see the old woman step back and make bubble shapes with her mouth. He really wanted to just reach over the twiggy sticks and shove his thumbs into her eye sockets and keep pressing until her eye balls burst under the consistent pressure. Oh so good. He grinned. He always got this way the night after, as the earth turned and the full moon snuck up on the planet from behind.
Boo!

Tonight, he knows, he will run free again. No longer just a man. Not just the Butcher of Willton. So much more. A beast, a creature of impossible power and focus. Over the years he has given up a lot as he becomes this wolf every month. Given up love. Given up companionship. But, of course, he remains still a committed Vegetarian. He hasn't given up his ethics.

A Sensitive Man

Peter Porter was a very sensitive man. He was not the one to notice. To him his hands were just his hands. His fingers touched, and the skin could feel the universe beneath. As he stroked Falcor, their woolly white Labrador, he could feel rivers of warm childishness coursing through the flesh of the dog. Falcor would beach-ball along the long dark-wood corridor of home the moment young Peter's key made that familiar snick. The dog knew the hands of the boy were special. The dog felt it. Peter's fingers felt the hair, the cheeky enthusiasm that held the hard keratin together. At the silent dining table, as mother and father looked over their noses at the photo-real meal placed before them in the fall of downlights, young Peter would pick up his knife and fork, quite properly of course, and feel the cool ignorance of the dead silver. Not as dead as the stainless-steel breakfast spoon. Mother's dining room silver still bore a faint pulse, the way the moon wears sunlight. The silver had no life of its own. It was only reflective.

Peter loved books. Reading them was okay, but old books, ah, they were something special. The pages were soaked with tangles and swirls, fears from distant minds, sighs and exclamations from long gone souls.

Didn't everyone feel this?

"The boy loves his old books," his father would grunt with a touch of pride. "Quite the reader that boy."

"You don't think he's gay do you?" His mother believed she was a modern woman, worried about modern things.

"Lots of very smart and very successful people love books!" His father would counter.

"It just seems so... so dry and... lonely. How will he meet a nice girl in a book?" She anguished.

"Have you read '*Lady Chatterly's lover*!?" His father had smirked.

"Most certainly not!" His mother blushed.

"Nor have I but I believe it is quite... instructional." He chuckled.

"Derek!"

As Peter Porter grew taller and more hormonal, nurtured by the trees and parks of the blessed city, he never noticed the existence of the town of Willton. When he first began to look beyond the neat box rows of rose hedge that protected his home, he looked only as far as the sandstone and red brick incubator that taught medicine. The twentieth century wisdom of blood and bone shaped his youth and his adult life took on the shape of white coats of judgement, years of sleepless study and impending power. The distant little country town existed of course, but not for Peter. It was no more than a name that floated by sometimes. It passed by in the news, attached to a crop report or a returning soldier. Nothing more, a bug on the windscreen of his day, brushed away. It would take a massive upheaval to introduce the doctor to the town and the town to the doctor. The upheaval was Expedia Dornton.

Expedia Dornton floats in a cloud of talcum powder, scented to hide the cloying smell of desperation, turning her into a floral pouch with a suspicious something hidden inside. For over seven decades, she has lived in terrible fear of bad skin, bad breath and, above all, bad reports.

Now she is lying on her perfect white tiles, sporting a cut above her eye that would make a teenaged footballer proud. Blood, thinned nearly to water by medication, is trickling and curling. Across her eyebrow, around the sunken orbit of her eye and then off across the cracked salt pan of her cheek, like a stampede of frightened animals. The furniture she has accumulated is perfectly expensive, terribly old and brutally hefty. When her eyes went suddenly dull and her head spun, throwing her from her feet, her ancient porcelain face met the solid rosewood side-board, ensuring that when she was found things would look a lot worse than they probably are.

“Ms Dornton, can you hear me?”

“Of course I can you fool. Help me up! I’m not a rug. Honestly.”

“Just stay still Ms Dornton I need to make sure...”

But Expedia Dornton would most definitely NOT lie patiently on the floor of her own hallway, so the ambulance officer was forced to help her sit, even as he wiped more of the thin blood from her face. Now it fell in staining blotches onto the beige silk of her *Carlucci* blouse.

“That’s a little better,” she harrumphed. “Not a lot better. Now, what’s going on here?” The old woman squinted her beaded eyes at the young paramedic. The blur failed to clear so she shook her head. Her grey crown of tight curls shook like a shrub full of birds. Spats of blood flew, blessing the paramedic and the immaculate tiles.

“You’ve had a fall Ms Dornton...”

“Muzz? What’s muzz? Do you have a speech impediment boy?! It’s Miss! Miss Dornton.”

“Right. MISS, you’ve had a fall and...”

“I can tell that! Do I look stupid to you? I asked a simple question. What’s happening?”

“Yes, Miss, you’ve had a fall and I’m trying to find out what has happened.”

“Well?” Her eyes are shut tight now as a lion seems to be roaring near her ear and its claw is clutching her forehead. Oddly, the rest of her seems to be very drunk. Odd because Expedia Dornton never drinks. ‘Turns a woman into a joke’ she would say, revealing what she thought about other women. And what she knew about jokes.

The paramedic took a deep breath.

“ Do you know where you are?”

“Of course I do. I’m on the bloody floor!”

“But where?”

“What?!” Soft velour seems to line the inside of her head. I’m at home. “In my Home. The house I’ve lived in for forty five years! Now get me off the floor! I’m not some bare foot hippy.”

“Miss Dornton, can you tell me what day it is?”

“Can you tell me why you’re not helping a lady to her feet, you obnoxious little man?! Stop laughing at me and make yourself useful.”

“I need to make sure you’re okay so, if...”

“I’m fine! All I need is the get up off the floor. And maybe a cigarette.”

She raises two fingers in a gesture that could easily be mistaken for rudeness. In the vague nearness about her Expedia Dornton detects the blurred movements of other people. A particularly large piece of space seems to be the shape of her neighbour, that dreadful fat girl, Jessica, who couldn’t stop dropping babies.

“Jessica,” she squints toward the big neighbour, “get this useless man away from me and help me up.”

“He’s just trying to help you dear.”

“Don’t you ‘dear’ me girl. Help me up or get out of my house, the lot of you.” Another voice, like a business card, is stating the need for a trolley and a CT scan.

“What are you doing?” She asks the vague shapes about her. Her colour is escalating, as noted by the paramedic at her side.

“Take it easy Miss, we’re just…”

“Don’t tell me to take it easy! I’m the victim of a home invasion and no one is helping! Get off me!” She tries to shake herself free but finds her limbs are having a rest, disconnected from her will.

“My God! You’ve drugged me haven’t you!” And now she begins to feel genuine terror, a deep-down pang of threat confused with anger and shot through with helpless limpness.

The paramedic holds her hand. It is purely professional. Her hand is hard, the skin cool like fish fillets. He looks at the old woman, at the thin wrist his fingers press into, then back at the old woman. Finally, over his shoulder, at the slender young woman who wears a uniform like his. He turns back to the leather tight face of Expedia Dornton and asks, carefully, like egg shell.

“So, um, how are you... feeling?”

“Feeling?! I’m feeling positively Furious!”

“Are you feeling... dizzy at all?”

“What?! No. I, well I was a moment ago but now, I’m fine. Strong as a Mallee bull. Stronger in fact!”

“You don’t feel at all dizzy now?”

“I said no. I mean no. Pay attention boy.”

“Donna,” the paramedic turns away from the old woman slumped on the floor. “I can’t find a pulse.”

“Well she must have one,” the slender young voice offers. “I can see her face getting redder.”

“I know, but...”

“Prick her.”

“Huh?”

“Her finger, prick her.”

The paramedic glances at Expedia then back at his colleague.

“You prick her. She won’t hit another woman.”

“I’m right here you know!” The air whiplashes around the old woman and she glares at the paramedic by her side.

“Ooh,” the fat neighbour speaks up from the door way, “Can I prick her? Please?”

Peter Porter sailed a neat little two bedroomed town-house throughout his University years. The winds of parental wealth remained fresh and constant in his sails. But, like the tang of rotting fish on a pristine beach, his years were a combination of the beautiful things he could have and the wafting stink emanating from his parents. Peter Porter’s mother was very white, like his milk bottle father. Both were born and raised on a stiff upper life. Mother wore pearls to bed and never breast fed her child, as the natives might. Nor did she have sex. It’s not something the civilised races do. Peter’s parents glowed white in a world that was increasingly turning to shades of grey.

“We’re rather proud of you Peter, your mother and I,” his father would puff over a golden-brown glass as he stood amongst the crystal and oak of the family lounge. “Don’t worry,” his father would tell him, “once you’ve treated a few of those darkies, they’ll let you onto the real people.” Every time he went home Peter pretended not to be appalled.

Sharim was a good mate, they often studied late into the night over pizza and kidney cross sections, the photos of which were often indistinguishable from each other. Sharim was from Pakistan.

“If I don’t pass I don’t go home,” he had said once. Peter had laughed at the melodrama in his friend’s voice.

“But really, what happens if you fail?” Peter asked around a sliver of pepperoni.

“They don’t send return airfare.” Sharim was matter of fact. It left room only for a stunned silence. Finally, Peter could talk.

“That sucks.” He concluded.

Peter had no issue with ‘Darkies’, of any nationality. But since Peter wasn’t paying the fees or the rent on his carpeted life style, he didn’t really have the power to open his mouth and let his true feelings speak. Compressed within him, therefore, was a sludgy soup of the unsaid. It was a kind of black bile that rose to his throat upon re-entering the home he was born into.

The woman with no heart-beat is wheeled into the clinging plastic and urine air of the emergency department and she is not happy. Within minutes she is able to unleash her considerable acid upon the newly graduated Dr Peter Porter. The big mechanical bed fills the room, absorbing all the energy and drawing attention to itself like a toddler with a chainsaw. The window presses itself against the wall, aware that no one is interested in looking at it because it is not the bed. A vampire’s cloak of darkness hangs outside making the cold blue light within the room seem just a little bit human.

The old woman lies in the bed and steam seems to lift from her, thin wisps of poisonous gas. She lies perfectly still. Straight. Like the diagram of a thin patient lying as they properly should. On the cardiac monitor at her side a flat line glows green to accompany the lonely mosquito drone of the machine. A single high, stinging note. The volume has been turned to its lowest but still the tiny alarm manages to climb the walls and cling to every surface of the room. Expedia Dornton is holding her teeth together, the muscles of her jaw buff and plump, as the expensive young doctor glides in on the tails of a deep breath.

“Hello Miss Dornton, I’m Dr Porter.”

He places a hand on her wire thin fore arm. The surge of life powers through his fingers. He feels the burrs and scratch beneath the skin, her uncertainty. The tiny electric shocks of fear.

“YOU’RE a doctor!? They have a *Sesame Street* medical school do they?” She sneers.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What are you ten, twelve? I need a real doctor.”

“Ah yes, very funny. But I’ll decide what you need madam. I am a real doctor and I am real tired so if you could just not behave like a bad-tempered child, we can get you out of here.”

Expedia's mouth imitates a gold fish and her face flushes.
And a bip slips from the machine. Then another. Her pulse begins to chase itself lazily across the green darkness of the cardiac monitor. Neither of them give it much attention as their eyes lock in a defiant arm wrestle. Suddenly the old woman's chest seems to burst open with laughter.

"Well, young man. Get on with it. I don't have all night."
A tiny grin tickles the corner of Peter Porter's mouth. Just a little touch, don't want to get carried away.

"Why aren't you dead?"

"Because I don't want to be. Now let me up. I need the ladies room."

"Will you stop tearing hair off the nurses?"

"Stupid girl tried to stab me."

"She was taking blood."

"Well I'm still using it!"

"And I can get you a bed pan if you..."

"Don't you DARE. I am a fully grown woman and I am quite capable of taking care of myself if you people will stop justifying your pathetic existence by turning me into some cripple..."

"You have no heartbeat."

"You have no clue! Do I look dead to you?!"

"No but…"

"Do I sound dead to you?!"

"Clearly not."

"Do I act dead to you?!"

"I wish."

"Don't you lip me boy." They share a little smirk together. "Until I am dead, you can keep your distance! I will accept no more of this rudeness from you or your abusive hospital."
And with that the old woman levers herself from the bed. She throws a defiant question mark at Dr Porter. The doctor shrugs. The woman throws a vinegar grin and glides to the little bathroom. She slams the door shut, turning it into a point of punctuation.

“But what you’re showing me is completely impossible.”

Professor Nigelson was shorter than a doctor should be but the importance of his silver grey beard made him seem wiser than his height so he was often the one who found himself bearing the weight of new doctors’ concerns. Peter Porter cast a shadow over the professor as they explored the charts and reports of the woman who wasn’t dead.

“I know,” the rookie told his mentor, “but have a look at the glomerular filtration rate. Her kidneys are doing their thing. SPOF, no sign of liver damage. But her ECG is deader than a Dodo’s dongle.”

“A Dodo’s Dongle eh?” The old professor asks, grins. Dr Porter carries on, rattling on passionate tracks.

“If it wasn’t impossible, it’s like the rest of her body is fighting to stay alive by sucking blood towards itself and,”

“Compensating for her useless heart?!”

The two men stare at the clutch of papers.

“You do know,” the Professor said, “that it is, of course, completely impossible?”

“I’m fully aware sir. But, the fact is, she is alive.”

“Are we sure? I mean, the tests say…”

“Have you spoken with her? She’s got more life in her than a rugby match! And about as much charm.”

“So I hear. And her pulse, it kicks in when?”

The young doctor looks at the floor.

“Um, when I go in there, apparently.”

The little old man lets another chuckle fall from his prestigious beard.

“Looks like someone has an admirer.”

Peter has the decency to blush before asking,

“So what do we do?”

“Well, if you’re not going to ask her out on a date, send her home.”

“Send her home? She has no pulse!”

“Other than that she is, as I hear it, the epitome of fighting fit.”

“An eighty-three-year-old woman with no pulse, fighting fit?!”

“Well,” the old mentor shrugs, “how would you describe her?”

Hindsight is that dark suburban ghetto where past decisions live when they turn bad. In hindsight, they lurk in the shadows, forming gangs, eager to pounce when you least expect it. Hindsight is a dangerous place to visit.
In hindsight Dr Peter Porter should probably not have prescribed *Rozerem* for the prickly old woman, to negate the nagging insomnia, offering a sleep of peace. It should have been obvious that, since the rest of her vital organs were keeping her alive in place of her dead heart, offering her a drug that would allow these organs some restful respite may be unwise. After all, isn't death just an overzealous restful respite?

"You didn't kill her Peter, the old Professor had implored, she was dead already."

"But when I was with her she came alive!"
The older man grinned patiently and shook his head.

"Peter, let's put this in to perspective. She was already dead. Now she is dead... and gone. Get used to it Peter. If you want to save lives, get used to death. Without it, your work is useless."

Dr Vlodek Posthuma is on the cusp of leaving. The silent air of Willton has been his constant companion since arriving on this peace-loving soil. Forty six years ago he left a dank mildew closet full of European tragedies. The rasping of infant lungs and the stomp of polished boots, parents carved from boiled potato and a home built on the tangled roots of feuding ideologies. The glittering prize beyond the horizon was this place where politics and religion are quaint fillers, taking up space before the serious news of the sporting pages. He washed ashore in Australia, the land of dreams. He soon realised that all those dreams were Australian dreams and his ancient bones would never find a place of comfort in the shifting sands of this new world. Forty six years adrift on a sea of ocker tongues and weak pagan rituals, touch wood, cross my heart, shake on it. It was too new. The outback too fictional. His blood was too old. How can these people not know the intimate aches of their own family? They do not even share a roof with great Grandma. Most of these people, he soon learned, were keen to leave their family and move on, 'make yer own way' and leave the past behind. Ignored. A mystery never to be explored. Vlodek has never

understood this. All he had was his past. He had been born into a world that honoured the elderly. Now his medical practice seems to be about how to pack them off. He looks out of the bay window, over the crew-cut rose bushes, and watches the couple in the car park. They hug tightly. Not romance, more of a clinging. They are trying not to be swept away by the flood of horror the doctor has just unleashed. This is what he hates about his life. The verdict. For over two generations now he has been the doctor in town and the people have grown to accept him, if not entirely welcome him. No one really trusts a doctor who uses the accent of Count Dracula. But for Sharon Brody he has become the trusted professional. He had laboured between her legs to deliver four little Brodys, he had wiped their noses, stitched their split brows, set their broken bones and answered late night fever calls for all the Brody babies. And then the babies of those babies. Now, even those babies are adults, moving on into their own stories, as their grandmother is being eaten from within. The breasts that have nursed her family now bustling with the life of relentless tumours.

He watches Sharon cling to the taller, farm fed frame of her husband. He stares vacantly over her sobbing head. So much muscle and yet he has no idea how to be strong.

Vlodek doesn't want to watch. He turns away, slides the papers on his desk and re-reads the note. His own diagnosis.

'I have misplaced my life,' he has written. *'Last night I dreamed of my own death again'* the note says. *'I sat on a bench next to Jesus. He was tanned. Smiling. He had teeth so white. And no beard. As I sat next to him, we are two old friends on a park bench, admiring his incredible garden. But I am just a Zombie. I know I am diseased, decayed. My flesh is ripped and rotted, my teeth are black and I have no lips.'*

The old doctor shudders, pens the next line.

'Why does he sit with me? Where is my perfect new body I was promised when I died? Why do I remember this dream so clearly? Medicine cannot save me.'

Doctor Vlodek Posthuma throws the ball point pen onto the table and turns back to look across the car park. The tail lights of the Brody's Land Cruiser wink goodbye. The sun is bidding farewell with another outback display of crimson and coral, shark blood splashed across a reef, as if the sky has thrown up its hands in joy, celebrating

and reminding tomorrow that creation is an amazing place. Vlodek watches the spectacle for a moment before muttering.

"Vill be dark in any minute now."

As a child Peter Porter loved to hold his father's briar pipe. Just hold it in his palm, a gentle bird of rich brown wood, carved and rubbed smooth. His skin would tremble with the cheeky passion of the disembodied man who had loved the wood and lived to give it this shape. The pipe had been so full of the wonder of itself that it glowed in Peter's little boy hands. His father would snatch the pipe from him

"Don't play with that boy, It's not a toy."

But his father didn't understand the overwhelming, chest clogging, throat clutching, heart thumping passion that Peter could feel when he held the little masterpiece. Even Peter didn't understand it. But he sure felt it.

The pen in Peter Porter's hand still bears the feel of the nurse. He jots a note and hands it back. Smiles at her. She has just become engaged. The pen vibrated in his fingers from the unstoppable excitement pouring from her.

"Congratulations." He tells her. She blushes then looks puzzled. He is whisked from the room by an ulcerated belly across the corridor. He is hoping his pager will beep and tell him to come and see the amazing results, see what has become of the impossible viscera of Expedia Dornton since her death. What has it revealed? But a man has mistaken his leg for a veranda support and nailed a cross plank to himself, barely missing the femoral artery but forcing the nickel coated nail deep into the structure of the bone. He recognises the paramedic with him. Her touch once made him coil inside, like she had a boa constrictor living within her veins. He had brushed her hand as they stabilised a cyclist who had head-butted a bus and the touch of her skin threw a deep, reptilian fear through him. Now he recognizes her. As she explains the vibrations of the man who has turned himself into garden furniture with a nail gun he notices her dilated pupils and the scent of blood about her lips. She has been careless he thinks. Careless reptile woman. The worst kind. It is one of those little 'it's a small world' coincidences that they will one day share a small town life when she becomes the wife of a mediocre accountant. But for now, he avoids contact as they one-two-three the table shaped man off the gurney and onto the ER table. Soon he is holding the slim slat of *Pinus radiata* in one

gloved hand and it occurs to Peter that he doesn't have a garden of any type, has no idea what one might look like. Or why. Day and night it is like this. The constant tumble of bodies and bits, breaks, lesions, problems, breakdowns.

The mortuary at the hospital is at the bottom. Beneath twelve stories of once modern concrete and polished floors, in the basement. Like one of those children's clown punching bags where the base is filled with water to stop it falling over as it suffers pummels and punishment.

Peter expected there to be a crowd of on-lookers for the old woman's autopsy. Not because many of the staff were keen to see the dragon slain but more because, as a teaching hospital, she had been an impossible curiosity. Clearly the strangeness of her had made her passing invisible to the medical world because she had already been separated into pieces for further analysis. As he pushes through the hefty door and into the cool hard-lit room only the mortician, a hairy bear named Arky, is there. He is at a sink washing glove-dust from his soft pink paws with a bar of soap shaped like a purple pig.

"Oh!" Peter says. "Is it all done?"

"Is what all done?"

"Autopsy, Miss Dornton. She's finished?"

The bear grins as he wipes his hands on a *Sesame Street* towel, crushing big birds face in his ham-hock hands.

"Completely done. Yep."

"Oh. Okay." Peter isn't sure why he is disturbed, why he feels he has missed out on an important moment. Not hearing your child's first word, missing the moment a stranger first smiles at you, ignoring the last words of a beloved friend. Peter has never experienced any of these, so he has no idea what unrequited grief might feel like. He is just put out. His body suddenly feels it is the wrong shape for this place.

"So where is she?" He asks. The bear grunts.

"Most'v er's in the drawers there, there's bits on their way to path'. Some tests, that sorta stuff. Did you want somethin'? A kinney? 'er spleen were in good nick..."

Even if he hadn't been using a voice from a distant land Peter would have had trouble understanding the bear. Everything was just wrong.

"*Hypervigilant Organ Syndrome."*

"I've never heard of that." Peter frowns at his mentor.

"I only made it up this morning." The old professor chuckles.

"Nice." Peter felt the phrase in his mouth, like exploring a tooth. "'Hypervigilant Organ Syndrome.' Yes, very nice."

"Glad you like it." Professor Nigelson nods.

"So her lungs, kidney, all that, were operating at some higher level, is that it?"

"And her largest organ. Her skin. It was shifting blood around her like a manic sheep dog. It's as if her whole body had developed this syndrome to cope with the fact that she had no heart."

"Wow, that's, well…"

"Impossible?"

"I was thinking 'amazing'."

"Okay. But also, impossible."

"Professor, after nine years of studying humans, I'm pretty sure most of what bodies do is impossible."

The old professor let a chuckle crawl out of his beard.

"That's true I suppose. But there's impossible, and there's impossible."

Dr Vlodek Posthuma barely even notices the decision being made. Like salt damp. Or liver spots. It's slow and it draws no attention to itself. But the infested breast of Mrs Brody is gnawing at him. Already into its fourth stage, the cancer has set off on a journey of discovery, conquering new places and invading essential shores within the woman he has cared for. And he has no-one to share this with. There is no brash oncologist he works with to whom he can throw his fears. There will be no sharp gallows banter with a like-minded professional. He can't turn to his receptionist and sigh together with her over the traumatic uselessness of their own abilities. His receptionist is lovely, but the limit of her skills is getting the filing in alphabetical order. She can nearly do this. But all the time the cells are rampaging through the old woman and he, with all his knowledge and experience, knows too much to just carry on. The tiny cells arriving in pristine bone, an arm or leg, a nice fertile expanse of femur, perhaps an ulna, to set down their dendritic roots and tear into the woman,

slashing holes, strip mining her from within. And they have been at it for too long. He had lost this war before he even saw the smoke of battle. The sun has fallen in a sulk beyond the scabbed wheat fields of Willton and he still stands in front of his window, hoping for a distraction. The brain within him is a general practice brain. Great in general. The curse of the country doctor. A jack of all trades and a master of ignorance. A car accident would be good right now. What wouldn't he give for a gall stone right now or a nice lacerated cornea, anything to drag him away from this standing here. Knowing. And perhaps it is the ruthless silence that helps him decide. It's time to leave Willton.

Peter Porter loves this city. Loved this city perhaps. It's starting to look a little less shiny. He sees the rust now. The dirt where flowers grow is still dirt. The feel of energy surging through the pavement is now more like a manic desperation, late night lonely drunkenness rather than youthful joy. A hand-rail hums, alive to his magical hands as he experiences the hectic busyness of every hand that has recently passed. But now he is feeling just the busy. Just the hectic. Movement with no destination. Rush without rest. With every touch he is connected with a distant traveller and now he is beginning to see that his fellow travellers have no destination. He no longer feels like a passenger on the Orient Express. This is a cattle car. What was once adventure is now just a journey with only one possible end. There is a shift, a deep opening within, as if every single thing in his life is sending him exotic postcards of elsewhere saying 'wish you were here'.
At night he sits at home before the screen to find cases like his own Miss Dornton but they only appear in works of fiction and before he can look further he is asleep, collapsed beneath the daily pile of flesh and blood. In two years he has hardly spoken to a person, only a condition. A month ago he was at the supermarket and asked the checkout girl "How are you today" and waited to take down her history. She said she was fine and he nearly cried. So Expedia Dornton, the woman who was impossibly dead, slipped away to that place where all impossible things go. Perhaps it is the relentless noise and need that helps him decide it's time to leave this city.

Like Clockwork

The people of Willton know something is wrong. The Post Office wall is nutmeg. The colour, not the flavour. Every three years Anthony, the tall German man, comes into town and repaints the buildings owned by organisations who have no other presence here. Like the Post Office. The Post Office is beige. It has always been beige. Even in ancient black and white photos, of horses and carriages and people with flecked and faded faces, the Post Office is clearly beige.
But now it's not.
It's nutmeg. And it's wrong. Terribly wrong.

"It's like a bloody great poo." Old Schulze is staring, one elbow out of the window of the Ford ute, targeting the building across the lazy intersection.

"Nar love, more of a chocolate. Yair, it's like chocolate." His wife, the dirigible Aileen, bobs in the seat next to him. She sucks air though her teeth to drown out her agitation.

"Huh," the old farmer grunts, "only if it's chocolate what's been eaten and turned into poop."

"You are a crass man Schulze," she tells her husband. She is right of course. But, she concedes, the Post Office does look a bit like a huge square turd.

"I don't like it," he scowls.

"It's wrong!" She hisses.

"It's makin' me eyes itch."

The Post Office was placed in Willton in 1906. Proud and beige, it had squatted on the corner of Schulze and Main street ever since. The number-neat squares of PO Boxes are dusty now, their business-like black lacquer has faded to grey and bleak spots of rust. But the heavy iron boxes still function. They made things to last back then. The walls have always been fresh. It's what people loved about the place. Repainted every three years. Like new growth. As you drive past in your dented, wheezing, grit scraped farm ute, the Post Office is clean and fresh, proof that this life of dirt and soil is not the only thing in the world. Something more than nature exists and every three years it comes to Willton. Like clockwork. In 1907 Anton had been

interviewed by the local paper. Back when there was a local paper, when there had been enough locals to buy a local paper.

"I am from Hamburg," he had told *The Wheatworker*. "I vas apprenticed to a master painter ven I vast made by ze Schloss und kluck vind-up Domestiks company of Hamburg."

"Why didn't they get a local painter, one from a factory in Melbourne maybe?" The journalist had asked. In 1907, newspapermen were just starting to appreciate the distant tug of socialism. The clockwork Hamburger had simply looked at the journalist, tilted his head to one side with a slightly hollow click and his eyebrow had moved up with a tiny whirring sound, an automated response of puzzlement. The newspaperman, despite the desire to be a hard-hitting socialist, didn't bother printing the reply. Everyone knew the Germans made better clockwork painters. They could go for ever and only needed rewinding every three years. Unionist rhetoric often fell flat in the face of reality. This was a long time ago. The town had watched, fascinated as the clockwork man whirred and clicked. Placing his tin of beige paint beside the squat wall of the Post Office, popping the lid with one thin finger and then, with brush in hand, dipping and swiping, dipping and swiping, over and over again. Relentlessly, with perfect neatness and just the right amount of paint each time. The cover was immaculate, there was not a drop of waste and every time, the Post Office ended the procedure in a fresh beige shirt. Clean as summer laundry.

Every three years the town received this little frisson of excitement, like the coming of an old friend, an occasional guest, perhaps met on holidays when one was a child, who would drop by on their way somewhere. That was Anton. No, not Anton anymore. He has changed over the decades. He is Anthony now. In 1915, when war had exploded over the other side of the world, the clockwork man had installed a new name, removing the Teutonic Anton Von Hessing and replacing it with the nice wool and stubble of Anthony Hester. His accent still smelled of mettwurst of course but he only came to town every three years so when people would say;

"Hey, you're that German fella int' ya!"

"Nein, not at all." He would say with a curl of mechanical grin on his tin lips.

"Yair, sure, ya names Anton init? From Hamburgerer or somink."

"Ha ha, nein," he would chuckle. "Mein name ist Anthony. Anthony Hester."

“You sure?”

“Ya, of course, I know mein own name.” He would grin as he continued to meter out

specific paint in perfect measures.

“So how come you talk all weird ‘n that, like one of them killer Kaiser guys?” The painter would raise that now familiar eyebrow of puzzlement before laughing and saying.

“Oh ha ha, yah, I see vat you mean. I am From New Zealand. Ick bin ein New Zealander.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay then mate.” And the town’s folk would walk on, happy. But now Anthony Hester seems to have a problem. His accent has become slightly less obvious, taking on some of the sand and weariness of the local language, faded by sun and distance. He still turns up every three years. Regular as clockwork. But this year, it has gone wrong.

Anthony stands back from his work and, like the people who pass by, looks up at the wall of the Post Office in a state of horror. And fear. The wall is dark brown. He was sure, as he painted it, that it was beige. He only ever painted beige. It was the nature of his cogs and springs, written upon the minute and precise perfection of his inner workings. He could only ever do beige. But the wall is brown. He tilted his head, a ping of tin, and listened for the smooth hum and whir of himself. Was there a scrape within the sound, a tiny failing? Yes. It seemed there was. A tiring, a weary gear, grinding down slowly. Inexorably. Simply wearing out and going wrong. He listened to himself in mute sadness.

The township has now become a crowd. Two, four, eight, maybe ten, no twelve people, standing behind Anthony staring at the wall of disgusting brown, their eyes offended by the wrong colour.

No one knows who threw the first stone. No one ever does. It clanged off his thin tin flank like a dropped can. Silence. A new possibility had opened up. The little crowd of locals could stand and stare in horror. Or they could act. A second stone missed the head of Anthony and bounced off the wall, leaving a small beige chip in the unspeakable brown expanse. Anthony’s clock-work head leaned in slightly, then dropped, hanging itself in shame. The next stone was a brick and everyone knew who threw it because Closey roared as he heaved it.

“Ya bloody kiwi idiot!”

A Spanner struck the clockwork shoulder, another brick and then a clump of concrete that had once been a piece of gutter.

“You’ve wrecked it mate!” A short male voice squealed.

The Clockwork painter tilted under the impact. He fell to the dirt. His arms flailed, a distressed cockroach trying to right itself, as the locals crossed the road and loomed over his fallen form.

The men wore work boots. So did the women. Steel caps crashed against the tin frame, buckling armatures and bending the workings.

“How DARE you!” Screeched Margaret Post in her blue floral frock and floor stomping Rossi boots.

Young Craig was on his way home from cricket practice and unleashed a fury of cover drives, not caring about the slashes and splinters caused to his bat as the tin skin began to split and curl. A red-haired tourist, with an accent many would think came from New Zealand, peered over shoulders and hunching backs to see wires and tiny metal fixings spilling form the battered shape. Father Portcullis had been at the back of the mob, as was often his way. Now he pushed his way forward. The shadow of his dark robes appearing in the epicentre of the violent beating, gave pause. Two farmers, the accountant and the doctor’s secretary stood up. Mrs Mankey dropped the wooden stake she was about to insert into the gaping face of the ruined machine and stared at the priest.

The Priest stared down at the wreckage then slowly at the faces of his townsfolk. Face to face. Slowly. A truck rumbled past on the distant highway and the sun began to sting the backs of their necks.

Somewhere at their feet, a spring went ping. Father Portcullis looked down at the desecrated machine. For some reason, he crossed himself. He could never explain why.

In this town beyond the reach of late night shopping and take away Pizza, the wall of the Post Office is now a dirty brown. The colour of chocolate or cow shit, it’s an open debate. But this will always be the colour of the Post Office, even as it fades, peels, bleaches or just crumbles.

The Haunting Shed.

This land has a big heart. A big, wide spirit. A big, weird spirit. It doesn't fit in a city. There's too much noise there, not enough breathing dirt. Concrete has closed it all off and choked it down. In a place like Willton the lid is off. The coiling weird is freed. Liberated. Maybe it's never been confined. It has never had a white name, that's for sure. The local natives around here, they knew it. Felt it. Loved it. They understood it. It's why they didn't want to leave. But they didn't get a choice.

Father Portcullis was a young man when he came to Willton.

But that wouldn't last long.

Willton was a parish for an old priest looking to quietly fade away, or a young priest with little or no earthly ambition. Father Portcullis was neither. He was a young priest with a serious desire to climb the ladder. He was a runger. Even as a little, round, boy, growing up amongst the rich market gardens of tomato vines and zucchinis, his favourite colour had always been purple. Bishopric purple. Sometimes, as a young priest working in the city office, sorting the resources that helped feed the homeless, he became careless. That was how he found himself in a conversation that ended thus:

"Best just to take the posting in Willton and let things quieten, don't you think?"

"But Willton is nowhere," the young priest had snapped. "It's a nowhere town for a nowhere priest." He glared at the wrinkly monsignor.

"And if the bishop sees you and realises it was you who told the press of his, how did you put it, 'Careless Banking'? You will have nowhere to run."

"You're defending him?! Seriously?!"

"No, my boy, I am simply… reframing him. For you."

"He's a crook!"

The Monsignor slammed an arthritic palm on the dark desk. He winced.

"He is your BISHOP! And, you would do well to remember, a Bishop with powerful friends."

"He should be locked up." The young priest glared at the old priest. The old priest glared at the young priest. The Madonna with child, on the wall, covered the

innocent eyes of her child. The old priest drew a heavy breath and a small grin crinkled the skin of his eyes.

"And you, young man, should exercise grace."

"But he has…"

"Grace, Father, whilst in the parish of Willton."

Father Portcullis was in Willton before the sun set the next day.

Around the dirt that is Willton there is endless hot, dry, sunburned country. Like the burning red skin around the site of an infection. There are so many secrets here. But not secrets that are hidden, like gossip or shame. No. These are secrets disguised by the disfiguring nature of time. By ignorance. By a lack of imagination. There are many ancient facts out here amongst the crackling weed grasses and tiny, biting insects. Around a town like Willton, out beyond the edges of the last garden, beyond the carelessness of cultivation, there are melancholy artefacts, archaeological ounces weighed by history and found to be triflingly too small. Things that are just not interesting enough of themselves to be remembered, they lie rusting and old. Like the name of a person you met once and didn't like but didn't hate. Just didn't care. These are the facts that get lost out here. But now, after generations, this fact has remained. It has always been. It is still here now. At the old shed. The ancient shearers knew but they didn't think anything of it, didn't recognise the significance. Then later, as oil and fuel powered the outback and shearing became mechanical, the new machines came with a design that dragged excess static electricity away from the shears and the sheep. But before, when men wrestled rams and the hand driven razor-sharp blades would cut the soft wool, back then, the build-up of static electricity from wool on metal and man would spark and crackle about the sheds. For generations, at a time of wagon wheels, when land owners were sepia toned, the tiny crackles of power took up residence in the tin walls. The sparks would leap until they came to nest in the nails and tin of the burstingly hot shearing shed. And there they would wait, tingling, coiling, so that there has always been a resting excess of energy just waiting. In the tin, in the nails, reaching into the air, searching for a home, for a way out.

Camira and Rusty were brother and sister, both named by their father. He loved cars. Their mother had wanted to impose her will but, by the time she had recovered

from the back-breaking task of giving birth, her husband had already signed the paperwork. Born a year apart they grew together in the sun and phosphates of Willton. Educated at the tiny school they learned only from the land and each other. And today they are going to become part of this land like strangers never can. They are going to the shed.

"Can I put my feet up?"

Jack looked over at the young girl in the passenger seat. Camira's blue summer frock like an excited flag, flapping, waving about her smooth brown legs. The legs of summer.

"Sure, jus' kick off ya shoes."

"You gonna stink the whole car with ya feet." Rusty shouted from the back seat, slumped in the corner, surrounded by the raging hot wind blazing through the open windows as Jack pushed the EH down the old Graebner road. Maps called it Highway A3. Maps know nothing out here.

The town was long gone. Out here was thin dust and gnarled old lady trees, bent over and wicked. Tiny white dust exploded from the heads of weeds, drawn after the pounding speed of the old Holden. Under the hood, the legendary red motor strained. It had been painted red by a factory wanting to give the car the heart of a fire engine. It turned out to drive like a tomato. Oh well. Jack was older than Rusty and a few years ahead of Camira. Normally they wouldn't be together on a Sunday afternoon. But this was not a normal afternoon. Sure, they knew each other. Camira glanced at Jack in the little school bus and Rusty was given certain leniency by the older boys because of his sister's smooth summer legs, but, as Jack and Rusty both told the policeman later, they were not friends.

"You ain't scared are you Rusty?" Jack grinned.

"Nar. I don't care. Was you scared?"

"Hah! No way. I wasn't scared. 'til I got there. Then I reckon I might'a pissed me pants."

Rusty tried to chuckle but the wind ripping through the window made his eyes water and his skin was puckered with hot dry goosebumps. Camira made her feet do a little dance on the dashboard of the old Holden.

"I wanna be scared. I love being scared." She turned to let Jack see her grin. "It's why I was glad they let you drive."

“Well,” he didn’t smile back, “you’re gonna love the old shed then.”

Jack wanted to write songs, to tell this girl how he felt, to turn the feelings in his chest into a song that would make her smile at him again and… and that. But he knew he didn’t have the words. Like he knew he couldn’t fly like a bird. He could never write a song to this girl. He would be stupid at it. Later, when he was an older man, with grey at his temples and eyes buried in sun dried skin, then he would write a song to this girl. By then, she had been dead for four decades.

And now he let the car slow. He pulled over at a point in the road where nothing was special, and nothing was different. More ‘same bit of road’ amongst endless baked miles of same grey road. The lines on this whole stretch were fairly fresh. The truck had been through in the last three months, ensuring the road knew where it was meant to go and kept going there. As the EH settled on the sand and gravel shoulder, a bush silence fell. The silence left when burning engines and rushing air are replaced by the native music of insects avoiding heat, and the unheard hum of sand cracking. The three youths stretched their spines and shoulders, the two boys flapped their t-shirts to let air scrape the sweat from their backs. Camira’s summer dress had no back and Jack noticed the hot red lines from the seat of the EH Holden. Thin vinyl tattoos.

“So?” She said, peering into the horizon.

There was a mountain of cloud, dark and thunderous, hunching on the horizon. It seemed forever away. None of them believed in the clouds. Rain never fell here. Jack pointed.

“Just past that stand of bloodwood, see that red bit there?” The two younger children squinted into the burning face of the outback.

“Oh Yair,” Rusty nodded. “I got it.”

“That’s the roof. You go, you grab a bit a wool from inside, and then you come back. Simple.”

“It don’t look haunted.” Camira said.

“So, what’s the big deal?” Rusty shuffled his feet.

Jack just stared at the distant roof, his face empty.

“That’s what you’re gonna find out.”

“What if there’s no wool, like,” Camira said from beneath her sun-shielding hand, “what if someone has taken it all?”

“Nar.” Jack grimaced. “No one is goin’ in there just for some stupid wool.”

“But we are?” Rusty grunted.

“You don’t have to,” Jack told the young boy. “If you’re too scared.”

Rusty kicked dust at the older boy and was about to lie about his own bravery when he realised that his sister was already shrinking into the scrub.

“Hey! Wait for me…”

As the two youngsters rattled and clattered the bushes further and further away, Jack crossed himself. He didn’t really know why, and he looked about, to make sure no one had seen him. He didn’t need to bother. No one came here. No one stopped here. This was the place everyone knew to stay away from. The air crackled like dry cellophane. Jack sighed and wished he smoked.

Despite growing up amongst family and fecund soil in the city, Father Portcullis had always been homeless. His parents, despite being wealthy, were frugal and thrifty beyond reason. They were so careful it hurt. It cut. It crushed. He had never felt part of the family home and its hair-shirt values. As a novice, he found himself in white robes, like a portly ghost, in a back room at the cathedral in the city, a bile chamber behind the organs and facial skin of the imposing edifice. In the room were piled old chairs and surplus cushions, chalk and pens in boxes, not needed for daily worship. Standing in the smell of old wood and mummified dust, looking at the things, the stuff, the collection of matter that seemed to belong to no one, a phrase entered his head for the first time.

“Oooh, I could use that.”

He didn’t know what for, but he developed a habit of hanging about afterwards or looking at the ground as he walked. On the curb he might see a discarded lead wheel weight. His eyes would lock in and the voice would say “Ooh, I could use that.” After a prayer meeting, a discarded drink bottle is left under a chair and the father thinks; “Ooh, I could use that.” As that young priest he developed a strange stigmata, the relentless itchiness in his fingers as his hands denied his minds request to act on this inner conversation. Even later, as he grew older beneath the staring Willton sun, the intense itching remained. It comes and goes like unwanted family, like guilt, like seasonal pests when he is around things that no one else seems to own.

No one would have believed the Aboriginal boy anyway. But since he only really told the girl he met at the lake, the story was never officially reported. By the time the truth was needed, the Aboriginal boy, like the rest of his family before him, had simply gone. The girl has vanished too. Nobody noticed when he vanished because nobody had noticed when he hadn't.

"I wouldn't never go there." He said and glanced nervously at the white girl on the bank of the muddy lake.

"It's just an old shearing shed." She squinted against the diamonds breaking off the water at the feet of the dark-skinned boy.

"Nar. The shed, he ain't bad. Well, there's ghosts there right…"

"Oh! That haunted shearing shed thing eh?"

"You laughin' at me?"

"No," she laughed," but seriously? It's thirty k's out of town! What self-respecting ghost is going to haunt a shearing shed, especially thirty k's out of town?" The thin native youth tugged at the fishing line, reeled it in and then tossed it back out into the soiled lake.

"You ever bin there?"

"Well, no. No point. It's stupid."

"Right. Well. You dunno. Right?"

Transyta tucked her knees into her chest, defending herself, and watched the boy deceitfully tease fish into committing a fatal mistake. A breeze skated across the lake. The boy turned slightly.

"Anyway. It ain't the spirits. It were rain."

"Rain? Made a girl disappear?"

He pondered as he jiggled the nylon thread.

"Nar. Dingoes, they made her disappear I bet. But the rain, that bring the colours. That what got her."

"The what?"

"The Dingoes."

"No, no, I get that, wild dogs, get rid of the body. But what killed her?"

Danny jagged the line. Nothing. He slowly trawled the line in again, muttering. He threw the line again and, as it settled into the oily, tepid, water, he half turned again to address the pepper faced girl.

“It’s some old legend, Yair? From me folks.”

“Is this like the Kangaroo falling over and becoming a mountain or something?”

He turned his head, so he could see her grinning face. He liked her grinning face. He had once loved the stories, the legends written in song and trodden into the soil of his land by dozens of generations of his family. They made sense of everything, made this incredible world a place of robust logic and brilliant truths. Now, though, those stories seemed so out of shape, like they were told to a child in a foreign language, in a foreign land, for a foreign purpose. His past had dissolved, driven out of town in the beaten-up ute with the rest of his mob. He no longer clung to the ancient stories. Strangely though, the ancient stories clung to Danny.

“The old people, they say it’s a bad place. ‘Cos the rain, it don’t fall much but when it does, there’s this angry spirit. He hates the rain. And the sun. And if there’s a rainbow out there, it gonna kill you. Stab you like.”

“A rainbow?” Transyta frowns.

“Yair.”

“A killer rainbow?”

“That’s right,” the Aboriginal boy states.

“You mean like a pot of gold, but deadly?” She is grinning now, gently mocking.

He has the hook in his hand, the line drifting about him in the gentle breeze. From the pocket of his ancient black shorts he pulls a morsel of grey meat and impales it on the little hook. As he casts the line off into the lake again he is frowning.

“Pot a gold? That don’t make no sense. Nar. See,” as he settles with the line between his fingers, the lake lapping around his dark calves. “When the rainbow come it don’t never touch the ground. That’s why you can’t never see the end of ‘em.”

Transyta is about to correct him but Danny continues, repeating a song from a dark corner of his memory.

“But there, out there where the trees don’t touch them rocks, past there, the rainbow ain’t afraid of the ground. It comes to the ground and it looks for the hunter what cut his legs off.”

“What? Who has no legs?”

Danny snapped the whisper of line. Nothing.

"Rainbow, he don't got no legs. The evil man, the hunter, I don't know what he's called, he cut off rainbow-man's legs. That's why he can't touch the ground no more. He just drift about, lost. But there, out there, you know, where that girl gone missing, that's the only place rainbow can touch the ground."

Transyta leans over and scratches an itch the grass has instilled in the back of her leg.

"Right. So… so what?"

"Anyone what's there when Rainbow man come to earth, he kills 'em. Rainbow's real angry. Cos having his legs cut off and not being able to be on the earth no more."

"So, a pissed off rainbow, with no legs?" She watched the muscles of his back haul in the line again. Nothing. "But… well, how? It's just light, in the air."

Danny Pondered as the bait drifted, dead in the lake. Then he turned to face the white girl on the bank.

"So's lightning, right? Just light and air. You seen what that done to a tree right? I guess that's what a rainbow does if it touches you."

He turned to face the lake again and muttered under his breath.

"It'll smash ya."

"Well, that's hardly, like, real, is it?" The girl snorted.

The wind had a chuckle in a nearby tree as Danny watched the water.

"How do you know," he muttered, "you wasn't there. My mob, they was there." He slowly drew on the thin skein of line. "So who you gonna b'lieve, Yair?"

Back when the old shed was still just Graebner's North shed, they decided to do more than just shearing. The cost of growing and shearing wool ballooned past the price Old Man Graebner could get at market and so the mysterious spirits of commerce drove him to change his way of doing things. At the North shed that summer, instead of just shearing the sheep, he had to cut his losses. So he cut their throats. That terrible heart-breaking summer, Old Man Graebner and his boys slaughtered nearly a third of their flock. Most of the rest died, thin and weak, strangled by drought. The cull lasted a week. Blood soaked the rough boards of the shed and a darkness built around them as they worked. No one knew why, but none

of the Graebners ever returned to that shed. No one could stand to be there anymore. Graebner's North shed fell deeply into forgotten history as it became the old shed. The Haunting shed.

The souls of those slaughtered sheep have absorbed much of the static electricity that poured from the handled wool and nylon clothing of shearers, giving form to their mourning ghosts. They tumble and meander through the bush around the old shed. Dazed. Angry. Confused. In daylight they can't be seen, but they can be felt. But as darkness regains control, there is the faintest suggestion of blue. The whisper of heart-broken bleats suggest something is near. The haunting sheep are only seen or heard at the very edge of hearing and seeing. More a hint, an unsettling afterthought. Like teenage shame. It strikes illogical fear and unwinds even the bravest of humans. Like a terribly high cliff or a tiny creature filled with deadly poison, the old shed drives terrible uncertainty and acid into those who draw near it. So, naturally, almost every child who ever grew up in Willton, has been there. Once. Just once. It is the impossibly horrifying memories of these daring pilgrimages to the old shed that make a Willton child who they are. There is no physics to explain how the souls of dead ovine could draw energy from the joists and nails of a boring old tin shed. No scientific understanding exists from which to draw an explanation of the ghosts of slaughtered beasts illogically returning to reclaim their land. This knowledge had been cauterized when man was severed from the land. Now it remains as just a terrible, turn-away-and-ignore-it, unspoken, mystery.

"Father! Father! Hello?!"

The voice was almost a shriek, an old woman, banging on the front door of the sand-stone and wrought iron Rectory. The young priest was still grudging his city clothes from his expensive leather suitcases. He was muttering beneath his breath, sharing a curse with his teeth, as he pulled open the front door. Its corner caught on the slate of the doorstep, giving a startled shriek. The woman wore tomato across her skin, blushing at the embarrassing effort of hammering at the priest's door.

"Yes, what is it?" He said in his city manner.

"You are the Father, priest, um?" She was short, old and coated in the black clothing that collects on those who are perpetually in a state of mourning, and loving it.

“I am Father Portcullis, yes. Is there a problem?”

“Oh YES,” she wailed. “A little one, the Eckert girl, they say she has been… been…” And like a vampire moth, the old woman’s crippled hand leapt up and clutched at her mouth. She gasped and then had sense left only to whisper. “Murdered.”

Father Portcullis stood on the step of the flaccid old house, only a half day in the town of Willton, and watched a woman made of shadows and holy fever, tremor and weep on his doorstep.

“Well,” he muttered. “That’s not good.”

“Come,” she whispered through her fear, “the Sergeant wants you to talk to the boy. Young Rusty.” And Mrs Gruber turned her humped spine to him and walked away.

“But,” the priest shrugged, “why me?”

She stopped and turned back to him.

“Because you are the priest. The boy asked to see you.”

“But I don’t even know this boy.”

“But you are the priest.” She held out an imploring hand. “You’ll do.”

The conversation that took place at the little police office was long, broken and traumatic in its own right. There is no need here to drag all that up again, beyond the relevant facts.

When the Father arrived, Rusty was on an ordinary chair. The static from the dry air and plastic made tiny crackles arc from his legs at random moments. As soon as the boy saw the stiff white colour and the black short-sleeved shirt he fell to the floor on his knees and started babbling.

“Rusty, I am Father Portcullis. No, please, don’t hold my shoe, here, get up. There. Oh, snot up my sleeve, there, just sit. Stop crying. Please Rusty. I can’t understand a… what did you say?”

“It cut her in half!” Rusty clung to the arms of the priest and stared into his face.

The father tried to step back.

“Who cut what Rusty?”

“IT did. There was rain!”

The Police Sergeant was gently guiding the boy back into the seat and Father Portcullis, acting as a jetty post to the drowning child, was being dragged down too. Eventually the boy was seated. Father Portcullis was bent over him, his arms clutched in Rusty's desperate hands. The boy spoke into the priest's face.

"And there was this scream. Oh God, the scream. Like… like a sheep, but horrible. And then rain! There can't be rain, not there. But there was. We was at the shed. She went in. I couldn't. I heard the screams before we got there."

"Got where?"

Rusty looked at the priest, puzzled, then at the Police Sergeant standing behind the priest.

"The shed, a course. The old ghost shed!"

"Ah shit," the sergeant muttered.

"Ghost shed?" The Father tried to pull himself from the face of the drowning boy.

"Yair Father. And we got closer there… the screaming started."

"From the shed?"

"From… from the air, like, an' the ground. In my HEAD! It were everywhere. Cami looked at me and she just… she ran. Into the shed! Why?"

Father Portcullis looked up at the Police Sergeant, at the boy, at the Sergeant.

"And…" he had no idea what to say. "Who was in the shed Rusty?" He said.

"What? How the hell do I know, I didn't go in there. It were horrible. Like there was some… thing. In the air, everywhere. I was gonna run back to the car. Then the rain came, just a little bit, like the spray next to the big sprayer. And then… it were there. Between me and the shed. It were there!"

The terror in the boy's eyes had a life of its own, the type of shocked horror that makes you realise that there is no way you are ever going to be able to joke about this.

"What," Father Portcullis swallowed. "What was there Rusty?" But the priest didn't really want to know.

The boy squeezed the priest's arms and Father Portcullis felt his radius and his Ulna bending, preparing to snap.

"Father, she ran outta the shed. Straight into it, like she walked into the harvester blades."

“Ran into harvester blades?”

“The rainbow Father. She ran into the rainbow.”

The priest frowned and looked across at the Police Sergeant. The Police Sergeant shrugged. No, he had no idea either. The bruises on the priest’s arms were still there three weeks later. A month after that, the boy had run away. To the city. Where he felt safe. His parents never saw him again. To be honest, the Priest will tell you, they didn’t want to see him again. It was too painful.

On The Beach

It's called Coastal Beach, or just 'The Beach' if you are led here by the white on green road signs. Everyone in Willton calls it *The Shells*. Fifteen minutes out of the town, past old man Johnson's place, now owned by a Turkish family who are as un-Johnson as it is possible to be, then to a gunmetal car park at the end of the tarmac. Millions of hands have been held here over the decades, millions of kisses have been shared, some of them firsts. Thousands of tons of dried drift wood have burned in the summer nights. Hundreds of thousands of litres of inexperienced teenage vomit has been washed out from *The Shells.* In the centuries before white settlement thousands of locals had been conceived on the sands of *The Shells*. Since then, hundreds of white babies began here. Fortunately, the miracle of beaches everywhere, *The Shells* is swept clean and renewed every night. *The Shells* is often windswept, frequently searingly hot, and always deep within the hearts of the people who have found their lives around the little town of Willton. Home to seagulls and hot chips, sunburn and sand burn, melted ice cream and teasing. *The Shells* is where Willton lets its hair down, kicks off its shoes and drops its pants. If people ever leave Willton, the ache in their chest for days past is lit with the light of *The Shells* on a summer afternoon. But it's not like every other beach in the country. To walk the silver yellow sand of *The Shells* is to walk among stars. The shore is made entirely of fragments of planets, grit from crushed moons, the detritus of the cosmos. It's not clear exactly why but, when dust from space lands on the earth, it gathers here. Like a high book shelf, or dust bunnies under a bed, the passing life of the universe collects and collates on the beach at *The Shells*. The shedding cells of the galaxy wash up on this single wide, long, sundrenched piece of shoreline. Some children have even found pieces of alien spacecraft but, being children, have not realised that the shiny metal glob, the polished glass doodad, the oddly flexible plastic-like coin, is a fragment from a race dying thousands of light years away. They use it to decorate their momentary sand castles and fleeting childish sculptures.

Mostly though, people who visit *The Shells* just walk. It is a beach shaped perfectly for a long, ambling contemplation, a shambolic, angry, discourse, or an unmeasured romantic unfolding.

There, two people now, on this spring afternoon. *The Shells* is mostly alone. It is a week day, a Thursday. Lunch has passed and the time of school children has yet to arrive. The sun is weakened by a t-shirt of cloud, diffusing its power. A young man and a little woman walk at the water line. The waves are gentle at their feet, like a cat, seeking attention but not too obviously. The man is taller, younger. He has an arm around the woman, a holding affection because she is obviously frail. Elderly or just broken, there is no difference at this distance.

Mrs Brody told her son two days ago and now she is allowing herself to feel it. Having the cancer within her was one thing. Having it named and diagnosed has caused her to become completely different. A week ago she felt unwell, an energetic elderly engine, feeling a bit rusty, under the weather. Now, after a discussion with Doc Posthuma, she is just another old woman with terminal cancer. The doctor has assigned her a course of treatment, but no-one has taught her how to be a cancer victim. That is what she must learn now. But she's a Willton farm girl, she's never been a victim in her life.

"Come on Mum."

"I don't see the point."

"It's easy. Just tell Satan to Fuck off." Her son is angry now. At her. At the disease. At the two of them, conspiring.

"David! Language."

"No, Mum, I'm serious." The tall youth stops and looks down at the precious grey face. "You reckon you know God, you always told us to watch out for Satan, Isn't this that? Isn't this… him, doing this?"

"Well, maybe."

"Well, tell him how you feel about it."

The old woman ponders. Her eyes measure the distance to the horizon, to the past, to the end of her life. She smiles.

"Satan," she says, "go… away."

"Really? Come on Mum, tell Satan what he can do with his stupid cancer, tell him to fuck off."

"David! That's not the type of language I…"

"Why not?! It's the PERFECT language. And the perfect time for it. I won't be offended. Try it. Fuck off Satan!"

“I don’t think God would approve.”

“I bet he would. Have you read his book?! It’s not blasphemy to tell Satan exactly how you feel about him. It’s only a problem if Fatty Portcullis hears you, and just quietly, I don’t think he’d be upset at all.”

The old woman looked up into the face of her son, frowned. Took a deep breath. Then sighed.

“No, I can’t.”

“Come on Mum. I’ll start. Fuck off Satan.” David grins.

“Back off.”

“Come on Mum, you know you want to. Just say what you feel.”

The old woman closes her eyes. The breeze tugs at the silk of her hair.

“You won’t get me down, Satan.” She begins. Softly.

“Okay…”

“And I’m not going to quit.”

“Good. What do you want to REALLY say?”

“You’re not going to win, Satan, you… bugger.”

“Ooh, getting there.”

“And, and go… away.” She sways a little. David holds the wire contraption of her arm.

“Mum. Say it.”

“Eff off.” Quietly, like an apology.

“Come on Mum, Mean it!” Her son softly wraps his arms around her. And into the chamber of his chest she whispers.

“Fuck off Satan.”

“What was that Mum?”

“I said…fuck off Satan.”

“Really? He can’t hear you Mum.” The old woman leans back in the support of her son, looks up at him as a grin fills her lips with blood and the grey skin glows.

“Fuck Off Satan.”

“Yes! Again!”

“Fuck Off Satan!”

“More.”

“Fuck off Satan!” She laughs, explosive.

“More!” Her son is laughing too, as his mother steps away, throws out her arms in defiant praise.

“FUCK OFF SATAN!” Again and again. She pirouettes as she shouts and seagulls circle, screeching agreement

“You will NEVER stop me LIVING!” She throws her arms around her son. “So Fuck YOU!”

“You tell him Mum.”

“You are a complete… arse Satan!”

They both laugh until the sound of the waves is drowned out. Tears cover David’s face, lubricating his smile. His mother is dragging in heavy breaths through cheeks that ache with joy. Standing on the offcuts of the universe they hold each other.

Five weeks later her hollowed-out body could withhold the ravages of the disease no longer. In her own bed, at home, she stopped being human. David wasn’t there. He would have loved to be holding her hand and looking at the impossible smile blazing on her face. She died in pain, at night, by herself, but not alone. And yet she had hardly stopped giggling.

Pets

I'm always awake early. I try not to wake Tarni, but I do like to wake up to the radio. So this morning, great start, I got to wake up with Styles.

Styles Catkin can seriously play the guitar. He doesn't make it cry or sing, he just seems to touch it and molasses flows from it. Pure blue-gum honey runs like golden water through his fingers. Not many people get Styles Catkin. They don't love honey fingers and molasses in the ears. They want the bubble-gum and cheap perfume of commercial radio. But I'm a traditionalist. Styles is my tradition.

Styles was born on a train between Adelaide and Darwin. He grew up on the train. His mother was an engine driver, still is as far as I know. She loves it, won't give up 'til they drag her exhausted corpse from behind the controls of the massive engine, which could be an occupational health and safety issue, but she wouldn't care. As long as she was standing splay foot on the hot steel floor of the diesel behemoth, dragging fifty carriages kicking and screaming through the dead heart of the continent. That's where she gave birth to Styles, with the speed nudging 120k's and hot desert air fondling her short-straw grey hair, Jess Catkin had dropped the baby onto the boilerplate as the train roared past the relentless red crust of Coondambo. The baby screamed at the indignity and Jess picked up her boy in one hand whilst she eased a bit of oil pressure through the main brake cuff. She only turned away from the controls to open the locomotives door and punt the placenta out into the desiccated scrub where it frightened the living daylights out of a nest of bull ants. Given this level of commitment to her work, it's no surprise her baby was raised with hot diesel in his nose and the thunderous rhythm of the transnational tracks in his ears. His mother knew no other way and why should she? She didn't think to give her boy any other kind of life because she didn't know any other kind of life.

One day the diesel in his nostrils was joined by a scratched old *Maton* six string left in the baggage car. And the thunderous drive of the relentless rhythm that was permanently ingrained in his blood. It never left him. It was always in his fingers and his songs. It's what makes him the guitarist he is. Maybe that's what I love most about the music of Styles Catkin. Knowing why he can do the things he does. I know what drives him. That's what I love.

It's a good day that starts with the hot honey licks of Styles Catkin shaking my shoulders awake. I don't even turn off the alarm, just lie there in the soft cocoon my body has made overnight and let the liquid sounds ooze about me like sun drenched cats. *Sharks of the Sierras* is actually by *Los Cadres* but they are friends of the great Styles and he agreed to lift their mundane tune above the rim by simply pouring his natural presence into it. But the ovens await. I swing my legs out of bed and pendulum upright. Tarni grunts, adding her input to my morning ritual. As my feet slap the floor I click my fingers twice. In a moment the big square head of Elron has found its way to my side.

"Good morning buddy, how you doin?" I whisper.

Elron pants gleefully and nuzzles under my hand, the perfect, unconditional greeting.

"Breakfast?" I ask, as is the tradition. He sits back and looks at me as if considering my question.

"Muesli." I tell him. He nods and trots off to get my breakfast ready. Being Elron, he farts on the way out leaving me no choice but to get up straight away and find some breathable air. I hadn't trained him to fart like that. That was all his own doing. You gotta love an independent soul.

It's pushing 4.30 in the dry-dust morning when I key open the back door at the café. The laneway is soft and warm even at this early hour of the morning. The air inside is still. This is the best part of the day. Nothing is moving. Nothing is wrong. Everything is waiting. At rest. I am the one who gets to begin things. A conductor, standing before the orchestra. Poised. And this is the first Monday of the month. Today I get to do something new. Today I launch our new thing. It's something I began twelve years ago when I took over *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery* from Angelo, my mentor, my teacher. The man who built this place. He would never have imagined Lemon cream bourbon muffins. It took a week to perfect it because the bourbon in the muffin mix wanted to over-power the delicate tang of the lemon cream but eventually I have managed to persuade them to get along and so, this morning, I'm firing up the *Amalfi* three decker and opening a bottle of *Heaven Hill* Kentucky straight bourbon. As the temperature within the kitchen begins to rise, a light sheen of flour is beginning to coat the gleaming steel of my kingdom. I have begun to fill the bread tins when Sarah arrives, her eyes still puffy. She will coax out the soft, fat,

bellies of bread and curl the edges of the steaming heat-filled pasties for the next hour. These will fill the breakfast bellies of early morning workers. Derek Derridge and his son Neil who will be making their regular run north to haul out sand. The council boys, who are working out past the beach road, ripping out the ancient trees to make new storm drains. Old Doc Posthuma, who didn't need to be awake early but even after four decades his body was still on Polish time. Until he moved on last month, he really appreciated my monthly 'thing'.

"Vy do you even bother?" He once asked me, his hand holding a cheese curry kangaroo croissant.

"Why not?"

"Vell, de only bakery for two hundred miles, a guaranteed market and yet you still pour all dis effort in to makink somethink," the doctor held up the croissant and inhaled it, "somethink extraordinary? Vy do you bother? Zese people here, Zey von't care."

I had looked around the crowded lunchtime rabble, the beef pies and ham and cheese sandwiches.

"Yair, maybe. But I care."

The doctor nodded as he chewed on the croissant. The smell of gamey 'roo tangled with the yellow sizzle of the curry, tumbling in the sweet French pastry. We paused to allow the amazing smell to parade between us. That was when I decided to never stop inventing. That was nearly a decade ago now. Today I'm adding bourbon. I love this time of the month.

It may seem odd to have a dog that gets my breakfast or a cat that acts as a doorman or a galah that takes care of the house work but it's all a question of love. Animals will do what they love doing. It's not training so much as aiming. So, first thing this morning Elron, the big black Labrador, was tipping cereal from a Tupperware container into a bowl that he had got from the cupboard. By now he may even have the milk carton out and placed by my bowl on the table. I won't get him to pour the milk just yet or the cereal turns into that soggy foreshore of washed up grain stodge. He does it for me because he loves to do it and he knows how to do it because I have expanded his imagination. You see, Elron came to us as an abandoned puppy. He was found in a home down in the city that had housed a Meth

lab and four people made entirely of tattoos and cigarette papers. His hungry whimpering had drawn the investigating officers to a cupboard where his little black body was cornered by its own fears, hiding from a past that was probably only seven or eight weeks long. That's how he got his name, Elron Cupboard. At first he could do little more than pee on the floor and circle his food bowl. It's all he had been allowed to do. The Meth heads had played a game where the puppy was stuffed in an empty Milo can and then rolled across the carpet. Then they'd take the lid off and, as the pudgy little puppy tottered about beneath his own whirling head they would flick lit matches at him. The winner was the one who could get a lit match to land on the erratically stumbling dog. Yep, real winners. There wasn't a lot that the terrified little puppy knew about life or his own potential. He was a dog with no imagination. Until he came to live with me.

It's the same with Acorn, my galah. The dusty grey parrot with the pale pink and white head spent his entire youth eating seeds. He loved them, monstered them. Sunflower seeds especially, but also green grass seeds when they were in season. Acorn didn't know cheese existed because, for him, it never had. Then Acorn came to live with me and I gave him some cheese. I wrapped it in plastic cling wrap so he could experience the familiar act of prying away a husk to get to the goodness within and the first time he did, his soft head stopped bobbing about, his feet clung to his perch with unique stillness. He had experienced something he had never imagined. Cheese. Now that his imagination had cheese in it, he was willing to try other things. Like Mango. Acorn loved mango but that wasn't enough. You see, a parrot can eat mango, just hack into it with that scything beak and tear out the flesh. But it's awfully wasteful and lots of mango was getting wasted, slumped in splots and splats on the floor beneath his perch. But Acorn had no idea that there was some other way to eat a mango because he didn't need to find another way and, more to the point, he couldn't have imagined any other way. Now, since I had showed him how it could be done, my galah eats mangoes using a knife and fork. Once I had shown him how, taking his talons in my hand and wrapping them around the handle of the little cutlery set, then holding his claw, like a toddler with a pencil, we cut up our first mango together. With the knife in one claw he pares away the skin and cubes the soft flesh. Then he places the knife to one side, picks up the little silver fork, a cocktail fork I

think they call it, and he skewers an orange-yellow piece and tears the flesh off at will.
Wait, you didn't think he used a knife and fork at the same time? No way. That's impossible. So anyway, it's not that the parrot was incapable of using a knife and fork, it was simply that the parrot couldn't *imagine* using a knife and fork. Now he can. And he does. And he loves it. I don't see myself as his trainer. I am simply his imagination.
The same is true for Elron. As I pulled on my t-shirt and padded down the corridor I shouted 'milk' and Elron poured milk on my cereal, his powerful canine jaws gently clutching the cardboard carton and pouring in just the right amount. I rubbed his hefty head and told him how fabulous he was as I flipped the kettle on. I won't let the pets make my coffee. It's not that they couldn't, or that the boiling water would be dangerous, it's just that I'm very particular about how I have my morning coffee. Besides, a man's got to do some things for himself.

My work days are not long, they are just very tall. I get to the bakery, fire up the oven and ease the risen dough from its overnight bed. This will fill the morning air over Willton with the earthy passion of cooking yeast. I feel sorry for businesses like Old Man Beakman's little general store, or Dave Baker, the Butcher. They can put out signs and lights to promote themselves, but I get to fill the air itself with my product. People breathing the air of Willton breathe the air of *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery.* As well as the wonder of baked goods, I have Sarah. She's not just an apprentice baker, she is also a sculptor of sugar cubes. She shapes them with such speed and passion that they take on the personality of their form. Recently she has been working through famous Australian leaders, shaping sugar cube into uncanny replicas of the nation's Prime Ministers. This allows our customers to pluck out, say, John Howard, and dunk him in their coffee with a view to dissolving him completely as a show of dissent. Or they can imbibe his wisdom as they take in their daily caffeine. It's not uncommon, as someone stirs a bygone leader into their cup, to hear a muffled '…for nothing can save the Governor General,' or some such thing.

Every afternoon, when I get home, Calvin is waiting on the fence beside the driveway. His tail flicks and swishes to remind the world that his stillness is voluntary,

he can move if he wants too. Calvin is a hunter, a grey mottled alley cat that found his way into my home in the cupped hands of my daughter.

“He’s the last of the litter and Janey said if we don’t take him they’ll have to put him down.”

“Clara! It’s a cat! We don’t need a cat!” It has been said that if cats were bigger than people we would be extinct as a species. They tolerate us because they can’t kill us all. Yet. The only reason humans survive is because we invented the bow and arrow before cats did.

“But he’s so CUTE.” She nuzzled the little grey powder puff under her chin and, right on cue, its massive black eyes opened and blinked with that terrible intelligence people forget cats have.

“Honey, it’s not gonna be cute for long and then you’ll have a huge lazy fat grey slob to look after.”

Tarni shouted something from the lounge but I missed it.

“We really can’t have a cat here right now.” I chose to stand my ground and insist that Clara return the kitten to her friend. I was the Father; it was my decision. I was firm and I was right. The cat has been living with us two years now, but at least he has become useful. Calvin is my doorman. The moment I step out of the car he flows from the fence, landing at my feet as if the concrete driveway is a gymnastics mat. He brushes a hefty grey flank against my leg and then saunters over to the front door. He leaps onto a small purpose-built shelf about halfway up the door. He slips a claw through the letterbox slot like a pirate hook and it emerges with a brass key dangling from it. He shifts his weight on the little shelf and, as I get to the door, he has popped the lock and the door is swinging open.

“Thank you Calvin.”

As I walk in I pick a piece of dried liver from the high shelf inside and Calvin leaps down, flows inside like storm water and nips the treat from my fingers. I take the key from between his claws and hook it back on the door. The screech of jammed steel brakes tears open the peaceful cool of the corridor as I sling my car keys and jumper on the hall table. A pink and grey blur explodes into the hall and another tooth jarring screech erupts from within it.

The galah’s name is Acorn because he fell out of a tree. And he’s a bit of a nut. Like all flocking creatures he has taken on the traits of his flock. That’s me. His flock. It’s

not like I've trained him to do lots of things, just eating with a knife and fork. But he sees me doing things and, because he sees himself as just the same as me, he wants to do the same things. Having no hands makes this tricky sometimes so he opens doors with his feet due to the obvious lack of hands. When he uses a teaspoon he clutches it in his beak for some reason, even though he uses his feet to operate a knife and fork. As much as he can, he does what a human does. He has majestic wings that will glide and swoop, but he walks about the house with a waddle and click of claws on the floor boards. Because I'm his flock and he likes to be just like me. It gets a bit weird. We all love to play catch with Acorn. And Calvin, the cat, is good at it. It's not difficult playing catch with a bird. You just have to be careful not to throw them too hard.

So I get home and Acorn is there, on the hall table where I drop the junk mail. He dances around the strewn paperwork and tilts his head to look up at me, his claws clicking as he steps up and down excitedly.

"Catch?"

Acorn draws his wings in and tucks his little pink and grey head into the protective cover formed by the tops of his folded wings. I wrap my hand around the warm soft body. I can feel the thin wires of his powerful bones and the pulsing excitement. Little clucks and chuckles are bubbling within him, making him chitter as his beak clicks and ticks. Acorn loves playing catch. Holding him firm I stand at the door to the lounge.

"Calvin?! Catch!" And in a moment the grey fur blur appears at the far end of the lounge room, eager, excited, pacing in front of the sofa at the opposite end of the room. My throw is a slightly restricted version of an American quarterback lobbing a deep pass. Acorn spins out of my hand beak first, his wings tucked in so he describes a nice tight arc across the room. He lands at the foot of the sofa where Calvin is sitting with his mouth open. The big cat shuffles slightly to one side and manages to catch the spinning bird perfectly in his mouth. The force is such that both cat and bird sprawl across the floor-boards in a rollick of feathers and fur. They spring to their feet and cat and bird both explode in joyous noise. Acorn's squawks are like shrieking laughter as he bobs and weaves, his wings now fully extended in praise. Calvin is pronking about in a circle making strange squeaking noises. I'm just

laughing, pointing at the tumble of pets. Yes, we love playing catch. Who wouldn't love coming home to their pets?

Maybe there's too much air in this town. The way the endless paddocks sweep away, inhaling deeply, lungs for a planet, but open to the endless sky. There are no boundaries to Willton. Fences, roads, paths, they just highlight the wide openness of the town; make it obvious that nothing is holding anything in here. So very little stays here. It blows away, erodes, carried off in bits and pieces. Like Tarni. The way she seems to be just drifting away, her importance fading from my life. Here, inland, it's not like the massive air of the sea or the shore, where gentle waves rewrite the beach, a constant coastal palimpsest. On the beach, at *The Shells*, fifteen minutes from *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery,* even though it looks open, everyone knows it's the end. The Edge, a boundary not to be crossed. We look but rarely go. Back in town, on the dust and space of land, where the vast air is cut with roads and possibilities, there we are constantly pulled to move, to fill the unfillable space. Perhaps nothing is really at home here. We just stop until the wind or the longing swirls us off again.

Every parent says they don't have a favourite and every kid knows that is a load of rubbish. Sure, the favourite can change, sometimes on a daily basis, but we all know there's a favourite. At work I don't have to pretend. Sarah is my favourite. She's not the hardest working or the best looking or even the one the customers notice and she's not even my favourite by a long way, but when she first came for an interview, she did make a feature of herself. Like every job in this town, it was never advertised. I needed to expand so I needed someone to take on some of the menial work and free me up to do the fun stuff. Her auntie was the nurse for Doc Posthuma. Now she works for Doc Porter, the new guy. She often comes in on the way to the little sandstone surgery. If she's expecting a tough one, she'll order apricot cinnamon Berliners with cream custard. If things are going well, she buys just the one. One morning I handed over a bag of three fresh Berliners and asked her what was going to be so tough today. She sighed and let a tear water-slide down her face. She saw the test results before the patients. Often days before. I don't make her pay for the Berliners. In fact, if she ever orders more than one, I slip an extra in anyway. She

knows. She knows I know. I know she knows I know. But she does her job and I do mine.

On a single Berliner morning I told her I was having a two Berliner week and that's when we ended up deciding that her niece should come and see me. The interview was all a bit metaphysical now that I think about it. She was in her school uniform, on her way home and I was wiping down and closing up so, as I gleamed up the kitchen, I philosophised.

"Truly great food is all about breaking the rules. That's what people want. Surprise. Excitement."

"From buns?"

"From everything. Of course, they also want predictable. So you've got to do both."

"Be predictably surprising?"

I pondered that for a moment.

"Yes. That's a good way of putting it. Predictable quality, surprising content."

"Like finding a mouse in a loaf of bread? That's surprising."

"Not at some places. But it's also not quality. Look."

I pulled out the stainless-steel tub full of the dough for tomorrow's loaves. The fat white wad gave off waves of warm, soft breath.

"This is bread dough. Really simple. It takes only four things to make a great loaf of bread. Great flour, great yeast, great salt and a great attitude."

I looked at her, very proud of myself. She nodded.

" And water." She added.

"Well, of course water, okay five things. It takes five things to make,"

"And an oven?"

"Sure, an oven but,"

"And some baking trays I guess?"

"Look, do you want this job or not?"

"You said you've got to know the rules before you can break them."

I gave her the job.

People aren't naturally good at seeing things that aren't there, at seeing a possibility where nothing exists. It's called creativity by some, the ability to create something

that didn't exist and therefore had no place in human experience. Something that came from a head in which it had not been envisaged, and suddenly it is imagined. So, for example, if an advert told you to think of the colour purple, you could and almost everyone in the world could point to purple. But if they asked you to think of the colour Ipswich, you'd join the hordes saying, 'There is no such thing as the colour Ipswich, put down the drugs and wait for help to arrive.' Unless you prefer the creative side of the footpath in which case you'll let your mind wander the colour wheel seeking something that has no other name. This you will call 'Ipswich' and you will probably be chased by the horde who don't understand what you've done. Some of us would be asked to imagine the colour Ipswich and instantly proclaim; 'Ipswich! That's my favourite flavour!' We enjoy a nice bag of strangely flavoured snacks whilst the horde rushes past waving pitchforks baying after the people who found a colour somewhere between orange and Icon. Creativity is about confidence. In a small town confidence is like rabbits. It's hunted down, trapped, killed and turned into something that tastes like something we are comfortable with. Like chicken. Yes, confidence is hunted down and turned into chicken. Non-threatening. Because confidence belongs to people who seem to think they are better than you.

It doesn't take a lot of time to train a pet. It takes consistency. But it also takes learning. I've learned some stunning things from my pets.
When Elron first came to live with me, skulking about in his terrified puppy skin, he was a wreck. Like a bed wetter who jumps when a door slams. When he ventured out from under the table, he walked about like autumn leaves. Trembling and on the brink of falling. That led to leaving nervous puddles. My objective was to be loving but firm, like the books and websites said. Training a dog who has been beaten takes a lot of patience. When Calvin, the boisterous cat, had started to stretch his claws using the corner of my sofa, tearing shreds of clawed cotton, it was simply a case of pointing, applying a percussive remonstration, also known as a whack on the shnoz, and soon enough Calvin decided that he could avoid the indignity of a snout snap by not clawing the furniture. Clever cat that. But Elron had been used as a furry football so any aggression at all would just send him back to his horrible past, reminding him how much humans can suck and inciting further puddles, thereby defeating the whole aim of the exercise. So when a little yellow puddle appeared I

would kneel on the floor, eye to big black eyes with the shivering gangly pup, and tell him.

"Not on Elron, that is Not On! See this? You did that! Not there, not again, okay? Here, come with me, yes, out here, out the door, come on, good boy. Now, here. On the lawn. This is where you wee. Okay? Good Boy, Good Boy, yes."

And then I'd make him watch me mop up his puddle with a thick paper towel. I'd throw him a scowl and then give him a hug.

And it worked. One week of wet surprises and then no more. I had taught him. But then he taught me that I hadn't.

The morning it happened I hauled my wearied skin into the kitchen, waiting for my eyes to remember how to absorb light and encouraging my joints to lubricate. Elron was cowering. He only did this after pissing on my floor. Cowering in the corner, those huge chocolate eyes looking up at me, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Elron!? Not again!? Where did you…"

And I saw a smallish puddle over by the kitchen counter. As I saw it Elron drew his fur inside himself even more, making himself a compacted, quivering un-target. He pressed himself against the floor as he belly-crawled, trying to sneak past me and out of the door.

"Elron! Stop right there."

He froze. I'm sure I heard him gulp. Guilt was graf-tagged across every inch of his little soft puppy body. His eyes were so huge it seemed impossible that they could remain inside his skull. I pointed at him. Then at the puddle, then back at the shrinking dog, then back at the puddle on th… hang on.

The puddle was red, near blood red. In a flash my mistake became clear. Something was horribly wrong with Elron's kidneys, or some other terrible trauma from his early puppyhood had come to haunt him now. I had been telling him off and he was sitting before me dying!

Then I had to laugh. I looked closer and laughed even more. Elron was trying to melt into the protective bosom of the floor boards but also looking befuddled, his clumpy head rolled sideways as puzzlement rattled around on his frowning black face.

I leaned down and rubbed his warm teddy bear flanks.

"I'm so sorry my boy. It's my fault. Not you this time. I must have splashed a bit of port last night. My bad."

And as I rubbed his firm crooning head, it struck me.
I had missed the entire point.
I had not taught Elron not to pee on the floor. What I had done is to instil in the puppy a fear of the presence of liquid on the floor. Elron wasn't cowering in the corner because he had peed, he was cowering in the corner because he knew from experience that if he was in the room, and I was in the room and there was liquid on the floor, he would be scowled at and sent outside. The toilet training had been coincidental. I had trained my dog to fear liquid. And to fear me. I sat on the floor for ages, hugging him and saying sorry until he eventually managed to squirm free.

At *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery*, Monday morning air is crusty with rising bread and, this morning, with the silver slick tang of lemon and bourbon as my new muffins grow and brown. I'm at the front counter, arranging focaccias like expensive cars, in the soft light of the serving case. Through the window I can see the grey of dawn slowly pulling up its coral red pants. Sarah is now entrusted with the *Amalfi*. The master of the oven, she will be the first to see the wondrous new muffins in their massed glory. It's a pleasure I allow her. But she screams. It pierces the side of the dawn and fear floods from it. I smack my head on the counter as I jump, rubbing my head as I push through the curtain into the bakery kitchen. She is standing rock still in a corral of silver machines.

"Jesus Christ!" She is shaking, no, trembling. At her feet I see why. A human head. The eyes are closed. The face is peaceful. The head rocks a little where it has landed and she's quite right, it does look a little bit like Jesus Christ.

Then things got pretty weird around *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery*. I prodded the severed head and it moved easily. I had heard somewhere that the heaviest part of the human body was the head. This wasn't heavy. I leaned down and touched it. Sarah gasped and jumped back.

"Don't, ooh. Oh my God! Call the police."
I crouched down, like doing push ups and sniffed the head. Sarah shrieked.

"No! You are disgusting!"
I picked up the head and handed it to her with a huge grin. My huge grin, not the head's.

“It’s a muffin. Bourbon and lemon. Smells good.”

She stepped away, clutching the tray of muffins she had been removing from the oven, protecting herself.

“No. It’s too big.”

“Must’ve accidentally got a couple stuck together.”

“And it looks exactly like a human head!”

We both looked at the aberrant muffin. It was starting to creep me out. It did look a bit like a human head.

“No. EXACTLY! Even the colouring, it’s like, the bit on top here, where it’s got a bit overcooked, it’s perfectly formed hair. Even the ears, they’re lighter. You couldn’t have made it more life-like.” Sarah gasped.

I put the head down.

“And I do think it looks a bit like someone.” Sarah put down her tray and came over to the bench top to stare closely at the muffin head, like she was talking to a toddler.

“Oh, who do you look like?”

“Jesus?”

She frowned, looked at me.

“You know what Jesus looked like? Got a photo?”

“No, but all those churches and that. I got married at St Tezza’s on Heaston Street and there’s a big statue of Jesus. Lots of pictures. He looks a bit like that.”

“Jesus is a muffin head eh?” She snorted.

“No, the muffin is a Jesus head.”

“Nar, it’s not Jesus, it looks like someone else. I can’t pick it.”

A busy bell tingled at the back of the room. Sarah took a deep breath and headed back to work. The plain white rolls wouldn’t get themselves out of the oven. I took up the tray of this morning’s wonderful cakes and began arranging the ‘All NEW Bourbon and Lemon Muffins’ along the top front shelf of the display counter. I broke one in half as I worked, and my mouth swooned. The rich warmth carried the wood grain of the bourbon up into my nose and the lemon tang rode joyfully about the base of my tongue. I closed my eyes and forgot all about the baked head of Jesus Christ in my kitchen.

Acorn, my galah, talks. This is unusual for a galah because all the books say that galahs are unlikely to be very chatty. Most parrots, budgerigars and especially the gloriously compact little corellas, they'll chat away like a three-year-old in a shopping trolley but galahs are supposed to pick up a word or two and then just grunt, cluck and squawk. After my terrible training faux pas with Elron the non-wetter, I decided to rethink Acorn's vocabulary. Acorn learned "Hello" "Fork" and even "Mango" but he hadn't learned "Acorn" or "Feed me" or "TV". I realised that the words he had learned were ones he responded to. When I said "TV?" he would just continue to sidestep on his perch waiting for me to do something worthwhile. But one day, after a boisterous Saturday at the Bakery, I came home and said "Football?" which I planned to watch on the TV, then he stood upright and squawked. So I stopped and spent ten minutes saying 'Football' to him. He squawked every time, then he started squawking twice when I said football. And eventually these two syllables became 'oot all'. Not bad for ten minutes' work. So I sat down with a plate of cheese and biscuits, a glass of red wine and the remote control. Acorn sat on my knee turning biscuits into crumbs and squawking every time I shouted at the screen. As the half time commercials tried to persuade me to drive five hundred miles from Willton to buy a new car, I realised what had happened. I hadn't taught Acorn what I wanted him to learn. He had taught me what he wanted to learn. So who was training whom?

"Football!" I said to the galah.

"'oot 'all!" he responded.

"Football!"

"'oot 'all!"

"Football!"

"'oot 'all!"

"Football!"

"'oot 'all!"

We carried on like this all through the commercial for the wholesale fish market and the local hotel. Local if you lived seven hundred kilometres to the west. By the time the suit and tie of the commentator reappeared, Acorn and I were just laughing. Out loud.

"Football!"

"'oot 'all!"

So now I'm teaching him what he teaches me he wants to learn. I'm learning what he wants to learn. The only difference between the two of us is that I think I learn faster.

It's probably not really Sarah's fault. She decided that the best thing to do was have a laugh. So whilst I ran loaves through the slicer and mixed the next batch of bourbon and lemon, she took the muffin head and placed it on the front counter, next to the cash register, leaning against the rough-hewn box that held the sugar packets. Pinned to the box, beside the Christ like muffin was the question: Who do you think I am? Then Old Mrs Gruber came in for her twice weekly loaf of wholemeal. No-one knows how old Old Mrs Gruber is, but she has always been 'Old Mrs Gruber' and she has always been around. She's probably only in her sixties but the constantly scuttling arthritic crab at the end of her right hand makes her seem so much more withered. The crab scrapes sideways across the countertop as she waits for her loaf, scrabbling in her dusty grey purse for change or, on a breezy morning, the crab will scurry through her native scrubland of grey hair, trying to instil some form of order. She is always leaning forward from her chest, as if she is perpetually on the cusp of a coughing fit. Mrs Gruber is one of the handful of old folk who ensure there is still a Catholic church in our crepe thin town. She wears black. Shapeless and historical, clothing that predates itself and hides her. Except for the constant crab. She doesn't hide that. This Monday the crab is even more anxious than normal. The recent cooler weather playing havoc with its tiny little arthritic joints. The crackly, grey, carapace tries to flex but is too dry. As Sarah hands over the loaf Mrs Gruber has ordered, she is amazed the crab hand is still able to move at all. Its legs are crossed over each other and gnarled, like a road crash victim or a pile of Mallee root. But the twitching and harsh scraping of her crab stops suddenly as Mrs Gruber sees the head shaped muffin.

"Bloomin' eck, her little voice wheezes. I'll be ridin' a legless pig! Tha's a head! Say girlie, why's there a head on ya table?"

"Ha, Mrs Gruber, it's a Muffin. We made them this morning and this one, well, it's got a mind of its own, ha ha."

Sarah clashed coins into the cash draw before asking the old woman,

“So who’d ya reckon it looks like?”

“Jesus Christ!” Mrs Gruber gasps. She swiftly crossed herself and bows her head.

“That’s what the boss said, but who knows what he looks like? It’s a bit more Leonardo DiCaprio to me.”

“Can I…” Mrs Gruber was now shaking all over. Not with the arthritic weakness of her disintegrating joints, but from some internal fervour. “Can I touch him?”

“Sure. You can eat him if you like. It’s just a muffin.”

Mrs Gruber reached out across the universe to touch the face of God, her crab hand driven by six decades of religious glaciation and the combined weight of her black clothing and her boundless belief.

And then Sarah screamed again. Just as loud as earlier this morning, ripping open the belly of the busy café. Knives stopped clacking, conversations ran into soundproof glass and no one moved. In a moment every single person in the early morning café was staring at Mrs Gruber. They all stared at the smooth and febrile hand that had once been a terribly disfigured crab. Mrs Gruber held up the hand before her glowing face, drinking in the smooth skin, the soft, straight fingers, the joints that moved like oiled silk.

Her voice was a whisper of unmistakeable wonder.

“Praise you Jesus. Praise you.”

Sarah stared at the soft pink flesh.

“Well bugger me.”

After that things got out of hand. We sold out of the new bourbon and lemon muffins four times that day. I knew they tasted good, but not that good. Then Doc Porter, he’s the new doc, he told me, on the Wednesday, that he had at least three patients who were rubbing my muffins onto their troublesome skin complaints. One patient was hoping my miracle muffins would help her become pregnant. He hadn’t asked her exactly how she had been administering them and neither of us wanted to know. By Thursday we had made the national papers and on Friday a cameraman and a woman with hair made of sugar and sunlight turned up to ‘do a story’ for the weekend TV in the city. By now we had the head-muffin under the glass counter, out

of reach but always on view, with a nice '*The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery*' logo on display. The muffin rushed around the world on the legs of the internet and that weekend the world invaded. On the one hand I was thrilled to have so many people come to the shop. On the other hand, let's be honest, it's just a muffin.

On Friday night I had a nightmare. It was weird because even whilst I was having it, I knew it was a dream. There's some unwritten dream law that says this shouldn't happen, but it did. I was at work, at the counter of *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery,* and Jesus was talking to me as a muffin.

"Of course I'm Jesus," the muffin said to me as it rested on the glass top.

"How do I know you're Jesus, I've never seen you before?"

"Oh, what, you want a miracle or something?"

"Okay."

The muffin rolled its sultana eyes at me.

"Right, because a talking muffin that looks exactly, and I mean EXACTLY like me, that's not miraculous enough?"

"Fair enough," I conceded. "So why do you want to come here, to Willton?"

"Because you are labouring."

"Yair, sure, I work pretty hard. I love it though and,"

The muffin interrupted me.

"Not working. Working isn't labouring. Working should be good! Joy! Fun! You love working."

"Yair."

"But you are also labouring."

I looked at the talking muffin head of the dream Jesus and he looked at me.

"Okay, let me explain. When you were in school, there was that boy, you called him Tossbag. Remember him?"

"Ah, yes." It was amazing how suddenly and completely I felt guilty about how we had treated Tossbag. The talking head of Jesus Muffin was stirring up feelings I didn't know I had.

"Well Tossbag, David was his name, I love him. Anyway, he had really bad asthma, remember? He breathed like a vacuum cleaner with a tennis ball stuck in the tube?"

“How could I forget? I sat in front of him. He must’ve had lungs made of sand paper.”

“Exactly. His breathing was laboured. That’s what I mean. You. You are labouring. Your entire life is strained and hard to take. Like David trying to breathe.”
I told the Muffin he was wrong. My life was fine. I wasn’t labouring like that at all. But then, as those little sultana eyes looked inside my chest, I knew what the muffin meant.

“Tarni?”

“Exactly.”

“Every night, in the middle of the night, I wake up. Frustrated. Crying. Or just…”

“Labouring?”

“Yair. I guess. She’s dragging me down.”

“No.” Jesus shook his muffin head slowly. Crumbs tickled at his neck where it met the glass counter. “*You* are dragging you down.”

“What? So it’s time I let her go? Get a new wife? I don’t know what to do. Should I ask ‘What would Jesus the dream muffin do?’”

“Don’t get smart with me. Just do both.”

“Get her back and let her go?”

“First you have to let her go so that you can properly get her back.”
As illogical as that sounded, I thought a moment. The muffin nodded sagely, a wise old cake. I felt dream wisdom forming.

“Wait. She’s not who I think she is, is she?”
The muffin raised a baked eyebrow.

“Go on.”

“So before I can know who she is I have to let go of who I want her to be?”

“Very good.”

“And then I can make my wife happy?”
The muffin grinned.

“No. Then you can *try* to make her happy. Whether or not she’ll still want to be your wife, that’s another question.”

“So how do I do that?”
The face of Jesus looked up at me and as it turned away from me it said;

"What would I know? I'm just a muffin."

When I surfaced from the floating pool of sleep there was a thought that stayed resident.

When we first met, Tarni and Me, I was attentive, outgoing, patient. She was forgiving, giving, cheerful. We were totally great people and great for each other. The people we are now wouldn't even recognise the us of then.

Elron is pouring my breakfast the next morning and it's no surprise to me that a dog can prepare my morning meal. Maybe that's why Elron isn't surprised either. We are the same pack, the same tribe, one flock, what we do is what everyone in the group does. I wonder for a moment if Acorn or Calvin get jealous of Elron's breakfast role. And then I realise something odd. When I learn to make a treat, like these Bourbon and Lemon Muffins, I work at it, prefect and do it. Then I move on. I still have the skill, the trick if you like, but then I move on to the next trick, the next thing to create. But the pets, they learn their thing and they are quite happy to keep doing it, day in day out, like a habit or some kind of act of existence. 'I am Dog this is what I do.' 'And what else would you like to do?' 'Nothing. This is enough. I love to do this, why bother doing anything else?' Maybe that's why they always seem so happy. Underlying my brilliantly clever and surprisingly gifted pets is this very basic principle. Perhaps for us humans, this is our blessing, and our curse. We are the only living things incapable of saying 'it's enough'.

Father Portcullis is the Catholic priest who traipses into St Tezza's church every Sunday morning to deliver the good oil to the tiny, aged flock. He has always struck me as a fairly down to earth kind of guy. Meat pie and sauce, maybe a flat white coffee if he has the time. So when he came in as usual, I steered him to a table near the front window and asked the bearded couple in the paisley rugs to please piss off if they weren't buying anything. They weren't. The priest and I sat.

"So father, what do you make of all this?"

I motioned to the cramped café, packed with groups and couples, many clearly in pain, some in wheel chairs, other holding hands in groups and singing songs.

"Ben, let me say, anything that brings people closer to the Lord is good with me."

“But it’s not the Lord. It’s a muffin.”

The priest chuckled and dropped a sugar cube into his coffee releasing a few lines of Paul Keating’s Redfern speech. He looked at me.

“You’ve heard the phrase ‘The Lord moves in mysterious ways?’” He nodded to my jam packed cafe’. “Welcome to the Lord and his mysterious ways.”

“You’re loving this aren’t you?”

“Mate, I have been the priest in this district for over twenty-five years and the only times people have spoken to me about the things that matter is when there is one of our bi-annual truck smashes, when those two girls were killed in the paddock or when they turn up for an unexpected funeral. Or a haunting. He shuddered. Today, here, and at church this morning, everyone was talking about this! Everyone wants to know. Is it a miracle? Was Mrs Gruber really healed? They ask me ‘is it possible?’”

He took another sip and shuffled the pie on his plate, preparing to dive headlong into the meat and gravy of its belly.

“And? What do you tell them?”

“I tell them what I’ve been telling them every bloody day for the last quarter century. Every single sermon, every talk, every funeral, every baptism. God can do whatever the heck He wants. Pass the sauce, will you?”

I slid the red plastic bottle to him. From a corner table a tuneless hallelujah chorus crashed to a crescendo like dropped crockery. When I looked back at him, Father Portcullis was grinning and cheerfully chewing.

“But, it’s a muffin.” I said.

“Yes,” he chewed. “It’s a muffin.”

“Or is it Jesus?”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s Jesus. But that doesn’t mean He’s not in it.”

“Oh great, as if it’s not weird enough.”

He put down the knife and fork. A finger released some of the wrinkled neck skin from his stiff white dog collar.

“Can I tell you a bible story?”

“I guess so. It’s your job right?”

“Okay, so Jesus was walking down the road,”

“Is this like ‘Two messiahs walk into a bar’?”

“Do you want the story or not?”

“Sorry. Jesus was walking down the road.”

“Right. Surrounded by people. Probably like this. Some were dancing and singing, some were probably demanding the lottery numbers from him, others just watching, wanting to see how much of a fraud he was.”

We both looked about at the crowd and saw the story before us.

“And then this woman was there, she was having some medical problem, scholars suggest it was some sort of unstoppable period, bleeding relentlessly.”

He paused as we both shuddered at the unfathomableness of ‘women’s problems’, two men unable to understand and knowing we didn’t really want to.

“This woman squeezed between the crowd and touched Jesus’ clothes, just a hand, a finger-tip on the fluttering edge of his shirt as he pushed down the road. And just like that, suddenly, she was healed. She fell away, back into the crowd.”

He cut a slice of pie, steam and fragrance burst out as we felt the turmoil roil around us like a feeding frenzy. He chewed and then looked at me again.

“Thing is, Jesus knew. He said ‘Who touched me?’ and everybody looked around and said ‘more like who didn’t touch you! Look at this scrum!’ and Jesus said ‘No, someone touched me, I felt power go out of me.’”

“And you think that’s what happened to Mrs Gruber’s hand?”

“I don’t know Ben, I don’t know. But I know it *could* happen.”

“Because my muffin is, what, magical? Holy?”

“No, because Mrs Gruber *believed* your muffin is holy. Or perhaps your muffin, maybe it just reminded her that He can do amazing things. Even in Willton.”

“So it was all in her head?”

“Not at all. Her hand is healed. Even Doc Porter says he is absolutely amazed. And you know how much he doesn’t like God. I think it was always in her heart to trust God to heal her. She just didn’t believe it.”

“So it *is* a miracle?”

“Oh, I definitely think so.” Father Portcullis fed in a steaming piece of pie and then spoke around it. “But it’s also just a muffin.”

Love of The Land

He's kind of small for such a big truck. Or maybe he just makes the truck look big. It's not an incredibly powerful truck. Just big. The vehicle has those tires on it that make you think roads are unnecessary and the bull bar on the front means the driver only uses his brakes as a courtesy to others. He's also very young to be driving such a big truck. But without this truck and the lines it paints, how will everyone else out here know where the road ends and the outback begins? His lines are the only thing holding the outback back.

The small, young man arrives in Willton in a cloud of exhaled dust. When he had first begun with the Highways people he needed others to show him the line between the road and the not road. Those people, his work mates, had jestingly called him Robert.

"What? Why you calling me Robert?"

"Cos it rhymes with hobbit. Ha ha ha." they had laughed and slapped each other's dusty backs as the little young man watched on.

"But my name is Paul," he told them. "You know, rhymes with small."

And the men stopped laughing. Looked at him. Considered.

"Nar, Robert. That's better."

So Paul, AKA Robert AKA the Hobbit, rolls into Willton in a big truck that draws lines, looking for a ham, egg and lettuce double cut white roll. The air in front of *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery* is grindingly hot. The stretch of grey concrete pavement throws out heat like a pizza oven. As he steps down from the truck, Paul watches a bull ant, just an angry pencil stub, as it launches itself from the gutter and scurries across the burning footpath. One foot, two feet it dashes and then suddenly bursts into flame. A sorry puff of smoke is a brief tombstone.

"That sucks." Paul shrugs and steps over the tiny cremation into the cool and bustle of the café'.

The clack of happy crockery, sprinkled with stainless steel, fills the air-conditioned space as a fringe to the rich buttery smell of pastries and vanilla, roast and herbs. The air salivates. Ben, who owns *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery,* is frantic behind the counter. The late morning roll-call of pre-lunch wonders is pushing him to stack the glass fronted cabinet. Ben is dripping with the kind of frantic joy you'd see on a

child with too much Lego. All these towns are the same and Paul has been to them all once or twice. Every single one has a café and every single café has a different way of working. It's a way of segregating the locals from those passing through, the ones who have roots here as opposed to those who bounce past with the wind-rush. Is this a friendly table service place? Is it a surly counter service café? Maybe it's a bit of both. There's a town out past the big rocks where you order cooked food at the counter but have to wait at a table to be asked if you want sandwiches or rolls. Coffee is ordered by mail two days prior to your arrival. All these towns are the same. They all have their own way of doing things. There is no standard practice. That's the standard practice. Sarah stands at the counter chatting with a tall man who collects small scars whilst welding. He is laughing at some random tale of burned skin and poor work-place safety. She smiles and looks on, a smile that merely reflects a deeper sadness, the way a dry landscape is reflected in an ancient rock pool. The smile never moves beyond her mouth to her eyes. Small Paul lets the door close behind him and is looking to see if the faces here are friendly when he accidentally sees Sarah for the first time. Her smile is like a dusting of icing. His first impression is of a mouth full of very white joy adrift in a sea of loss. She is focused on the man before her. Sarah is only there for the tall man with the collection of storied scars. Paul instantly dislikes the tall man. He pulls out a seat and begins to read the menu with its instructions to 'please order at counter'. He is still discussing his choice with himself as he gets to the counter. The traditional, usual, ham, egg and lettuce double cut white roll, or the 'Bonza egg and bacon buster' pie? His head is saying 'stick with what you know' but his nose, his salivary glands and his heart are saying 'go for the Bonza, go for the Bonza!' But is Paul the kind of man who listens to his glands? By the time he gets to the counter, the melancholy pressure of Sarah has gone and Ben is smiling at him.

"G'day, what can we get ya?"

"Hameggnlettucedubbacutwhiteroll thanks."

Ben notes this on a pad.

"And a cake?"

Paul looks down into the rounded glass cabinet filled with carnival colours and pre-school shapes. Amongst the éclairs a hand is sliding in more fresh treats. Paul leans back, looks in and the face he sees is serious now, but achingly passionate. The

eyes still echo with the distance he saw before. Sarah looks up and sees him. He smiles and pretends to be perusing the baked products. He looks back and she hasn't moved. Suddenly she jerks back, smacks her head on the shelf and stands next to her boss, rubbing her head.

"Are you okay?" Asks Ben.

"You okay?" Asks Paul.

She looks at the two men, they look at her. They all look at each other. She is confused

"What?"

Ben is grinning. Paul is trying not to look too much.

"What?!"

Ben leans closer, so only the three of them can share.

"You have a donut stuck to your head."

Sarah finds the little tiny donut, a choc coated mini-nut they call them, and runs from the counter as her face fills with red. Ben turns back to the little truck driver.

"Sorry 'bout that. Anything else?"

"Actually," Paul is grinning too, "skip the roll, gimme your Bonza egg and bacon thing."

He sits at the table and lets the world of noise wash over him. There are maybe a dozen other folk in *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery* and Paul isn't interested. He is pondering the seat he has taken, being beside the window that looks out across main road. Is it the front of the shop, as it is nearer the road, or is it the back of the shop, as it is furthest from the counter which is, clearly, the most important part of the café? He wonders if this is where to meet when one says 'I'll be sitting at the front of the Café' Or is this totally the wrong place for that meeting. Not that Paul ever meets anyone in cafes. It's one of the things he loves about places like this. He is unknown and knows no-one. That's pretty much what he likes about every place he has ever been. Upon reflection he also admits that, as well as the peace and anonymity, he also rather likes the Bonza egg and bacon thing. There is a lull in the floor of noise and suddenly a plate appears before Paul. He looks up into the eyes. They are butter soft, skin like bedsheets and cheeks glowing with happy work. A face engaged, and genuine.

"Hey, I just wanted to say sorry about… before."

Paul scrambles from his lethargic slump and sits up, causing the chair to brachiate loudly.

"Oh. Hi. Um. Before?"

"Yair, I don't usually have, like, donuts stuck to my head."

"You never wear your hair in a bun?"

"What? No, I… oh right. That's very funny. No. I try not to get the food in my hair."

"Is that worse than finding hair in your food?"

"Oh don't, it's bad enough already."

"You could wear a net, on your hair."

"But my name's Sarah."

"I mean you… oh, Annette. Very good, yes, I'll give you that. Sarah."

And as he says her name he realises how wonderful the little café smells. The tiny Donut on the plate before him is pink and plump and cheerful and Paul knows he has never seen anything so pink in his life.

"I have never seen anything so pink in my whole life!"

"Ah, yes, it's a new icing. Made from the hearts of roses, we squeeze the colour out while they're still beating."

"Is that meant to be a sales pitch?"

"Hm, now that you mention it, that does sound a little…"

"Disgusting?"

"Unusual."

"It looks amazing though."

"Well, it's on the house."

"As opposed to being on your head like…"

"Yes, stop that now. Just Enjoy. And sorry about the, you know."

"Thanks."

He watches her hips roll away and finds his head full of warm bakery thoughts and hot buns. It is the last thing he remembers until he wakes up in the little hospital bed with a head full of wadding.

The little room smells of evaporating fluids and thick, ground, coffee. Every bone in his body is light, like polystyrene, and feels stringy. His lungs are doing nothing to

bring in air. His skin feels spiky and there is a hole in his belly where snakes are unravelling themselves. A tall man in a neatly ironed pale blue shirt is standing in the doorway being deliberately blurry and wavering back and forth like a hot roadway mirage.

"the mme em mum muuble." The wavy man says.

"zhe gugglemen?" Paul asks.

"Vat's that?" The blurry man is walking closer and pulling himself together, taking on the form of a respectable older man. Glasses have emerged on his face and the older man looks over them, down at where Paul is lying.

"Wha's up, wheereaml?"

"Sh, lay back, und relax there young man, you'f had a bit of a turn."

"A turn of what?"

"Anaphylaxis. Seems you haf a terrible reaction to pink."

"Pink?" Paul is puzzled. "Wha, she's mm'kay, budd I don' like her ummm, albums." "Za colour. You had some pink at the café and pretty much passed out. You stopped breathink for a moment zere."

"Really?" He is too dazed and lethargic to find this anything more than interesting.

"So I gave you an epi shot and a little somethink to keep you rested. How are you feelink now?"

"Assaulted."

The older man smiles.

"Ya. That vill pass shortly. Can you see a visitor?"

Paul looks about.

"No."

"I'll send her in."

And in a moment the shape of the girl from *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery* impresses the doorway. She isn't the least bit blurry. Her hands are choking a dishcloth to death.

"I'm so… are you… um. You okay?"

Paul sits up and grins.

"Hi. Um, Annette."

"Sarah."

“Sarah, Yair. Sorry. Hi.”

“I just wanted to say, well, I’ve never done that before and, Yair. Sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for nearly killing you…”

Paul just sits there. Grinning at her

“Um, so, sorry… and um.”

Paul chuckles a moment.

“Your eyes are very blue.”

Sarah looks over to the doctor. Whispers,

“Is he suffering some kind of brain damage?”

The doctor chuckles.

“The vorst kind I sink.”

“What’s the matter?” She asks Paul

“Nothing. Just nothing.” He grins at her. Now she is starting to grin at him too.

“What?” She shuffles her feet.

“What what?”

“I asked first.” She says and can’t stop her cheeks from folding into a smile.

“I just never had a lady come and see me in a hospital before. Am I in a hospital?”

“Not really,” the doctor explains, his words lilting with European fragrances. “It’s my surgery. Zere isn’t a hospital here. Unless you are a cow. Zere is a veterinary hospital.”

Sarah moves closer and sits on the little bed. No sheet covers Paul but a tiny wire runs from a clamp on his finger, constantly eavesdropping on the behaviour of his heart.

“So it looks like you’ll be staying in town for a bit I guess?”

Paul’s face caves in a little, like a precursor to a mud slide, a landslip as the joy starts sliding from his face. He looks at the doctor anxiously.

“Nar, I can’t, I gotta get out to the road. I reckon just sitting here, there’s already bits just out of town that’ll be starting to go astray. I gotta line them or the outback will just go wherever it wants. I can’t stay here!”

The doctor shrugs and tells him;

“You are okay now, just take a few minutes to get your feet back und there’s nothink to stop you gettink back to vork.” The doctor runs a pen over some papers that he leaves on a table top as he walks out.

Paul sighs deeply and slumps back.

“Thank goodness.”

“Oh. Okay.: Sarah stands. “But surely you need some rest?”

“I rest out there.”

“You don’t like Willton?”

“I don’t really know Willton,” he tells her. He hangs his head a little, the weight becoming too much. “I’ve only been here a bit of today and already a lady with donuts in her hair has tried to kill me.” He looks up, grinning.

“You’d love Willton,” she tells him, strangling the towel in her hands.

Paul fiddles with the little wire at his finger tip.

“I… I don’t really love any place. I think that’s what I really love. Being everywhere. Anywhere. But not somewhere.”

“Where’s home?”

“Parked out front of your café, last I saw.”

“You don’t have a place to… to settle down?”

“Every night, I settle down. I just settle down somewhere different every night. You ever get sick of being in the same place all the time?”

“Sure, I guess. But at least I know where I am, and what’s going on.”

“Yair. That would kill me.”

“Knowing what’s going on?”

“Yair, where’s the fun in that?”

“I got stacks of friends, lots of things to do. I have a lot of fun!”

“Okay, sure, I’m just saying it’s not my fun.”

“What is your fun then?”

They look at each other. The doctor is making a phone call somewhere in the other room.

Paul Grins. Sarah feels her cheeks fill with warmth.

“This is fun,” he tells her. “This is the best fun.”

For two weeks now Paul has been gone, his day in Willton just a memory which Sarah doesn't visit. A paperweight of embarrassment holds it in the past. It has become just another scrape, the scab now dried and gone. It wasn't so much nearly killing a complete stranger that tugs at her, it was how easily she had seen his smile and felt her heart turn to face him. Why this one? Why did this sweet little man with the truck draw her to him? And she had decided the answer was obvious. She liked him straight away because he was guaranteed to leave straight away. No pressure, no challenges, no need to change. That's why she was drawn to him. Because she could never be near to him. So she had sighed and let the scab form on the little wound and got back to her life at *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery.* But today, for no reason, a box arrived with the morning mail when Ben had stepped out to collect the usual raft of bills, invoices and offers of hair insurance. Apparently baldness was becoming big business out here in the wheat belt. The box was addressed to her.
Sarah, *The Fiery Buns Café and Bakery*, Willton.
And it has found her. She opens the box after the lunchtime rush has subsided. Ben has been mercilessly ribbing her about it all morning.

"It's a box of make-up right? For all those dates you never go on?" He nudged her.

"It's a Quija board! Maybe you can contact my wife," he suggested.

"But she's not dead," Sarah reminded him.

"I'm not so sure," Ben chuckled. "Or maybe it's a box of, you know, special toys, for ladies…"
He looked at her and wiggled his eyebrows as the lunchtime orders bounced around them.

"You're an idiot Ben."

"Hey, I'm not judging."
Ben never would have guessed. Neither would Sarah. She opened the plain brown box and lifted out another box containing a brand new short-wave radio transceiver. They both stared at the box.

"It's a radio."

"Thanks Ben, I figured that out from the pictures and the words."

"Why did you get a radio?"

"I don't know. It's not like I ordered it or anything."

“Someone just sent it to you?”

Sarah shrugged, turned the box over, found the note sticky taped to the bottom.

Hi Sarah, out here with the roads I hear lots of radio. Lots of songs, lots of news, even lots of stories. But I have learned in the last two weeks, since my stop in Willton that there is one thing I have never heard. So with this radio, if you don’t mind, can we talk? Instructions are enclosed. I normally finish work at sunset and so I will try and contact you then on Channel 44. By the time you get this I’ll be about 500 ks East of you, so sunset will be a little earlier for me. If you want to talk, grab a donut and tune in. PS: I’m feeling all better now and have had no further reactions, although the bright pink wings of Galahs do make me a bit nervous. Yours sincerely Paul, Lineologist, Dept. of Roads and Boundaries, Southern Region.

Ben looked at Sarah. She always seemed cheerful, but he had never seen a smile reach so deeply inside her face.

Out past Yagunda the big truck is at rest, reclining as the evening pulls a curtain across the roadside. A monster roars past, wheels of thunder, its snout full of dieseled fire and then it is gone, vanished like dragons into myth. Paul has his deck chair out. The warm roll of air from the truck tugs at his hair as it rushes on into the eternity of saltbush and gnarled shrubs. Behind him is the great wheat-swollen belly of the land and the sulking invisible pain of the outback. A thick, busy silence is unfolding. Then Paul presses the handset and the radio snicks.

“Nar, I’m not big on Henry. Not my thing.” He pauses, smells the sand, the rich fragrance of eucalypt. “Lawson didn’t like Australia I reckon.”

There is a comforting silence and then Sarah’s thin voice is with him.

“Really? All he did was write about the land, and the folks that lived, you know, out there.”

Paul chuckles.

“Yair, that’s me, the drover, the swaggie. Out to make a buck and swindle any dumb gaffer.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Sarah’s voice is smiling too. “But, well, not far wrong.”

Paul chews on the conversation. A large bull ant, made of hard, angry shell and wielding a pair of chain saws in its face, has stopped by his foot, considering its chances of victory. In a moment the brute decides the *Rossi* boot is more than its match and scurries out of the little pool of golden light.

"Thing is, I reckon that Lawson wrote all over Australia like a murder writer does corpses. It's something, I dunno, terrible, fearful. But really exciting because of it. He never loved it, you know. The land was never his home, it was just where all his characters survived. But jeez he really wanted to just kill the whole place off didn't he?"

"Yair, I can see that. So you're no Lawson?"

"Nar, I can't write for nuts!"

Their laughs spanned nearly a thousand kilometres of Henry Lawson's murdered corpse.

"Is that why you never come back here?" Sarah is quieter now. "Cos it's not good?"

There is soft white noise, the sound of the air expelling electricity, tiny volts across the planet's surface.

"Maybe. A bit. I'm here cos I need to work here but. Yair. If I'm not here watching the cockatoos and smelling the rain on the one day it falls, who is? What's the point?"

"Huh."

"So much beauty, such a waste to not, you know?" He lets her hear him inhale deeply, as if the sound of his joyful lungs might transmit his sense of smell across the land to her little room in the far, distant town.

They sit quietly, neither needing to say anything. Just being. Enjoying being. It would be such a waste not to.

"Oh hey,"

Sarah's voice grins into the radio.

"Huh?"

"Amorlita is going to have a baby. Remember her? She's the one who looks a bit pale all the time."

"I though old Doc Posthuma said she couldn't?"

“Yair, but he left remember? The new Doc, seems he’s some kind of amazing or something. Anyway, she was in at the café all blushing and ‘oh, don’t ask me why I can’t eat the whole vanilla slice’ and of course we asked her and, well, four weeks.”

“Four weeks?” That’s not much.

“It’s completely pregnant Paul. You don’t get more preggers the longer it goes. She’s completely…”

And something between the two of them loomed up and prevented the rest of the sentence. This time the silence was there because it had taken over. Now, night had fallen completely.

Paul was over two thousand kilometres away the next time he saw Sarah’s face. Her picture was in the newspaper. She was holding the head of someone who they said looked like Jesus. Sarah was smiling the way he remembered, with her whole face, including her eyes. Something in him snapped off at the edges. The face of Jesus wasn’t smiling but, given that the head was detached, it still seemed remarkably calm. Perhaps it was that moment, the beginning of the crack that formed inside him, that made things move the way they went.

Three days later that newspaper was still, pride of place, on the front seat of Paul’s truck. He was grinding the truck slowly along a toffee-stretched length of road between two railway sidings, the paint hissing from the tiny jets to frighten back the encroaching outback and allow the road to rest in its perfectly straight line. The flashing orange lights above the truck snapped out into the glaring sky warning the approaching ute that Paul was at work. The ute pulled in and stopped ahead of the truck and a man in clean moleskins and a collared shirt got out and walked back towards Paul. He stopped the lumbering truck and stepped down.

“G’day, Gotta problem?”

“Hi there, you’re Robert?”

“Paul.”

“Oh. Um, Bluey said you was Robert.”

“Oh right.” Paul took off his hat and rubbed some dust from his hair. “That’ll be a joke.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Yair, Robert rhymes with hobbit. Apparently, that’s funny.”

“Oh right,” the shirted man looks down at Paul. “But Paul, that rhymes with small.”

“I know. That’s what I said. Bluey said he reckons ‘Robert’ was funnier.”

“I dunno,” the clean man shrugged.

“Me neither.” Paul rubbed his nose. Moved a piece of gravel with the toe of his solid boot. “But you know why he’s called ‘Bluey’ Right?”

“Cos he’s got red hair I guess.”

“Right.” Paul nodded. “Exactly.”

“Huh. Okay. Well, Paul. Got a change of plans for you.” The man in the shirt unfolded a yellow command and handed it to the little road man. “Seems the road nor’ east of Willton has got a bit out of hand. The A3. Old Graebner road or something they call it. You know Willton?”

“Yair, Nice spot.”

“I know it’s really outta your way for about the next six months but,”

“Not a problem,” Paul jumped in. “I reckon I can make that happen.”

“Um… right. Well. Good then.”

As the ute drew away from the freshly contained road Paul revved the engine and the big truck grumbled along the side of the road at a snail’s pace, laying down a perfectly straight line. But now it was going somewhere.

The last of the evening flock are wheeling through the sky like sheets being shaken out in the wind, flowing, weaving and swooping in the sheer exuberant joy of the air. Paul is set for the night. The truck ticks as it cools and a hot cup of tea is breathing into the night.

“You’re sounding very chirpy this evening,” Sarah tells him.

“Ha, oh, nothing much.”

The familiar peace rests between them on the lover’s whisper of static.

“Come on, tell.”

“I was just thinking, maybe we should work on a baby.”

She gives a nervous giggle.

“Well, I know you’re not the most educated man,” she jokes, “but even you know that two thousand kilometres is one hell of a contraceptive.”

“Ha, Yair.” Paul’s voice is grinning across the ether. So is she, but still not daring to hope, like a child with a present who knows what it is but doesn’t want to open it in case they are wrong.

“Can’t a bloke come home to his wife?”

He clearly hears her squeal, a feedback of sheer joy. And he is impressed that, even in her spontaneous explosion of passionate excitement, she manages to hold the transmit button down. That understanding of communication is very important to a man like Paul.

Africans

I think our family has always lived here. The house is getting exhausted now. Too many years stretching it and holes are appearing. Last month I had laid my eggs, gently placed then in the moist corner, warm, safe. The floor fell away. They vanished. My young had crashed into the dark nothing beneath, I cried for a day at least. I couldn't eat and yet wanted to devour my own limbs. I was empty and torn, no energy to do anything but rage against the horrible loss. But life goes on. So does death. I never saw those children. I never will. They will never rush and tumble with raucous joy and electric laughter. They are dead before they could live. I have had other children. Hundreds. Each one is special. And because I have had so much joy, I have also had so much terrible hurt. I have seen my children feasting like a party on a fallen morsel. But I have also seen my children crushed, their spines broken by the feet of the humans. Many times, I have seen a child of mine gasping, pleading eyes asking me for help as poison tears their bellies inside out. What can a mother say to their child when that is happening? But last month it was our house, our home that betrayed me, fell in, killed my beautiful brood. All of them, crushed by the one thing I had always trusted. Home.

A new family has moved in to share this home with us. I almost want to warn these new humans that their home is a killer. But they are humans. They also are killers. But the family is just a mother and her brood. Like me. A mother with children she loves. Uniquely and totally. This new family is different to others, so we are learning to live off their strange yellow words, words that smell of deep musk and shiny gloss, herbs and pods, unlike the usual milky foods, cheesy, and sugary, of the usual humans who have lived here ever since I can remember. Maybe it is their bizarre food that makes these newcomers talk strangely. They speak like they are underwater, their words upside down and drowning in themselves. Maybe this is why I don't try to warn this new mother. She is too strange. And yet she is still a mother, just like me. I would never want to see one of her little children, four of them there are, all coiled up energy and bustling limbs, I would hate to see one of them crushed on the floor, or see her little girl, the impossibly dark braided hair, with her stomach churned and haemorrhaging from invisible poison. Yes, I don't care where she is

from. She is mother and I care for her children. I wish for her never to experience the horrors I have seen.

I am a Madagascan. Other ‘roaches say, ‘where are you from?’ and I say ‘from here’ but, of course, we are none of us from here. I am, apparently, from Madagascar. I don’t know what that is, only that it is not here and so I am from there. But I have always lived here, was born here, have brought many of my own into this place. Doesn’t that make me from here?

A hot breeze rushes across the floor at me and I freeze. Another human is entering the house so I rush beneath the cupboard. It hides me from their ignorant eyes, so they can believe I am no longer existing. The new voice is human, like the last family, a voice from here, slow and dumb, stubborn and bland. Like their food. Her voice is made of beef and white paper. An ‘Aussie’. She is telling the strange new woman that she is an advocate. I have no idea what that means and neither does the saffron smelling mother with the bed sheet clothes.

Madagascan ‘roaches live by the word. We eat them. Arguments that fall to the floor, full of passion, energy, fat. They are delicious. Sometimes these words will be thrown like daggers, full of blood and willingness, these will feed my young. The words tumble down and lie on the floor, swept under the cupboard or dripping from the tea-towels and the edges of chairs and table. The aimless chatter of young children is also especially delicious. It gives my own children a joyful sheen, hardening their adolescent shells with the endless enthusiasm and unstoppable, sugary surging. This new family has strange words and yet they still seem to be very nutritious. Their words are still very tasty, just differently so. The advocate woman, the one who is not a foreigner, her words seem bitter and I will not let my children eat them. This local woman may well speak poisonous words. She says she is here to help the foreign woman and her dark-skinned children, but her words lack energy. They are empty husks, useless seeds that lack the substance to grow into anything. The foreign woman is confused by her words and fear is dripping to the floor from her. The foreign woman speaks words that are seeds, spices, herbs. And fear. The foreign woman can’t understand what has happened. Why she is here. There is a terrible darkness in her words. I can taste the salt and sadness amongst the bright sparkly tangs. Perhaps she is Madagascan too? Perhaps she, also, had other children, who have been crushed and torn apart? And all the local woman gives her

is poison and fear. Now I know I feel sorry for this new woman. I hope she will not try to kill my children. I think I might like her.

The Coming Storm

Amorlita stands on the porch, looking down on the rest of the town, and tells him.

"There's a cold front comin'."

She makes it sound like he cares about such things.

He doesn't. There was a time he cared about the little things she said, when she would serve up fresh, sweet treats of conversation. He would relish the intimate joy, being the one she treated to such things. Now? Not so much.

He looks out at her. In the sky behind her a vapour trail of distant jet travel is turning to blood as the sun dies over the ocean.

She looks out. Away. She is a porcelain woman, dropped and broken too many times, so the lines of ancient glue show in her surface. She was born hundreds of years ago, far from this little town, born into a family of step parents. Her birth mother had been invisible because, so the story went, she had travelled far too much when she was younger. So, after centuries of hiding, this cracked vase has found the streets and homes of Willton to be the nest her heart craved. Here in the country, where young children play on streets named after their Grandparents, where everyone is holding genetic hands with at least two other people and family trees grow with interlaced fingers, like an ancient olive grove.

"Gonna be a mean one." She mutters through her lips. She just watches. The sky is clear nearly to the horizon, where a line of grey sits like the waist band of an old man's underpants. No one wants to see that.

"Give it two hours." She calls to him.

She landed here in a space ship, kidnapped from her native city by Martin Close. Pronounced Closey. Martin's grandfather built a home on a strip of Willton that became known as Close Close, proving that, at some time in the past, a town planner had a sense of humour. Now Martin and the missus live in the only home to sit on a slight rise. She looks out across the town, over the tin roofs to the open arms of the eternal grain and then, finally, to the sea, the end of the known world.

"Says here you're from Willton," she had said, from the end of the emergency gurney. A needle invaded his arm and a pillow supported the leg smashed by the car. The ambulance ride was making them sway in time.

“That’s out in the bush, isn’t it?”

“Yair,” he mumbled, lips made heavy by sedation and a deep fear of attractive young women.

“What’s it like?” The terrifying young woman had asked him and his eyes succumbed to an odd magnetic effect. They saw nothing else in the little cabin. Just that face. The woman, the Paramedic. This girl.

“Well,” he tried to think. “It’s like the city only with.... everything gone.”
They both laughed.

“Sounds... perfect.” She smiled and then broke the magnetic bond, turning away to do her job.

He could not have known, the first time they met, that she was what she was. Even though it’s really why he met her. She was one of those who chose a big city life to support their hunger for crime scenes and accidents. Wherever free blood may be available. In her green overalls, reflecting headlights and strobing colour, she would nurse the broken bodies and subtly feed her own need. But now, in the tin and grain town of Willton, she has turned away from her bloodlust. A Haemophite in a small town doesn’t last long. Suspicion, pitchforks and coroners soon weed them out, betrayed by the immortalising effects of human blood. She had broken her own heart and turned away from the life that had haunted her for the last half a dozen centuries. An eternal life was too long. So she flew away in his Torana, the city falling away as the space flew by. Headlights filled the air before the car even though they travelled at light speed. Behind him was the years of study, the getting of knowledge, the getting of degrees, if not the getting of wisdom. Behind her was six centuries of getting to this moment of escape. He drove well. Calm, sure handed, a man who knew where he was going and how to get there. Such attractive things in a man. She never noticed the flinch of fear as the edge of the road drew too close to the tires and he felt the veneer of cool begin to slip, before he regained control of the hurtling car.

‘*Dream lover come my la la, dumb de doo ooh...’* she sang along with the hiss of erratic AM, the windows down, her feet up on the dash of his space ship. He laughed at her lack of lyrics. So did she. She was going somewhere.

‘*I should have known better la la fall in love um you...’* They sang to each other as the engine ate up the time between there and here.

And now she says there's a cold front coming.
'Going to' has become 'Gunna'. In fact all her 'ings' have abraded at the ends to become 'in's'. 'The comin's and goin's uv country life I s'pose,' she might say now. From the porch, she can hear the distant snake of the sea, hissing on the sand down at *The Shells.* It is much more soothing than the thumping of hot, red blood. The tell-tale heart in her ears that spoke to her back in the city. She is a different woman now. That's why she talks different. More different? Differently?

"Whatever." A word that fills her rural landscape. "Whatever."
From her stance above the town she nods at a clothes line two blocks away, where the white flags of Manchester are surrendering to the changing breeze.

"Should call Glenda, let 'er know. She's still got 'er sheets out."

"What? Who's got the shits?" He looks up from the papers before him, to his wife, perched on the porch. She seems so far away.

"Glenda. 'er sheets are gonna get soaked."

"Right. Nice." And he's back into the numbers he has brought home from the office. His wife turns and looks into the heart of their lounge room where her husband is putting on weight and helping the town's people with their mortal finances. He's looking older. Her own reflection in the window reminds her that she is too. Her curves are more rounded, circular rather than curvature. It's the price you pay for getting on. She's getting 'round. Sometimes he slaps her backside playfully. Where once he would caress with reverence, now he finds clown-like joviality. She turns back to the horizon. There's a cold front coming in. Fast. And she knows what she's given up.
In her ambulance, he had looked so perfect, a baby doll of a brave young man, a collectible personification. She should not have done what she did but she knew she had to. She withdrew the cannula from the fat-worm vein in his arm, hunched over and tasted his blood. It changed her life. Not the copper and lead sweetness she expected, his blood was filled with strawberry! And a hint of marshmallow.
She dropped the needle and jumped back. Stunned. In the back of her mind, for over five centuries, she had been looking for someone different, someone to change her. Now she had found him.
The soft child-man had woken from his brokenness and saw her terrified face.
Her boy of sweet fruit whispered through grey lips.

“Am I in heaven?”

How could she not give up everything to have this one impossible man? Here was her chance to grow old together.

Now, two long decades later, she wonders if they are just growing cold together. Alive but dying.

She looks at him in the lounge room. Hair thinner, his careless belly, the fray of soft slippers. She breathes deep and tries not to feel the hunger in her blood. She turns away and looks out into the world and wonders again if maybe being immortal would be better than this. Maybe eternal youthfulness is better than slowly drying out.

“Yep, gunna be a big old cold front.” She tells the air. And she jumps as his hand lands on her shoulder. Soft. Familiar. An always touch.

“Want to go for a walk before it hits? Once around the park and back?”

She looks into his smiling eyes.

“That’d be nice,” She admits.

And as she holds his hand she’s sure she can smell strawberry. She tells him,

“Tomorrow’s gunna be nice though.”

A Very Willton War

Josh is woken early by the pain, the tug of dried blood on the hard sheet. There is old, animal heat in the cramped room. The bedding is littered about him. He groans and his eyes crack. There is the trailing end of darkness at the window. The ache of the gentle grey of dawn, like the lights beneath the door when parents were still around. But parents are long gone now and so he lays abandoned in bed in his little cottage. Just off Schulze Street. He lives alone here. Even if people drop by. And nights have become a constant puzzle. At first it had been terrifying to wake up snarled in the sheets, pyjamas soaked in mud, sticks tangled his hair and the soft undersides of his feet were scraped and nicked. Now, after a couple of months of these nights it is less terrifying, more just annoying. The constant background hum of fear, of disease, like seeing evil in distant trees. He isn't getting enough sleep and it's starting to show at work. Two days ago, he had almost opened the loading chute and ordered five tons of barley poured into a hopper that was being cleaned. It would have crushed and drowned Jerry what's-his-name, the guy from up north who was grabbing a few month's work whilst hitching the country. Jerry was a dick so it would be no great loss, but they would have had to reload the hopper and then there was the paper work. It's not that Josh doesn't care about people. Just not people he doesn't know. But these relentless nights of waking dazed, exhausted and dirty are rubbing him rice paper thin. As often happens when life seems wrong, upset and off kilter, death can begin to seem so right. How hard would it be to just… off himself? His mind refuses to use the word 'kill'. Do himself in? Get free of this crushing, empty, teetering un-ness. And the muscle soreness. What is that all about? The ache in his forearms and the lower back, like a band of hot steel wrapped about him. Yesterday, and now this morning too, there is blood. More now. It is caked on his forehead as if a puddle of mud has splashed in his face and dried there. He feels it crackle as he shifts and the sheet tugs at his skin. His opened, slashed skin.

"Agh! What the hell?!"

Josh stops moving to prevent the dried sheet ripping at the wound further. He can feel that the slash burns from above his eye and down to below his cheekbone, just in front of his ear. Left or right, he can't tell, the pain befuddles him. It's the side that

hurts. Josh moans. He presses his fingers against his face. He holds his teeth together and slowly pulls the sheet away. It's a bit painful. It stings. He pulls and,

"ARRGH!"

It hurts like a bitch. He is lying in the dark, on top of his ruined sheets, panting and sobbing as he feels fresh blood ooze down his face like a child's tears. And he realises he is terrified again.

Josh tries to shower. The crusted blood turns to jelly then washes away from his face, his chest and the backs of his hands. It's a lot of blood. Some of it is obviously his. But the bruises on his shin are a sudden revelation and something has left a train of deep, sharp lacerations on his back that even twisting in front of the tiny mirror in the bathroom refuses to reveal. The hardest part is the trembling. Nothing stops it. Hot water. Cold water. He sits on the toilet seat, wet and naked, waiting for the tremors to fade. They don't. He dries off amidst the brambles of his skin and makes a coffee. The kitchen is silent about him. His head hangs over a bowl of white milk, remnant cereal. A droplet of pure, red blood falls from his face, staining the milk, spreading like a cold hand. Another drop. Outside the day has lifted an eyelid. He dabs at the weeping slash on his face and peers at the piece of kitchen paper. Josh hasn't ever been a bright light in the rural education firmament. His mother had once said that he had caught a falling star. Josh took this to mean he was born lucky. She was trying to tell him he had taken a nasty knock to the head when he was young. A few of them actually. Now Josh is seated in the soft and sterile comfort of Doc Posthuma's waiting room. It is the front room of what was once a gentleman's cottage, before all the gentlemen moved to the city. Now it is a strange combination of antique house and modern medical practice. It is strangely old and new. Like a grandma with a bionic arm. Josh has one of his clean tea towels pressed against the opened flesh. There is only one other person awaiting the arrival of the old Doc. He is older, wearing wrinkles around the eyes from many decades watching the sun. There is bandage up his forearm that was probably white but now is stained with browns and greys.

"How ya doin'?" The sun watcher asks. "Cut yerself shavin'?"

"Ha, something like that, yair." The boy mutters

“Yair, I’m jus’ gettin’ me bandage redone. I tried to catch a chainsaw. Ha.” The sun faced man raises his bandage in a sort of salute. “Yair, he carries on, down by the woods there, y’know? We’re takin’ out them trees near the road.”
Josh doesn’t know, he never goes to the eastern edge of town where the old gum forest still clings to the land.

“Yair, yair, I know.”

“Yair, right. So I was rippin’ through a bough and din’t see the knot. Bang! Saw just jumped outta me hand. And here we are. Dozen stitches and a week a just standin’ about watchin’ the rest of the guys get to have all the fun.”
Josh wonders why the complete stranger is telling him his life’s story.

“You’re lucky.”

“Yair,” the old man nodded. “Coulda been worse.”
Josh nods and says nothing. He meant the old man was lucky because he knew what had got him.

Kerlew wakes abruptly, as possums are want to. His eyes pop open. The empty day is gone. The deep freedom of night is here. But his brain seems to remain shut. It sludges and wobbles inside his skull. He is in a rock cave. It begins to form now. Yes, not his tree, his tree is gone. He had torn a snake out of this hole to sleep here two nights ago. He can’t remember how he got back here though. Night has dropped heavily. The bush outside the hole is thick and rustling with activity. He remembers suddenly. The fight. Rakar and Argat from the Yellow Flower clan, they had found him in their tree and they were as desperate as him so inevitably it turned to teeth and claws. Kerlew raised a paw, touched the side of his face where Rakar had gouged him so terribly and found… what? What is this? It is… not open. The tear should be red, engorged, angry and bloody as wounds always are after such a battle. But his wound is clean. How is this so? With a claw he gently caresses the sliced flesh and finds it bound together with some sort of little stringiness. Yet again Kerlew has woken up very late, very confused, and bearing another mystery on his skin. He still hasn’t worked out why the soft down of his face keeps just disappearing during the day as he sleeps. Now, as he slept today, the aftermath of the terrible brawl with the Yellow Flowers has been… healed. Impossible. And yet. Kerlew unfurls himself, his spine clicking and creaking, letting him know he has a skeleton

within his soft body and that skeleton didn't take well to the punishment it had absorbed last night. He gasps in pain, a short screech as he straightens his tail and feels the skin object. He tries to peer over his shoulder and see if there is blood there but the cave is too dark even for his powerful nocturnal eyes. Also, he notes, his eyes hurt. The muscles seem to grab inside his skull as he turns them. He is in a bad way. Since the first of the wattles had fallen, the home of his Red Bark clan, the fighting had, of necessity, become worse. Once, before the invasion, the clan fighting had been for fun. Teeth bared for show and scratches made only as a proof of contact. It was all part of the tumbling joy of life. But now it was more. It was life and death. The trees were going, vanishing in the frightening roar of men. Homes gone meant homelessness and no possum could be homeless. That way led to death. Kerlew touched his mended face again. Perhaps this way, also, would lead to death.

Josh hooks his keys beside the front door. Order. As always. There has been a rope inside his head, slowly coiling tight since returning from Doc Posthuma's this morning. The slash on his face is warm, it zings to the touch but, since he doesn't smile, it doesn't really bother him. At work, looking out of the machine shed as the trucks blazed sunlight from their windscreens, his skull had contracted. The relentless dust of crushed grain, invisible in the air until the sunlight tried to slash through it, rasped in and out of his weary chest. In the little shed the air conditioner chuddered away, tipping out air that is cold but with steamy warm edges, a dank billabong stink of mouldering wet air. It squeezed him and filled him. Now he is home he just needs it to stop. He pushes into the still, warm, woollen air of his bedroom, thinks about what to change in to. Instead, Josh collapses on his bed. A much better decision he feels. A rush of blood pulls at the scar on his face, then the pain recedes like a stranger. On the windowsill is a glass bowl. Where, once, fish might have swum aimlessly, now there are slips of paper. Beige *Graincorp* post-it notes. Josh has written on the notes, over the years. In the moments at night when he couldn't sleep, he would throw down the offending memory. Things his mother had said. Things he has trapped inside him, leaf litter in a clogged gutter. *'Don't stand out, you get knocked down.' 'You always get what you expect so don't expect anything*.' His mother had said 'aspect' nothin', but he knew what she meant. '*Nothin' wrong with bein' you if you isn't a moron'.* And so on. The wisdom of the woman who had raised

him and then died. He is looking toward the bowl. Not at it. Unfocussed, his head throbbing and his eyes too weary to bother bringing vision. It's good to just lie and let the tight rope loosen ever so slightly. His back is burning with pin points that bite like tiny insects. The stinging pock marks, the rash or scrape or whatever it is. He reaches behind him, picks at the soreness. Then he tries to have a look. Lying on his back he twists his hips as if he is made of playdough, trying to see the back of himself. In the periphery, hard to focus in the dull dusk of the bedroom, he sees the sore points and frowns. There is nothing he knows that has caused it. He went to bed, slept, woke up and he was tattooed across his back like he had been hit with a big stick of rough-hewn bark. It is impossible. And yet. Josh picks at one of the thick dark scabs that pepper the wound. It pulls at the skin and a slice of pain jabs him. He keeps pulling, keeps hurting. Now blood begins to seep from the wound, sticks to his fingers like hamburger sauce. It feels wonderfully real. It is so much less frightening. Pain like this, inflicted by his own hand, is so much better than the terrible unknowing. Outside the sun drains in dirty blues to deep velvet black. There comes the screel and hoot of distant animals, the prelude to battle cries, an etude of awakening. Josh's skin ripples, a splintery itching reaction.

The men with the chainsaws and shovels, the bulldozers, are back again. For a week they have been stopped in their tracks by a dead man. When a shovel had struck old, grey-brown bone, there were questions about land, about spirits, about past. But he was white so all the questions had vanished and now the digging and hacking got under way again. The body had been buried over a hundred years ago. It was a man. A man with bad bones and a thin skull. The city told them he had been shot. Had died slowly. A lead ball had torn through his gut, splashed his bowels and torn holes that he could never repair. A thousand miles and a hundred years from any suitable healing, he had stunk and bled, probably for days, maybe weeks. Maggots had grown in the wound, so they knew he had lived for a while. Though not well. And yet this pathetic corpse soon became a bit famous. He was probably a victim of the notorious, no, legendary, bushranger Eric Collins. Collins roamed near these empty roads, far from the law, and drew about himself a cloak of mystery. There grew around him a weed bed of myth; that he was a rebel, that he was a gun toting freedom fighter, that he was a beloved man of the people. That was his

legacy. But he robbed from the rich and gave to himself. He robbed the poor too. Like this man here in the scrub. This little man who just wanted to see his baby daughter grow up. Instead, his one spot in history would be because he was senselessly disembowelled by a selfish bastard on a lonely piece of land that didn't even have a name. And now the workers can get back to work.

Kerlew used to dream of soft leaves, of dropping from impossibly high branches and landing on soft, spring legs; of youth and frisking. Now he dreams of a taste he doesn't know is bacon. He dreams of standing on two legs and the terrifying choking of air filled with wheat dust. He sleeps in twisted patches. He is filled with little fits, seizures jabbing at his limbs, causing his hind leg to kick out, tat tat tatting at the hard, cool rock of his temporary home. But he doesn't really wake. The heat of the day is poking rising fingers into this little hovel, searching tendrils of air wafting in and resting on the little creature's fur. Still, it's not enough to wake him. A series of fits ripple across the base of his tiny spine, little grabs of offended skin making his fur shake and ripple like a wheat field. A gasp and a discomfited squeak escape his parched mouth. But the little beast sleeps on. The distant sound of chainsaws fills the daylight outside like bushfire smoke and the possum's ears flip and twist, anguished in nightmares. For generations his family has lived amongst these trees. Generations of generations. He has this in common with none of the men who now take biting steel to the mansions he was raised in, these white men made brown by sunburn and sawdust. They are fake natives, painted in the black-face of doing a job. They don't feel the pain of the trees though. Kerlew and his Red Bark brothers have now been scattered and splayed by the felling of their homes. As their history becomes mulch and cheap firewood they look on from beneath temporary housing. In the time of bushfire, they accept the loss of their trees as that is the way of nature. But this mechanical molesting of their glorious homes is not the way of nature. It is the way of death. And still Kerlew sleeps. But he doesn't rest. Another tiny moan falls from his little mouth.

That night the battle for the trees is more intense than ever. The new natives have now been tearing down the castles of the Yellow Flowers too and Kerlew finds himself trying to find a new home alongside Rakar and Argat. The searching soon turns to acrimony as the nocturnal panic grows more desperate. Kerlew gives as good as he gets. Better in fact. Argat will soon die from the gash across his belly. But

it has cost him. Kerlew has lost a claw to the flashing razor teeth as they had locked in combat on the soft eucalypt floor. The warm, dark, leaf litter was soon spattered by the blood of possums, Yellow Flower and Red Bark clan alike. And so, as the sun breaks across the thin remnant of forest, as daylight lifts the exhausted eyelids of Josh in his curdled and bloodied sheets, it wakes him with a scream. His own pained and fearful roar.

"Josh, Agin? Vat hev you done now?"

Doc Posthuma is surprised to find the boy sitting on the doorstep of the old cottage when he gets to work.

"Doc, I, Um, I have done my hand," the boy mutters.

The doctor takes in the pale shivering face and the tea-towel wrapped about the hand, nods and opens the door, leading the trembling boy inside.

"Vat are you doing son? Chew don' just lose a finger."

"Yair. But, here we are."

The hand is bound in pristine white now and the old doctor is looking at the boy with the scared face. The so recently scarred face.

"You are a mystery yah." Sighs the old doctor. "How long your family bin here Yosh?" His European mouth still struggles to fit the English language.

"Dunno. Always I guess."

"Und suddenly, here you are, a daily injury?"

"Huh. Well. Hopefully not." The boy's eyes are wide. Wet.

Out on the Highway, at the end of Willton, the dirty brown work men are already at their labours, tearing out the last pieces of native scrub, hacking trunks, crushing seed pods, kicking mice, eggs, possums, clearing the ancient, unprotected land. They think they are just clearing the last of the troublesome vegetation. It has stood since long before the white people arrived. But not anymore.

The Long View

The two boys found the shack amongst the dunes. Finders keepers. Refugees from the trauma of a city childhood, from smart phones and take away coffee cups. They had grown pubescent facial hair and the urge to escape. Like generations before and after, they hit the road, not going toward, simply going away. All ‘from’, no ‘to’. They had been drawn from the unravelling highway with its neatly constraining white lines, by the simple green sign; ‘The Beach’. They found the beach. They lounged, they lazed, they kicked at the sand. They got bored, they explored. They found the desiccated grey wood shack. So, who are these two reckless youths? What are their names? What is driving them? It doesn’t matter. They won’t be here long enough to leave any kind of mark. They are of no consequence to Willton.

Sand hisses from the brow of the dunes and scrapes its bony finger nails against the petrified wood walls.

“Hello?! The taller boy calls.”

The smaller youth, his ears and nose glinting with metal inclusions, is pressing hands and face to the window.

“Fuckin’ dump. No one in there.”

Tall boy tries the front door. Again. The lever handle is pocked and worn by years of angry salt spray. It looks like it should just fall apart in his hands. It doesn’t. Tall boy frowns.

“Geez, they musta welded the bloody thing shut.”

The metal face boy has a rock in his hand and the window smashes impressively.

“What the hell?! Why’d you do that?!” Tall boy shouts.

“Why not?”

“Ya fuckin’ idiot. This door’s gonna open,” as he tugged at the tortured looking handle. But the door held fast. Penitent sand has fallen to its knees at the door, piling and then blowing away. Dry, restless. Eventually the two boys roll themselves up and thread their bony bodies through the shattered window and into the heart of Keelty’s shack. No one sees their act of vandalism except a small blonde hawk, quivering high on a rising current of air. Its diamond eyes monitor the youths even as it seeks the tiny patches of furry movement that will be its sustenance. The hawk is the last creature to see the boys alive. The last *living* creature to see the boys alive.

The longer Keelty is awake, the more distant his gaze becomes. At first, he is just like everyone else. But, after a while, once he has been awake for three or four uninterrupted months, then he finds his gaze is lengthening. After five months, old man Keelty's gaze will rest and stare such that he can see as far as the day after tomorrow. After six months awake he will sleep. A deep, untroubled slumber that will carry him through half a year. But that time when he is awake and gazing into the future, that is what plagues him. He had been awake for nearly twenty six weeks that night the dogs had run. He still remembered the way the air fondled his cheek as the beasts had formed in the still night. Cool air. Then warm. Then cool again. Like fingertips on his skin. From where he was seated on the hillock he could see all the way through to the next day. Could he have saved those two little girls? Certainly. But Keelty pondered. *Should* he have saved those two little girls? Ah, that was the question that always plagued old man Keelty.

The two boys stand in the little shack. It is compact, that's how a real estate salesman would frame it. It's bloody small. There is not enough room to swing a cat. So there is certainly not enough room for the massive dog.

"Whoa! Where'd that come from?!" Metal face whispers as the boys try to make every single cell in their bodies invisible. The dog is huge. It is black. Really black. So black that even night time would fear it. It had suddenly just been there, appearing before the two boys. The tall boy is holding a spoon he had picked up from the table. The metal faced boy is holding his breath. It is not the size, nor the darkness, not even the sudden, impossible appearing of the dog that terrifies the boys. It is the silence. The beast makes no noise. Until it exhales slowly, a single breath, like it has made a decision. The dog is known as Beuvernvulf, the beautiful hound. Keelty just calls him Bob. It's easier for the old man to pronounce using his old Australian tongue. Bob the dog is the protector, the guard. He is here to protect Keelty as he sleeps his six uninterrupted months. Bob ensures the 'uninterrupted'. Bob is not there to protect the two bored city boys. But a dog's got to eat, even a ghostly dog, formed of nocturnal mist. And thus, the two boys leave Willton.

Keelty wasn't always the weird old hermit who lived in the dunes. No-one is ever born the way they are. 'It's a boy Mrs Keelty, a weird old man with no friends and a penchant for whisky. Congratulations.'

The young Keelty was always in the team, one of the guys. At school, then at work, at the pub. You'd see them and know them all, the grinning handsome one, the loud, kinda crazy one, the surly quiet one, the smart, cheeky one. They were all there, the whole gang. And Keelty was always with them. He was always the 'also there' one. When the town boys went to *The Shells*, young Keelty never took off his shirt, grandstanded or flexed for approval. He never took a spectacular catch playing beach cricket. Sometimes he'd drive places with his mates. Or not. His car was useful but not special. He wouldn't even be able to tell you what sort of car he drove as a kid. Or since. But he was there. He'd fit in but never stand out. No one ever said to Keelty, 'How will you ever amount to anything!?' Because no one ever expected him to. He was never encouraged to strive for better things because he wouldn't and the fact is, for other people to do great things, there needs to be a lot of people doing average, everyday things. Keelty was one of those. So, from the moment he was born, Keelty was destined to drive a tractor on a farm. In order to plough, one only needed to do alright. Excellence was decidedly unnecessary. Much of life on the land is like that. Good enough is good enough and any drive to go beyond good enough only upsets the delicate balance of the natural order. There is no such thing as 'above average harvesting' or 'exemplary seed spreading.' There's done and there's not done. No excellence needed. So Keelty was at home here.

As the sun had ripened the golden grain that harvest, Keelty had been drafted by Brian Blight to help bring in the crop. The paddocks reached far and wide and the harvester, a gleaming red International 503, came from the pocket of last year's profitable fields. Brian was notoriously obsessive about his paddocks, the lines neat, he insisted on every last grain making its way to the big silo.

"Don't sweat it Mr Blight," the fresh faced young Keelty said as he had mounted up into the cabin of the 503, looking out over the sharp teeth of the harvester. "I know what I'm doin'."

Brian grunted and watched 300 thousand dollars' worth of machinery vanish in a billowing cloud of dust. The next time the farmer saw his new machine it was near dark. The young boy was not in the cab. The engine was dead. The shopping trolley

wheels at the rear of the machine were frozen in a moment, sagging in the dirt, like beachside children. In his frustration at the massive machine becoming trapped in the soft-sand culvert at the edge of the paddock, the fresh young Keelty had leaned his shoulder into the looming drive wheels at the front of the machine. A small slippage, a rotation of the giant machine, and in a blinded moment the boy was beneath the wheel, only the softness of the earth preventing him from being completely crushed. He was unconscious and his hip was shattered within his muscular young body. But it wasn't this alone that completely changed the way Keelty lived.

Brian dug the boy out and laid him in the back of the ute, arriving back at the farm house with the horn bleating. Bea knew the sound. The urgency. The arrival of the unexpected was part of farm life. She looked at the boy in the ute and as she pressed her potato hands against the sand and grit of his overalls the boy shuddered and gasped.

"Well, he ain't bleedin' to death," she noted.

"So why's he out like a light?" Brian asked his wife. She had no formal medical training but she was a woman on a farm. Things of the body were her precinct. She pressed at the young Keelty's leg again, where it dipped in rather than out, looking exactly the opposite of how a hip should look.

"Looks like he's all busted up in there. Ya gotta get him to the Doc."

Brian looked at his wife, at the one-hour round trip into Willton that would slash the night's harvesting time, the further hours he must now waste looking for someone else to help drive the Harvester. He, himself, would do some of it but, as much as he was considering it, he knew he couldn't go twenty four hours a day. That's how accidents happened. He growled and looked at the boy.

"Now Brian, don't be like that. He din't mean to get himself crushed! Get him to the Doc. I'll call ahead now. And take it easy over the bumps."

"You can take him, can't you?"

"Brian," Bea sighed at her husband. "There are seven other blokes out there workin' and they need to eat real soon. You aren't gonna to feed 'em. So just get the boy to the doctor and get back here, then you can get back to your precious harvestin'."

Brian growled again and whistled for the dog to get out of the back of the ute.

"G'won. Get down boy, stop lickin' the poor kid."

The taste of summer air flung the boy's hair about as the ambulance carried him from the vast, dry soil to the dry, concrete air of the city. He never opened his eyes and his shallow breathing barely registered. The driver had the window down with a tanned arm hanging outside as he tore miles off the land. The night was dark, deep, and filled with empty heat. The boy, trapped in the pain of his broken body, on a gurney in the back of the station wagon, offered no interruption as the ambulance fled. Occasionally the driver would fire up another cigarette, the exhaled smoke curling over his shoulder and teasing the damaged body in the back. The man was careful to use the ashtray, never flinging the useless butt onto the road side. Even he, a city dweller, knew about bushfire season.

The young Keelty was in the little hospital room for a month, the sounds of ambulances and busy city life constantly pressing their faces against the window. This is not what changed Keelty forever though. That, on the bed-side cupboard, is part of what changed the young Keelty forever. The radio. A radio in his room! His own radio! *He* chose what he wanted to listen to. No one else. The room was daubed with soiled yellow paint the colour of post-harvest stubble and the bed was made of iron painted again and again, over dozens of years, to leave a thick white coating, like candy. It seemed almost edible. The Beatles crawled from the little black radio by his bed. He'd never really listened to them before, but now, pinned in his bed by his shattered bones, waiting for them to heal, he had nothing else to do. He had heard them before. Other boys had radios in their cars, a radio in Beakman's shop back in Willton. Some people even took portable radios to the beach. There young Keelty would hear music, a background like waves or the passing singing of wind through the road-side markers. Like bird song. Just a thing, not a special thing. But now the amazing radio, his radio, sang to him like a lover. Personal, intimate. His own.

Not like at home. In the wood and bleach kitchen, his mother made the radio speak of weather before shutting it down. His father had a radio in his truck. It only ever played cricket. Or football. When he borrowed the family car he was forbidden from changing the station. Not that there was a lot of choice. The ABC with its words and

reports, its rural updates of weather patterns and wheat prices. There was a little commercial station now and that was where the music came from. But not for Keelty. He had never been given the choice. He had never had a radio of his own.
He had also never stolen anything before, but after a month of lying on the hard, card sheets, the daily attempts to walk and bend, the hours of joyous listening, the doctor decided that Keelty could go and finish healing on his own. His father arrived in the truck, cursing the time this unscheduled trip to the city was costing, and collected his son. Keelty didn't even think twice as he unplugged the radio and slid it into the little brown vinyl suitcase. It was like he had already decided to take it before he thought about it, like there wasn't even a moment of questioning, just straight on to doing.

"You won't get no 'ousework outta me," his mother growled, knuckled fists on her green, floral hips.

"I don't want yer 'ousework," the young Keelty spat. "I wanna be in me own place. Me own space. Outta here!"

"You's an ungrateful little scab int ya. Ya too big for yer own name int ya?"

"So you'd be 'appy to see me gone!"

"You's me boy. Bad as you can git. If I ain't lookin' after ya, yer jus as likely ta ferget ta eat or fall outta yer bed and snap your neck. Ya in't old enough ta live by yerself."

"I'm tweny three!"

"And you's a bloody cripple."

"I can walk fine Mum, an' it's getting better. I 'ardly needs me sticks."
His mother shook her head and turned her massive hips to lumber back to her kitchen. She muttered as she went:

"You's a fool boy. You changed. This ain't like you."
And she was right of course. Mothers often are. The Young Keelty had changed. He was like a different man. For a start he was like a man. A man with a radio. A radio his mother must never find out about.

"Where'd ya get it?" She would ask, wheedling. Her fat eyes would sharpen at him, stab into his face.

He would try to lie and that wouldn't end well and the truth would come out and if the truth will set you free, this one would simply entangle him more. The radio sat in his bedroom, in the ancient wooden cupboard with the recent padlock, beside the sagging single bed. Like a dirty secret, as one might have pornographic magazines or a stash of illicit liquor, hidden the way his father did, in the back of the old drill press in his workshop. Since leaving the hospital in the city two months ago he had not once dared listen to his radio. Someone might hear. Every night he would wedge his door shut with the old wooden chair and take it out. Just to look at it. Just to know it was there. To know that there was something he could do if he chose to. But no one must know it was there. And so his radio, his precious radio, was driving him out of his childhood home. Out of his childhood.

Young Keelty's old man helped him move out. Two cardboard boxes, dull black stencils had marked them as once housing 'Shell Diesel Oil 10x2 litres.' The old man's ute was unique in Willton, like every other car. Twelve years ago, heading back from out toward the ridges, the exhaust system had fallen off. Not a problem really but, as luck would have it, as he unbolted the last torn end from beneath the car, an Aboriginal bloke had stopped and stood looking down at the scarred knees of the older Keelty.

"Whatcha doin?"

"Huh?" Keelty dragged himself out from under the battlefront damage of the ute and squinted up at the Aboriginal man. "G'day. The 'saust system fell off. Piece a crap."

"Oh, right." The little Aboriginal man was comfortable in a red flannelette shirt and a beard made from steel wool and dignity. He nudged a toe against the rusted entrails of the ute, lying in the roadside dust. "'zat a bad thing?"

"Nar, not really. I'll get 'ome aright."

The two men looked at the torn guts of the car. The black man tipped the pocked muffler with his bare foot again. Keelty's father knew he wasn't one of the locals, most of whom were now chained to park benches in the city. This bloke was a wanderer, following the veins and capillaries of the land with a handful of knowing and the long didgeridoo strapped to his back. Keelty nodded at the instrument.

"You play?"

"Play what?"

"The didge."

"Oh, right, Yair. Nar. Nar. Got it from a bloke in Tennant, makes 'em for the tourists. I cured his baldness, he gimme the didge."

"You cured his baldness?" Keelty's father scratched at his own thick nest of hair. It felt like the inside of a vacuum cleaner bag. "How'd you do that?"
The black fella looked about, breathed in the dry heat with his eyes.

"Pretty simple, baldness. Just gotta remind his head what it's meant to do."

"And how'd ya do that."

"Ah," the little man said from within his beard, "that's the magic."

Now Keelty's father slings his son's two boxes into the back of the ancient ute. Young Keelty's clothes are in them. A couple of plates and a bowl. Two knives and two forks that don't match, making them too untidy for his mother's kitchen drawer. A frying pan and a kettle that may last another two months. Possibly three.

"Just enough to get ya started," his mother preached. "You wanna go, you get your own stuff."
His father had managed to get his son's sagging old single bed and mattress out to the ute before his wife knew what he was doing, so his son would have somewhere to lay his newly independent head.

"Don't take it so personal," her husband told her. "The boy's lookin' to grow up. He's leavin' 'ome, 'es not runnin' away from you."

Angsty, hormonal waves have thundered with their heads down, across the deep cold ocean, all the way from the Antarctic waste. Like anyone after a long journey, the waves are grumpy and short tempered when they arrive at the coast near Willton. For centuries of generations these waves have crashed against the rocks at the headland that forms the end of *The Shells*, a solid barrier of tumbled granite that demarcates the end of the long silky stretch of silvered sand. Every minute of every day, day and night, again and again, remorselessly, relentlessly, these waves have travelled thousands of miles, millions upon millions of waves over the centuries. They have all, without exception, smashed themselves against the granite rocks. And nothing has changed. The incremental change has been so minimal, even the sea has not really noticed. The granite rocks, massive boulders, have stood firm with

no effort. The sea has wasted its energy. Wasted itself, to no effect. So, about a hundred or so years ago, the waves quit. They just gave up. The rolling waves no longer thundered like head-rush steam engines to explode in spume and spray upon the insufferable rocks. The waves simply relinquish their energy now, just idling, flattening themselves as they near the coast line and finally just rolling slowly to the foot of the granite headland where they barely even lap at the monumental granite face. Even in a seafarer's storm, where the wind tears at the world and hurls huge handfuls of energy at the sky, sea and land, even then, the waves turn away from the granite headland. The faceless power of the staunch, timeless rock is such that the waves now, forever, show it nothing but disdain. The waves will no longer be defeated by the mass of rock because the waves no longer play that game, not on the shore near the little town of Willton. To walk from this tumble of mindless rocks for a minute or two, will lead one into the scrappy dunes that dance constantly, changing day by day, their shape whipped about like ballroom silk by the teasing wind. Here amongst the shifting sands is the bone grey shack where Old Man Keelty now lives. The ordinary boy of black and white photos who became the lonely old hermit of whispered fear.

It was the radio that separated him from everyone. That's how he saw it. That's how he chose to see it. He loved the radio. He didn't love other people. The choice was simple. A week after moving into the old shearer's shack on Hughes Street, he was forced to decide.

The radio was in his bedroom, on a cardboard box beside his bed, at his ear the way it had been in the hospital he stole it from. It talked to him at night and woke him in the morning, a Bakelite lover who whispered sweet nothings, elicit, sending him out into the fields of work each day.

There was a knock at the door.

"Hello! Boy, let me in."

His mother had been eating vinegar and glass, he could hear it in her voice, it brought a cringe to his face even as he jolted upright in the sagging little bed.

"What?! Hang on Mum."

His lover talked to him, his shame, whispering of rainfalls and runs scored, his warm lust.

"Come on Boy, open up, it's yer mother."

But he didn't want to open up. To let acid and sharp hurt into this womb of enfolding safety. His lover was here. But his mother was also here. The two must never meet. Like trains rushing at each other, the only possible outcome was a terrifying wreck.

"Mum," he raises his voice. "Go away."

Silence.

"What did you say!?"

"Go… go away. I'm. Busy."

Silence. The silence of something that was very, very obvious being turned up and over so it is no longer recognisable as itself.

"I..." His mother gasped and in that gasp he heard a glacier sliding across the mouth of a deep and ancient cave. He heard the sun become obscured by the earth. He heard her feet shuffle away in the ancient grit and gravel of his door step, leaving him alone with his illicit, stolen lover. As he would always be.

And so, he made his greatest mistake. Maybe it was living so completely alone. Maybe it was the sting and click of his wrenched hip. Perhaps it was the green mould in the spit flecked bathroom mirror, peeling silver within the gritty glass. Whatever it was, it was all piled on top of the grainy, soiled feeling of being older. In the night, guilt stole in and sandpapered his face, gouging it with talons. All night this wind blew in his face. By day, the harsh light of unfiltered shame would sear him. Young Keelty was looking old. That afternoon, he stopped at Beakman's shop and slid and clipped his crackling hip joints along the fluro-lit aisles, past the candy coated packaging and showground cans. Past the nappies and tampons, the Anzac-day brand condoms, '*Lest we beget*', past the little clutter of toothbrushes and the clutch of colour coded gargles. He found the cream. He wasn't looking for it. It was just 'there'. '*Young Again'* the box shouted. *'Your Skin. Your Youth'* it cooed. $25 it cost. There was no way he could afford that, not on a farm hands slowly leaking wage. So he stole it. '*Amber's Night Cream*.' But this wasn't the mistake that finally altered his life.

At home again, in his closed up little box, he locked the cardboard front door and stood in front of the pocked mirror. He dug stubby farm fingers into the rich fatty cream and smeared it on his face, the white paste cool and heavy on his cheeks, smeared about his dragging eyes.

Nothing happened.

He scooped another dollop and, grinding it now, like a pestle, he squeezed the night cream into his guilt filled pores, crammed the chemicals through his tortured skin. And nothing changed.

He looked closer. The skin around his eyes was soaked now, sagging. Wet. But still inexorably aged. The weary eyes of a hound-dogs' great grandmother. He cursed at his horribly aged face and slapped more of the rich, powerful night cream onto his already soaked skin. He rubbed. He stretched, he pushed and ploughed. Yes. That was his mistake. After ten minutes the whole pot of virulent night cream was gone. The cream worked to move the night. Keelty leaned into the cratered face of the mirror and sighed.

Nothing had changed.

So he silenced the secret voice of his illicit radio, closed his watery eyes, and fell into another night of fruitless sleep.

The next morning, a stomping low-pressure cell sat above the land. Depressed rain, whimpery and thin, oozed from the low grey cloud. Keelty had lost what little work he had, he found he was being ejected from his little flat in the middle of Willton and he had lost the life he had known. It had oozed away whilst he slept, uninterrupted. For six months. He would not fall asleep for another one hundred and eighty days. His nights were now six months long. He moved away from the town, built his shack in the inhuman dunes. Far away from the town, far from people. Far from normal.

Something About Dogs

There is something, it seems, about Willton and dogs. The working dogs in their gossamer coats with their playground eyes and their military attention. The mongrel ferals that stalk the dunes and scrub land, barely able to keep their twisted skeletons within their skin. And, of course, the cloud dogs that run rarely. Dogs never come here as pets. They came as pests or labourers. Dogs in Willton are just like ideas. If they're not earning their keep, why the hell would you have them?

Gordo is explaining all this to his wife, Velda. She wants to keep the puppies alive. Three of them. Found amongst the harsh hessian sacks at the back of the old tractor shed.

"That bitch ain't been doing her bit for months. 'Least we knows why now. Thought a snake had got 'er, but it were prob'ly one a them ferals. Or one a Schneider's mongrels."

"Schneider's not so bad," his wife reasoned from within the bowl of peas she was disembowelling.

"Yair, but 'is dogs dunno their place. Always out and gettin' at the chooks an' that. They is badly controlled an' a danger to 'emselves and the rest of the bloody county!"

Velda popped a fat pea in her mouth, held it between his back teeth and squeezed gently until it burst under the ceaseless pressure.

"Bit like them daughters of his too eh?" And they both chuckled. Then they remembered that it was one of the Schneider girls who had been found scared to death in Johnson's paddock just two months ago. It was too soon. Even the air in the room feared they might mention the dogs that formed of mist and mythology, blending into shape whenever the night-time was perfect. Gordo changed the subject.

"Dogs is 'sential on a farm. I couldn't do without Zatso." He slurped at his cooling tea. "Yair, dogs is gotta be good, but. Or they's a useless waste a space. It's like kids right? If'n you don't need 'em, they's a waste of space. An' money." Gordo grunted as he slapped his empty tea cup on the tin sink and turned to face the plump quilted flowers of his wife. She stopped shucking, drew a deep breath and then dived back in to the large plastic bag of peas.

“So what’d you do with ‘em?” She asked.

“Shut the bloody shed, left the bitch in there with ‘em. Useless brood.”
Velda flinched. There was something essential about children that made a farm worthwhile. Gordo never seemed to understand that. This farm was devoid of children. It was a barren land. There were two dogs though. Zatso, the champagne coloured Blue Heeler was mostly Gordo’s dog. The bitch, Ergo, was primarily a house dog that kept Velda company and warned of snakes, visitors or impending loneliness. But Ergo had been out of sorts, resting, panting or just hanging about the sheds, refusing to work.

The dust from Gordo’s ute fell softly back to earth, like insects, displaced by his passing, now returning to their rightful place. Velda gave it a moment. Just to be sure. Then she lifted her hands from the bowl of torn pea husks, dried them on the ever-present apron, picked up the lime green plastic water jug from the table and pushed out of the flyscreen door. As it flapped shut behind her the sunlight slashed at her exposed forearms like broken glass. She dropped her head, ashamed of the brightness, and headed straight toward the old tractor shed. The handle was hot but not burning and the effort it took to drag the door across was sufficient to distract her from thinking about how she was deliberately disobeying, no, betraying her husband. But she was doing what was right. Looking around inside the tomb gloom of the shed, it took her a minute to find an empty tin. It was big, her hand just able to hold it. An old dog food tin. She grinned. The air within the shed held its breath inside dry, cracked lungs and refused to budge. An uncomfortable, clinging body heat. It smelled of old diesel and things rotting away, the smell of time that sat down here decades ago and just died. When Velda’s eyes got comfortable with the inside of the old shed, she was able to see the dog on its thrown down bed of crumbling hessian sacks. Gordo had been right. Poor Ergo. Their bluey. Her Bluey. The dog’s breath came like tiny punches to her chest.

“Oh you poor baby.”
Ergo whimpered, opened one eye like wet concrete. It rolled a moment before finding Velda.

“No. No, stay still girl. You rest.”

Velda dribbled water from the jug onto the gasping mouth of the dog, eliciting a pitch of moan that made the old shed want to weep. Velda lifted the blue heelers head a little and tipped more water into her mouth.

"You poor Mumma. Where are your babies?"

Velda looked about where Ergo lay. The dirt about her, around her own feet. Nothing. Velda stood the tin on the ground and poured water into it from the lime green Décor jug. Ergo trembled at the sound of cool, splashing water and tried to rise. She collapsed amidst a weak shriek of surrender. Velda knelt to lift the haunted mother and saw, as if following closely behind her, the back half of a puppy. Ergo had been too weak to fully expel the little body. It had died. Half in the world, half in its mother, a dog that never really came to be. The body was hard and dry. Ants were feasting on it, a barely perceived coat of dark, shifting on the corpse. Velda knew that, within the mother, the un-expelled placenta would be turning rancid and infected. A hessian sack turned to sand as she grasped it so instead Velda untied the apron at her waist, shuffled in the dust to kneel beside the dog and, trying not to breathe in the stink of decay, she wrapped her hands in the pale blue flowers and pulled the dead puppy from the mother. It took two hard tugs then the corpse came out smoothly, accompanied by a wrenching wail from Ergo and a splatter of stinking fluid, knotted with black lumps.

Velda crawled away gagging. She was a country woman, things like this didn't bother her. But sometimes things just got to her.

Ergo stood like weak grass and lapped water from the big tin. In a moment, three tiny puppies appeared at the tin too, playfully nudging each other. A black and tan one, a toffee one and the third so black, at first it was just shadow. Appeared? Velda blinked. A trick of the darkness no doubt. But the puppies had just… appeared.

"Weird, the tricks an old girl's eyes'll play."

And she emptied the last of the water into the rusty old tin from the lime green plastic jug.

Any other time, perhaps Velda would have noticed Gordo's distraction and been more concerned. But now her own distraction was such that she barely noticed his distractedness or, when she did, treated it as a blessing, freeing her to follow her own secret passion. Perhaps if two large logs floated side by side down a wide and

sluggish river, they would simply take for granted that their shoulders were forever touching. And then, perhaps the river may turn a little more rapid and under its influence these two big logs pulled away from each other and started to spin erratically and ominously. As long as they didn't actually bash into each other or run aground, perhaps these two logs, now hurtling through unchartered rapids, may find their path much more invigorating and not even notice that they are no longer shoulder to shoulder with the other. Velda and Gordo had, perhaps, reached such a river passage.

The puppies would now be a couple of weeks old and Velda, as she did every morning, waited for Gordo to vanish into the shed with his welding rig, or fly into town in search of things. When Gordo and Zatso are absent, she pulls the old tractor shed open and her children come to her. She allows them out and they roam the yard. Today there is just the one puppy, standing by the door as she opens it. She looks down and can't recognise which one it is in the gloom. In moments a chemical reaction seems to occur, or the splitting of an amoeba. The puppy steps away from itself and then, as Velda frowns, steps away again with a soft pop sound and there are her three babies. Ergo, their mother, trots up from her safe nest and nuzzles Velda's hand as Velda tries to understand how she just saw her three puppies come from one. In a flash the dark tan, the toffee and the blue-black fur bound past her in a yelping cloud of happy tails and paws too big for their feet and the puppies are off. The two women watch them go. Velda looks down at Ergo who looks up at her, and they both seem to be thinking the same thing:

"Kids eh?!"

Gordo was welding long into the night. He is making a tower of some sort and, like a dog gone feral, this idea of his is scaring her. In the compressed warm darkness of their little bedroom, the sounds of his labour dart across the dry yard, jump through the window and bite her ears before scampering away again. And then she is inside herself. In her dream she is climbing a mountain. She is aware it is a dream. She has never even seen a mountain in real life, now her sturdy feet are treading over loose rock and sticks. Ahead she sees the top of the mountain, now her feet, now the top of the mountain. The mountain has changed, become higher. Again. In her dream heart she knows she will never reach the top of this mountain, that it will always be

moving higher faster than she is. The mountain moves beneath her feet. Unstable. She is aware of the smell of sweat and burned ozone. She rises to the surface of her dream and is aware that Gordo is in the bed with her. She is also aware that she is very anxious. She tries to dive back into sleep but prickles and hardness drive her to wakefulness. Her chest fills with the drowning weight of unnamed fear. Her eyes drift open and she is awake. And terrified. Again. And she doesn't know why.

"Ah, bugger." She mutters.

Finally dawn has rescued her and she is washed clean by the thought of her puppies. Today, Velda can no longer hide from the truth. She loves her children. But she also knows they aren't her children. They are dogs. But for Velda, that will do. It is enough. It must be enough. They are her children. Now, she rarely sees Gordo, so they are hers and hers alone. Gordo is so absorbed in Gordo world. Velda has everything she ever wanted. But today she finally accepts the truth. She knows it is no longer a trick of the light. Gordo has been disappointingly present around the sheds the last few days, doing Velda knows not what, something to do with the old rain water tanks. This morning he had come into the kitchen lugging his favourite armchair and chuckling to himself about comfort and acceleration. This should have concerned Velda. It didn't. She was more concerned that Zatso, the light tan bluey that was always at Gordo's heels, must sometime soon be drawn to the happy yelps and puppy-cheer sounds that would often bounce out of the old tractor shed. Even Gordo had noticed.

"You hear that Vel?" He had said one morning over the breakfast table. "Sounds like dogs or summit."

"Pigeons," she said and nonchalantly bit into the fat black bread she had doused in jam.

"What? Pigeons? They don't sound like that."

"Oh yair Gord, always do. All day."

Gordo listened to the distant sounds, bent out of shape by his wife's explanation.

"Huh."

But Zatso seemed to be actively staying away from the old tractor shed. On the rare occasions this week when Gordo would pass it on his way to the big shed where he was doing whatever it is he's doing, Zatso would actually move away from Gordo's

heels to avoid walking too close to the old tractor shed. Velda had watched this from her kitchen window and it had made her head tilt to one side and say;

"Huh."

But now she understood.

Gordo and Zatso had both bounded into the ute with puppy enthusiasm.

"Gettin' some solderline…" His voice had been thrown out of the ute like an empty beer can as he scattered gravel behind the ute. Quickly Velda threw aside the scissors she had been sharpening, grabbed a bag of dry dog food from the pantry and strode out to the shed to be with her family. Velda heaved the door open. And there they were. Ergo sat upon her proud healthy haunches watching three rabbits.

"Hello my little… what the hell?!"

The bunnies had been rolling about and now sat, as if in headlights, blinking in the morning sun bathing them. Ergo gave a cheery bark. The rabbits, spell broken, began running about each other, not trying to achieve anything, more as if they were just enjoying running. Just excited about being bunnies. There was a dark tan rabbit, a toffee coloured one and a rabbit so black it was blue black. Their big floppy ears bounded about their heads and little yelps filled the shed, squeaks and gurgles of pure joy. The bag slipped from Velda's hands spilling dry dog food on the ground. The rabbits stopped dead. Stared up at Velda. At the food. Then at their mother. The three rabbits slipped inside their skins and, as they bounded across the dusty shed floor, became three very ordinary Blue Heeler puppies. They fell upon the dry food like a cuddly locust plague. A single bark rang out, startling the rafters of the old tractor shed and the three puppies froze. Ergo padded softly over to the pile of food at Velda's feet and began to delicately eat. The three puppies watched her and then began to crunch away, now more like a gentle breeze than the whirling maelstrom of before.

With a sigh, a grin every mother one day must wear, Velda realised she could no longer excuse her children as a trick of the light. These puppies were not as she had previously decided they were. She crouched down and tickled blue-black fur, rubbed the toffee head, ruffled the dark tan flank and finally ran a hand along the powerful, majestic flanks of Ergo.

"Well, I guess that's that. We're a weird pack."