

CREATIVE WORK:

LACEPEDE

VOL. 1

EXEGESIS:

DESIRING NATURE: FEMININITY, TRAUMA AND
DESIRE ON THE COORONG

VOL. 2

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

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March 2014

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ABSTRACT

The exegesis and the creative work are complementary forms of a poetic inquiry into gendered engagements with the Coorong's landscape, ecosystem and human history. Through a framework informed by post-colonial theory, psychoanalysis and French feminist philosophy, the exegesis explores why the traditional conflation of nature and femininity has so often been occasioned by silence and as an unrepresentable space of absence in western writing and discourse. In both components of the thesis, the exploration of female subjectivity and alternative ways of connecting to place are rooted within the local details of the Coorong estuary as the grounds to particularising the aesthetic, ethical and political engagements at stake for this fragile ecosystem. This has required an examination of the ways in which dualist logic has shaped western culture, language, subjectivity and knowledge and, more specifically, how this dualistic conceptual ordering of the world has operated to negate a subjectivity and language specific to the feminine. The exegesis then turns to two male-authored texts which have deeply influenced mainstream representations of the Coorong and discourses of human engagement with its landscapes to identify the operations of masculine desire. Analysis and psychoanalytic interpretations of these texts are then contrasted with a discussion of the creative work's exploration of female desire, subjectivity, trauma and the aesthetics of a feminine engagement with nature. These ideas culminate with an exploration of the possibilities of a female sublime. Overall, the idea of a feminine aesthetic is an experimental one that engages with poetic language, narrative forms and psychoanalytic theory to re-imagine the conceptual framework that shapes subjectivity.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their invaluable guidance and support, for their engaged commitment to my project, and for the wealth of insight they have provided which has contributed to my development as a literary writer, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Eva Hornung and Dr Dianne Schwerdt.

Others who contributed significantly to helping me write and complete this thesis, in the way of long informal discussion of ideas, the reading of manuscripts and providing constructive criticism and moral support include Jan and Richard Love, the late Ngarrindjeri elders Uncle Neville Gollan and Uncle Matt Rigney, Vesper Tjukonai, Shane Crilly and Heather Stuart.

VOLUME 1: CREATIVE WORK

LACEPEDE

Geraldine Love

Because we are still half-fish and half-birds. Not yet women, born women (or men for that matter). Not yet human and divine.

LUCE IRIGARAY: *Divine Women* (1986)

When we turned, looking for Eurydice, we thought perhaps we could know she was there by seeing, and so we thought that looking would be a way of knowing and capturing. But it turned out that she was uncapturable in this way, and that, in general, she is uncapturable, that capture will not be the way in which we might experience her.

JUDITH BUTLER: "Bracha's Eurydice" (2006)

human remains

The island defied language. If Helen tried to speak beyond the shelter of the field hut or the transportable buildings that made up the station on the isthmus, the wind would enter her mouth like a hard kiss, leaving an ache and the taste of seawater in the back of her throat.

With each journey south across the Southern Ocean, Helen sensed a shift in time. The nights of watery darkness were her passage into prehistory. The flora was primeval, the diversity limited. Not a single tree or woody shrub softened the harshness. Long tussock grass dominated the slopes beneath the escarpment. The ancestral daisy *Pleurophyllum hookeri* and the geranium-like Macquarie Island cabbage flourished in herbfields that blanketed the valleys and the more sheltered coastal slopes. The feldmarks of the plateau were wastelands of black gravel, basalt outcrops and cushion moss.

It was a kind of netherworld: ocean-bound, fog-bound, storm-bound.

In December the elephant seals came ashore for the moult, drowsing on the beaches and in the coves and some lumbering up into the grassy folds of the slopes. Royal penguins came skittering out of the waves in their hundreds of thousands, their colonies covering every clear inch of ground over the lower regions of the islands. Skuas circled above, always watching for an easy kill amid the penguins or a sickly seal that had strayed away to die alone.

On her first Christmas morning on the island, Helen walked out onto the hard frozen beach of Hurd Point. The seal cows slumbered on thick beds of kelp, surrounded by the rabble of the penguin rookery. Their gold brown fur was peeling away to reveal the new silver hide beneath.

Helen came to a standstill when a cow held her with her large liquid-black eyes. All knowledge of herself fell away – there was a sense of relief in being something uncomprehended, a stranger, the unknown.

Seal-mother, Helen thought, *I'm living in the prehistory of the seal-people. In the dark barren land of myth.*

Helen was sick of Latin, her profession's tongue. She wanted to speak the seal-mother's tongue: the minor-keyed music of a language that had emerged from the frozen ground and sparse poetry of this island. Surrounded by the birds and the seals and the wind, she could hear the ghost of a language: guttural and raw sounds, words formed out of the ancestral echoes of barking snarls and rumbling sighs, words that had coalesced around the lilt of bird calls, perfected imitations that had flowed into human speech.

Helen longed for the words of this unborn language that would capture the nuances of the island's narrow palette of colours of greens, blues and greys, the shifts of pelagic light, the different moods of the wind, the distinct forms of violence inherent to the different kinds of storms. She longed for speech that could touch upon the arcane soul of the island and could weave her body and soul into the cold hard world of rock, grass and sea.

Unconsciously at first, Helen began to strip down her language. She forgot the abstract elegance of the scientific lexicon she had loved in her first years of university, loved so much that she had taken on Latin as an extra subject. But after five years on the island, hers was the lexicon of a minimalist. The few words left were brushstrokes of dim sunlight, grey mists, windswept plateaus, pale grey basalt, oily black kelp, the dark pagan green of wet tussock grass and moss. She preferred the hard, often monosyllabic nouns, Germanic in origin. Tarn. Shingle. Sleet. Squall. Fernbrake.

The Norwegian meteorologist at the Isthmus gave her the word *trolsk*. Troll-like – used to describe a quality of darkness, as much an inner-darkness as it was the Nordic winter twilight.

One morning she was drawn to a small huddle of expeditioners standing on the flat beach of the isthmus, straining to see into the mist. Against the grey sea a giant iceberg

became visible. Helen was mesmerised. The gasps and murmurings of the others faded out around her.

Up until that moment, icebergs were a thing of cartoons and school lessons and tragic Atlantic legends, never truly existing for her throughout her dry and sun-bleached childhood. She felt all her childhood knowledge of icebergs suddenly rendered irrelevant; even the word itself had no affinity for the stark ethereal beauty of this thing.

The glaciologist was explaining the iceberg's tabular shape: it had been calved recently. *Calved*. She found herself recalling the word for days as a silent herd of icebergs drifted past the island, disappearing northward on their strange and most haunting migration.

Another morning, when she looked down on the hoar-frosted beach from her hut, she whispered *pakane*. Her breath frosted in the air, the word signifying itself. Frost. It was from one of her 'Baltic memories' – the name she had given to memories that eluded her if she tried to call them up but glowed dim like snow on a lightless night when her mind was elsewhere.

Eventually she noticed she had turned to the languages of the Boreal, the Arctic, the North Pole, to translate her own unfathomed, unknown South. To piece together a language that could take her back to beginnings.

Helen dreamed that there was a goddess in the ocean who stalked the edges of the island. She was unnameable, her presence defied personification. She was tidal, precipitous, meteorological, and more than all these things. Helen was struggling to cling onto a ledge on the side of a rock stack as the ocean strained to pull her down into gathering vortex. She woke with the knowledge that one could live too close, too dangerously close, to a deity. She risked succumbing to a multitude of madnesses.

The ocean was a steel grey. Helen reached the southern slope of Petrel Peak at sunrise after walking two hours in the dark. It was deep winter and she had only a few hours of daylight to fix trackers to the albatross chicks. They peered up at her with bright black eyes,

undaunted by the storms that were lashing the island day after day. A chick close to fledging began to groom her wind-blown hair while she fumbled with the tracker. Her hands had gone stiff and inflexible. She could feel the cold in her two missing fingers the same as she felt it in the living flesh of what remained of her right hand. She slipped on another pair of thick woollen gloves over her tailor-made pair.

She was fixing her last tracker when she felt an earth tremor beneath her. Skuas lifted away from the slope and hung on the air, spooked by the disturbance. Helen felt herself slipping and braced her feet against the base of a large tussock clump and waited for the tremor to pass. Down below, waves were breaking against the rocks. Higher up the peak, a black-browed albatross had returned long enough to feed its chick and was now taking to the sky again, heading for the black storm front coming towards the island.

As Helen climbed the slope a guttural cry from above stopped her in shock. A sound she knew like a mother's voice.

She looked up and saw nothing but the thick lenticular cloud above her. She stood still, waiting for the sound again or for the bird to appear below the cloud. A white-faced heron.

She dismissed the thought but couldn't stop herself glancing up again and again towards the cloud above. There was only one reported sighting of a vagrant heron on the island, thirty years ago. There had been some massive south-easterlies this winter, stronger than usual. A bird could get snared on that sort of wind.

She stared down the steep drop of the escarpment to the waves smashing against the rock stacks. Her face was cold and wet; drops of freezing water trickled down her neck. A light rain had started to fall from the cloud above her.

Helen felt then as though she was seeing the island through a second set of eyes. The sun had broken through and struck the black clouds with a shaft of brilliant light. The ocean heaved and swelled below her, waves collapsed as violent surges of water pushed through from beneath, crashing against the rocks and arcing into great wings of white wash and

spray. The crash of each wave pushed a rush of freezing wet air surging up the slopes, billowing through the long thick grass that surrounded her. How had she come to be perched on the very edge of the world?

In a slow blink she saw something else, as she would have seen it had she had closed her eyes to the bright sunlight to see its dark negative: a line of sandhills. The image was evanescent.

Lacepede.

Where the croaks and cries of herons and egrets had been as familiar to her as the slow burr of her grandfather's voice.

She shoved the thought back down into the deep black mud amongst the voracious crustaceans. Yet she waited and waited on the slopes. She neither saw nor heard the heron again.

Tam's skin had turned a waxy grey. The sound of his laboured breathing and the sickly smell of his body filled Vivi's every waking minute and her dreams. She slept in an armchair next to him and often woke through the night, her joints stiff from the cold when the blankets slid down to her feet.

She wished he would hurry and die. She had contemplated easing him gently into death, had gone so far as to go next door and ask Galway, their Aboriginal neighbour, about poisonous plants in the woodlands. Galway had turned his head slowly from the window to her face and she had felt the blush spread down, like prickly heat, to her shoulders. He could see through her; she felt she must be as limpid as the green Coorong after a windless day.

His grey-sea eyes were stern. *I didn't hear you ask me that.*

It was not spitefulness on her part. Tam was deeply affronted by his cancer's lack of decorum and he refused to die anywhere but in the privacy of his shack. It was his last shred of dignity. But all thoughts of a dignified death had long since left him. He had strayed off into the dark water of memories.

Vivi woke sometimes to the sound of his voice, strangled with pain. His eyes would be open but unfocussed, once a dark blue, now a bleached grey. She would lean down close and listen, watching the words form on his lips. He was not talking to Vivi, but to someone else. The room had come to feel inhabited by a third presence. Someone who stayed against the far wall, no more than an indistinct shadow. Occasionally, Vivi looked up from her book with the strange feeling that someone had, only a second ago, left the room, the air still eddying from the swish of a long skirt.

The tide, Eliina...it's turning.

The words pulled her down close to the decaying stink on his breath. She had heard this phrase several times over the last week. His eyes were open but his stare slid past her cheek to the shadow against the wall. His words were winking lights that she followed again and again out into the fog-bound sea of his mind.

Oh Eliina, we were liquid beings, our bodies living in the time of the tides. I taught you how to feel the turn of the tide – a pull on the blood and then that sudden slackness.

You told me our bodies, alive, were marshlands, our true natures hidden water that rose and fell with each move we made. You emanated peril. It shone through your skin like soft light.

I was like a marsh tree, rooted in liquid earth. Love, a quaking mire.

Õrn sõnad vägivaldsete inimestele.

The sea mouth used to whisper when the tide turned. And then, a sigh. I knew this sound. I have gone down to the sea mouth at night just to listen for it. It was the same sigh as yours, your sigh in my ear as I pulled out of you.

Then the tide ebbs, drawing the Coorong out into the sea – a gush of warm fertile fluids disseminated into the wild surf.

I always warned you to be careful in those kinds of places, Eliina, at such moments. When time slackens by the sea mouth, our deepest beings escape through the slack and wing away into the dark.

Mulloway are on the move. They wait for the slug of Coorong water as it flows out into the surf, carrying the scent of kongoli amassing in the shallows inside. I once hooked a huge sea-cow. But when I touched her I was overcome by a strange urge to let her go. She was heavy with eggs, ready to spawn, but there was something more to her than this. The longer I looked at her lying on the sand, luminous in the moonlight, the more the night pressed in on me. I was spooked. I had drawn unseen eyes upon me; the dunes were alive

with them. I knew then: this sea-cow was an ancestor, a keeper of her species. I slipped her back into the water and watched as the pale ghost of her body disappeared into the black water.

And the ghost of another appeared. You were standing on the spit of sand where the sea mouth curved away into the Coorong. You were darker than the night, your hair a black shadow streaming behind you in the breeze. As I walked towards you, you receded further and further away until I reached the place where you had stood and found there was no trace of you.

When the tide slackens, the past backwashes into the present.

Vivi snapped awake and felt the book slide from her lap. The phone was ringing. She nestled back into the armchair and closed her eyes against the sound. *It will stop in a moment.* It kept ringing, echoing shrill through the shack, making the small rooms seem large and cavernous. She glanced at the window. Outside, the morning sky was dark and overcast. *Brontë weather*, she thought to herself. The Coorong was a sombre iron grey; the sand-dunes beyond appeared immaterial through the falling drizzle. She remembered that the phone was an ancient model with no answering service; it was going to keep ringing.

She got up and went into the narrow hallway to where the phone sat on a small stand. The voice was unfamiliar, a man's voice, calling from Hobart, he said.

Vivi could not follow him, her mind still sluggish with sleep. He was calling from the head office. She asked him to start again.

'I'm calling from the ANARE headquarters in Hobart,' he said, listening to her confused silence. He spelt it out, 'The Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions.'

Vivi took the words in slowly, 'Antarctica?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Why on earth are you ringing me?'

The man gave a little laugh, 'We were contacted by the Red Cross; you asked them if they could locate a woman, a...Helen McCodrum?'

Vivi felt cold and naked all of sudden, her skin like wet silk caught in a gust of wind. Her bare feet and hands were already numb.

'Alive?' she whispered, for the air around her felt too fragile to withstand the question. Instantly she felt stupid; what had compelled her to ask such a question?

'Of course, she's alive.'

Vivi leaned against the wall. For a year she had been searching for Helen. She had spent hours in the local library, her only access to the internet, skimming through every H. McCodrum in the Google searches. One H. McCodrum was the author of a paper in an online journal, charting the decline of the Wandering Albatross; the voice had been so dry and dispassionate, masculine even, that Vivi had tossed it aside, thinking, *probably a Harold, or a Herbert*. She worked her way through phone numbers listed under H. McCodrum until it dawned on her that Helen might have married and changed her name. The thought that Helen might have died had never crossed her mind until just then.

Tam refused to be of any help, declaring that he had no maudlin dying wishes regarding that girl. Vivi tried in vain to reason with him – shouldn't Helen know she was about to lose the last of her family? She had pleaded for a clue, anything that rang a bell?

A bell? Ringing? Well now, that's different.

Vivi had no idea what he meant but he had slowly lifted his arm to the window and pointed a long skeletal finger to the sand dunes and the black winter sky. *That way.*

'I can give you a number to ring,' said the man on the phone; 'It's a good connection to the island.'

'Island?'

'Yes...Macquarie Island, ma'am.'

She vaguely remembered some documentary she had watched years ago about the island. Thousands upon thousands of penguins and sea birds and seals. She was shaking her head to herself, of all the places...

She was writing the number down and reading it back to him when she arched her body back to glance into Tam's room. Her voice died. His eyes were open and his head slumped off the side of the pillow, facing the doorway where she stood. On his face was a queer avid expression, as though he was hanging on to every word. In the grey light, under the sound of rain pattering on the roof, the dark lines of pain around his eyes were gone, his laboured breathing was silent.

Vivi stood, awkward, under the narrow verandah, the rain falling in a sheet behind her while Galway took the news silently. Then she waited, wrapping the large woollen jumper tighter around her thin body.

'The ambulance hasn't come yet,' she mumbled, 'to take him away. It's the rigor mortis. I can't close his eyes. I don't want to go back in there.'

He heard the shy plea in her words and opened the door more widely for her to come in. She sat down at the table while Galway filled the kettle and set it to boil on the stove. He glanced at her; she stared, unseeing, out of the window into the rain, dark bags under her black eyes. Then she stretched her arms out onto the table, folded them into a pillow and lay her head down.

'They found Helen, the Red Cross, they found her,' she said, her voice muffled through a woollen sleeve.

Galway turned his back to her. He said nothing but waited for more, hardly daring to breathe. He reached for the smokes on the bench and saw the trembling in his hands.

'She went far, far away,' she said wearily, 'Into the world of birds. I missed her by one letter – H for Helen.'

He shifted on his feet when the silence started to draw out. He wished the rain would stop for a moment. When he turned around Vivi's head was still cradled in her arms, her breathing long and slow.

He put the mug of tea down by her head with a heavy clunk, hoping the sound would rouse her but Vivi didn't stir. He stepped away, feeling suddenly, unaccountably, trapped with this pale woman sleeping in his house, slumped over his kitchen table. He sat down opposite and watched her, unsure who was intruding more into whose privacy. She stretched an arm out and it lay across the expanse of the table, frozen in a statuesque gesture of appealing for rescue. It drove him to distraction.

The world of birds? He wanted to slap her awake, make her tell him more. It sounded like an eloquent reference to Helen's afterlife – did Vivi say that deliberately? She often spoke in strange little phrases that Galway found irritating. He stood up again, making the chair scrape against the floor. She went on sleeping. He went to the door and opened it but stayed at the threshold. He rarely ever stepped outside. He watched the rain sweeping across the flat promontory, the stunted bushes and long grass shivering with the wind.

On the other side of the small bay that crooked into the side of the promontory, Galway saw the dark-haired woman standing under the large gum tree that broke up the bareness of the paddock. She stood beside a large pile of broken limestone, watching his shack with an air of patient waiting while she picked off pieces of bark from the tree, the cold scud drenching through her thin pale slip and whisking over her bare arms and legs. Galway slammed the door on her and returned to sit at the table.

When Galway realised Helen had gone away, suddenly and with no goodbyes, he had felt intense relief. She had kindly spared him any sort of aftermath. And so had Tam, strangely enough. Tam couldn't live without that girl and Galway had driven her to run away. Galway knew he should have wondered more at Tam not coming for him – to tear him limb from limb. The most thought he gave the matter was to keep a handgun loaded.

And I'll shoot the cunt too, he always thought to himself when he handled the gun from time to time.

When Tam did finally come for him, in the dead of night, he came hobbling slowly down the passage, leaning against the wall after each step to catch his breath. He was clutching the doorframe, struggling to breathe with rotted lungs. He had come to make good on his threat to Helen that one day he would go over there and gut Galway like a fish. Not with a knife, in the end, but with words.

Vivi roused, groaning softly as she dragged her head up.

'God, I'm sorry,' she said quickly, realising his eyes were on her, 'I only meant to shut my eyes for a moment.' She tilted her head from one side to the other, relieving the stiffness in her neck.

'Is Helen okay?' Galway asked.

'I think so,' Vivi answered, 'She's down near Antarctica.'

'Antarctica?'

'Hmm,' Vivi reached for the mug of tea he had made for her. She took a sip and flinched; the tea had gone cold. 'I keep smelling ozone. And burning grass. Sometimes I can hear the grass burning; the sound – it's so gentle.' She looked fully at Galway, 'What do you make of it?'

Galway shrugged, 'I ain't no fuckin psychic.'

Vivi mumbled an apology, rose to her feet and left. Galway saw from the kitchen window that she didn't walk home; she was walking in the drizzle away from Lacedpede, following the edge of the promontory to the track that ran along the mainland shore. She drifted on into the paddock where the track disappeared into the sand and long dry grass. The woman was still there, by the tree. Galway saw her eyes follow Vivi as she walked past, Vivi's pace listless as though she still drifted through a dream of burning grass.

There was a descent.

The Coorong had been deep, deeper than Helen had ever known. With neither feet nor hands had she been able to find the bed of the estuary. Her last memory of the Coorong was the disappearing shoreline of the Hummocks, a white egret picking through the shallows, as the water closed over her.

She endured the slow agony of an army of tiny crabs picking her bones clean. She would not have been the first on the Coorong to be disposed of in such a way. The crabs, it was local knowledge, could be a neat accessory to murder. There was nothing left of her now but the tangle of bones and fishing net lodged in the deep mud of her Coorong bed, her remains preserved in this anaerobic silt.

She didn't mind being down there, didn't mind the dreamlessness, the plutonic pain.

There was another memory, more troubling than the first. She had slept by a fire afterwards, feverish with rage, while Galway kept watch. But she had no memory of Galway's shack from that night, though she had felt the storm lashing his shack, the rain thundering down on his tin roof. She had always suspected Galway was never who or what he appeared to be, with his silvered scars and his sea-green irises ringed in blue. He sat that night with the firelight wavering over his shadowed face and had seemed like some other, more occult being, as though firelight could reveal his true self.

Years later, she still couldn't distinguish the real from the hallucinated. She never went back to Lacedpede to piece together the wreckage of memories. She woke up in a windowless room in a city hospital. No one at the hospital seemed to know how she got to be there. Two police officers had been outside her room since the night before, waiting for

her to regain consciousness so they could question her on the nature of her injuries. Helen went silent. Revealed nothing, not even her name.

A chaplain spent the afternoon with her, speaking softly of how the nurses had spent half the night cutting and disentangling the fish nets from her limbs after the operation on her hand. They saw all the bruises. She still had a greenish-yellow tinge around her left eye; x-rays revealed old bone breakage and fractures, and fresh ones too. She had looked down at her hands in her lap; her right hand was heavily bandaged. Her grandfather's face flared through her mind like a flame catching fumes and she snapped her head up. The chaplain was watching, waiting to see if she might say something now. But if anything, the silence inside her had settled deeper. He resumed his soft monologue about abused women, their unknown capacities for survival, for resilience, the most powerful thing she could do was hold her abuser accountable and share her story.

Helen kept her gaze focused on the framed print on the wall opposite her. It was a photograph of a steep, green-cloaked escarpment that plunged down to a beach of black sand. In the foreground a pristine white albatross hung on the dark air. When she was discharged two weeks later, she was taken to a women's refuge, her identity still a mystery and her story, in her own mind, safely submerged under the sun-spangled surface of green water.

Heavy fog shrouded the beach and the rain pattered against the window. A rock stack loomed in the greyness, overgrown and shaggy with grass, like a ghostly mammoth on the beach. She stared at her reflection, hardly recognising herself in the glow from the kerosene lamp.

Tam is dead. Her breath misted from her mouth as she softly voiced the words. Her double stared back at her, unmoved. The lamp hissed and flickered, pulling her attention back to her field notes. As she touched pencil to paper, she sensed a shift in the approaching

storm. She looked out once more into the fog, listening now to the waves breaking against the offshore rock stacks, the rattle of the backwash as it clawed into the shingle beach.

Along the window ledge she had arranged her five pebbles. One for each of the years she had been on the island, polished to a brilliant black by the sea. Obsidian. The same liquid black as the eyes of the seal, the eyes of the albatross, the eyes of her stepmother – a woman she only vaguely remembered. Vivi had rarely crossed her mind and she only thought of her now because her name, curiously, had been mentioned with the radio message relayed from the Isthmus.

She drifted back to her reflection. She rarely studied any image of herself except, occasionally, her reflection on the tarns. She liked the aerial and transparent image of herself, her skin semi-luminous against the water that was heavy with minerals and little else.

She could return to Lacepede. The idea struck her as strange. Her banishment had been so violent, so absolute and final, that she had never considered she might go back. She shrugged off the thought. But the strangeness of it was already turning to something else – a vague feeling of longing, lengthening like an afternoon shadow.

Tell me a story, Seanáthair.

Strange accounts emerged in the days after the Lacepede bushfire.

As the fire raged into the night, a v-formation of pelicans descended into the inferno and lifted out a man scorched, body and soul, by fire and burning desire.

A lone gum tree in a paddock of dry grass blustered into flames. A body with its limbs falling away, crows rushed out of the broken knots like unfurling bolts of black silk.

The morning after, in that blackened paddock, through the falling ash and the lingering smoke, the ghostly forms of grey herons and white egrets were seen in their hundreds, picking over the marshy ground.

Those were the stories told and retold in the pub for years after, the sources long-forgotten. Tam only ever listened, staring deep into his glass of beer. Hours after the others had tired of them and conversations had moved on, Tam was still remembering.

All night he had stumbled in the dark along the edge of the Coorong, searching for his small granddaughter, the smoke stinging his eyes and throat. He never stopped to look at the magenta glow that suffused the night sky behind him.

He woke the next morning lying down on wet sand. It was early dawn. Smoke hung over the place, an acrid carbon stench as though the fire had burnt through the woodland and grass to something black and ancient in the earth. He sat up and saw ahead of him the sand dunes across the water. There was a wide gap between two sandhills through which he could see the surf. The sea-mouth. He was on a large flat sandbar island surrounded by water. Behind him was the wide flat beach of Hindmarsh Island, a line of distant shacks visible in the smoky haze.

Drifting away from him was a wooden boat. He began to shake. It was the *Moonbird*, his daughter's boat. For a brief moment he believed that the day before had

never happened. But the boat was empty, the oars flung out over the sides, rocking gently. He had just missed her, lifting off on long white wings.

He walked out into the water and moved up alongside the boat. Inside, he found his granddaughter asleep in the bottom, lying in the bilge water. With the rope he guided the boat over the water and up onto the sandbar. He lifted Helen out and sat down on dry sand with her cradled in his lap, her head against his chest. There was a gentle breeze pushing the smoke away inland.

He wished they could stay like this, slowly weathering to a pile of stones on this flat stretch of beach with only the sea birds and the sound of the ocean. He wanted to meld seamlessly into the landscape the way the old neglected gods had done all across his homeland. Wounded by their encroaching oblivion, they had slumped down to sleep and fused into the hillsides.

Tam had a scar down the inside length of his arm. It was from the war which he never talked about. Helen could tell from the way it had healed that the wound had been a gored mess of muscle and flesh. With his hard deep-sunk eyes, his aquiline nose and his smoky tobacco smell, the scar gave him a peculiar kind of magnetism among the sun-dried women, even the younger ones, who eyed him in the pub. As an adult, Helen recognised the same quality in some men – a sexual edginess that was hard to ignore, hard not to quicken to.

On occasions Tam would smuggle Helen into the pub when she was a child. She would watch, fascinated, at the levels of meaning that could be communicated through cigarettes: the deliberate way a woman would lift her faded eyes and lock into Tam's as he lit her fag, the way she could blow smoke towards her grandfather to brush against the side of his face or his neck. Tam would feign simplicity towards the nature of the women's attention to him, slowly turning his lit cigarette over and over in his fingers, the movement suggesting shyness.

Tam's aloof manner only added to his magnetism. He did not like small talk or mundane remarks about the weather; he did not go in for local gossip or the perpetual back-and-forth between fishermen about the going price for particular fish or the virtues and pitfalls of different makes of outboard motors. He spoke with a slow Scottish burr that made conversations difficult and directionless. In the smoky ambience of the pub, he would talk at length, slowly and without a clear trajectory but with catching sincerity. Helen remembered him one night describing to a heavy-lidded woman the formation of the Coorong, his words chosen with the precision of a geologist. Another night he described the primitive ancestors of the Murray cod with the vocabulary of a biologist. Perverse, she thought years later when she remembered those nights in the pub, you were being perverse.

In the fierce summer of Helen's tenth year, Tam took her with him on one of his nightly jaunts down to the sea mouth.

The heat of the day had been fierce: the harsh shimmer that radiated off the corrugated tin of the shack was so bright that the shack partially disappeared into its own liquid light.

Inside, the cutlery and crockery in the kitchen were warm to the touch, the air almost too hot to breathe in the small dark rooms. A bowl of unfinished weet-bix and milk filled the kitchen with a sour smell. Sluggish flies droned behind the drawn curtains as they baked in the heat that came off the glass.

It was late in the afternoon when Tam returned from the pub and found Helen lying stomach down on the tiles of the bathroom floor. She was naked except for underpants. Her head sideways, her eyes stared wide open at nothing. He sank heavily onto the floor next to her and laid his large callused hand on her hair. He closed his eyes and his breathing shuddered as he was swallowed up in the darkness of his own private well of angry grief.

They went to Goolwa first. Tam left Helen waiting in the boat pulled up at the wharf and returned twenty minutes later with a six pack of beer, a bottle of cold lemonade and two cornettos – one for her, one for him. It was mint and chocolate, Helen's favourite though she knew it was a lucky fluke that Tam had picked it out instead of something else. She tore the wrapping off and then caught herself in time: ice cream was such a rare event, she had to make it last. She licked out narrow grooves of cream with the tip of her tongue, savouring a little at a time, until Tam ordered her to eat the damn thing properly.

It was early in the evening when they stood on the rise of a high dune and looked out to the sea to where the water was a brilliant green beyond the surf. Out in that strange water, Tam told her, swam the mulloway, waiting for the tide to turn. The light was prismatic. The sandhills and the sea glowed as though illuminated from beneath.

Night fell long before the moon, swollen and luminous as fire-lit copper, emerged out of the inland darkness. As it climbed the sky it flooded the sea mouth in silver light. Tam fished the mouth for mulloway, luring nothing for a few hours. Helen whiled the time away down by the surf, digging with her feet for pipis. Eventually she had more than she could hold in the soaking wet pouch she made with the bottom of her t-shirt and carried them back to the boat, dumping them in an empty bucket so Tam could use them as bait the next day.

Tam still hadn't caught anything but he was relaxed. When the tide turned and the Coorong water snaked out into the surf, the mulloway would come, tantalised by the smells and flavours on the brown water. Helen took off to explore the dunes, coming out further down the estuary beach, where she stopped to watch the black shapes of pelicans moving across the surface of the night sky. They were herding a school of fish into the shallows of a small sandy cove, dipping their bills again and again as they glided on the water. She followed them along the beach until they formed a tight ring. All at once they began to plunge repeatedly into the dark circle. They threw their bills up into the night, the water splashing down from their creels as fish slid into their bellies. The feeding frenzy lasted a few minutes and then the circle dispersed, most of the pelicans drifting away into the

darkness. A small group of them reformed and started to herd more fish, moving slowly downstream.

She turned back to the sea mouth. On the other side of the water she could see the lights of the shacks that lined the edge of Hindmarsh Island. Across the water came the sound of voices talking and laughing, a dog barking, a car being revved till the engine was screaming. There were kids on the beach on the other side; their gleeful shouts and splashing resounded over the water and the dog's barking grew more insistent. The stereo was suddenly cranked up for a Midnight Oil song that was obviously somebody's favourite. She sat down on the sand, drawing her knees up to her chin, and listened. She liked this song. Galway used to sing along to it when it came on the radio. He would play air drums on the steering wheel as he was driving, his lips pressed tight like a drummer concentrating on getting the rhythm right. Her heart felt as hollow as the echoes on the water. She missed Galway.

She heard Tam calling her name and looked up – he was walking along the mouth towards the estuary, three mulloway hanging from a single large hook he used to carry fish back to the boat, their bodies glistened in the moonlight.

Back at the boat, Helen sensed her grandfather's odd mood. When he tried to start the outboard motor, his pull on the cord was weak, and he struggled for breath after each effort. She offered to do it for him and was growled at to shut the fuck up and sit still. She sat back and gave him a surly stare though it was too dark for him to see. The boat drifted out onto the water and between each attempt to start the motor, Helen could see Tam clenching and re-clenching his fist like he was trying to loosen an ache in his arm. With a final curse he sat back down again, rocking the boat as he shoved the oars into place. It was a slow row back to Lacepede across the glass-smooth night sky.

They got back in the early hours of the morning. Away from the cool blast of the surf, the air was still sultry. The limestone was warm under Helen's bare feet as she walked

up to the shack on the cliff-bank. Inside, the shack was stifling and airless. Helen stripped to her singlet and undies and drifted to sleep quickly, drowsy from the heat.

When she woke, it was to the floating strains of jazz – the whine of a mellow trumpet, the sudden muddle of double bass and drums like a drunken scuffle. Tam found solace in the slow moody kind of jazz that the classical radio station played very late at night. Helen grew up believing the soft formlessness of blue jazz belonged solely to the small hours. Those early hours took on the dimensions of a place: some secret room in the shack with a door made of night-time that was unlatched from the other side. In stepped a small round man with a velvety voice who talked with witty eagerness between songs to a somnolent Tam. A nocturnal recluse, Helen imagined, with a pointy possum-like nose and twinkling eyes ringed with wire spectacles, who nibbled to himself on walnuts and wild apples while the music was playing.

It was still dark outside. Tam would be sitting hunched over on the edge of his bed, a bottle of beer hanging loosely in his hand, his eyes closed, so deep in thought that it was a kind of sleep.

Where she was lying, her bed sheets were damp with sweat. She rolled onto her side and her eyes went large. A woman stood in the doorway of her room. Her skin was pallid and her face difficult to make out, her eyes hidden in pools of soft shadow. She wore a pale-coloured slip and her thin arms, shoulders and legs were bare. Her long dark hair was a wild stiff mess, the way Helen's own hair dried after swimming in saltwater. For that was what Helen could smell, the woman had brought the salty cold smell of the sea into her room.

When she spoke her voice was silvery and familiar.

Tagasi minna magama, armas.

Helen closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Two months passed and there was no word from Helen. Tam was buried in the Meningie cemetery in a suit Vivi bought from the St. Vinnies shop in Tailem Bend. Two fishermen stood at the graveside service with her, one a small surly Welshman and the other a kindly old man who patted her hands after the coffin had been lowered. The men retired to the pub to drink a beer each for Tam. Vivi wasn't invited to join them.

Sitting at the table in the kitchen, listless, Vivi was roused by the sound of the gate creaking. Who could it be, this late at night? She held her breath until there was a knock at the door.

A tall black-bearded man stood in the square of light that spilled out from the lit hallway. She glanced over his shoulder, looking both ways into the darkness, then back to him.

The archetypal stranger. Her heart started to patter. *At last, she was thinking, could this be a story, about to happen to me?*

'Did you blow in with the wind?' she asked.

He considered her question, 'Yes.'

She invited him inside. He was not the first stranger to be blown like tumbleweed through Lacedpede.

He assumed the proportions of a giant in the small kitchen. An odd sort of darkness lingered around him, as if the night had got trapped like dust in the fabric of his clothes. His jeans were old and faded and his woollen jumper had been repaired numerous times. The ends of the sleeves were badly frayed and Vivi wondered if she should offer to neaten them up, or maybe just offer him one of Tam's old pullovers.

Bojan. Her mind rubbed like a thumb over his name, feeling out the smooth bend of the two syllables. Like the whorled inside of a sea-shell. *Silken.* His English was good, his accent heavy but clear. He had eyes that were deep-sunk and shadowed. Vivi was anxious to see their colour, glancing at him from time to time. He caught one of her glances and looked directly at her. His eyes were a green like clouded jade.

She offered him supper but he declined. He just needed something warm to drink, to shake off the chill. She was glad to give her hands something to do.

He had asked where he could find shelter for the night. *Shelter.* Like he would have been happy to spend the night in a hay shed or an old ruin. Maybe it was a European thing. Those long walks through the Alps and bedding down in caves and old barns. It could also have been politeness: giving her the choice to send him away to some idea of shelter or invite him to stay.

The clock struck the hour and the echo gave the shack an air of emptiness. Sometime later the Frigidaire burst noisily into life with the sound of gurgling water somewhere inside its workings. Bojan glanced over the kitchen and Vivi became aware of the scrubbed-bare surfaces, the glare of the naked light bulb, the spider webs in the corners of the ceiling.

The woman was flustered, shy. Her eyes had a brittle shine, like black japan, and she frequently ran her fingers through her white-blonde hair.

She offered him supper a second time, she had made a stew with lamb shanks, and he declined again.

She pushed the sleeves of her woollen cardigan up to her elbows and glanced again at the clock. She had thin white arms that she folded across her flat chest. Her face was one of striking contrasts, with her fair skin and almost white hair against her black eyes. Her complexion was smooth but he guessed her to be in her early forties – the signs of her age suggested instead by the mature definition of her cheekbones and brow.

‘So, what brings you to Lacepede?’

‘I came here once, some years ago, with my father. He was a bird-watcher.’

She smiled, ‘Of course. We get a lot of bird-watchers.’

He nodded.

The woman glanced up at the clock. Bojan glanced too, it was quarter past ten.

‘I apologise for the lateness,’ Bojan said.

She brushed the apology off, ‘It’s fine.’

He still felt he should offer more of an explanation. ‘I followed the shore along the Coorong. There was no sign of people for miles and miles.’

‘Which way did you come from?’

‘South. The last town I saw was Salt Creek.’

She was surprised at him, ‘That is some fair way south of here. You must have been walking through the Aboriginal reserves.’

Bojan shrugged, he didn’t know if he had or not. ‘I remember some people lived in this shack.’

‘There was an old man lived here, Tam, a fisherman. He passed away only a few weeks ago. And my step-daughter too – I mean, she lived here, once, was...my step-daughter, I mean – barely,’ she waved a hand as though she was brushing an insect away from her ear, ‘I wouldn’t actually know a motherly instinct if it bit me.’

‘I didn’t know them.’

‘Seems like no one did.’ The woman went quiet.

‘Your step-daughter – she lived with the old man?’

‘Yes. He was her grandfather.’

‘Where is she?’

The woman sighed, ‘On some god-forsaken island in the Furious Fifties. She left years ago, no one’s seen or heard from her since.’

‘And this old man...he is your father?’

‘No,’ she answered quickly, ‘No relation. I looked after him for a while.’

Bojan concentrated on finishing his tea. She waited till he placed the empty mug on the table before she stood up, ‘You should stay here tonight. It’s too cold out there.’

‘Thank you,’ Bojan said, rising to his feet as well.

She told him to pull his chair up to the woodstove and keep warm while she hunted about for some spare clean bedding. She left him alone in the kitchen.

The woodstove filled the large alcove, black and sullen. He pulled his boots off. Holes had been worn through the socks and the painful blisters on his heels had burst and bled, crusting his socks with dried blood. He was drifting to sleep when the staccato call of a lapwing flying over the shack jolted him back into the unfamiliar kitchen.

He woke to a touch on his chest. The kitchen was in darkness and he was covered by a heavy blanket. A woman stepped back, curling her hand into a fist and holding it against her chest, as if she had taken something from him. It was not the woman from the night before. This woman’s silhouette was smaller. Dark hair fell over one shoulder. Behind her the window was filled with the granular twilight before sunrise. In the darkness, he could feel her eyes on him. He could smell the sea in her skin.

His mind was still a fog of dreams dreamt in another language.

She knelt down and opened the door of the woodstove and he saw the glowing embers buried in the ash. She fed in some kindling and larger pieces of wood, then closed it up and turned the spin-wheel to allow air in beneath the embers. He peered harder through the darkness. She moved like a blur of black silent wings, and suddenly she was gone.

Bojan set off before first light. He had not been able to go back to sleep. He went out to the road that had led him to this place and studied the shack in the grey light. It was old, built

from corrugated tin and painted white many years ago. The flat roof was dotted with large rocks and on either side of the door was a window, shuttered like a closed eye. He was sure that this was the shack. One of a pair on the edge of the small rocky point. The one turned inwards. Given over to dark introspection.

He followed the track in the direction he had come the night before until it disappeared in the long dry grass and sand. Ahead was the fence line he had climbed over in the dark. Beyond was an empty paddock except for a large windswept gum tree that grew on the slope running down to the marshy edge of the Coorong. A black-winged kite was perched on a fence post, watching him with ruby eyes. It took off when Bojan approached the gate. He climbed over and walked out to the tree. It was shaggy-looking, covered in rough bark with long thick limbs that grew out horizontally, all bent away from the coastline by the wind. The base of the tree was blackened, as though from a past fire.

Near the tree was an oblong cairn of broken limestone. He had seen plenty of them in the middle of empty paddocks along the Coorong: rocks turned up by ploughing and pushed into piles out of the way. But this one was different. At one end of the cairn a brass jug had been wedged into the rocks and held a bunch of desiccated flower stalks. It looked to Bojan like a grave. Up in the crown of the tree two black-winged kites looked down at him from the branches.

He turned and retraced his steps. Near the shack the track forked, one way went inland and the other along the shoreline. He walked on along the shoreline, glancing through the trees at the other shacks along the edge. They were old and decrepit, built mostly from corrugated tin, some with limestone chimney stacks, other with grimed windows barred on the outside. Nearly all of them had been painted a long time ago, either in a shade of military green or an off-white now streaked with rust. Fiery-coloured gazanias flowered in forgotten gardens. A small lone Norfolk Island pine grew in front of one shack, perched on the cliff-bank and seemingly unaffected by the salty winds that twisted the paperbarks and

tea-trees back on themselves. The pine had grown as straight as a rod and looked conspicuous amongst the rest of the scrubby vegetation.

Further on, he paused. There was the shack he and his father had stayed at. It sat on short stilts and the rotting dart board was still nailed to the wall by the back door. From the bedroom window he'd had a view of the shoreline down to the small promontory that jugged out like the base of a broken land-bridge that might have crossed the Coorong once. In the crook of the promontory was a small bay with the long narrow sandbar where he had first seen the girl walking with an old man out to the fishing boat.

He hadn't paid them much attention at first. But they appeared every morning. The girl and the old man didn't talk to one another and they moved around the boat with ritual precision and then disappeared into the glare of the sun. And then one morning the old man walked out alone, and the morning after, and there was no sign of the girl. Bojan's father had teased him about his sudden keenness for bird-watching.

There had been a small dingy at the shack where they stayed. They used it to row across to the sand dunes where they spent most of their holiday fishing on the beach, mostly so his father could content himself for hours watching the sea birds. They hadn't talked much, Bojan remembered. It was his fault. He was all moody silence and smouldering emotion over a girlfriend's unfaithfulness. Inconsequential history, in the end. Staring at the derelict shack now, Bojan remembered himself as a fool who ignored his father's dreadful puns and gentle silence on a holiday his father had suggested because, unbeknown to his son, time had become precious.

Bojan walked around the shack and found the dingy. It had been pulled up the slope and stored in the space beneath the shack. He dragged it out and looked it over. The dingy seemed okay but he couldn't be sure until he tried it on the water. He glanced up at the shack and saw the signs of its neglected state – the rotted wood of the window frames, the piece of tin missing from the roof, the disintegrating bags of empty beer cans that had gone dull and brittle in the sunlight. No one had been here in years. The oars were on the back

verandah, the varnish bleached away by the sun. He would re-polish the oars in return for borrowing the boat and whoever owned this place would probably be none the wiser. He dragged the dingy down to the shore and then looked up and down the shoreline. The morning was still only a thick pale sky and, apart from the woman he had met the night before, he felt very alone in this place. But not vulnerable. This place lay bare and open so that only the small dangers could lurk unseen in the grass.

He crossed the water and disappeared into the sand dunes.

It was the first week of November, two months since Bojan had disappeared. *Thank you kindly for your hospitality. B.* was all that was written on the note he had left for her on the kitchen table.

Vivi kept it tucked inside a book of Beethoven sonatas and thought of him often, still cursing herself for having left him to fall asleep by the woodstove. After a few days she could no longer bring his face back but she still went on thinking about him, unable to restrain herself from imagining all the different ways that night could have unfolded – the stories that could have happened to her.

She got to work in the garden, preparing the beds for summer vegetables. She had collected the winter rain into two large tanks which, she knew from the two previous summers she had lived with Tam, would not be enough, even if she saved all the grey water and limited what she grew. This summer she was growing only fast maturing plants – carrots and radishes, rapini, arugula and silverbeet – plants she could easily start again after the worst of the heat was over. She planted a rhubarb crown under the incurable dripping tap and laid generous amounts of mulch around the old mulberry and fig trees, their south-facing sides brittle and blackened by the salty winds. Mulberry and fig. She savoured their names in her mind, even if they had only managed small and tasteless fruit under her loving care. They were the usual survivors of forsaken dreams.

She was turning over the soil with a rake when she heard a car pull up at Galway's. Two black women emerged, taking out bags of shopping from the car boot and carrying them inside. There was a third person who stayed in the backseat, an elderly man with a brushy white beard. She didn't recognise them but assumed they were family. They didn't stay for long; one of them waved to Vivi as she got into the driver's seat of the car and Vivi

waved back, wistful for a conversation with them. Even after the sound of the car had faded, Vivi still stood with her chin resting on the tip of the rake as she stared absently at Galway's shack. It had been three weeks since he had returned and the curtains remained drawn day and night.

The third day after he came home she had gone to see him. He opened the door, shirtless and morose. His protruding ribs were covered in the brown silk of seared skin. There were welts of scars across his back and forearm that looked like melted bubbled plastic. Vivi was more unnerved by the sharp ice-blue of his eyes which were usually a muted sea-green with outer rings of blue. The shack was a mess and smelt of cigarette ash. He had ransacked the place during his psychotic episode but he couldn't remember what it was he had been looking for. Vivi began to tidy up some of the mess, sweeping up the butts and shattered glass ash trays. Out of the rubbish of empty cigarette packets and years of unread mail strewn over the floor of the kitchen she picked up an old cassette tape. Written on the sticker across the bottom, in thick black text and block letters, were the words *SIGUR ROS*.

'Almost obsolete, these things,' she said, holding it up.

Galway almost flew at her and snatched it out of her hand without a word. He went and sat in his chair, or perched as he sat on the edge and jiggled his foot with impatience for her to leave. Vivi couldn't prise another word from him and left, getting the message that he didn't want to share with her the music on the tape.

The wind was picking up, its spring touch like fur on her bare arms. She was still standing there, in her garden, staring into space. Small birds were picking over the turned earth. She pressed her cool hands against her flushed cheeks. She should have worn sunscreen. The sunlight was cold with the sea breeze but it still burned her fair complexion.

She glanced down the road as she turned to go inside and stopped. No more than a dark shape in the distance but Vivi could not mistake her.

Helen.

‘Look what the wind’s brought home,’ Vivi said as if there were a third person present, someone on her side.

Helen stood by the gate, confused. Vivi didn’t wonder – the last person Helen would have expected to see pottering around Tam’s shack was her stepmother. And any moment now, confusion would become suspicion.

‘Hello, Vivi,’ she said without emotion.

Vivi crossed her arms over her chest, ‘It’s about time. Tam died four months ago.’

Helen’s expression hardened, ‘I couldn’t just up and leave, Vivi.’ She glanced at the shack, still not reaching out to open the gate.

Vivi glanced down the road again, ‘Did you walk the whole way? From the town?’

‘Yeah.’

Vivi raised her eyes. It was a distance of twenty miles, ‘You should have rung. I would have come and got you.’

‘I had no idea you were living here,’ Helen replied flatly, ‘What *are* you doing here?’

Vivi felt the anticipated fluster, ‘Your father and I separated – two years ago.’

Helen appeared surprised.

‘The farm fell apart – the bank took away everything; even my piano. Henry went back to shearing – I don’t know where he is these days.’

She had forgotten what Helen looked like until now. The teenaged Helen had been plain, with an awkward smile. The change was in the lines around her eyes and her mouth, Vivi realised, looking now at this different face that was as hard as slate. The lines were beautiful now that all vestiges of youth were gone, as if these lines had always been meant for a later maturity.

She still hadn’t answered Helen’s question. ‘I had nowhere to go. Tam came for me. Out of nowhere.’

Helen looked unconvinced, 'That isn't Tam.'

Vivi tried to think of a more definitive explanation of herself and at the same time tried to suppress her body's usual habit of acting as though she was lying, 'Like I said, it was quite unexpected. I didn't know how to take it, he never asked, he just came for me.' She shrugged.

'And you just dumbly followed?'

Vivi felt her back go straight, 'We had actually become friends before that state. And he was in a very bad way. I think he was quite desperate.'

Helen stared at the shack for a long moment. Vivi shifted, feeling as though she was the one being scrutinised. She had changed the appearance of the place: there was a garden where before there had been long grass and rank weeds littered with broken bottles and rotted buoys. Helen's face betrayed nothing. Vivi felt even more apprehensive about Helen going inside.

'Your room's the way you left it, I believe,' Vivi said, wanting the moment over with, 'You look beat.'

Everything in Helen's room had been draped in old bed sheets. Underneath, she found it all indeed the way she had left it, down to the unmade bed with unwashed clothes still lying crumpled on the floor: brown shorts, white singlets, chequered overshirts and woollen boot socks. The hand-embroidered bed linen was musty and stale. The lace curtains were still on the windows, in between layers of blankets that had kept the room plunged in gritty shadows for years. Helen could smell it: air that had died.

On the bedside cupboard a framed photograph still stood. Her mother sitting on a large rock in front of a wind-eaten cliff, hugging a four-year-old Helen to her chest. Fae's smile was wide and her face freckled. A pile of thin seashells sat next to the photo. Their colours had gone dull and the shells were brittle, some had cracked or broken into pieces.

She remembered how they used to look, thin translucent shells of vivid sunset colours – orange, pink, yellow. She had collected them from the ocean beach on the other side of the sand dunes, on the edge of her world where the constant thunder and violent energy of the surf clawed away at the periphery.

Helen slept through the afternoon and the night, finally roused just after dawn by the sounds of Vivi moving around in the kitchen with the radio playing classical guitar music.

Vivi started at the sight of her standing in the kitchen doorway. ‘I’m making porridge,’ she said.

Helen glanced over the kitchen. Vivi had made several changes: an old sideboard and two mismatched chairs to complement the two that had always been there. Flowering branches of eucalypts stood in old jugs and milk bottles around the room. There were framed pictures on the walls taken from a calendar – Uluru, a ruin in the Flinders, the Three Sisters in the Blue Mountains. Vivi had mastered the art of cooking with a woodstove, had learnt to make do without a microwave.

‘Did you see the state of the lakes?’ Vivi asked, turning back to the stove.

‘Yeah,’ Helen went over to the window, looking out at Vivi’s garden, ‘I saw Lake Albert from the highway; it’s got a bad smell to it.’

‘It’s getting quite desperate.’

Between the peppercorn trees Helen could see Galway’s shack. It was more run-down than she remembered; one of the windows had been boarded up with corrugated tin, and the guttering had come loose at one end, falling diagonally against the outside wall to the ground.

‘They’ve been dredging the sea mouth for the last eight years too,’ Vivi was trying again, ‘Your grandfather told me about how furious he was when they started dredging, said it was a violation. Never went down there again.’

‘Is Galway still here?’ Helen asked, looking at her now.

Vivi nodded, ‘He got out of Glenside a few weeks ago. He’s still coming off the meds, I think.’

Helen turned her back on the window, and took in the kitchen for a second time.

‘What ailed him?’

‘Um, schizophrenia, I think. To do with the fire.’

‘No. Tam.’

‘Cancer,’ Vivi answered, ‘By the time he saw a doctor, it was too late. Refused treatment, even painkillers. Took an awful long time to die. He really wanted to see you again – it was his dying wish.’ She gave Helen a pointed look.

‘Somehow, I doubt that.’ Helen couldn’t suppress a sardonic smile; Vivi was too earnest to make a good liar.

‘Could you lay the table?’ Vivi asked, looking away.

Helen went to the drawer next to the kitchen sink and got out two spoons, noticing that Vivi had replaced Tam’s collection of bent and tarnished cutlery.

Vivi ladled porridge into two bowls and they sat down to eat. Helen ate a mouthful and looked up. Vivi was staring at Helen’s right hand, at her missing fingers. Vivi blushed when she realised she had been caught and bent her head down, saying nothing.

‘He left everything to me,’ Vivi said after a while, ‘There’s still another 45 years on the lease so... Parks and Wildlife can’t knock it down just yet. Of course, the place is yours if you want it – Tam seemed to th...’ she trailed off. Helen was looking over the kitchen again, taking it in as she considered Vivi’s offer.

‘I’m going back to Hobart next week. I only came back to get some of my stuff. The place is yours.’

Vivi’s face fell, ‘You’re going back?’

Helen nodded.

Vivi watched her for a while. *Her eyes. How did I forget about her eyes?* A dark amber, or saffron, or topaz – there was no word for that colour. It was her eyes that left the most lasting impression on anyone who met her. It was her eyes, Tam had told her, which had sealed her fate.

Galway spent most days sitting in his wooden arm-chair in front of the wide windows of his bedroom, looking out over the Coorong. He never closed the glass panels; it was wide enough to allow him to feel every change in the air, to pick up each scent – crabs drying out on the exposed reef, rain before it started to fall, wattles in flower, a fox slinking past under the sill of his window. He heard every distant bird call clear as a bell and the ever-present thunder of the ocean.

After nightfall he would stir, shuffling to the kitchen to make a meal of toast and baked beans or scrambled eggs. He could only sleep for an hour or two at night. His eyes would fly open in the dark, his heart pounding hard against his ribs, his bearings uncompassed as he waited, certain that he had been woken by the sounds of an invading fire.

It was late in the afternoon, his shack shadowy and twilit, when he heard the scrape of the door. When the footsteps neared his room he turned his head slowly, expecting Vivi.

His eyes sharpened in the dim light and he felt suddenly cold.

‘You ain’t supposed to be here,’ he scowled at her, ‘This ain’t right.’

Her silence filled the room like smoke.

He shook his head, ‘Get away, now.’ He turned back to the window and the sight of the water that was flecked with sunlight. His heart was making the blood rush to his head.

She was still there.

‘You s’posed to wait for me,’ he snapped, ‘On the island. This – this ain’t right. I only just got my shit back together.’

She moved closer towards him and he shut his eyes. ‘Get away from me, Fae.’

The breath collapsed from his chest. He had not said her name aloud since the day of the fire, not even to Helen. He shook his head and jammed his eyes shut tight. She was so close now he could breathe her in. He could not bear another second of this.

‘That fire keeps burning and burning and burning. I never stop smellin’ it. It’s still burning, Fae, away under the earth.’

The silence changed and his words dispersed into the familiar emptiness of being alone in his shack.

He opened his eyes. A white egret was flying low over the water.

Helen woke on the third morning with the feeling that Fae had only just run out the room, calling to Tam that she was coming, the thud of her boots on the wooden floor. The shack had always contained a peculiar kind of silence, like soft clay in which sounds could leave palpable impressions.

There was a gentle tap on the door. Helen half-opened her eyes and saw Vivi's head appear around the door as it opened.

'Did I wake you?'

Helen shook her head and slowly sat up.

'I wanted to give you these things,' Vivi said as she stepped fully into the room. She was carrying a cardboard box which she placed on the bed for Helen.

'It's from the farmhouse,' she explained, 'It's some stuff your father was going to take to the dump, you know, when the bank was gutting the place.'

Helen pulled out a battered paperback. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She flicked through it and noticed passages that had been underlined in pencil.

'See, they're your mother's things. I saved them.'

Helen reached into the box again and pulled out envelopes of used dress patterns. The illustrations on the front showed kaftans, summer dresses, gypsy blouses and wrap-around skirts. Helen realised she had no memory of the clothes her mother used to wear.

She looked up at Vivi who was watching her with an anxious expression.

'Thank you, Vivi.'

'I'll be outside, in the garden,' she said, backing out of the room, 'It's almost lunch time, by the way.'

Helen pulled the box closer. There was another book, much older with thick cardboard covers; written on the spine in stamped gold: *Balfour's Elements of Botany*. There were pale spots of mould on the pages throughout and pieces of ribbon bookmarked certain pages – a page explaining the carnivorous aspect of sundews, a page with a diagram of a generic orchid flower with the labelling of its different parts in a footnote, and another page which contained classificatory notes on the Orchidacea order. Throughout the book, sentences had been underlined, especially in the chapter dealing with the anatomy of flowers.

Under a folded square of aida cloth on which Fae had started to stitch a blue wren, Helen found a large antique photo album. She lifted it out and pushed the box away with her foot. The book was heavy and thick and appeared to be of Edwardian design. The covers were padded and bound in dark vinyl, with a brass latch to keep the album closed. She opened it out on the bed in front of her. Her mother had removed the inner pages and glued pale green paisley-patterned fabric to the insides of the covers, then filled it with sheets of black paper that had been bound at the spine by hand with thick black thread. On each page was a carefully composed A5-sized photograph of a wildflower; underneath each one was a strip of buff-coloured paper with her mother's cursive script noting the name of the plant, the date, and the location where it had been photographed.

She flicked through the book: most of the photos were of wild orchids, some reappearing often throughout the four-year span of dates. Nearly all the photographs were taken in the Coorong woodlands near Lacedpede; a few had come from the Mount Barker summit and woodlands near Strathalbyn and Echunga, others from the native pine forest on the station. Occasionally, her mother had left a page blank for writing, using a silver pen for the black paper. They were haiku-like details.

The reflection of storm clouds on the glassy lake.

Lake light.

Storm light.

She left a blank space and then wrote, perhaps some days, weeks or months later:

The sound of close thunder, a brief silence, and then the clamour of white cockatoos falling like rain as they take to the sky.

Helen flicked through the pages till she found another of her mother's written fragments:

The wind is blowing very strong today – it's hot and very dry, stripping the gum trees – the kind of wind that will break hearts.

She turned to the last page that had been written on, the rest of the book a ream of empty black pages. *Remembered something Ema used to say when she wanted me to put on a jumper. Autumn has summer's eyes, but winter's teeth. I saw her come walking up the drive last night. She was dressed in her Sunday best. She was coming to visit me. I went inside and started folding all my clothes into a suitcase. Helen started crying in her sleep. It spooked me; it was as though she knew I was leaving without her. I woke up.*

Helen closed the book and put it down. Then picked it up and re-read the last paragraph. She felt a dark pulsing in the corner of her mind, as if she was trying to think over the roar of rushing water, and suddenly she thought of Tam. Is this what it was like for him? The verge of his rage?

As she stuffed the book back in the box she noticed some loose photographs in the bottom. They were all stuck together and she pulled them apart carefully. There were four of them. Three were of an old stone house surrounded by sheoaks. Tree trunks dominating the foreground while further back the wooden door of the house stood half open into darkness; only the wooden frame remained of the roof and the windows were glassless. The fourth photograph was compelling and beautiful, of a black man's face. He appeared to be lying down in the grass, with an arm across his face shading his eyes from sunlight that shafted across, blurring out most of the photo with hues of orange and yellow, making him hard to identify. But Helen knew him through the gaps of his fingers: the line of that cheekbone, the straight ridge of that brow.

Helen entered by the south-western gate and took in the muted green of the low-growing trees. The rough vehicle track ran in a straight line right through to the other side of the woodland, joining up with the north-eastern boundary track. She followed it for a while and then strayed off.

When she was sixteen, Helen found a copy of the coronial inquest into her mother's disappearance among Tam's papers and learnt its details by heart.

The far north-eastern boundary was the last known whereabouts of her mother before the fire razed the woodlands. A farmer, in the paddock on the other side of the boundary track, had seen her briefly from a distance. She disappeared into the trees. Half an hour later, a great wall of flames soared through the woodlands.

References were made to a separate investigation into the cause of the fire. It was believed to have been started by a green and yellow motorbike that was seen by several fishermen and tourists though neither the rider nor the bike were ever identified or found. Helen and Tam had seen it flying along the track – the sound of its exhaust a feral wail that ruptured the afternoon. Tam was in an angry mood, muttering to himself in Gaelic as he pulled apart an outboard motor, his hands covered in black grease.

The investigation concluded with the theory that an accumulation of chaff or grass seeds on the bike's exhaust had caught fire from the heat, creating spot fires along a length of several kilometres along the Coorong track and then inland as the bike headed for the road to Meningie, creating a serpentine line of flames that, combined with the winds, almost certainly had Fae surrounded by fire. Helen had watched the woodlands burn through the night, from out on the water, safe in the *Moonbird* where Tam had placed her. He pushed her out into the deep water and then turned, running through the water back to the bank. He spun the wheels of his ute in the sand and grass and drove at breakneck speed for the

woodlands to find Fae. By nightfall, the woodlands were engulfed in flames while the dark sky above was suffused with a red purple glow.

Helen had come here often as a child in the first years after the fire, when the place had been a sea of black earth and the charred tree trunks were bandaged in vivid milky green. The wattles had flourished first, rapid and short-lived, the spring air thick and heady with the fragrance of their yellow blossoms. Year by year, Helen had watched as the sheoaks and eucalypts slowly re-established themselves, until the woodland was once again thick with mallee gums, grass trees, paperbarks, boobiallas, olearias, old man's beard, bush peas, pigface.

Helen followed a kangaroo track worn through a dense thicket of acacia brush, down a gradual slope into a windswept hollow of sand and grass. She continued walking in a south-easterly direction, through more brush, then into stands of shaggy eucalypts, through more windswept blow-outs, through a limestone outcrop. Signs of the fire were still there: mostly large skeletal tree trunks charred black, their girths much wider than any of the living trees surrounding them. The remains of lost giants.

She reached the shadowy boundary of the she-oak forest. She had never come this far as a child. The sheoaks branched over the boundary track. On the other side was barren farmland. The fences were overgrown with old man's beard, its fluffy silvery flowers glinting with sunlight. Helen walked aimlessly through the sheoaks for a while. Sand dunes bordered the north edge, dense eucalypt and wattle brush along the western, dry and windswept scrub along the east where the land rose up into a low rocky ridge. She turned to head back when she glimpsed a stone wall through the slender trunks.

The roof and the door were completely gone. The walls had crumbled away in places. Black scorch marks charred the bases of the outside walls like charcoaled drawings of flames. The frameless windows resembled mouths full of broken teeth. The ruin was a cottage of two rooms, barely more than a hut. In full flower, thin vines of hardenbergia, old man's beard and kundawi grew wild up the stone faces, seeking footholds in the gaps and

cracks before tumbling over into the airy rooms, while grass and moss grew along the crumbled tops of the walls. The soft sound of wind in the sheoaks hung over the place like a shroud. She stepped through the doorway into the ruin.

The earth floor was a blanket of wild orchids. Pink fairies, with a few small clusters of the rarer white species. There were blue fairy orchids, an earlier flowering species, and she could see more of their withered stalks with swollen heads full of seeds. Helen crouched down closer to the ground and absorbed the vision, transfixed. She had not seen an abundance of orchid flowers like this since the first year after the fire.

In the second room the stone lintel of the window had fallen away completely, taking down most of the upper wall with it. The fireplace was no more than a large sooty cavity. The chimney stack had toppled over into the sheoaks growing against the outside wall. Near her feet, an animal had been scratching in the dirt, uprooting orchid plants. The claw marks were large and fresh. Vivi had told her that morning that there had been rare but verified sightings of wombats along the Coorong, where there had been no wombats for over a hundred years. A farmer further south had rolled his header into a wombat warren in the middle of his paddock, which had, until that moment, been hidden from sight by the high wheat. *They're on the move, Vivi said, something's distressing them, some change in the environment; everything's in flux these days.*

In the recently-turned earth she picked out a piece of bone, stained brown by the soil. It was a piece from the vertebrae of an animal, from its size she guessed kangaroo, but the longer she looked at it the more she suspected human. She brushed the soil away for more pieces and her fingertips caught on a brittle necklace. She tried lifting it away but most of the thin chain was embedded in the earth. It was badly tarnished and flaking. Carefully, she tugged and a section came free with a soft rip. Along its length were fine white grass roots, filling each link in the chain.

She began to scoop away handfuls of gravelled earth until she had worked free another piece of bone. She went on, grating the edges of her fingernails on the gravel, unloosing another piece.

Knotted pieces of vertebrae.

She turned them over and over in her hands. Human bones. She sat back on her haunches and looked over the orchids again. She felt serene, calm. The air was cold in the shade of the sheoaks, filled with the twittering of small birds and the fragrance of damp earth.

She put the bones in the pocket of her coat and walked, unhurriedly, home.

hide-away

Bojan was living in an old humpy burrowed in behind a low foreshore dune. On the slope of sand above the flat roof he could watch the waves storming in to claw away at the beach. The humpy was built of wood slats, old sheets of tin and recycled windows that had been scratched to opacity by windblown sand and shell grit. Large rocks kept the roof down. The chimney, made from a long piece of stove pipe, leaned crookedly, its wind-bent slant matching the tortured angles of the surrounding scrub. Old fishing material frayed out over the ground, still embedded in the sand – rotted nets and ropes, broken craypots. He loved the humpy: it was like a shy withered man who had turned away from the world so long ago that it now belonged to another time.

Inside it was dark and sparse. The wind caught in the gaps between the buckled slats, its sound a hoarse whisper like a debarked dog. The roof beams were made from unhewn tree trunks. A rough-made table stood beneath a window, its unvarnished top made from the planks of old packing crates. A wood stove had been fashioned from a 44 gallon drum with a large square hole cut into its side and a cast-iron grate sitting in the bottom. An old iron-frame single bed took up the length of a wall, the mattress threadbare and rotted through.

When Bojan first arrived he hammered pieces of wood over the cracks in the outside walls and repaired the stove pipe after the first fire he lit in the stove filled the hut with smoke. He dragged the mattress outside and set it on fire. It whooshed into large orange flames that twisted into rapid plumes of black smoke and then died away almost as quickly, leaving a layer of fine grey ash which the wind scattered across the hollow. When he went back inside, he found on the floor of the humpy a heron skull looped through the eyes with a thin black chain. The skull had been varnished but its smooth lustre suggested the oil of

human skin: once worn against a chest and frequently handled. He kept it in the pocket of his coat and often felt around for it at absent moments.

Bojan slept on the hard floor and lived with the constant edge of hunger. The isolation of his life by the sea was the loneliness he desired; it wrapped around him as though he were a boy sheltered in his father's old trench coat.

He repaired an old surf rod he found under the bed and spent the day fishing on the beach, using pipis he found rolling in the backwash for bait. After a couple of hours of light nibbles, he felt the definite tug. He played with it for a while, feeling the line go taut, then slack, then taut again, as the fish dipped and lifted with the swells. As he started to reel it in, commencing the real game, it reacted by thrashing on the end of the line. It fought with brute strength, like some underwater horse. Each time it grew tired Bojan would start to reel it in slowly, blending the pull with the swells. As soon as the fish was dragged into the maelstrom of the surf, it resumed the fight. Bojan glimpsed it in the distance, flashing on the crest of a wave like a silver muscle. He released the drag each time and the fish escaped back beyond the surf zone, still too strong for the old rod.

The sky grew dark with the afternoon and rain clouds rolled in from the ocean. The fish was oddly still, refusing to move for the moment. Bojan had been agitating it for hours, forcing it to fight again and again, not too strenuously but constantly, slowly tiring it out. The tide had come in and reduced the beach to a narrow strip of sand that forced Bojan up against the dunes. He walked a short stretch up and down the beach to get blood moving through his body. A mist was banking up on the beach and creeping off into the dunes. The shoreline was dark and sullen, and Bojan could not distinguish if the mood belonged to him, to the fish or to the place itself.

Along the length of the fishing line he could feel the undertows and riptides and the shifts and collisions of currents, but at the end where the fish hung on the hook he started to

sense a different place. He felt in his mind the contours of a chasm beneath the waves. The currents were calmer here. Almost quiet. The space was deep and wide, the floor lost in darkness. An ancient river. The limestone bones of an older Coorong.

As the last light of a pallid sunset was leached from the dark clouds, Bojan resigned himself to an eerie feeling like exile. It became a darkness inside of him. And then the girl started to haunt him, as though she had been waiting for this moment. His father wasn't alive anymore to keep dispelling the memory. *We must forget her*, he had often repeated, saddened by the indelible change in Bojan. He believed his son to have fallen for the girl, that she was the source of his melancholy. Bojan once tried to set him straight but found himself constantly breaking like a wave against a wall of stubborn silence.

They felt it building up all morning: a sense of the air closing in while the heat intensified, humidified, grew heavier and heavier. And all the while the wide sky remained empty and impassive. Around mid-afternoon the inland horizon was turning green. The strange glowing nimbus was slowly soaking towards them, thick and opaque. The languid stillness condensed and Bojan had felt a suppressed quiver in the air like a body on the brink of ecstasy. He went outside to take photographs of the sky and drifted some distance away from the shack. The sky above him changed to a dark ocean-green: radiant and eerie. The Coorong was as still as glass, reflecting the strange sky.

When he lowered his eyes from the green sky, he saw her standing on the track, in a shimmering mirage, and thought for a moment that she had materialised straight out of this weird thalassic gloom. She was dripping wet and tangled in fishing net, metres and metres of its length sprawled out on the ground behind her. He was rooted to the spot by the shining blaze of her dark yellow eyes. Blood streamed down the side of her face from a mat of wet tangled hair on the side of her head. She held her hands clamped hard together in

front of her and he saw the red blood oozing, quickly, through her fingers, dripping onto the dusty earth. The muscles of her jawline were clenched tight, her mouth a thin hard line.

And then she collapsed. Bojan took a few steps, faltered, looked back to the shack, trying to think of some other way to help her. She lay unmoving. Some deeper impulse kicked in and he ran towards her, skidding onto the ground beside her. The blood was spreading across her stomach. His mind went blank at the urgency of it all. The bleeding, he realised; the bleeding had to be stopped. His panic and the girl's swollen purpled face made him feel this was all a nasty dream.

He shook her by the shoulder; she was limp, unconscious. He looked again at her wounded hand, lying there. In the glinting blood he saw that two fingers had been hacked off. He backed away and stood up, looked in the direction of the shack – it was too far away to yell out for his father. There was no time to run for help. He pulled his shirt off and ripped it with a violent yank; he bunched some of it against the stump of her two fingers, then used the rest to wrap her hand up tight. The net had mutilated her, cutting into the flesh of her arms, her shoulders, her hips, her legs.

He got an arm under her legs, another under her back, and lifted her up. He hurried as fast as he could. The net dragged heavier and heavier behind them, with a life of its own, fighting and struggling like an ocean fish caught on a line, refusing to be reeled in. It was towing that strange sky after them. Bojan could feel it: the storm forming, gathering, condensing behind him. Thunder rolled in the distance as a breath of wind hissed against his naked back, passing him to swell through the sheoak by the side of the track. The grass around them was starting to flatten and shiver. He felt the rising wind again, a burning hot gust that blew up from behind him, hot grit stinging his legs. The thunder broke, much closer, angrier. When he saw the shack ahead, he started shouting.

The whole way to the town, his father yelled at him to slow down as the small car fish tailed on the loose gravel road. All around them the wind shook and shuddered. A heavy curtain of green rain pursued them. The girl lay lifeless across the back seat.

On the outskirts of the town a sign pointed the way to the hospital. Bojan took the short series of streets at breakneck speed. Everywhere, people were standing outside their houses, fascinated by the vivid sky. Bojan brought the car to a screeching stop outside the emergency entrance of the local hospital. A nurse was standing outside. She came to the car as Bojan's father jumped out, gesturing wildly at the car window and speaking a gibberish of English and Bosnian. The nurse looked in and saw the girl. She dashed away inside and came running back with two more nurses and a barouche.

As Bojan and a nurse lifted her from the car, the veil of rain reached them, drenching them all in moments. The girl's face, turned upwards at the sky, did not flinch as the rain pummelled her closed swollen eyes and cracked lips. Bojan went to follow them inside when his father put a hand on his arm to stop him. *We leave her now, son. Other people will look after her.* Bojan stared at him, dazed. All he could feel was a wild tide still coursing through his body.

It was deep into the night and the tide had gone out. The clouds were moving on and the ocean glinted blackly before him. Bojan realised the fish was moving sluggishly on the line, exhausted. He reeled it in. When it hit the hard sand of the shallows it went still and turned to dead weight. He walked into the surf and saw the fish lolling in the swell, glinting like a cold dead eye in the moonlight. Bojan was dismayed at its small size – all this time he had felt he was fighting some marlin-sized beast. It was heavy in his tired arms and carrying it the twenty metres up the beach sapped him of all the strength he had left. He dropped it on the dry sand and collapsed next to it, breathing hard.

He wanted to close his eyes and let the darkness finally have him, but the fish was flopping weakly next to him, sucking in air. It was asphyxiating. Bojan dragged himself onto his knees and pulled out his pocket knife, unfolding a long thin blade. By the moonlight he touched the tip of the knife to the head of the fish, where he estimated the brain

would be, and then drove the blade in hard, jiggled it side to side to mush it. The fish went limp under his hand. He turned it on its side and sliced deep into the side near the gills, cutting through the artery. He sat back, the knife dangling loose in his hand, and stared vacantly at the black surf while the life of the fish poured out into the sand next to him.

The beach had been chewed up by tyre tracks, not yet erased by the high tide. Bojan heard the vehicles on some days, gunning it through the sand. He walked for miles without seeing any other sign of people. A grey-blue curtain of rain billowed over the ocean. A large Pacific gull rode the wind, sailing close above the surf. Bojan walked on, indifferent towards the encroaching weather. Pied oystercatchers bobbed along in front of him, jabbing quickly at sand in the swash before the next wave came in.

The beach barely changed. It was a belt of sand between the surf and the dunes, sometimes narrow where a foreshore dune had been half-eaten by a high tide, exposing old shell middens and blackened roots. Where the beach was wider there were thick mounds of bleached and broken shells at the high-tide mark. The dunes closest to the surf were sand with only the hair-like dune grass growing down the slopes, whipping in the wind. Further in, small shrubs and groundcovers established the scrub.

There were shadows of human figures moving in the dark air. They were doing a strange dance in the swash zone. When Bojan got closer he saw they were holding onto large poles jammed into the sand and twisting their feet deep into the backwash. One ran out deeper into the water, dragging a net through the surf back towards the beach. They were grown bearded men, the hems of their trousers rolled up to the knees to reveal lean and finely muscled calves. They twisted and twisted, taking turns to run out and gather in the nets the pipis they had unloosed into the rushing water. The shells were being emptied into buckets with a watery clatter. Further behind them he saw the outlines of sleek 4WDs.

The grey rain was sweeping towards them, foreshadowed by an umbra of unnatural twilight. The waves rolled in, ghosted by nimbuses of white spray. Little breathing holes appeared and disappeared in the sand as water rushed forward and retreated. In the rain and mist, the men danced on in the autumn darkness, immaterial and otherworldly against the glimmering wet sand around them.

The skin of his hands turned to leather. The sinews and muscles of his arms and calves grew hard and defined as he got leaner, his hair coarser, his features darker. He observed, curious, the weathering of his body by the ocean beach. Each day he went down to the surf and cockled. It was hard at first. The muscles of his legs and feet burned and ached in the freezing water. He went to sleep at night still feeling his legs twisting in the backwash, the rush of water and sand around his calves and the odd hard pipi under his feet. The currents of the shallows were strong and he saw the need for the long pole to hold onto as he twisted and lifted the sand into the swash. For the first few weeks of his sparse existence, he survived on pipis and the fish he caught in the surf.

When he had enough pipis one day, he flagged down the 4WDs. Both vehicles stopped and the men jumped out and rushed over. Bojan asked them if they could sell the haul for him. It took them a long moment to get over their mystified reactions; they looked about for signs of his vehicle and equipment. Bojan imagined the impression he would have made – his thick hair and beard hadn't seen a razor for several weeks, his accent had gone thick and English words slipped his mind. They thought he had been stranded here, for weeks by the look of him, in need of rescue. They told him they would not be back till the following week and asked where to find him to give him his money. He replied he would be here, on the beach. The men exchanged glances, then agreed. He passed them the hessian sack and they told him he could probably only expect about twenty dollars for that amount. Bojan didn't mind – could they get him some candles, vegetables, garlic and olive oil and

drop it off for him. They exchanged glances again. Bojan said thank you and good day and wandered away along the beach, hands in the pockets of his tattered jeans.

He was on the beach fishing the surf on the day the cocklers said they would be driving through. The vehicles appeared, the one in front driving on while the other stopped. Bojan secured his rod on the beach and went up to him. The cockler passed a paper sack through the window.

‘Here you are, Hide-Away.’

‘Hide-Away?’ Bojan repeated.

‘Think you’re the first bloke to go native out here?’

Despite the humpy, the thought had not occurred to him, ‘There are others?’

‘Last of ‘em died a few months back. Usually Poms, for some reason.’

Bojan nodded, with no idea what Poms were. The cockler’s skin was so bitten and bleached by the elements that his age was hard to guess – he could have been a young man or in his fifties. His thick mop of curly hair wasn’t quite blond and wasn’t quite grey. He had oddly moist eyes that peered out through crinkled skin, it gave him both a kindly look and a cynical bent.

‘I’ll have more pipis on your way back,’ Bojan said.

‘No worries, mate,’ the cockler said, ‘Name’s Cole, by the way.’

‘Hide-Away.’ Bojan shook the proffered hand and felt the name grow within him.

Cole gave him a frowning smile, ‘Terse, aren’t ya?’

Bojan shrugged and saw that the rod was bending low to the waves.

‘If ya catch a tuna, I’ll pay ya for it,’ Cole called out as he drove off.

Weeks passed and the days lost their names. Bojan subsisted on fish and whatever Cole or Joe, the other cockler, bought for him in Kingston after selling Bojan’s pipis and the odd sought-after fish. He kept to the ocean side of the dunes, only straying across to the Coorong’s edge on fog-bound mornings to fill bottles with the fresh water that seeped out at the back of a small cove. He caught a reflection of himself one morning and realised his

face had disappeared behind a full beard of black hair. He saw the faintest line of gaunt cheekbones and a glimmer of green eyes. Hide-Away.

Helen stood in the centre of the humpy, eyeing the signs of someone else's habitation. A few clothes hung from a line tied from one corner of the humpy to the other. Men's clothes. By the drum fireplace a bed roll was spread out on the floor, neatly made of threadbare blankets and a single flat pillow. The enamel plate and mug, the aluminium frying pan and the single set of cutlery – things she had brought over when she was a girl – had been left to dry on the bench. There were faint lingering smells of garlic and charred fish. The humpy was sparse and bare. By the bed roll, slumped against the wall, was an old backpack. She picked it up and felt its weight. She put it down on the table and unzipped it, releasing an incense like dried basil. She handled each object inside one by one.

An antique pair of binoculars.

A dog-eared book: a field guide to the birds of Australia.

The hard whittled bone-like cartilage of the upper part of a pelican's bill.

A small tin box with a picture of a trawler on the lid.

Inside the tin, a few large buds of marijuana.

A rolled-up leather wallet with a shiny patina.

Laid out flat, it contained slim pockets which held a cutthroat razor with a handle of silver ivory, a small pair of scissors, a shaving brush.

A brown-papered journal with handwriting that looked like loose knotted string. A cursive Cyrillic script, it was incomprehensible to her.

She felt around inside the bag a last time and checked its pockets. She looked over the humpy again and knew it wasn't here. He must have it.

The promontory shimmered and baked, silent, under the raw sun. The sunlight glared off the white limestone where the wind had stripped the skin from the earth. A glossy knot of crows unfurled at Hide-Away's approach and dispersed like black seeds over the water towards the dry paddock. The carcass of a fox lay in the grass, its face dried out to a milky one-eyed snarl, its belly torn open and the hollowed ribcage teeming with swollen flies. It was symbolic of the end to a punitive summer. By the sea he hadn't noticed the effects of the worsening drought except when he rowed down to Goolwa. Then he saw the whirlwinds of sand lifting off the dry-out of the lake beds on the other side of the barrages. He also noticed the growing numbers of birds descending on the Coorong, starved and exhausted.

He passed clean beds of upturned earth where the garden was being started over. At the shack, he peered into the darkened hallway through the wire-screen door and could feel the cool air from inside passing through the mesh. When he knocked on the wooden frame the shack greeted him with blunt silence.

He walked around to the back. The shack sat precariously close to the edge of a low cliff, the two small windows like eyes squinting in the bright sunlight coruscating off the water. He looked over the edge of the cliff. Down below a woman stood with her back to him, bare feet in ankle-deep water. She wasn't Vivi. She had a loose knot of dark brown hair against her neck. She was working at a fishing net hanging from a beam bolted across two wooden posts rammed into the reef. There were several pairs of beams, all with nets slung over.

Hide-Away looked to his left, feeling he was being watched. In the window of the neighbouring shack a net curtain fell back into place. Hide-Away faced the window squarely and thought he could see the shadow of a dark head through the netting. After a

long moment, the shadow moved and was gone. He turned and walked in the other direction, along the edge of the cliff that sloped down and levelled out to the reef. A ute was parked on the bank next to an old shed. The water had receded, leaving the reef of the small bay dry and exposed. The surface was serrated, a grey-black conglomerate of shells, pebbles, mud and sand. Small pools of water filled the hollows and depressions closer to the waterline. He walked around the curve of the promontory, noticing a few wader birds at the water's edge. Godwits, he knew, from the slight upward curve and the length of their thin bills; they were either the last to leave or overwintering.

The woman and the posts came into view. She wore jeans rolled halfway up her shins, clearing the water, a white singlet under a red-chequered over-shirt with the sleeves rolled back to the elbows and her long hair pulled back into a loose bun. He could barely catch the movements of her hands as she unknotted and reknotted a torn section. She was surrounded by birds, sitting on the posts and beams. Caspian, crested and fairy terns, black and pied cormorants, silver gulls, pelicans and swallows – some were preening, others watched the water for signs of life beneath, most of them looked on the woman. A pelican sat asleep with its bill buried into its back. As Hide-Away came closer the pelican sensed him and slowly swung its head around to gaze at him. Suddenly, the birds all took to the air in a single rush of beating wings and throaty croaks, squawks and chirps, and the woman looked up.

Her eyes were a dark amber. Not quite human, almost avian.

He stood there for a long moment, not thinking to say anything, instead absorbed in exploring her lean face, undamaged and smooth; her skin, not unattractively, sallow. She never wavered as the strange silence between them drew out into what felt like minutes.

‘You’re the one in the dunes,’ she said finally, ‘the cockler.’

He nodded.

‘Hide-Away,’ she spoke again, and he felt the whole of his life gathered into three syllables.

‘Joe spoke to you, in Goolwa?’ he asked.

She nodded, ‘How did you get across?’

‘I have a boat.’

Helen looked for it, ‘I didn’t see you.’

‘It’s on the other side,’ he gestured at the promontory, then pointed to the net she was working on, ‘Your nets – torn?’

She rubbed an itch on her forehead with the back of her wrist, ‘Seals.’

Hide-Away noticed the two missing fingers, the puckered skin around the blunt stumps. The blood gugging from the wounds like milk from an overturned bottle, spreading across the thin cotton of her singlet. He met her eyes again and saw that it bothered her when he failed to look embarrassed. She went back to repairing the net. Her fingers were long and bony; the skin had weathered to a leathery brown and dark veins stood out like embedded wire.

‘Seals come down this far?’

‘Occasionally. It’s still deep out there.’

‘What kind are they?’

Helen frowned for a moment, ‘I don’t know. Fur seals, maybe.’ She stepped back and looked over the newly-repaired section then pulled the net across the beam like a curtain until she came to another torn section. She concentrated, threads looping and unlooping from her fingers into tight small knots, re-making the diamond pattern of the net. The breeze was brushing the hair away from her eyes, occasionally strong enough to make the nets stir and breathe out the smell of fish and salt.

‘You have pipis?’ she asked.

Hide-Away looked from her hands to her face. She was still working on the net, but listening, waiting for an answer.

‘Yes. In the boat.’ He lingered on her eyes again. ‘Joe didn’t tell me your name.’

‘Helen.’ She glanced at him and he saw that he still troubled her.

As he walked away the birds drifted back to their posts around her. He had the feeling they were picking up a conversation from where they'd left off.

Some days later, Hide-Away went to the trouble of trimming his beard. He had found a broken piece of mirror in the sand and wired it to the outside wall. He stood naked to the waist, cutting the beard back close to his jawline with slow careful snips in between long pauses when he studied parts of his face in the piece of mirror. When he drew back to see more of himself, Helen appeared inside the mirror's rusted edge, her reflection marred by the blooms of corrosion. She was standing on the far side of the hollow, a large bundle hanging from one hand. Hide-Away went on with trimming his beard, keeping her within the edge of the mirror. Finally, he brushed himself off and slipped his jumper back on. Helen waited on the far side till he approached her.

'I told Vivi about you. She thought you could do with these.'

She passed him a bundle of clothes tied with thick twine. They were soft and faded with age and many washes.

Helen waited outside while he boiled some water. They drank coffee sitting on the top of the low dune, looking down to the beach.

'Who lived here in the past?'

'Other Hide-Aways. Men with broken hearts. Then the humpy disappeared under a sand hill for thirty years. No one really knows about it. Those who did are gone now.'

She drew her knees close to her chest and rested her chin on her crossed arms, her eyes closed to the wind. The empty mug sat in the sand by her feet. Her body folded neatly into itself like a primrose or a dandelion at sundown. He looked back to the sea.

'Where do the women with broken hearts go?'

Helen tore out strands of dune grass and began to plait them. 'Islands,' she finally answered.

When she stood to leave, she tossed the plaited grass. Hide-Away picked it up and kept it with his things.

Late in the afternoons, he crossed the dunes to the Coorong, sometimes with pipis for Helen, other times to watch her from the wind-flattened top of a sand hill. The shacks and sheds lined the shore of the Coorong like knots in a length of rope. It was hardly a town, and too loose to be a hamlet. It seemed like a mere accident that it had been given a name – Lacepede. Only a few of the shacks appeared occupied. From the sand dunes at dusk Hide-Away would watch the lights come on, often the only sign of life day or night, and he had begun to think of the inhabitants as a nocturnal kind of people, with crepuscular lives and habits. Near Helen's shack, the exposed sandbank curved out into the water like the back of a giant seal. At the end of its tail sat the dinghy.

Helen walked along the sandbank every evening towards the boat. She was only a dark shape in the distance but in his mind he could see her bare feet and the jeans rolled halfway up her shins, her slender wrists, her dark salt-stiff hair and her amber eyes. To Hide-Away, she seemed to have been created directly out of the estuary itself – limestone, dune grass, salt, sand, egret eyes, an avian aloofness. She was as moody as the estuary. As inscrutable as the sea.

She pushed the dinghy into the water and pulled herself up over the side, Hide-Away knowing, rather than seeing, the nimbleness of her movements. The outboard motor snarled into life, rupturing the stillness like ripped fabric. She sped away across the water till she and the boat were only a small dot on the far side, a long way downstream towards the sea mouth. The motor was a dull throb, then cut.

The silence resumed.

A man appeared on the beach one morning, standing in the backwash of the waves with a surf rod in his hands. Hide-Away approached him, resentful of the intruder. The man was startled.

‘I’ve heard about you,’ he said, recovered, ‘You’re that cockler, the Slav. You livin’ it rough out here?’

Hide-Away nodded. He didn’t like him. He was a small man, emaciated. His clothes were limp with wear and engrained with old sweat and dirt.

‘Yeah, I done that a few times too. I’ve tried comin’ over here to die – just laid down in a hollow somewhere. The cold’s a bitch but she just can’t seem to kill me.’ He said it cheerily. ‘Neil,’ he proffered his hand and Hide-Away shook it, still not liking him.

Neil’s skin bore the ravages of alcoholism and chain-smoking: wrinkled, dulled and discoloured. The wind was blowing the man’s stale smells towards Hide-Away, and with it an underlying smell of disease. He had a head of fine white hair. His face was unshaven and his teeth and fingers were stained a rusty orange. His eyes were faded but darted repeatedly from one thing to another, constantly skimming his surroundings with an air of alertness which Hide-Away suspected was pretence.

‘Thought I’d get over here and get in a bit of fishin’ while I’m feelin’ good.’

Hide-Away cast his own line into the surf.

‘How long you been out here?’

Hide-Away had no idea, he had lost track of the days; ‘What month is it?’

‘Eh?’ Neil looked at him, ‘April, I think. Easter’s been, hasn’t it?’

Hide-Away shrugged. Neil grew lost in thought, trying to remember the date. After a while, he turned back to him.

‘You been associatin’ with Helen and Vivianne?’

Hide-Away gave him a sidelong look and Neil chuckled.

‘They’re an oddity, those two. There’s not a lovelier lady than Vivianne. Been thinking lately, I should scrub up and take a bunch of flowers over to her. I reckon she’d like the old-fashioned approach. But Helen...’

Hide-Away waited, testing his line, feeling the sea pulling it taut again.

‘She’s a hard nut to crack, that one. She simply walked off the face of the earth ten years ago and, just like that, comes walking back again with nothing to say to nobody. I’ve heard a rumour she’s missing two fingers.’ Neil looked at him, expecting confirmation of his titbit of gossip.

‘Does Helen owe anybody an explanation?’ Hide-Away asked.

Neil cocked his head at the question, ‘Her old man Tam for a start. The day she disappeared, Tam died inside. He was like a machine after that, his eyes went dead. Finally died a few months back. Tough as old boots. And Helen – fuckin waitin’ till he’d dropped off before she came back. Didn’t have the guts to face the man.’

‘She just disappeared?’

‘Yep. Without a trace.’

Hide-Away tested the line again, sensing a nibble, ‘She must have had her reasons.’

Neil shook his head, adamant; ‘Yeah, selfish ones. Tam raised her all on his own. Did a good job too – she was quiet, polite, but...fuckin’ cold. She was one of them kids you just couldn’t get through to. The older she got the more you knew she was wired wrong. I don’t reckon Helen ever shed a tear for her mother. She was old enough to understand – she was there when the fire went though, old enough to understand that her mum died in it.’

‘The fire?’ Hide-Away asked.

Neil looked away. His mood had changed instantly, like a door slamming shut.

‘Burnt out the scrub,’ he offered after a while, ‘And several farms too, twenty years ago. If parks and wildlife had fuckin’ looked after the place, if they’d listen to the blackfellas, maybe no one would’ve died,’ his tone was growing irate, as though Hide-Away had started a quarrel with him, ‘They should’ve been doing regular burn-offs, clearing out all

the dead shit, instead of just leaving it there to pile up for a hundred years. That's why the fire was so bad.' He lapsed into silence.

Hide-Away caught two small tuna in the course of the morning. Neil eyed them lying on the sand with a look of disdain and muttered, 'Never could fish for shit anyway.'

Hide-Away offered him one which Neil tried to refuse but there was a queer look in his eyes and Hide-Away suspected it had been a while since the man last had a decent meal. Neil accepted and Hide-Away walked with him back to the Coorong, leading him well clear of the humpy. Away from the cold blast of the beach, the day was hot and sticky. The smell of salt and dead crabs hung heavily on the air.

Neil sniffed sharply, 'Know what this place smells like?'

Hide-Away shook his head.

'Cunt. Stinks of cunt.'

Vivi was at Galway's shack, remaking his bed with the linen she had washed for him earlier that morning. Galway sat with his back to her, his hand curled around a glass of water and lemon juice on the end of the chair's arm. She had made a few attempts at conversation but Galway was taciturn. She was becoming familiar with this mood, when he could spend whole days sitting in a brooding fog of silence.

While she was in the kitchen, packing away the groceries Galway had delivered once a fortnight, a pleasant incense smell started to waft through the shack. When she came back into his room he was leaning his head back, a bong in his hand. He was holding his breath, his chest expanded and full. A moment later he exhaled a steady stream of white musty-smelling smoke in one long sigh. He flicked his eyes to Vivi's face as she sat down on the window sill in front of him. The stoniness was gone from his expressions. His limbs sprawled loosely over the chair.

Galway flicked his lighter, bringing the flame to the cap of the bong and inhaled; the water bubbled with an ominous tinkling sound. He exhaled, careful that the stream of smoke avoided Vivi.

'When's Helen going to come see me?' he asked her, his tone sullen.

'Um, I don't know,' the question confused her, she was not aware of more than a passing acquaintance between them, 'Were you expecting her to?'

He shrugged.

'I'll let her know you asked.'

'Is she still angry with me?'

Vivi was more uncertain, 'She's never talked about you. Did something happen?'

'A long time ago.'

She knew he wanted her to ask questions which he could then flatly refuse to answer – he liked that kind of attention. Instead, she picked out pieces of lint on her skirt. When she looked up again, Galway's eyes were on her.

'Why do you never offer me...' she pointed to the bong, 'a bit of that?'

He gave her a strangely shy smile, 'Women like you don't usually approve o' yarndi.'

'Women like me?' She heard the tightness in her voice.

He nodded.

'This isn't actually who I wanted to be. Not even close.'

'Unna?' he was reaching for the cigarettes on his bedside table. He lit a smoke, inhaled, held it in his lungs for a long moment, then exhaled. When he turned his head to look at Vivi again, his eyes were glassy, more bloodshot.

Galway pointed his chin at the window and Vivi turned to look. Hide-Away was on the water, the oar strokes slow and graceful. He was coming across. Helen had disappeared into the woodlands earlier that day; she would not be down on the reef to meet him.

'I should be going,' Vivi said, turning to face Galway. She could feel the heat blooming across her skin. 'Helen always meets him,' she felt the need to explain, 'but she's gone off into her own world this morning.'

He shrugged as if he didn't really care, 'Mah. Get on down there then.'

Vivi was already standing on the reef, hugging her woollen cardigan close around her thin summer dress, as Hide-Away pulled the boat up onto the rock. He produced a hessian bag dripping wet with cockles.

'What do you need?' she asked.

'Nothing today. Helen's not here?'

'She's vanished for the day. Do you want to come up for a cuppa?' Vivi asked him, 'I've made a fruitcake. It's my latest achievement with the wood stove.'

Hide-Away declined, 'I should head back before it gets dark.'

‘You have time,’ she assured him.

Reluctantly he agreed, walking behind her up to the cliff path to the shack.

Hide-Away seemed more ill-at-ease in the kitchen now than on the night of his arrival. He stood by the woodstove with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his coat, a large black shadow dimming the afternoon sun so that Vivi felt compelled to turn the kitchen light on. When she came near him, she was aware of the smell of his body, something she had not noticed on that first night. From living in the dunes, she thought to herself. It was a clean wild smell, of dark humus and ginger.

Vivi moved about with ungainliness, her familiarity with the kitchen’s dimensions and edges and surfaces suddenly awry. She misjudged the distance between stove and table and walked hard into the corner of the tabletop; there would be a dark purple bruise on her thigh by the time she undressed for bed. She forgot her special trick to get the drawer by the sink open, she tugged hard and it suddenly came free, she lurched back, catching herself on the back of a chair. Hide-Away asked if she needed a hand. Vivi waved him away, breathless.

She was relieved to be sitting down, the tea poured. Hide-Away broke pieces off his slice of cake, his jaw barely moving as he ate a little piece at a time. The cake was not the success she had thought, the bottom had burnt and the rest had dried out, making it bland and hard to swallow. She looked on, privately embarrassed, as Hide-Away finished his slice.

‘I don’t think I could survive the way you do,’ Vivi said, ‘I was so glad Helen decided to stay for a while. I’m not good on my own.’

‘I’m not on my own,’ Hide-Away replied, his voice deeper and softer than Vivi remembered, ‘Do you hear the bristlebirds in the morning?’

‘No. I wouldn’t know a bristlebird if I was looking at one.’

‘You won’t find yourself looking at a bristlebird. They are difficult to see. And they only live in the sand dunes. But their songs are very clear. They can be heard on the water. They song-share. Each pair shares a portion of their songs with the surroundings pairs so

they can know each other. It's how they flush out trespassers, because there are songlines unique to each hollow. It is language – it surrounds me. I think they sing about me sometimes. How could I find that lonely?'

'Indeed,' Vivi replied with a smile, 'I guess you're seeing a lot of Helen, too?'

They were interrupted by a bird flying into the kitchen window. Both looked up and watched as the bird, a magpie, scabbled for a foothold on the frame while it savagely interrogated its reflection in the glass. It dropped out of view and then reappeared, its wings beating in a flurry against the glass. It gave up and disappeared into the fig tree.

Vivi looked back to Bojan, 'It's only that window. It drives the birds to distraction.'

Hide-Away added another spoonful of sugar to his half-finished tea.

'When they see their reflection, they see an intruder,' he said, before taking a sip.

'An unfamiliar face.'

'Yes.'

'I often think I don't know what my own face looks like.'

'That's not unusual.' He downed the rest of his tea and seemed ill-at-ease still.

'You should get going,' Vivi said, releasing him, 'It'll be dark soon.'

Rowing back to the Hummocks, Hide-Away was thinking about Vivi.

She's a seed-eater. Her eyes have the lucid thirst of a granivore.

Hide-Away jolted awake. The flame in the lamp was low. His book lay open under his arms. A sound had woken him, a crash, he thought. He had fallen asleep to the sounds of the storm. He listened and heard only the wind outside. Then a banging started from the roof, a sheet of iron had come loose. One of the rocks had slid off. Outside it was just on nightfall and the dunes were shrouded in drizzling rain. Another front of storm clouds was coming towards him from the sea. A large rock sat in the sand, too heavy for him to lift on his own. He pulled himself up onto the roof of the humpy and stepped gingerly across to edge another rock carefully down the slight incline until it sat over the loose sheet. He stood up to his full height to feel the blast of the wind.

Through a break in the rain he saw a human shape in the distance. The breath caught in his throat and he felt a knot in the pit of his stomach being tugged, unravelling. *Helen.* She appeared calm, walking casually along the edge of the waves, stopping every now and then to pick up a shell or to stare out into the dark oblivion that hung over the ocean: the other side of the storm.

He jumped from the roof to the ground and ran down to the beach. Helen was drenched through but appeared impervious to the cold. Her feet were bare and her jeans rolled up her shins, there was no sign of her shoes.

‘We’re in the eye of the storm,’ he told her, trying to make himself heard over the surf.

She turned to him, her eyes brightened by the cold.

‘Have you been out here all this time?’

She nodded.

He glanced again at the approaching storm front; ‘Come on. Come inside.’

Inside, Hide-Away set the kettle to boil and stoked the fire back to life. ‘You should change. Your clothes are wet,’ he said, not looking at her, ‘I can give you some dry ones.’

When Helen failed to answer, he turned to look at her and felt his whole body falter. He had seen her like this before. Her hair was a mess, dripping wet around her pale face, dark shadows circled her searing yellow eyes.

‘Helen?’

He approached her and hesitated. She shivered then. Hide-Away picked up the blanket and then a woollen jumper and a pair of trousers. He held them out for her to take and Helen stared at the clothes with uncertainty. She took hold of the jumper and held it to her face, breathing in, ‘It smells of you.’

‘You can wear it?’

She nodded. He turned his back to give her privacy.

Later, as he scaled and filleted some fish, he watched her out of the corner of his eye while she took in the changed aspect of the shack’s interior. He had nailed small wooden crates to the walls as shelves. The shelf near the bed held the books he borrowed from the Goolwa library: local history, the flora of South Australia, and a photographic book on the Indigenous nations of Australia. The shelf near the door held his grooming kit. Helen took down the bottle of aftershave, removed the lid and inhaled. Hide-Away felt disarmed.

The third shelf above the bench held his basic provisions – pasta, bulbs of garlic, sun-dried chillies, paprika, olive oil, salami, a block of hard cheese, a jar of coffee beans, two bottles of wine from a local vineyard on the eastern side of the lake. On one of his trips to Goolwa he had found a shabby second-hand shop where he bought an antique coffee grinder and an ugly plastic coffee plunger.

Helen moved to sit by the fire and Hide-Away passed her a mug of steaming tea. She went still and then looked at him, ‘Did you hear them? Oystercatchers.’

He shook his head and she turned to stare into the fire.

Hide-Away placed a small saucepan on top of the drum for the white beans and a frypan he had drizzled with olive oil onto the coals. He waited for the shimmer to appear on the oil, then took it out, throwing in chopped garlic and flakes of dried chilli – they hissed and sizzled and filled the humpy with heady aromas. He felt suddenly conscious of the funky smells and sounds and avoided looking at Helen. He tossed in the fillets of fish and placed the pan back on the coals. He served them with mashed white beans and chunks of bread and poured wine into the enamel mugs. He felt her eyes on him when he bowed his head and murmured a short grace in Bosnian.

Helen tasted the fish and gave him an impressed smile. ‘Most people cook fish badly, I’ve discovered. It’s usually the kind of thing I’d rather not eat if someone else has cooked it; same with soups. It’s like wearing someone else’s dirty socks.’

Hide-Away chuckled, a little surprised by this glimpse of humour.

Helen’s eyes fell on the small icon he had hung on the wall, an old image of the Virgin Mary and child, the gold leaf of the halos glinting in the lamplight. He watched her, waiting. She looked at him with a smile that was almost shy.

‘It was given to me by an old neighbour, Sergei,’ he offered, ‘He was Russian Orthodox. He used to take me along to mass when I was a teenager. It appealed to my love of rituals.’

‘You’re Russian Orthodox?’

‘No,’ Hide-Away smiled, ‘I became an ornithologist – for the same reason.’

‘The love of rituals?’

He nodded.

‘I like that.’

Hide-Away barely stirred when she rose, changed into her dry clothes and quietly left the humpy. The ocean’s mood was sullen in the leaden light. Sea-weed and wrack lined the

high-tide mark on the beach. Helen walked in the backwash, her eyes on the water that streamed around her feet. She picked up whelks, spindles, dove shells, small cowries and moon snails, stiff sea horses and live urchins.

Hide-Away had laid the bedroll out for her next to the fire and then laid down a few metres away in a corner plunged in shadow. Helen was awake for a long time. The firelight that flickered over the rough walls of the humpy seemed to enclose them in a space that belonged to different world: earlier and hand-made. She heard him sigh and turn onto his back. He was awake, the firelight catching his eye. *Like the green speculum on a duck's wing*, she thought. She rose to her feet and Hide-Away turned his head to look up at her when she stood next to him. He reached out and pushed the hem of her trouser up, placing his hand around her calf muscle, his fingers brushing the sensitive hollow behind her knee. When she lay down over him, he buried a hand in her hair and kissed her with the slow easy grace of an old lover.

There was a flurry of wings at her feet and she saw a bird tumble away into a pile of seaweed. She carefully scooped it up in her two hands. A fairy prion. A pale grey bird with white chest and underwings, its wings outlined in dark grey-blue, its bill narrow and short with a strong hook. It had been driven ashore by the storm. It blinked, unresisting in her hands against her chest and she turned her back to shelter it from the wind off the waves. And of all things, she suddenly remembered the pump shed.

It was an old stone hut by the edge of the lake with a heavy wooden door and a misty window. It was a damp cool room inhabited by frogs, geckoes and sleepy lizards. In summer the air was fetid with the smell of carp and diesel but in winter it was earthy and cosy with the thrum of the pump. Swallows got in under the roof and built mud-nests against the rafters. When Helen was seven years old it was her favourite place, where she would spend the afternoons pretending it was her house, deep in a great forested swamp, and

the line of ranges across the lake was the dark and sinister country of Russia. She caught imaginary fish and cooked them in the rotted cupboard which in her world was a black wood oven like Seanáthair had in his shack.

Birds descended on her house and turned into humans wearing thick feathered coats that were the rich colours of their bird forms. They all feasted on her fish and bread and told her stories of the oceans, of deserts of white sand and ancient cities buried beneath, of dark mountains where wild men played violins as a kind of black magic. And an owl came one day and turned into a cailleach who told her there was a lonely hunter living deep in a swampy forest on the other side of the world. The cailleach turned Helen into a white egret and told her that she must follow the Linnutee and go to him.

Helen took to the sky by running with arms outstretched and beating them slowly like the egrets flying over the lake. She ran across paddocks and along farm tracks, through the sheep yards and down the centre of the empty shearing shed and out again into more paddocks that sloped upwards away from the lake. She came finally into the pine forest, her arms burning with ache. She found the hunter by a ring of stones Galway had shown her only the day before – *an old camping place*, he had told her, *my people slept here once, they cooked thukeri an' wanggami on that old fire there*. The hunter fell in love with her and she stayed till the end of summer, and then told him she must return to her homeland. She promised she would return again at the end of winter and the hunter let her go. Helen flew all the way back to the pump shed and found the door closed when she had left it open.

She could hear sounds from inside and pushed the door open a crack. She peered into the dimness and was transfixed by the sight of a naked brown bum, the muscles flexing. He wore a black jumper and a beanie. In front of him, her mother's long hair fell across her face and over his shoulder. She was braced into the space of the window, her long bare legs on either side of the body that pushed against her. She ran a hand through her hair and threw it back, lifting her face up to the swallows' nests in the rafters.

Helen stepped away from the hut. She knew she'd seen something she shouldn't have and felt a small knot of fear in her chest. She wished she was with Seanáthair at that moment. She stalked off along the lake to where the lignums grew like a thick jungle with tunnelled muddy paths that had been created by the cows.

That evening Fae sat Helen down at the kitchen table with paper and crayons while she prepared dinner. Helen started to draw her house in the swamp and the silver-haired cailleach pointing a wand at an egret.

'What did you get up to this afternoon, armas?' she asked, turning from the stove to lean against the bench and watch Helen.

Helen glanced up and then back to her drawing, 'I made cubby houses at the lake.'

'What, in the lignums?'

Helen nodded.

'What else did you do?'

Helen could feel Fae circling her like a buzzard.

'I played with the kittens in the hay shed.'

Fae let the silence draw out. Helen didn't breathe.

'You didn't go near the pump shed?'

Helen shook her head slowly from side to side, intent on her drawing.

Fae's hand shot out and grabbed Helen's chin in a hard bird-claw grip. Helen mewed a faint protest, her chin hurting, as Fae forced her head up to meet her eyes. Her face was like a bleak wilderness of stone.

'Lies have short little legs, Helen,' she said, voicing each word like the swipe of a thin blade on a wet stone, 'So don't you say a word.'

The next day Fae took her to Lacepede and Helen ran down to the reef where Seanáthair was repairing a tear in the net. She flapped her arms like an egret as she drifted down towards him, holding in both hands the drawings she had done the night before.

'I wanna tell you a story, Seanáthair!'

She gave them to him with pride and told him the story of the egret woman who lived in the forest and journeyed every summer to be with her hunter on the other side of the world. Seanáthair liked it. It was a patchwork of bits and pieces Helen had taken from the stories he had told her. Except he didn't know what the Linnutee was.

'The Bird's Way,' Helen told him.

'Is it? Where'd you learn that?'

'I made it up,' Helen lied. She noticed Seanáthair flicked a glance at her mother.

'She's like a sponge, Dad,' Fae was defensive, 'She could have heard it anywhere.'

He turned back to Helen, 'How did it end for your egret woman?'

'She lost her house.'

'Really?' This was a new twist.

Helen caught the withering look Fae shot at her.

'A wicked black eagle and his wife came along and destroyed it.'

Helen carefully tucked the prion under her jumper. The close warm darkness would send it to sleep. She turned back for the humpy. It was better for the bird if Hide-Away cared for it, so close to the sea.

As she got nearer she could smell brewed coffee from the beach.

Hide-Away glanced up from the table as he poured coffee into a bowl with torn chunks of bread. Without a word, he pointed with his spoon to the cleaned mug on the bench. She poured herself a coffee and sat on the threshold of the door, looking out into the hollow of the dune on one side, into the humpy on the other. She could feel his eyes on her between spoonfuls of coffee-soaked bread.

When she had finished her coffee, she brought the sleepy prion out from under her jumper.

‘Can you look after him? He just needs a box, warmth and darkness to sleep off the shock. He should be okay in a few hours.’

Hide-Away nodded. Helen rose to leave.

‘Will you come back?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He stood to take the bird from her hands. He barely moved as he touched his mouth to her temple. Helen stood still and absorbed the nearness of him, his height and broadness, the rough fabric of his green woollen jumper.

In the dunes, she passed Neil walking towards the beach, a surf rod against his shoulder. He looked up as she approached, gave her a curt nod and walked on. Helen paused, catching the heady waft of booze and cigarette smoke, and turned as Neil threw a skulking backward look at her as he disappeared through a thicket of boobiallas.

limosa

Hide-Away knocked on the door of the shack and waited. The door wasn't closed properly and he pushed it open to stand on the threshold, listening to the music that was ringing off the cold tin walls of the small passageway. At the end, a door stood open into a dark room. The woman's voice flowed through a winding melody as easily as water, accompanied by a lute. The pentatonic key was pensive; voice and lute belonged to the shack's interior winter darkness.

To call out was to intrude; arrogance.

He stepped inside, into the space of the tidal song. The kitchen was empty. He looked into the bedroom opposite. Most of the small room was taken up by a cast-iron bed. On the bedside table, the glass of a small photo frame glinted dimly, reflecting some unknown source of light within the room. At the end of the passage, the door led into the lean-to. A single bed stood beneath a small window, the curtains were closed. He gradually saw the outline of Vivi's body. She was lying down on her back, a long pallid arm laid across her eyes. Blond hair trailed over the side of the pillow. The bodily scent of sleep hung on the air.

Silently, he stepped backwards into the hall. As he turned for the front door he saw a shadow slink into the kitchen. He looked in but there was no one there. The room was warm from the woodstove and there was a faint smell like rotting citrus. As he passed the other bedroom, he realised it must be Helen's, but allowed himself only a passing glimpse.

Vivi woke to the sound of the wirescreen door swinging shut against the frame. She rose to her feet and checked the passage. Empty. She pulled back the curtains in her room, unsure

how much of the day had passed, and saw Hide-Away's back as he walked away down to the reef.

She watched him keenly, the way he moved with that distinct gait that was slow and graceful. So graceful it verged on ludicrous. Light-footed, lazily fluid. Her chest felt like a broken drum – he had been here, she could have spoken to him. She had missed the opportunity. The story of her life, she thought with a resigned sigh, which was no story at all – stories had a habit of stealing past her while she wasn't looking.

Helen's ute was pulled up on the bank. It was late in the afternoon, she would be going out soon to cast her nets. She had been in the woodlands for most of the day, coming back after lunch with broken fingernails and cuticles bleeding and engrained with dirt. It had become a familiar sight and the only time Vivi asked what Helen was doing out there, Helen was evasive, answering, 'I think you'd rather not know.'

Vivi watched from the window as Helen and Hide-Away stood by the ute, talking for several minutes. Then Hide-Away walked down to the bank and pushed the *Moonbird* back onto the water, leaving. She noticed Helen didn't linger to watch.

Vivi let the curtain fall, her room dark again. She'd had a brief dream, she was remembering it now – not even a dream really. She had felt a mild coldness blow over her body. It could have been Hide-Away, looking at her while she slept. She rubbed her face with both hands and felt sand in her hairline, around her ears, in her eyebrows. She felt over her pillow, there were more grains. She brushed them off. The wind was always blowing sand across the water from the dunes – it got into everything.

Helen came in long after dark. Vivi placed bowls of lamb stew on the table, giving her a sidelong look as Helen shrugged out of her jacket and boots. She sat across the table from Helen and watched as she ate in silence. There were things about her that Vivi imagined to be Helen's Estonian-ness. Her sparrow-like appetite, her bird-boned wrists and hands. The fine dark strands of new hair growing near her temples, fraying from the loose side braid she always wore to sweep the hair away from her face, twisting the rest of it at the

back into a loose chignon. What woman living in these backwaters wore her hair like that, flouting the conservative fashions with that air of loose and easy elegance? Could the hair-style be some innate European thing? Helen's sallow complexion combined with the strong lines of her cheekbones and jaw struck Vivi as particularly Germanic.

And then there were those dark sulphuric eyes. The female bloodline. The Birdline.

Eliina stole her frae me. Tam's voice rasped and clicked in the early hours of the morning. She abandoned us, then came back and stole the girls. If we'd had a boy she wouldnae cared.

'I've been meaning to ask,' Vivi broke the silence, 'What was Tam's thing about menthol cigarettes? He was always insisting he could smell them, someone smoking them. I'd never heard of them – menthol cigarettes – Galway tells me they're horrible.'

She noticed Helen wouldn't look at her. She was sitting very still, perched over her bowl, the spoon unmoving in her hand, resting on the edge. Vivi started to ramble.

'I guess it was the cancer, and a bit of dementia,' she tried for a tone of affectionate sympathy, clawing for some response from Helen, 'Menthol cigarettes. Salted cod. He talked about a lighthouse – said it kept him awake, flashing into his room. I think he might have been remembering his childhood. He was from an island, wasn't he? One of the Orkneys?'

When Helen lifted her head, Vivi blinked slowly at the look levelled at her. She wanted to keep her eyes closed but opened them again. She knew at a visceral level that she had strayed too far into the uncharted space between them. Something was agitating in that space; Vivi felt exposed, like a little brown mouse on a rock. Her eyes were straining. She noticed how dull the light actually was in the kitchen. Helen was scrutinising her. Vivi braced herself.

'Tam came for you, because you were destitute?'

'He was in a desperate state himself.'

'He'd have put a bullet in his head than have someone else wipe his arse.'

‘He was very frail.’

‘He had knives, Vivi, very sharp ones.’

‘Well, I *was* destitute.’

Helen was vehement, ‘Tam wouldn’t give a fuck about that. What did he really want with you?’

‘I – I don’t know. He’d call for me when he woke up and – wanting to tell me stories. Maybe he wanted to pass them on to someone. He just wanted a listener. That’s all I did – listen. Otherwise, he didn’t let me near him. Not till the very end, when he didn’t know what was what.’

Vivi guessed, from the way Helen’s expression relented, that something of what she had said rang true to Helen.

Helen picked up her mug of tea and it slid from her fingers and clattered on to the table, hot tea spilling everywhere. Helen started to her feet, her face ashen.

‘I’ll get a cloth,’ Vivi said, springing to her feet, but Helen reached the sink first. Vivi stood by as Helen mopped up the mess. She dumped her dishes in the sink and stood still for a moment, her hands pressed against the edge of the bench, her shoulders tight and rigid. Vivi couldn’t tell if the pain was physical or emotional. She realised that the mug had slipped from the hand with the missing fingers.

‘It’s okay, Helen,’ she said as she put a hand on her shoulder, ‘No harm done.’

Helen threw off Vivi’s hand and stormed out of the kitchen. The front door of the shack slammed shut behind her.

Vivi waited for her limbs to feel solid again and then returned to her chair at the table. Fat was congealing on the surface of the stew. She pushed it away.

Stupid. Stupid. ‘No harm done’? Really?

She ran a hand along her lower arm and brushed more sand away from her skin. She stared down unblinking at her arms and the fine layer of redbrown sand on the table top.

Redbrown. Not white.

I'm shedding sand, she thought to herself.

Vivi had always felt the high altitudes of the gibber plain. Here, the desert suddenly fell away at the edge of the salt lake. She imagined the salt was eating its way down to find the old sea. The land broke into blunt terraced slabs of plains. The south-bound highway was a series of sudden plunges over the edge of the earth. Brown tablelands jutted upwards like eroded islands and coastlines in a sea of wind, their tops planed off smooth and level. The gibber stones were the brown and burnished residues of lost landscapes.

The morning she left, the lake-cliffs were blood red from the rising sun, the salt sheet shimmering pink. The sun rose and fell quickly here. In the space of minutes the cliffs were washed out in the haze of a mirage which filled the lake and refracted the domineering sky.

On the road she wound her window down to feel the hot wind rake through her long hair; the back of her linen blouse was drenched in sweat against the vinyl-covered seat. As she drove, her mind and body slid from level to level, slowly descending from the relentless horizons of the gibber plains into a shallow sea of silver green, a seabed red as paprika.

She reached Port Augusta in the afternoon. It had become muggy and the briny stink of salt from the gulf hung over the town. At the truck stop a man watched her for some minutes; he was so faded by the heat and the sun he seemed immaterial. He stopped her as she was walking through the bowsers towards the diner. It was about the smell coming from her car, of burning oil. Reluctantly, she let him take a look under the hood while she went in to pay for the fuel. The engine was covered in black grime, riddled with oil leaks.

It'll get me to Adelaide, she insisted.

He told her she was game. A lone woman like her, broken down on the highway – did she know what kind of a temptation she would be? Vivi could not stop looking at him; he appeared uncemented, as though he might crumble like compacted sand. She caught the swift way he looked her up and down and she took a step back – it was his eyes that alarmed

her: they had opalised. He said he was a miner, from Andamooka. He reached into his pocket and brought out an opalised nautilus shell as big as his palm, it was a milky iridescent green.

You know, I hear it when I'm down there, it's so dead quiet, he said; his pupils were permanently dilated, giving his manner and his words an odd intensity, *I hear the sea*.

Vivi took another step away from him, thanked him and got back into her car. She spun the wheels in the loose gravel of the car park and swerved back onto the highway.

Lately, she had been seeing the miner in her own reflections but could no longer evoke the fear he had stirred up in her. She had never found a name for it. She leaned in close to the mirror some mornings and saw an odd glimmer in the whites of her eyes. A glimmer of opal.

So the desert had finally recovered her. Months ago, she was stopped mid-step one morning as she crossed the school quadrangle – she knew that hot panting wind, the one stripping the farmlands bare, its breath smelling of old carcass and rib-clinging hunger. But the desert's journey had been mostly a chthonic one: drinking the aquifers dry and leaving the gums to wither. She had watched them day after day along the road to Pitlochry. They went thin in the leaves, lost their lustre, and then the brown set in, starting at the edges. Then the earth started to crack and fracture above the hard bony back of this beast as it broke its way through. Great chunks of bank started to slide into the river. In the lakes, it was pushing the past up through the mud to the surface where it rapidly oxidised on exposure to the air. Acid sulphate soils. Hob-nailed boots. The petrified stumps of an ancient forest. The rib cages of sunken paddle steamers. She read about them with interest in the regional paper with a growing sense that her own past was impending.

And finally it was here. Under her garden, lapping up the bucketfuls of rainwater she poured into the limestone earth. It turned her vegetables bitter before she could eat them. The spines of the carrots turned to wood. The spinach and lettuces bolted barely out of their seedlinghood. The broccoli sprouted flowers before their heads were larger than golf balls.

When the desert emerged from the shade of the peppercorn it came to her on silent feet, soft and padded for walking the scorched earth.

Bones and fur, with her own black thirsty eyes.

I left to find culture.

She still didn't know what she meant by that.

The desert nuzzled its velvet black nose against her thigh, then sat on its hindquarters, its tail wagging gently in the dry dirt, soft ears pricked to the faint beat of Vivi's hibernating heart.

I can't remember if I really grieved for her. With the way life simply went on...it was like her dying wasn't any different to when cattle died, or one of the kelpies.

But some things she kept remembering: the tap at the bottom of the bore water tank, crusted solid with scales of calcium; the deep soft gong when her sister hit the side of it with a long piece of mulga and turned to look at her with a dusty smile.

Henry fell for her eyes. They were unnatural, like polished buttons of black stone. They made him think of deep wells of water – attractive to a man constantly stalked by drought. His first wife, he told Vivi, hers had been those of an egret’s – the strangest colour, like topaz. Hard and glassy. Alien and unsympathetic.

The titles to the family station were passed on to Henry as a wedding present from his parents. In a fast and breathy *sotto voce* at the long mahogany table, his mother bent her head down with Vivi’s and told her they felt Henry could be trusted now. Common sense had prevailed with his choice of second wife: a demure, middle-of-the-road woman, one of their own kind. They were impressed with the credentials of her father’s station in the far north, as though that vouched for Vivi’s moral fibre, for her durability.

Demure. For days, Vivi swallowed her rancour till there was a citric bitterness in the back of her throat.

The homestead was set back into the low sandy hills, beyond the marshlands that fringed the lake, with a long curving driveway lined with slim river gums. It was a large single-storey stone house from the earliest days of white settlement, with an iron-ribbed glass conservatory built on the side – a remnant of the family’s once large Edwardian fortune, but now dilapidated and partially enveloped in old peppercorn trees. In the conservatory was an old Rönisch grand piano that had belonged to Henry’s mother, left there for Vivi.

Inside the house, the ceilings were high and the rooms always a little too dark. Vivi started examining her arms and her face in the mirror, convinced that the dark house was

causing her to whiten till she looked anaemic. Henry assured her that he couldn't see any change. Vivi thought she understood how plants felt when they were hungry for light and went all leggy and thin. She spent most of her spare time in the conservatory where the morning sun flooded through the panes of uneven glass.

From there she watched the lake as she practiced scales, arpeggios and Hanon exercises. The lake was not beautiful; there were no trees or reeds, just a grassy bank between the water and the marshland along which the birds congregated and shat – pelicans, cormorants, herons, gulls, ducks, swamphens – a line of them that stretched for hundreds of metres on a fine day. When the shoreline was devoid of birds and a cold misty scud was blowing over the water, she felt its sadness, watched the air turning grey. It was a sluggish-flowing, muddy lake. Up close the water was greenish grey and lightless. Dull and uniform. During seasons of drought, when Henry had to wade into the mud of the channel to take pipelines out to the receding shoreline, he always came back with the stink of carp in his skin; it lingered on, tainting his freshly showered body, hanging on the warm darkness as he sweated in his sleep.

Sometimes, in the early hours of the morning, she was woken by eerie hollow booms coming from the lake, followed by the distant cries and cheeps of birds disturbed from their sleep. She asked around; everyone was familiar with the sounds but no-one knew for certain what caused them. The neighbouring farmer told her his theory that there were large caverns under the lake and the sound was caused by the tide's pull on the subterranean water. Up until that conversation, Vivi had not thought of the lake as affected by the tides. The flows were so regulated and controlled that most days the lake took on an ugliness that Vivi associated with the singular utilitarian purpose it had been reduced to. She had come to assume that this airless water would be impervious to such elemental and feminine forces as tides and flood pulses. She started listening for the tide times on the news, then she would

walk down to the lakeshore some evenings to look for its signs. They were barely perceptible. Sometimes she thought she felt the tide in herself, faint and subdued, as it was with the lake. But it was there – an unseen contour. And when she imagined how the lake must have appeared, without the barrages, open to the sea and to the floods, without the accumulating silt and voracious carps, she realised it was a whole other lake. Sacrificed by a people with no mind for beauty. Another lost landscape to haunt her.

In the dark of the night, when she heard the booms from deep under the water, she felt she could walk out the door and arrive at the shore of that other lake. The deep hollow pulse was like a mythic uterine heartbeat. When the droughts came, the lake fell silent and Vivi grieved for the mysterious sound.

She was driving home from Pitlochry one day not long after she had started giving piano lessons at the local school. She turned off the bitumen road onto a dirt track fringed on both sides by thick lines of sheoak trees. The track ran straight for several kilometres, cresting low hills where she caught glimpses of the Coorong sand dunes on the horizon. On one side of the track, the farmland turned to thick bush. She drove slowly, unthinking, till she slowed to a stop, the car immersed in the shade of the sheoaks. She turned the engine off and sat there, her hands on the steering wheel. The minutes ticked away on her watch. She stared unseeing at the furrowed track. The car grew warm. She lifted her hands away from the wheel and burrowed her face into her fingers. And then she was crying.

This is not what I wanted. Over and over in her mind, her only thought at first. They were supposed to be passionate, hungry for each other. She had expected some kind of an awakening. Not her legs bouncing off his body while he pumped into her like a machine. Wet drops would land on her face in the darkness and she couldn't tell if it was sweat or spittle. She was always sore afterwards with pinprick blisters in her crotch that stung when she pissed urine that stank of infection.

The tears were sliding down her neck. The car had got hot and the shopping on the seat beside her was sweating. When she got home, the ice cream had melted and the lettuce and broccoli had gone brown and bad-smelling in their plastic bags. That evening as Vivi was serving up dinner, Henry noticed the amount of shopping dumped in the bin and asked her how half of it could go bad in the half hour it took to drive home from the shops in Meningie. Vivi couldn't think of anything to say and stood mute by the sink, twisting her hands in the tea towel.

'I'm sorry,' she said finally.

She was apologising to him for letting the shopping go bad but contained within, like an almond kernel, was an apology for herself alone.

One door had remained closed since the first day of Henry and Vivi's married life at the homestead. There was no unspoken rule that the room was off limits, no air of mystery; it had merely remained unmentioned. It was almost a year before Vivi tried the door knob for the first time, finally curious. The bulb blew as soon as she flicked the switch. The brief flash of light had revealed garish purple and red carpet and an unmade bed. It was a child's room.

She went to the window and pulled the curtains back. Light avalanches of dust fell from the drapes. The bed-head was a shelf filled with children's novels and a collection of small objects – sea shells, bits of smoothed driftwood and large eagle feathers that had collected a thick layer of dust. In the drawer of the bedside cupboard were photographs. A woman and a small girl. Vivi went still, her eyes locked on the image. Fae and Helen.

Fae was beautiful. Vivi felt a wall inside her head suddenly, partially, crumble. No one had told her – not Henry, his mother, the women in the shearing sheds, the women in Meningie. No one had said anything to Vivi about Fae; at times it had been easy to almost forget that Henry had been married before. At the wedding, Tam had stood by the door at

the back of the congregation, holding a small Helen in his arms; there was the suggestion in the way they stood that they weren't staying long, and they were gone before the service was finished. In the beginning, Vivi had been relieved by Helen's absence from their lives and by the girl's seeming irrelevance to Henry's family. A clean slate. No prior claims that could, in the mere mention of a name, exclude Vivi from so completely from Henry's past.

Fae was standing on the shore of the lake with Helen, no older than two years, on her hip. The sun was behind her, her upper body a willowy silhouette through the gauzy white shirt, her long legs lean and brown. Her dark hair was fanned out around her face by a breeze. Her arms were thin and tanned olive. There was an old-fashioned word for that kind of smile: artless. But amber-coloured eyes full of knowing.

The other photo showed the two of them sitting on the verandah steps of the homestead, Fae in tight dark jeans and an oversized white sweater and large gaudy sunglasses, her long hair draped over her shoulder. Helen, maybe five years old, looked directly into the camera, unsmiling, distrustful.

Vivi stared. She couldn't breathe. The window wouldn't budge; she had to put all her might into it. As the frame started to give she gave it a violent push and the frame lifted with a screech. She could smell rain. She still couldn't breathe.

That night she pressed her body along the length of Henry's as he lay with his back to her, craving for some kind of certainty. She rested her head in the depression between his shoulder blades and laid her arm over his hip, her hand on his thigh. Henry stirred in his sleep and grumbled at her to give him some space, she was making him claustrophobic. Vivi turned away, her eyes wide open in the dark, and waited for Henry's breathing to go back to its sleeping rhythm. She got out of bed and went outside onto the verandah.

The rain had failed to arrive that afternoon. It had fallen halfway through the sky above the lake, only to disappear mid-air. The night sky was empty but the stars were dim. On the marshlands the black shapes of swans were drifting against the mercurial reflection of the night. She sat down on the stone steps and curled her knees up close to her chest. These

same steps were in that photo. Where another woman and her daughter had posed. She bent her head down to rest her forehead on her knees and cried.

Fae was *consummately* promiscuous. Apparently.

Vivi honed the phrase for several days after overhearing the women in the shearing shed. She became conscious of the conversations around her and made a decision to eavesdrop, realising that it was something she rarely did, and was amazed at the amount of information she had been missing out on. She realised, with a shock, that she was generally excluded by the women who worked for her husband, by the wives of her husband's friends, and by the women of Meningie in general. She knew it was partly her fault: she often gave in to self-retreat, the slide inwards was so easy, almost unconscious.

Her phrase had several incarnations before she decided on 'consummate' – she thought the accompanying undertones were appropriate: skilfulness and the dark urges of an artist. A woman who *wielded* sexuality. It gave Vivi's image of Fae an incandescent vitality, her svelte limbs a kind of urgent beauty.

One of the women had spoken up, realising what the others were talking about, and implied that Fae's father had sexually molested her, adding in her loud bark over the bleating sheep, *that's how a lotta girls get to be sluts in the first place.*

Vivi kept the photos tucked inside a book of Beethoven sonatas. She rarely forgot they were there. At first she felt ashamed about taking them from Helen's room to keep for herself. She felt harassed by a strange feeling that her private act of theft had not gone unnoticed.

During a piano lesson, she stopped mid-sentence, leaning towards the music on the stand, her pencil poised over a phrase – *an arc*, she had been saying to the girl, *it needs to rise and fall, like a sentence. These phrases are sentences. Each one has meaning, this is all language—*

She closed her eyes. Searched her mind for whatever it was that had flashed past her in the blink of an eye. It was the dream from the night before. She had woken with no memory of it. The scraping sound. She had walked out into the dark hallway of the homestead and up to the front door. She stood on the tip of her toes to peer through the glass pane; the door was so large it made her feel like she was child again. Fae was standing on the other side with a chisel in her hands, scraping along the thin metal frame of the wire screen. She looked up and locked eyes with Vivi through the glass.

Fish scales, Vee. They're taking over the house. Vivi saw, then, the greenish gleam of wet fish scales covering the walls of the hallway. The other end, where the back door should have been, disappeared into blackness. It was the blackness she had woken with.

The girl was watching her, sidelong. She was sitting, unmoving, inside the curve Vivi had made with her body still leaning towards the piano.

‘Do you know Helen? The McCodrum girl? Are you friends with her?’

The girl’s posture straightened, ‘She doesn’t come to school much.’

Evasive, Vivi noted to herself, eyeing the girl’s uneasy shift on the piano stool.

‘How does she seem these days?’

The girl shrugged, her face blank, she didn’t seem to understand the question. Vivi remembered to pull herself back from the piano and return the girl to her personal space.

Occasionally, she saw Tam in the town and had come to recognise his dilapidated maroon ute with the empty red crates on the tray that was usually parked outside the pub. He walked with hunched shoulders, his beanie pulled down low and the collar of his jacket turned up

against the cold wind and the locals. When she passed him in the street, she would smile straight into his line of vision and say hello as she walked on. Tam always faltered, caught off guard by her, and Vivi would glimpse the flickers of confusion and interest that relaxed the hard lines of his gaunt, grey-stubbed face. He rarely mustered a reply and when he did it was a short and clipped, *Vivianne*.

It was years before she really spoke to him. As he passed her in the street, she asked after him, 'What is Helen doing these days?'

The man froze in his tracks and turned slowly back to look at her. He eyed her with contempt and Vivi felt it cut through the opaque mask of mindless contentment she wore when she was in Meningie.

'She's gone. Ran away last summer.'

'Oh,' it was merely a sound as she inhaled sharply, she didn't know if it was the news or his carbon-black voice which had affected her; 'We didn't know.'

'We?' Tam snapped at her, then seemed to remember that she was married to Helen's father, 'No, I told Henry. He knows.'

Vivi's breathing went shallow. She felt something large and liquid coming loose inside her body.

'He didn't tell me,' she spoke quietly. She turned her eyes down to the pavement and walked on without another word. She dumped the bags of shopping in the boot and went to get into the car when she realised that Tam still stood where they had spoken, watching her.

The sunlight of the drought was unbearably harsh. Too much, even, for Vivi. She retreated into the dark shell of the homestead during the day; after nightfall she would step into the conservatory where her piano waited in darkness. She didn't need to turn a light on. She knew the keys so well, the feel of the distance over a double octave, could plunge her hands

into Russian chords like they were cold silt. She played only one piece every night. She could stretch it out over hours with long silences, go back to an earlier phrase, go back to the beginning even – the piece allowed it. Arvo Pärt's *Für Alina*. The first note, an octave chord deep in the bass, drifted out into the deep recesses of the house, faded to a faint thrumming and then silence. Then the sparseness of a few gentle notes high in the treble – the ghost of melody, undertone and open strings.

Porous and full of the wilderness of the sky.

A dry empty sky.

She was haunted by something she had seen one afternoon when she drove home from a day of giving lessons in Meningie. The road crossed a large swamp that had dried out to a thick crust of white salt; in the heat of that afternoon it had turned into a sun glade. On the salt, in the shimmer of the mirage, she saw a ripple of black. It became an unstable vertical line and then a stick figure. The contours of black curved and bent in the heat and Vivi waited for it materialise into a girl. Vivi held her breath for her. The shape solidified – a heavy round body low to the ground with skeletal wings held out. Gradually, a pelican. Standing on the salt. Some days later the bank told Henry they were foreclosing on the station.

Vivi wanted to lose herself in a rich silence. To resonate against the timbre of sounds: bird-song, a cello, rustling sheoaks, a silken soprano singing *Voi Che Sepate*. She meant to truly lose herself –

traumatically,

irretrievably.

Vivi glanced into Galway's room and paused. He had his back to her, sitting in his chair in twilight darkness by the open window. Outside the sky was thick with black clouds while the last of the day still lingered on the air. She inhaled deeply.

The mineral-scented promise of rain.

'What is it, Vee?' came Galway's voice.

Vivi remained silent. He shifted in his chair, turning his ear to the doorway. He waited, and then, 'Vee?' He sounded anxious.

'Do you need anything else?' she asked, 'I've sorted your shopping. I threw out the bad milk in your fridge too.'

He was relaxing again, 'Helen's over there again. She ain't comin' back till the morning. She's sleepin' with the fulla, isn't she?'

Vivi came into the room, 'It's none of our business.'

Galway looked despondent. 'I ain't feeling too good.'

She gently held onto his arm as he lifted himself onto his feet.

'You're so creaky,' she remarked.

'Everything...hurts,' he said, growling with the effort of standing up. He shuffled to the bed. She pulled back the covers and lowered him down, then lifted his legs up onto the bed. She pulled the quilt up and Galway pushed it back down to his waist.

Vivi stood by him, in the strange cocoon of cold air that enveloped Galway's body. It was the brisk cold of a winter downpour. She leaned forward slightly and breathed in again.

'Helen used to always come over...when there was rain coming.' His eyes were closed and his chest barely moved. 'How long she bin back now?'

‘Since November last year,’ she counted the months in her head, ‘Eight months.’

‘Unna? Why hasn’t she come to see me?’

‘I don’t know, Galway,’ she said quietly, ‘I told her you wanted to see her. She said she might come over. That was weeks and weeks ago.’

‘She didn’t say nothin’ else? Nothin’ about me?’

‘No. She is very private.’

‘She’s punishing me.’

Vivi didn’t know what Galway was alluding to. ‘Helen’s angry,’ she said, ‘I sense that about her. But I don’t think she’s the punishing type.’

Galway said nothing. Vivi left. When the door swung shut behind her the rangy desert snapped awake from its snooze under the nearby tree and scampered over to walk beside her.

Vivi stood on the garden path, realising that time fell away so easily when she went outside each morning to stand amid her plants with a cup of coffee in her hands. A half hour would slip past her while she observed the signs of new growth or paused to stare mesmerised at the morning light shimmering off the Coorong, all the thoughts emptied from her mind.

The lavenders and rosemary were surviving along with the silver and blue sea hollies she had ordered from a catalogue that listed appropriate plants for the seaside garden. She realised that this was what she should be trying to create – a sea garden. She went on to order moon carrots, St. Catherine’s lace, gypsophila, gaura, purple tradescantia and sea squills. But most of the salvia plants she had planted to line the path had already died from salt necrosis. She knew the look of that disease. She saw it often on the tea-trees, boobiallas and shrubs that grew along the Coorong. She liked the ‘necro’ of the term, it seemed sinister and interesting, and she liked its pairing with salt. The doctors told Tam he was dying of

lung cancer but she thought it had looked more like this – the greying first, then the blackening, the encroaching brittleness, the way branches that faced the sea died first.

In the last weeks of his life, Tam would swim up to the surface of consciousness like a seal from the deep. A flash of brown-gold fur bursting through the fall of a swell. Each time he woke, he told her fragments of a larger story. After he had slipped down again, returning to the deep sea, Vivi would rise and walk out into the warmth of the kitchen. She took out the roll of paper she kept concealed in an old thermos and sat down at the table, trying to piece where this latest fragment fitted. In the days after his death, she spread all the pages out over the table and started again.

One evening I came back from casting the nets. Behind me the rain clouds were banking up beyond the sand dunes. I walked along the small bay towards the path up the cliff bank when I saw in the brown samphire the white body of a dead egret. It was not something I usually stopped for but I turned back to take a closer look. It was too big to be an egret and I realised it wasnae bird at all – there were no legs and no snake-like neck. I picked it up and the breeze took hold, unfurling it into a long white-feathered skin. It glowed in the twilight and the feel of it travelled straight into my heart.

I looked all around me but the Coorong was deserted. The sea-mist was drifting across the water and there was a deep rumble on the sea. I hied away up to the shack with the bird skin and hid it in my old duffel bag under the floorboards beneath my bed.

The rain was hammering on the roof when I came into the kitchen. I knelt down at the woodstove and stirred the fire back to life. I had set the kettle to boil when there was a frantic knocking on the door. A small thin woman stood shivering in the pouring rain. She was naked, her dark hair was hacked off close to her skull, her body was covered in old bruises and her feet were cut and bloody. She glared at me with hate.

I leaned against the doorframe and crossed my arms.

She hugged her arms close around her chest and shuddered as the rain swept over her.

I stepped aside and gestured for her to come in. She pushed past me as though it was already her home and headed straight into the kitchen for the warmth of the wood stove. I gave her some old clothes to wear and she sat back in a chair by the stove. She didn't speak a word of English but understood that I wanted to know her name. Eliina. She had the dark yellow eyes of the white egret. She was exhausted and soon fell asleep. I watched her for a while, more bewitched with her with each passing minute. Sometime during the night, when I was deep in the marine gloom of my dream, she slipped into my bed and became my wife.

Within the year Eliina gave birth. It was a difficult labour. I held the bairn to the early morning light falling across the bedroom and waited for her to open her eyes. They were a dark amber like her mother's. I named her Fae, after the Faery folk. I kissed her soft head and she tasted of salt and rain. I felt complete.

Each year after that, when the first autumn storm was brewing on the sea, Eliina grew restless. I would come home some evenings to find the shack ripped apart, my Fae playing amid the chaos with an air of unconcern. Eliina would be huddled in bed under a heavy pile of quilts and blankets, ignoring my voice and touch. I tidied the shack, neither reprimanding nor consoling her. In a few days the mood would pass and life would go back to normal.

And then one day, at the end of winter, Eliina was dressing one morning when an earring slipped from her fingers and rolled underneath the bed. She crouched down to retrieve it and saw in the dark space the lines of two short planks of woods. She pushed the bed aside and lifted the planks. The duffel bag lay there. Inside, her bird skin was neatly folded, as pure as the day I found it.

A heavy feeling had started to overcome me that day while I was out on the water, as though a part of my soul was withdrawing from the world. I returned to the shack and found

my Fae standing alone on the shore, her eyes wide and fixed on the white egret flying close against the green water. Two nights later the great flood arrived. The year was 1956.

Vivi sat on a large limestone rock in the garden with the desert asleep near her feet. She was absorbed in the study of the small fossilised bones embedded in her skin – a sinuous vertebrae trailing up her calf. On both sides were small rib-like bones at right angles to the spine. A kind of primeval sea snake or eel, she thought. There were more. Small bivalve shells and nautili. A thin sea horse. Tiny fish. Her toe nails had opalised and she checked her hands to see her fingernails had also changed. They were shallow greens and blues and milky white.

The sound of a bird smacking into the kitchen window made Vivi look up. A magpie lark. The bird scrabbled at the base of the window, his wings beating against the glass as he pecked at the reflection. He slipped and lifted up again, attacking his image again before darting off to perch on the edge of the tank where he paced back and forth. The bird continued to size up the window, craning his neck to see if the other bird was still in the glass.

Vivi walked through the garden beds up to the kitchen window and stopped to look at the glass. The kitchen beyond was dark and dingy through the dirty glass. The streaks of dust and dried rain gave the reflection the appearance of a painting. She could see the blue sky, the leafless fig tree and the rain water tank behind her. Her sun-worn skin and early wrinkles were smoothed into the flawless complexion of a girl. She smiled at herself.

Helen brought home a piano for Vivi. She had found the instrument in an old town hall not far from Meningie where it had sat in darkness for decades at the back of the stage behind decaying curtains. Vivi didn't know how Helen had managed to bring it back to the shack

and she didn't ask. She was mildly disturbed that Helen had simply picked the padlock, walked in and taken it. A piano was not the kind of thing that was just there for the taking.

Helen shrugged; 'It's only going to end up in the dump.'

Vivi also didn't know in what spirit Helen intended the gesture. She doubted Helen had gone out of her way to find a piano for her but rather had somehow noticed it in passing and thought Vivi might like it. Vivi was touched but still nervous. Helen had been the kind of child Vivi still feared; she had a few piano students like her – the kind who had an enigmatic dislike for Vivi. The dislike had seemed instinctual, canine even, as if Helen had sensed something dark and twisted in Vivi's soul the way a dog or a horse could. She hoped there would be a day soon when she could ask Helen about this. Frank and direct conversations were becoming easier. As Vivi probed the sound of each note, Helen asked her why she hadn't pursued life as a pianist.

'I did try. I studied for two years at the Con in Adelaide.'

Helen was surprised, 'What happened?'

'I couldn't handle it. I had a break-down.'

'So you married Henry? Became a wife instead?'

Vivi felt the sneer in her own smile.

'He was a workaholic,' Helen said, 'Did he even know he was married to you?'

'That was the worst part of it. He didn't.'

The piano was an elderly-looking instrument. An old German make with the brass candle holders still in place. The ivory had jaundiced, buckling on some keys and missing on others, the exposed surface beneath still sticky and rough under her fingers. Vivi found a small spanner in Tam's box of old tools and attempted to tune it, eventually achieving a sound that she found pleasantly bearable. It was still out-of-tune and the felt on the hammers were threadbare. The upper octaves had a pleasant piercing ring while the discordant twang of the lower octaves sounded raw and plaintive. Her Bach fugues were peppered with

wooden clacks and strangled notes and Vivi came to hear the four voices as harbouring wounds and unfulfilled yearnings that laced the few undamaged notes with a bitter edge.

Despite her desperate yearnings as a younger woman, Vivi had never amounted to more than a passably good pianist. After years of smudged Mozart and heavy-handed Chopin, laboured Beethoven and Janáček misunderstood, these fugues struck her as...

alternatively,

perfect.

the orchids

The first orchids appeared in mid-winter. The gnat orchids, *acianthus reniformis*, grew in the damp mossy earth under stands of tea trees, with flowers the colour of hidden skin. Out of the mulch of old leaf litter under the sheoaks emerged the delicate mosquito orchids, *acianthus exsertus*, with slender burgundy racemes of flowers and translucent perianths like the long wings of an insect. The leek orchids, *prasophyllum austral*, grew long grass-like inflorescences, the tiny white blooms in a loose cluster along the spike. The blue fairies, *caladenia deformis*, had been Helen's favourite as a child; Bluebeards, Fae had sometimes called them. They were a deep-blue five-petal orchid with a yellow-tipped anther and a hairy purple-blue labellum at the centre.

Helen could feel herself succumbing to obsession, to that peculiar power of orchids. The strange and diverse anatomy of perianths and sepals, of labellums and hooded anthers, enclosed a dark and libidinal space. It was the suggestion of tongues and wings and hooded nerve-endings. She couldn't look at photos of *caladenia carnea* or *diuris longifolia* in her mother's book and not think about the feel of the tip of Hide-Away's tongue.

Then there were all the other wildflowers: twining fringe lilies, early nancies, billy buttons, goodenias, guinea-flowers, flax lilies and purple paper-flowers. It was the season for old-man's beard, *clematis microphylla*, when great swathes of white blossoms cloaked the shrubs and tumbled down from the branches of trees. The luminous sun dews, *drosera whittakeri*, grew in the sandy earth around the ruin. Hades-like, Helen thought. It was the kind of flower she imagined finding in the underworld: the viscous and carnivorous hunger of its leaves giving form to the purest of white flowers that pierced the dusk. Most of the day would pass photographing the wildflowers before Helen came to the ruin.

Half the skeleton was still embedded in the earth. A clump of blue fairies were flowering in the bowl of the pelvis. Next to the curved wall of the hip, the bones of a hand

lay almost on top of the earth, the arm already removed. The fingers were still aligned and laid out flat and open. There was the air of a gesture there, as though she was waiting for something to be placed in her palm. Helen used a soft-bristled brush to sweep away the rest of the soil, the brushstrokes tender as she contemplated how this soil had once been skin, flesh and desire. She then lifted the pieces of bone with a thin trowel, leaving only an imprint of the arrangement of bones in the earth. She wrapped them in a square of linen and carried them in the pocket of her coat.

Beneath a photo of a grassy clearing dotted with white everlastings, Fae had written, *My passion for you is the first rush of wildflowers.*

There was a style to Fae's photography in which the sensual experience of the woodlands had been transposed into the intricate details of orchid flowers, frosted webs or shafts of shadow and light through the soft draping needles of the wild native cherries. Fae had worked the sunlight with dexterous skill so that the smallest details were illuminated as sharply as though through the eyes of an insect or a raptor: adder's tongues that were barely distinguishable to the naked eye from blades of grass, tiny yellow star flowers in a dark-shadowed patch of moss, the pattern of white and magenta on the minute labellem deep inside the orchid flower of the *caladenia carnea*.

Earlier in the orchid season, Helen often returned home from the woodlands feeling like a hollowed-out tree filled with cryptic discontent and longing that verged on suffocation and pain. She caught herself one day as her eyes were searching through the trees and scanning the undergrowth: she was looking for something, she realised, but what? For something nebulous that had slipped into her heart from the pages of her mother's book. She learnt to walk in a half-dream and this way of moving through the woodlands made the orchids strangely easy to find. She wandered from the farthest boundary to the other, feeling

that her body and mind were wide open, waiting – that whatever it was she was searching for might instead find her.

Helen was staring at a photograph of a flying-duck orchid. *Caleana major*, Lacepede, 8th August 1989. The photos were in a chronological sequence that charted the changes of the season. The black pages evoked a dreamlike darkness that contained these images of orchids and wildflowers and shafts of winter light as though they were like particles of memory. She realised that the woodlands of her mother's book was an entirely different place to the one she had been exploring. The tactile woodlands of grasstrees with tips like pincers and brittle bark that crumbled against her jacket, the soft and various sounds of rustling leaves and wings, of bird calls and the muted thud of kangaroos somewhere in the wattle brush, the layer of cold damp air that hugged close to ground through the day – this place was impersonal and alive for itself alone. The woodlands of the book was more spectral and boundless; what absorbed her through the pages of trees and shadows yet always eluded her like the flit of a coloured wing in the brush, was her mother's gaze.

A few pages on, beneath a photo of the wet Coorong reef shining with winter sunlight after a heavy rain, *My passion for you is the cry of the lapwing piercing the night*. Helen looked up: there were soft footfalls in the shack. Vivi would still be in Meningie. She put the book down and stepped out into the bare passageway. The shack was creaking softly, straining against the wind. Vivi's room and the bathroom were both empty. She went into the kitchen and placed the kettle on the stove, then stood by the sink to stare out at the grey afternoon.

Beyond Vivi's garden, on the clothes line that had been strung across a frame of wooden post, the bed linen and clothes billowed in the breeze. She went outside. The air was cold and fresh off the ocean. She walked along the corridor made of pale linen and unpegged a woollen jumper from the line. She slipped it on and then let her eyes drift to Galway's shack. Another line from her mother's book: *My passion for you is the scent of wattles under a black sky*.

Your mother was a boong-fucking slut.

Who had said that to her? It was at school – one of the girls in her class. Helen had been fourteen years old, in the quadrangle at lunchtime, hemmed in by this girl and her friends. Her sandwich had turned to wood in her mouth and she had kept her head bowed down, refusing to see them standing there with their ugly teeth in their sickly sweet fug of body spray.

Are ya deaf, Helen? You a boong-fucker too?

The periphery of Helen's vision went dark as she kept her eyes firm on her hands, motionless in her lap. Not a muscle in her body twitched.

You're fuckin' disgusting, you are.

She had stilled and listened to the sea gulls that were wheeling above the quadrangle seeking out half-eaten sandwiches and empty chip packets while the kids played foursquare.

Fuckin' wog, another girl called as they gave up and walked away. She stayed frozen for a long time, until the girls were on the far side of the oval, before she tossed her lunch away, zipped up her schoolbag and walked off the school grounds. Down the main street of town, she noticed Tam's ute parked outside the pub and climbed in with the same relief she would have felt crawling into her bed. She didn't care if he stayed inside until nightfall, the ute was snug and warmed from the afternoon sun and she fell asleep to the smells of rope and grease.

Helen drifted away from the clothesline and down the cliff path to the reef. She took her boots off and left them on the bank, then walked into the water to where the nets hung on the beams, repaired and ready for the next evening. A school of tiny fish darted in a single movement beyond the patch of shadow she cast on the water. She walked further around the promontory to where the Coorong lapped against the cliff bank. She was directly below Galway's shack. Using the rocks embedded in the sandy slope, Helen started to climb up.

Her hands felt whole as they curled and gripped on the edges of rocks. She dug a bare foot into the loose sand and gravel for the last foothold and lifted herself over the edge.

She saw Galway in the window, sitting in his chair. He perched up when he saw her appear. She got to her feet, brushed the sand from her hands and walked up to his back door.

‘What you climbing up the cliff for?’ he asked with mild irritation. A thin thread of smoke was weaving upwards from the glowing tip of his joint. He dragged and exhaled. Smoke drifted before catching on the draught that pulled it through the open window.

She went forward and stood in front of him. Galway took her in, his eyes drifting down and up. On his bedside table, a tin of yarndi lay open and Helen picked it up for a sniff. It was distinctively strong, hydroponic.

‘Roll yourself one,’ he said, before taking another drag. He blew the smoke towards her and Helen caught the basil-like scent, damp with Galway’s breath. He was already slipping back into an old familiarity with her, barely knowing it, Helen suspected.

‘I don’t smoke anymore.’

‘I remember how thin you got, smoking this,’ he went on, not listening, ‘You was a lovely thinness, soft.’

He flicked off the ash and rubbed a hand over his stubble, ‘You was yarndi-thin. That’s what I always thought: your yarndi-thin body.’ He shook his head to himself, ‘Thin and soft, like one of them white cranes is.’

‘They’re egrets, Galway. Cranes don’t fold their necks back when they fly.’

Galway gave her a surly look, then pointed at her hand. ‘So the gossip’s true then. About your hand.’

Helen moved away from him, shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. ‘An accident; oyster farm in Tassie.’

‘Unna? Those oysters pretty sharp, are they?’

‘You could show a little more respect.’

‘Don’t tell me lies then.’

‘Lies?’ she spoke in a casual voice.

His eyes hardened but Helen knew he was masking sudden uncertainty.

‘Lies have little legs, Galway. Yours are exhausted.’

‘What you accusin’ me of, Helen?’

‘You and Fae had an affair.’

Galway’s eyes slid past her to the sand dunes.

Helen pulled the photo from the back pocket of her jeans and passed it to him.

Galway stared at it for a long moment, utterly absorbed in the blurred sunlit image of himself. He took a last drag from his smoke and stubbed it out. He was quiet for a long time, his head downcast.

‘I came to see you, the day after I came home,’ Helen broke the silence, ‘You mistook me for Fae. Told me to go back to the island. What island were you talking about?’

He shook his head once, his mouth a thin hard line. ‘I never said nothing to you about no island. You wasn’t there.’

‘Galway. It was me. You called me Fae.’

‘No, I never. I wouldn’t get youse mixed up.’

‘What’s the island?’ she pressed him, ‘You told her to go back to an island.’

She wanted to claw the scowl from his face and find beneath the man she had known as a child. But her childhood had become a set of unfamiliar and faulty memories that revealed nothing when she sifted through them again and again for some understanding of who her mother truly was. More disturbing was the disappearing naivety that, like rainclouds suffused with sunlight, had always suffused her early memories of Galway.

‘I think her grave’s bin disturbed.’ His bloodshot eyes were glassy, ‘She’s been around lately. She doesn’t say nuthin’.’

Helen turned her back on him and pressed her forehead against the window. She was tired, she realised, it had gone all the way through her; she felt soft and brittle like old wood.

‘She was going to leave me anyway,’ she spoke against the glass.

There was silence, then Galway's voice, gentled, 'Nah. Nah, she didn't mean to.'

Caladenia

Galway pushed the shorn sheep down the chute and stood for a moment to stretch his back, glancing over the crowded shearing pens. The shed was like a furnace, thick with the smell of lanolin and shit and the sounds of whirring shears, bleating sheep and men cursing.

There was a woman standing near him. She had said something to him.

He looked at her. Her face was veiled. She had wrapped white netting around her straw hat down to her bare shoulders to keep the flies off.

Excuse me, she said again. He still didn't understand. She pointed to the shorn wool on the floor. He stepped aside and she moved past him in a sleeveless blue dress drawn in at the waist with a brown leather belt. She used paddles to gather up the wool and walked away to the racks without another glance. She was incongruous alongside the three older women who were dressed more sensibly in jeans, men's shirts and work boots. She threw the fleece out onto the rack and began to pick through it for impurities.

Galway glanced up from time to time to look for her. She worked silently. He never saw her speak to the other women. When she walked away to collect another fleece, their eyes followed her like gleaming beads. One of them would make a remark, followed by snorts of laughter.

At smoko she stood away from everyone else, keeping to the shade of a peppercorn tree. She leaned against the trunk with a book open in one hand and half a sandwich in the other. She seemed unaware of the flies and the heat while she read, her chewing slow and thoughtful. He watched when she rested the book in the fork of the tree and took her hat off, unpinning her hair to comb it loose with her fingers. She redid it into a loose knot against the back of her neck. When she looked out in the glare of the sunlight beyond the shade, her gaze drifted over a yard full of grimy sweat-soaked men sitting under akubras and smoking

their cigarettes. When she saw that he was watching her, she turned away and returned to her book, one hand massaging the side of her neck as though a muscle there had suddenly started to ache.

Galway stayed on after the shearing finished. Henry told him to keep his room in the shearers' quarters and gave him a motor-bike to use around the station. There was only one other stationhand, a thin whip of a man with an exotic-looking dark-eyed wife and five children who lived in one of the smaller farmhouses on the property. The station was too large for a workforce of three men and jobs were often abandoned half-done to shore up unpredicted problems elsewhere.

Though Henry worked alongside Galway nearly every day, Galway was no nearer to having any real sense of the man than when he first started. Henry was reserved and spoke to Galway along formulaic lines: he would explain the task he was setting Galway to do, the possible complications and the time-frame in which to do each step. There was a controlled anxiety in Henry's manner; he only betrayed the frenetic state of his mind at such moments as when he found his hands suddenly empty or his time being swallowed up in phone calls that could not be fobbed off with politeness. Within weeks Galway was seeing the signs of the station's financial distress and came to suspect Henry's inflexible form of sociability was his way of containing some large and ever encroaching fear.

Helen was five years old when she fell in love with Galway. Every afternoon when she arrived home from school she would jump down from the verandah steps and set off in search of him. She would weave her body into the fence rails of the sheep yards and watch him with serious attentiveness as he worked on replacing rotted paling with new wood. Or she would crouch down next to him while he worked under a ute, passing him tools as he

asked for them. She plagued him with questions about his Aboriginality. Did he play the didgeridoo? Had he ever seen the mulyewonk? Could he throw a boomerang? Had he ever killed someone with a spear? What did kangaroo taste like? Could he make a fire by rubbing sticks together?

What she really loved were the stories. He picked her up from school one afternoon after dropping off a clapped-out pump and Helen beamed at the sight of him sitting in her father's ute, his black arm leaning out the window as he scanned the crowd of faces for her. She came with a weightless floaty run towards him and clambered into the seat next to him, bursting with rapture for the story of Ngurunderi. She and her class had watched a video of a Ngarrindjeri man chasing a large fish which thrashed out the path of the Murray River with its flapping tail as it tried to escape the hunter. She spent two hours reciting the story of Ngurunderi to Galway as she had seen and heard it on the video. Galway had grown up hearing it told and retold by the uncles and the aunties. He delighted Helen each time he gave her a Ngarrindjeri word as she rambled along with the narrative: *pondi* for the Murray cod, *no:ri* for the pelican, *thukeri* for silver bream.

She was remembering words weeks and months later, pointing out anything and everything to him if she could name it in Ngarrindjeri. Helen was easy to delight. When Galway nicknamed her Katjeri, she radiated pride and sauntered over the hills with the straight-backed gait of a catwalk model.

One day Galway was riding his bike back out to a paddock to finish a section of new fencing. The paddock was bordered on one side by the lake edge where the water was eroding away the base of a line of windswept hills covered in tussock grass. Like most of the station, the paddock was denuded of trees and the cattle had caused blow-outs in the sides of the sandy hills. Dark clouds were coming across the lake. He followed the track

down the fence-line towards the lake and then along the shoreline towards the rise of the sand hills.

Fae suddenly appeared in his path, rising to her feet from where she had been sitting in the long grass on the bank. Galway swung the bike to a skidding stop, digging a foot into the ground to stop himself flying off.

He cut the motor and got off the bike, then hesitated. Her dark hair whipped around her face and she stared at him with sharp yellow-black eyes, wary like a wild soul. She turned and looked out to the lake for a moment, then pulled her thin sweater up over her head and let it drop to the grass. She undid the button on her jeans and then, with a honed slowness, slid them down the length of her long legs and stepped out of them. She stood in white bra and flimsy panties, facing the lake. Galway stood fixed to the spot, unable to look away. Her unflinching exposure to the cold winter afternoon demanded his silence, his stillness, the touch of his gaze only. Dark moles marked her pale-skinned body. Her flat belly showed the stretchmarks of childbearing. Behind her the sky was almost black with rain clouds. She glanced at him, almost a smile, and then walked out into the water.

Galway followed, compelled, up to the edge of the bank. The water was dark and turgid, its surface serrated by the bitter breeze. She turned around and stood still for him. Through the thin silk of her bra he saw the bumps of her erect nipples. In the bared space between her small breasts her skin was gooseflesh. She let her body sink slowly backwards and the water spilled over the lines of her body and into the hollows of skin. Small wisps of cold rain arrived on the breeze. Fae turned and stood slightly over the water, the knots of her vertebrae in stark detail. She dived down and was gone.

Galway waited, watching the water for signs of her. She reappeared some distance away and turned to float on her back. She was moving through the water now for her own pleasure, her strokes languid. She was offering her body to the sky, not him, drifting out to meet the long curtain of rain sweeping in. He looked down at the pool of her clothes on the

bank and took off his jacket to lay over them. He kicked the bike back to life and continued towards the hills.

The first time, Galway had started with the intention to be gentle. He reached down to touch her and Fae shoved his hand away. *Don't be lazy.* Her voice seared.

So he stripped her viciously and pinioned her against the wall. Her breaths became clipped and shallow against his ear as he closed his mouth over an artery in her neck and the fire blustered through his body. He forced her open and slid inside. The friction was electric. She bit down into his kiss and it pulled the air from him like a black sea.

She left straight away. He fell heavily on to his bed and slept. When he woke, it was with the vision of Fae standing in the lake. Her bony back to him and her hands skimming the water either side of her. The black sky all around her. His room was in darkness and his body shivering with the cold and his unfinished desire.

They sought each other out at every chance. They had a surreptitious code of body language to convey opportunity: Fae picking a sprig of gum leaves to wave the flies from her face, Galway shaded his eyes to the lake. Fae liked to flaunt the cryptic effectiveness of their code when Henry was standing there beside her on the verandah or when she came up to them in the sheep yards to tell Henry there was a phone call for him.

When they found each other, it was always in a twilight place. The meeting of their bodies belonged to a penumbral zone: the darkness of the pump shed, the blanketed black-out of his room or the cabin of the ute up in the pine forest with a rainstorm lashing the windshield.

Recalling her was difficult. He saw pale skin. The outline of bone. A delta of brown hair. The long slender eyes he found hard to look into as he came. She could lock his

gaze onto her and then elude him. He slowed down and teased her until she clenched her legs around his waist and her hand snaked down his back to grip his buttock and thrust him hard into her. He would plunge down into the depths of her body then, wanting to puncture the unseen skin of silk that hid that place of hers, that wilderness her eyes spoke of. Instead, she dissolved him into a blissed darkness that left him desolate.

Yet beyond the periphery of Fae were signs of daylight. As they lay still, their breathing quietened, the room filled with the dulcet notes of blue wrens or the liquid warbling of magpies beyond his window.

When she dressed to leave, he would stand by the wall and watch her. He couldn't read those quick movements of hers: the way she snatched her clothes off the floor or pulled her boots on as she hopped towards the door to leave. Was she in a rush? Were they signs of some private frustration? Or were they simply part of her varied impulsive nature?

He would reach out as she walked past him and pull her back. He raked his hands through her hair, pulling it back from her face, and drew her into a kiss. They were slow languorous kisses, a different kind of sex. It was something of a ruse on Galway's part to find out the meaning of Fae's adultery. But somewhere in that space they shared with their mouths Galway always lost the trace of what he was searching for. Fae could find his soul in a kiss and take it into her mouth like an ecstasy pill from his tongue, leaving him hollow, the currents of his body in disarray. Infidelity was reduced to something merely incidental at these moments.

He asked her, one time afterwards, did she fuck or did she make love to her husband.

'We barely touch anymore. It's the farm. He called me naïve once when I told him the farm wasn't worth sacrificing me and Helen for. We used to make love. He was just a boy then, a foolish romantic boy. I miss him.'

There was an unexpected softness to her as she spoke of Henry. Galway sat up to find a cigarette, his movements deliberately brusque like he was finished with her nakedness, done with an impersonal and opportunistic use of her body. He wanted her to feel stung, a

little humiliated even, but she left in a mood that suggested her mind was already elsewhere and Galway was deserted, sitting on a chair, smoking in sullen silence.

He had fucked women who belonged to other men. He was a master of the tells and signals in the smoky pubs or at the fluid dark parties that coursed with electric substances and a thumping bass. Galway was only interested in the fuck, not the moral compass. What they felt afterwards was not his problem. But Fae beguiled him. She had everything to lose but acted as though she was deliberately tempting her own fate. She experimented with desire like Galway experimented with drugs. She had fashioned a liaison in which she acted as though there was nothing he could take away from her and yet, surely she knew, he could destroy her precarious balance in one fell swoop?

She knew, Galway realised. Fae had knowingly handed him a rope to hang her with. He remembered another story Helen had told him one afternoon when he drove her home from school. The one about the bird skin. This was bondage at its most subtle.

Thelymitra

On Saturday afternoons, Galway played football. When he was on the oval, his life beyond the sidelines hazed into obscurity. It was the one escape he had from the bullshit that trailed after him, an escape which didn't take him to that numb place from which he would wake to find he had created more trouble while he'd been drunk and off his face with coke. Football was a clean and pure space: an oval of dark waterlogged grass under a curtain of scudding rain.

The nature of the game came down to the shape of the ball, he told Fae one time when he was trying to persuade her to come to a game. It was the ball that fuelled the violence and confusion that made him feel alive.

Come watch me Fae, I'll make ya blush.

Fae was not interested.

How come you never play netball? Like all them others?

The mention of netball set Fae's teeth on edge; *it's a bitch's game, especially for the fat ones.*

Hey, the cutting tone of Fae's bitterness took him by surprise, that's nasty, what they ever do to you?

What all fat bitches do, Fae snapped and rose from his bed to get dressed.

He sat up; *Get back here.*

Fuck off, her anger now aimed at him.

The final siren broke the spell of the game. Galway shambled off the field with his teammates, starting to feel all the hits and falls. A group of Nunga women stood talking near the gate. Galway skimmed their faces. His aunty and two cousins, and a woman he had

been seeing around town lately. Yasmine. She had been a thin stick of a girl when he left to be a shearer a few years before. She tossed him a careless smile as he walked on and Galway thought no more of her until his eyes lifted with the glass of beer he put to his lips and got snagged on her steadfast gaze. They were at a bonfire party on the edge of town. In the firelight he saw her wide full-lipped smile revealing teeth of pearls and her long black hair like a mane over her shoulders blending into the night. Her broad forehead, the flawless arcs of her black brows and the hard shine of her dark brown eyes suggested a capricious nature: the fragility of a wounded girl, the viciousness of a cut snake.

He wished Fae was here to watch this: the women who came onto him afterwards, this Yasmine as she pressed him against a wall in the darkness and slipped her hand through the opened zip of his jeans, his cock in the deliciously iron-cold grip of her long thin fingers. And for Fae to know that she couldn't say or do anything if she wanted to keep their affair secret. He tried to torment her sometimes by consciously bragging about the parties, the pubs, the drugs, all the girls and women he'd been through in the past few years. Fae refused to be drawn into this world of his; her face changed and became like cloudy glass and, behind it, she went elsewhere – maybe that same elusive place he couldn't reach when he fucked her. It was like she went away from him to stand on the brink of some dark abyss. He would realise his ruse had been reversed and he was the one jealous, uncertain, and then angry. Fae didn't need him the way he wanted her to. He craved a kind of madness from her, a madness for himself alone.

Diuris

One afternoon Galway heard the soft talk between Fae and Helen coming from up in the haystacks. Fae was curled around Helen who had the kittens cradled in the bowl of her body. Galway watched them unnoticed from the ground, in love with them both.

Fae was speaking softly against Helen's temple, 'And then the snow clouds cleared and she saw the Linnutee. Peace came into her heart because she had found the path back home.'

'The suursoo,' Helen interposed.

'She could go whenever she wanted.'

'When she found her bird skin,' Helen corrected her.

'No, Helen. There was no bird skin.'

Helen tilted her head back to frown up at her mother.

'She died, armas, I've told you. She drowned in the sea mouth.'

Fae saw Galway then and looked away, her expression smooth as glass and still alight for Helen. It was the smallest gesture of a snub, so seamless as to not be a snub at all, but that brief glance left him in a sudden state of estrangement, as though he had just discovered that the ropes which moored him against the perilous nature of her desire had been cut when he wasn't looking.

He couldn't get near her for days. Helen disappeared from his afternoons. He watched Fae when she came outside at the homestead and was galled to find he was invisible to her.

Some nights he couldn't go near his bed, other nights he buried his face wherever the sheets

smelled of her. He bought an ounce of dope in Meningie to numb himself through the nights.

When he saw her walking out of the pine forest a week later he was done with discretion. He had still the rope to hang her with. He met her at the gate and grabbed her wrist.

‘You stop this, Fae. You ain’t just gonna throw me off.’

She wrenched her hand but couldn’t get free of his grip.

‘Let go of me,’ she said, her voice cold.

He backed her against a fence post, ‘What you doin’ to me?’

She shoved free of him and kept walking. He followed her into the old stable.

Inside, she turned on him. ‘You fucked her,’ she hissed.

He felt the outer shell of his being slide away like water.

‘Ah, so what?’ he retorted, ‘It was a great fuck.’

Fae turned her back and walked a few steps towards the wall in a private struggle to compose herself. When she turned again, she stung his face with a slap that sliced his cheek open. He looked down and saw an old bridle in her hand, the bit glinting in the sun. The pain flared like wildfire. He was too stunned to move. Fae whipped the bridle again, cutting across his chest. It came back again, the bit stinging the upper half of his bared arm.

He caught the bridle as she struck him with it again and yanked it off her. She stepped back, already reaching for the riding crop on the wall. He lunged for her and felt Fae’s fist smash into the side of his head. He caught himself as he collided into the wall. The balance was knocked out of him. He felt the weight of his body sliding over the wall.

She was pale but she was still blazing with fury.

‘Why?’

‘It’s just a fuck,’ he said.

‘Why her?’

‘What do you mean, why her? Who would you’d rather? Some white girl?’

Fae froze, bereft of words.

‘You think I’m a dumb cunt, Fae? I know what you are: just another farmer’s wife hangin’ out for it cos your lazy bastard husband can’t get you off on his cock,’ Galway wanted to shut his mouth but it kept moving, his voice rising as the hate uncurled inside him, ‘I know I ain’t the only one you fuck. You got yourself an endless river of fellas coming through here, fuckin’ all the shearers, bet you pick one out every season like ya did me.’

Fae’s stare didn’t leave his face for the whole tirade, hard and wide-eyed, her silence tight-lipped and rigid.

‘You aren’t gonna fuckin’ deny it?’

Her breathing was slow and unwavering; ‘Tell Henry you’ve quit.’

She walked out of the shed into the harsh cold sunlight. He stumbled after her and caught hold of her wrist; ‘Fae, you can’t ju—’

She threw him off. ‘What? End it like that? I didn’t. You ended it when you fucked her.’

Galway’s head spun with the pain and the bright sun. ‘It was just a fuck, Fae.’

‘I’m going to forget you, Galway.’

She was walking away from him into a wall of dry light. He couldn’t see trees, the hills, the lake. There was nothing. She had walked away into glaring white light.

He didn’t bother to clean the blood off his face. Mosquitoes were active with the warm night and hovered around the long thin gash across his cheekbone. By midnight he had drunk two six packs, smoked all of his yarndi and two packs of cigarettes. He hankered for more; only oblivion was going to get him away from this rage.

He smashed the empty beer bottles against the trees outside his room and then rocked himself on the step, trying to hold down the pain. He picked up rocks and hurled them at the shearing shed; he jammed lumps of wood into the engines of tractors and generators; he

smashed every window that looked back at him with that blank condescension he hated so much.

The light on the front verandah of the homestead came on and Galway spun round towards it, started floating up the homestead drive, drawn to the lurid yellow glow. Henry stepped outside. Galway stopped. Picked up a rock on the driveway and lobbed it at him. It missed and went through an open front window.

‘Oi!’ Henry shouted at him.

Galway shuddered at the sight of him, buzzing on hate. Henry’s indignation turned ridiculous as he squinted into the darkness to where Galway teetered beyond the reach of the verandah light. He started scrabbling over the ground, searching for another rock.

Henry had stepped up to the edge, ‘What happened to your face?’

‘Get fucked ya white bastard!’ Galway screamed back at him, lobbing another rock at Henry. It missed again, shattering the upper part of a front window.

Henry retreated back to the door, ‘I’ve already rung the cops, they’re on the way.’

‘Fae!’ Galway yelled out, ‘Get ou’dere! I’m gonna tell this gutless wank!’

‘She’s not here.’

‘Don’t fucken lie to me, cunt. I’ll kick ya fucken head in.’

Henry’s face looked hard-boiled in the greasy mustard light, ‘What do you want with my wife?’

Galway felt the ugly laugh bubbling in his chest, ‘I’ve had ya fucken wife.’

Even in his drunken state, he could see that Henry was rocked.

Galway started cursing at him. He barely knew what words were pouring out of his mouth. It was like a swarm of mad wasps. It was a different, discarded, frame of mind that had taken over. Galway had not been inside this person for years. The familiarity of it had the same sickening feel as putting on old fetid clothes. Henry slammed the door on his words.

Galway kept cursing at the house as he foraged the driveway in the dark for more rocks. He lobbed them at the homestead, creating a racket on the roof as the rocks rattled down to the gutter. He staggered up onto the verandah and rattled the knob on the locked door.

‘Fae!’ he yelled into the solid wood. He started pounding on it with the rock in his hand. He stepped back to kick at the door, still calling out Fae’s name. He felt the door starting to give and kicked harder, conscious of nothing except that he wanted to break down this door.

Hands suddenly clamped down on his arms. He lurched out of his blind frame of mind. Blue and red lights were flashing up the undersides of the gum trees. He started to kick and thrash as two cops dragged him off the verandah towards the dogbox. He heard the door of the homestead open and he pulled round to see her, calling out her name again. But it was Henry.

‘Don’t ever set foot on my land again.’

‘This is my fuckin land,’ Galway screamed back at him, then turned his head as far as he could and spat in Henry’s direction.

He was shoved into the dogbox and the door slammed him into darkness. He flew at the walls of the box, ramming his shoulder against them, hyperventilating with claustrophobia. He screamed to be let out but the box contained and dulled his voice. The vehicle was moving. His heart was pounding hard. Pain rippled through his arm and up into his shoulder.

He kicked and punched out wildly at the walls but his strength was leached away as he struggled harder and harder to breathe. He choked on sobs as he hit against the side of the cage with a limp fist. The darkness had swallowed him up.

Caleana

He woke on his stomach, lying on the concrete floor of the cell. His body felt twisted. He was lying as he had landed. At first he couldn't move but then he rolled onto his side and some feeling returned to his leg. He could stretch it out, and then the other. His head pulsed with a bright light behind a giant slow-spinning fan. The small window high in the wall showed a grey sky lightening towards morning. He rolled onto his back and passed out again.

As he came around again, more sober and clear-headed, he was suddenly plunged into scratchy suffocating darkness. A blanket had been thrown over him. Rough hands gripped his arms, pulling him up onto his feet. A fist crashed into his ribs and another. Galway sank to his knees, winded. He knew straight away what this was. A beat-up. No doubt a friendly favour to Henry. Galway didn't struggle. He managed to cover his head with his arms still tangled in the blanket as the punches turned to kicks. They left him on the floor, the blanket still over his head. Galway threw up into the airless darkness and fell into a sleep that was poisoned with the stench of bile and alcohol.

He was let out on bail some days later. He went to a brother's place in one of the backstreets and borrowed his car to drive out of town. He drove along the Princes Highway until the wall of tea trees and melaleucas pressing up against the road started to smudge and flow into a disorienting blur. A dirt track led him deep into the close scrub. He stumbled out of the

car and eased himself down to lie on the hard earth. His skin was no longer containing him. His body was a space expanding with the flowing frontiers of pain.

Somewhere, his heart was beating hard like a tribal drum. It dawned on him that he could be dying.

He was in a dusty shadowy place. Around him were papery white tree trunks with branches that meshed together above him, creating a dense black canopy perforated with sparkling pinpricks of sunlight. Fairy-wrens flitted through the red samphire and green glasswort, flashes of sparkling blue. Wherever he turned his eyes, everything sparkled. *Well, this is nice*, he thought to himself.

His mind slipped from face to face.

He saw a woman he felt he knew. She was very white with skin like cold marble and long dark red hair. She wore a red silk dress that was lustrous in the rich light and a long necklace of white pearls. As they neared one another he saw the details of her extreme thinness. Bones showed through her dress. The lines of her face were gaunt. Veins of purples and reds and blues showed through her marble white skin.

He looked around and saw that she had led him into a communal bathroom with windows of thick uneven glass. The walls were tiled in all the colours of water. But the place was dry. He noticed signs of its decline. Broken tiles. Wounds in the walls where tap fittings had been smashed off. Long cracks in the windows. He turned back to the woman and saw she was slipping off the shoulder of her dress, revealing more white skin. He touched her bared shoulder and her skin felt like rose petals. He asked for her name but even as she spoke it Galway already knew –

Fleeya, he said.

Yes, Fleeya.

His heart was as light as a dragonfly. He had loved this name once. Fleeya. The place was suddenly awash with Capricorn sunlight.

Another face. He was dark like a blackfella. Galway couldn't see him clearly. He made out the flattened nose and the ivory whites of his eyes. He wore a long moth-eaten trench-coat that unloosed gusts of twilight from its folds as Galway walked beside him along the lonely wheel tracks through the desert. The outline of the ranges on the horizon was as familiar and homely to him as this man's hidden face.

There was a man who wouldn't give Galway his name. He appeared like a grey wraith, framed in doorways, with a maniacal grin. He wore tattered moleskins and boots barely held together by the stitching. Each time he appeared Galway was gripped with panic. The memory of this man was just beyond reach. It was urgent that he remember. The familiarity of this awful face was maddening.

He woke each time and his lungs sucked in a great gust of air where moments before a dead hand had been pressing down on his chest.

He felt wide awake, properly awake. Alive. Night had fallen and it was cold. He could see the car in the moonlight, the driver's-side door still wide open where he had tumbled out. Had it been hours? Or days? He got onto his feet and climbed back into the seat of the car. He felt for the lighter in his pocket and flicked a flame into life. There was a jacket on the back seat and he reached around for it. He let the seat down and pulled the jacket up over his chest and tucked his arms underneath. He flicked the lighter again and mucked around with the stereo but no radio stations would come into range. He pushed the cassette tape in and laid back to hear what the music was.

Out where the river broke

The bloodwoods and the desert oaks

Holden wrecks and boiling diesel

The fierce ruthless voice was a dear old friend.

Galway woke shielding his eyes from the glare. The sounds of scratching reached him. He peered from under his hands. The glare was the morning sunlight clearing the line of the scrub and level in the sky with Galway's line of vision. There were smudges of black moving around on the car bonnet, making the scratching sounds. Galway lean forward and the dark beings suddenly fanned their black wings out and let out nasal cries as they flew off. Crows.

His eyes took a long time to focus. He was still seeing the crows before they had taken off, burned on his retina, overlaid by the image of them taking flight. He closed his eyes but more layers still accumulated: the paperbark trees, the distant line of scrub fringing the glaring white salt pan. His pressed his hands against his eyes. Against his eyelids, the images were dark and smouldering, outlines of fiery reds against blackness. In the midst of this inversed image someone was in the distance, near the paperbarks, or on the fringe of the salt pan. A woman, no more than a mirage-like ripple, she turned and disappeared into the scrub.

Galway let his hands down and opened his eyes, blinking slowly and carefully until the lingering after-image was aligned neatly with the line of scrub in the distance. It was Fae; he was sure of it. Only Fae could walk into his world like that: from under his eyelids.

He got out of the car and his legs wobbled under him as he stumbled across the hard crust of ancient salt towards the place where he had seen her. He could hear the sea in the distance, its thunder sonorous on the clear morning air. There was a smell on the air as well: salty, slightly pungent. He knew this scent from the folds of Fae's skirt when he sank to his knees wanting to kiss her there.

He reached the other side of the salt pan to where he had seen her and turned his eyes to the ground to seek out her footprints in the sand. There were none. He stared at the thick line of tea-trees and saw the path that had been tunnelled into them, disappearing around a corner within the thicket. She must have gone that way. The trees grew so close and dense there was no other way to walk through them except along this path.

In the sand he saw only kangaroo tracks but he walked on. He could still smell her salty scent on the air. The path forked: one way looked more like a tunnel that he would have to crawl through. Fae wouldn't go that way: she wouldn't go crawling on her hands and knees through the undergrowth. He took the other way but it was only a few steps and the path forked again. He had walked into an animal's labyrinth.

At each fork in the path he paused and stood still, waiting for some feeling of being drawn in a direction. The sea was growing louder, the smell stronger. He heard the soft thuds of hidden kangaroos bounding away from him. He walked on and on. The sun was high in the sky when he came up to a broken fenceline and stepped over the barbed wire. Suddenly he was clear of the tea trees.

Light seared across his eyes as he caught the dazzling hit of the sun on water. On the other side honey sand-dunes rose up from beds of dark green. The sound of the surf was coming from beyond the dunes. He started to walk down to the edge of the water but was stopped where the exposed reef began. It was a jagged surface of embedded shards of broken shells. On top of the reef, everywhere, were the dried husks of thousands of small dead crabs. The smell enveloped him – brackish saltwater, guano and dried out shellfish.

He looked up and down the shoreline. Lone trees dotted the grassy banks, scrub covered the low sandy hills behind. The stillness filled out the whole of the huge sky so that the flight of a lone pelican through the sound of the sea seemed to him to be delineating the path into a dream of the sky's own making.

The intense light on the glassy water was beginning to sting his face with sun burn. He was swallowing repeatedly. The thirst had crept up on him. It was the salt on the air. Each time he tried to wet his lips with his dry tongue, he tasted salt.

He felt the hollowing fear of abandonment. Fae was not here. She was nowhere. This was not the landscape of Fae's desire that he had walked into. It was his own.

He walked close to the edge of the water, his sight set on a lone tea tree in the distance that gnarled away from the edge of the reef. As he got closer he could make out something black in the fork of its two main branches. When he reached it he stood beneath and looked up. It looked like a giant nest of burnt wood. And then he made out a black foot, a black leg. He shied away in fright. It was the dried body of an old black woman.

He looked back, curiosity overtaking his fear. He peered up into the shrunken face that was framed with a head of wispy silver hair and he no longer felt afraid. The wind had started to blow cold across the water. Sea mist was drifting out from the folds of the sandhills.

When night fell over the water, fires began to appear on the opposite shore, strung out along the edge between the water and the rise of dunes like a necklace of burning garnet. On the dark water, the flames shattered into pieces, regathered themselves, then shattered again against the sluggish lap of the water against the shore. The fires blinked with the dark shapes of people moving and shifting around.

He stood on the edge of the water, catching the sounds that carried across on its surface. The distant boom of the sea was overlaid with the sound of clacking wood and voices singing, filling the night with a raw rhythmic power that meshed with the howls of the wild dogs from every direction. The language rustled on the water and he heard how it breathed with the ruwi: the sounds, the rhythms, the rise and fall of a sentence – all of it was from the ruwi. A shout rang into the pristine night air, followed by gales of laughter. Later,

there was a quarrel. It smoothed over. Then more laughter. Another song cycle. His family was still here.

Galway had fallen asleep watching the fires, sitting against the base of a tree. The morning sun was fierce and brilliant. The sandhills seemed far away and washed out in the heat haze. There were no threads of smoke or signs of people on the other side of the water.

He swallowed hard. The urgency of his thirst had returned. All he could taste was salt and brackish air. He steeled his mind: he had to find water. He must steer all his thoughts towards finding water. He told his body to move, one foot after the other. The ground was hard and hot under his bare feet but he walked on, ignoring the prickles, twigs, stones and broken shells.

Look here, Fae stopped him and knelt down. She was showing him a plant with the strangest flower he had ever seen.

It's a flying duck orchid.

He looked at it from the side and the name made sense of its weird appearance. The top part had the shape of a duck's head and the petals grew out like a duck in mid-flight. It hung on to the end of a long thin stem that quavered on the air. Fae touched the flower with a fingertip and it closed with a shiver. She looked up and smiled. *Sexy, isn't it?*

He stumbled and looked up, coming up for air and light.

A scent on the air stopped him. Fresh water. The scrub had disappeared. It was all barren paddocks along the shoreline now. He could see a low stone wall starting from an old windmill and stone tank and running some twenty metres down towards the shore. He walked faster and the scent grew more definite. When he saw the glimmering surface on the other side of the wall he started to run.

Collapsing against the stone wall of the trough, he reached in to bring handfuls of stone cold water to his mouth. It was clean and pure. He dunked his head over the edge and

the cold shock on his scalp brought him back to himself. He opened his eyes under the water and saw the rough texture of the limestone wall, the strands of algae and small water plants that grew on the bottom and up the sides of the trough. He pulled back for air and let the water drip down over his body, soaking through the dust and caking it onto his skin and into his clothes. The water flattened and he peered down at his reflection – his face was covered in black stubble and his eyes were wide and wild.

Calochilus

In the main street Galway attracted stares and wary looks. White fellas gave him a wide berth but then stole covert glances at him, even men he dimly recognised from football. Outside the pub he stopped at the sight of his reflection in the tinted windows. He was as thin as a rake. His singlet was torn and covered in old blood stains. He'd lost his boots and his jeans were caked in dried grey mud. He contemplated the pub longingly, then walked on.

A warm gust of air was released onto the pavement as the door opened into a take-away shop. Galway swallowed mouthfuls of saliva at the smell of boiling fat, hot chips and roast chickens. He had no idea how long it had been since he had last eaten. His stomach felt stuck against his ribcage.

Then suddenly, he felt the world fall away. Fae was further up the street, getting out of her car outside the supermarket. She didn't look his way as she stepped up onto the pavement and disappeared into the shop. He stood rooted to the spot, waiting for her to re-emerge.

When Fae came out, her eyes were cast down. Two women who stood by a nearby car watched her as she walked back to her car, their eyes steely and their mouths pressed thin and mean. Fae's hand was on the door handle when she paused. She looked up and straight at Galway. Her face changed from blankness to appalled recognition.

She didn't move for a long moment, her eyes wide. There was an almost imperceptible shake of the head as she took in his appearance. Galway sensed the turning of many pairs of eyes towards him and Fae. A muted hush seemed to fall over the main street. In an instant Fae was resolved, walking towards him, her back straight and her eyes level with his.

‘Galway?’ Her voice was soft as feathers.

He swayed on the spot, dizzy with the sight of her so close to him again.

‘Fae,’ he breathed her name, ‘Show me that orchid again.’

Fae’s hands gripped the steering wheel hard as she drove out of Meningie, her eyes not wavering from the road ahead of her. Galway glanced at her once, twice, then kept his eyes ahead of him, strangely comfortable with the silence between them. He wound the window down and let the warm wind blow across his body.

She pulled off onto a dirt road with an old wooden signpost pointing the way to Lacepede. The road cut through barren farmland. The low hills ahead were grim with olive green scrub; in the far distance he could see the pale sandhills.

The scrub started at a fence line with a boundary track running along the inside. Fae turned off the road at the gate onto the boundary track.

This scrubland was different from the one he had spent days wandering in. The greens were darker and felt cooler on the eye. Fae drove along the boundary track a few hundred metres and then slowed down. She brought the car to a stop, nosed into a stand of old sheoaks, and switched the engine off. She didn’t turn to face him. Galway didn’t want to move just yet. The only things his world contained at this moment were the rustling sheoaks, the cool shade and her silence. He leaned back onto the head rest and closed his eyes.

‘How’ve you been?’ he finally asked, breaking the silence between them.

‘Oh, you know,’ her tone was scathing, ‘I’m the town’s newest harlot. And not your garden variety kind either.’

Galway waited a bit, a pause to smooth the space between them. ‘What happened with Henry? Did he throw you out?’

Fae was chafing as she spoke, 'He says he forgives me. That he can see how he might be partly to blame.' Her sigh was tired; 'All he does is make me feel monstrous. I didn't want to be forgiven, not that easily. I haven't even apologised to him.'

'You still with him?'

Faye was quiet for a long time, 'He proposed I stay, for the sake of 'the child'. Helen – his daughter's name is Helen. I screamed it at him. How does he not see it – how gorgeous and ancient and wise she is?'

She got out of the car and came around to help him out onto his feet.

Galway steadied after a few steps and Fae walked on ahead into a dense forest of old sheoaks and yaccas. They were following a thin track through old growth and deep woodland debris.

'Watch the snake,' Fae warned him. He looked to where she pointed and saw a black snake coiled under a yacca. Its primordial stare made him feel fragile as he walked past it.

Through the sheoaks he saw a wall of pale-coloured stone with a chimney stack and the wooden frame of a roof without its cladding. It was a ruin. The windows were boarded up with corrugated tin. The wooden door was tinder dry with a large rusted barrel bolt on the outside to keep it closed.

Inside the two rooms were filled with cool green light. They smelled of humus, rotting wood and the dust of forgotten houses. The wooden floorboards were decomposing into the earth beneath. His eyes adjusted and he made out patches of wallpaper that still clung to the walls. It was patterned with roses. They were in an old bedroom.

'This is my house,' Fae told him, 'My wild house.'

She came up to him and placed her hands on his waist and then lifted her face into his neck to inhale the ripe salty smell of his body. She pressed her tongue to his skin, tasting him.

'You were going to forget me, remember?'

She spoke, brushing her mouth against him, 'But then you went so crazy.'

‘You’re gonna get me killed one of these days.’

She moved away and Galway felt the gulf between them instantly. He pulled her back and enclosed his arms around her neck. ‘Don’t go away from me like that.’

There was a peppery smell on her skin where she had brushed against a plant.

‘I ain’t done with ya, Fae.’

Fae’s voice deep in the night, ‘My mother found this place. We used to hide here.’

‘Why?’

They lay wrapped in blankets on the ground of the roofless bedroom. A small fire burned in the cavity of the fireplace. She had left him and returned later with food and some of his clothes.

‘Things used to set her off. Gun shots when the duck-shooters came. A heavy truck clattering down the road. Once a Russian man was lost and saw Ema outside the shack. He went up to her to ask directions back to the main road. She heard his accent straight away and told him in her broken English how to get back to the main road. Soon as he was gone she picked me up and we ran all the way to this place. We hid here for days. It was so cold. We slept sitting up, wrapped together in a big old coat. Ema wouldn’t light a fire because of the smoke. She thought he was a spy or an agent, hunting down the last of her family. Not even Dad was allowed to know about this place. She didn’t trust any man.’

Galway listened with his eyes closed, her voice in the hollow of his collarbone.

‘She was always listening to the birds. She knew the clan calls of magpies and crows. She could follow the call and response of native pigeons. She knew all the birdsongs; she could whistle them and birds would answer. She drew around us a skin of birdsong. No one could get near us without her knowing. She translated every warning call, every screech of alarm, every sliver of intelligence that rippled through the trees.’

She fell quiet for a long time, then added quietly, ‘Helen’s so like her. I swear my mother has been coming back along the Linnutee to visit her.’

‘What is that?’

‘The Linnutee? The Bird’s Way.’

He saw her long pale arm emerge from the blanket to stretch above them, a finger tracing out the bough of stars across the sky. ‘That path of the stars. It’s the path the birds follow when they migrate between the hemispheres. It connects the Coorong to the Emajõe.’

‘In my world, that’s Ngurunderi’s canoe.’

Fae was silent. Then, ‘Helen misses you.’

Galway held her head in his hands and kissed her hairline, her eyes, her cheekbone.

She sat astride him, the blankets slipping from her so that firelight flickered over her nakedness. She slipped him inside her and guided his hands over her body. ‘This is the true marriage, Galway.’

Fae’s eyes were alive on his face, sharp yellow-black, wary like a wild soul.

Galway stuffed some yarndi into the bong and then lapsed into reverie, the lighter forgotten in his hand and the bong unsmoked.

‘You make her sadness seem so enigmatic. I don’t remember that. I remember her as...ordinary. Just my mum. Tired.’

Galway looked up, focusing on her. It was almost night-time. Helen still sat beneath the windowsill, the old book closed in her lap. How long had they been sitting in silence? He couldn’t remember if he had been talking or not. He couldn’t distinguish the things he had said from the things he remembered without words. What were the things he told her yesterday, the day before? How many days now since he had opened this door onto his past?

‘You was just a kid. Kids can’t see their mothers as anything other than their mothers.’

He flicked the lighter and smoked the bong till all the yarndi had been sucked through the cap. He refilled it and passed it to Helen.

‘The day of the fire. You were out there with her then? She was the reason you were out there?’

Galway reached for a cigarette, stalling; ‘I couldn’t find her. I lost her in the smoke.’

‘It never crossed my mind to wonder why you were out there that day, why you were burnt in the same fire my mother disappeared in. I just thought – you’re a black man, this is your place, your element, it was nothing out of the ordinary for me that you were out there.’

Galway could just see her in her pool of darkness; the window above her head was a shade lighter with the dissipating dusk.

‘What happened to her?’

‘I told you, I lost her in the smoke.’

‘Did you love her?’

Galway nodded, then realised it might be too dark for her to see.

‘Yes. I died for her. I died with her. We went to an island and then...I was gone. I was here. I think about her every day, I see her walking over them big smooth rocks where the waves crash when the tide’s up, waitin’ for me. Waitin’ and waitin’ for her man; long, long time. But now she’s here, and she shouldn’t be. It’s cos her grave’s bin disturbed, I just know it. She’s been dragged all the way back here.’

Helen smoked the bong and then put it down on the floor next to her. She sat back against the wall and opened the book in her lap, flicking the lighter to find the page in the dark.

‘She wrote these lines for you.’ She read by the light of the single flame, darkness wavering across her face; ‘My passion for you is the scent of wattles on a black stormy day.’ She turned to another page. ‘My passion for you is the cry of the lapwing piercing the night. My passion for —’

‘Helen,’ Galway stopped her. He could hear her – Fae – her voice an urgent rustle on the very edge of his mind. ‘She was writing about you.’

He saw her in the shadow of the tree that waved and dipped against his wall. She was in the steam from the kettle. The floating halo of smoke he exhaled. In all these things he saw the curve of her back, the arc of her pelvic bone, the sharp angle of her shoulder. Bird and woman. A nimble body of air. She melted back into nature at will, disappearing into shadow and then re-emerging a moment later. Always shifting, never still.

The very last time. Faint signs of feather-down had appeared on her body, delineating the centre of her spine, the curves of her hip bones. Her pubic mound was covered in white feathers where hair had been. He had stroked them with his fingertips and the touch, like silk, travelled straight into his heart. It was the most powerful arousal he had ever felt. She had made love to him from above, astride his body as though he were a giant eagle, her body arcing back into the moonlight.

Galway lifted himself out of his chair and went to his bed to lie down. He felt exhausted from the long journey of his past and his head ached with a buzzing like radio static. He felt old pain clenched through his legs and hips as he tried to stretch out. He waited to feel warm under the covers and closed his eyes.

A conversation with Vivi came back to him. She told him that each night after she had gone to bed she looked down at herself to see she was standing in a creek, dry woodlands of graceful eucalypts behind her, an endless grass plain before her. She wanted to go out into the grass plains but she couldn't step out of the water until she had let each thing go that tied her to her present life. Each thought, each regret, each longing, became something in her hands that she could drop and the water would take it away – handfuls of dried leaves, grey ash, ink, sand, a dress she had worn as a child, insect wings, dried chamomile flowers – she had no control over what her thoughts became in her hands. She

called the stream Hunger Creek, the water was tea brown and there were tiny silver fish that slipped past her feet. She always fell asleep before she got to the very last thing she had to let go of before she could disappear into the grass plains. It was the thing that Hunger Creek wanted most.

What's that? Galway asked.

Vivi's eyes were distant, *my sister*.

Galway made a careful study of her. *What happened to her?*

She drowned. In a water tank. She was seven.

How old was you?

Six.

Some nights, I find myself standin' on that beach over there, Galway said to her, *and I see the island. Each wave comes and takes something away from me.*

Is there an island out there?

Galway flicked his eyes open. His heart was beating hard. There was a movement in the doorway of his room. It was Fae, in her white silk bra and panties. She came silently into his room and stood at the foot of his bed, looking down at him. Then she crouched down over his legs, crawling up over him, her body straddling his, then gently lay down on top along the length of his body. Her face close to his. Her weight real and solid. Her skin smelled of lake water.

'I'm staying a while longer, my baby,' he whispered into her ear.

He felt her warm tongue on his ear lobe; she started to taste her way down the side of his neck, feeling out the spider web of puckered scars. He felt the blankets being pulled down from his body but he no longer felt cold. He could not bring himself to watch as she moved down his body. Her mouth moved down over his chest, exploring the silver smoothness of his healed burns. His breath caught in his throat as she took him in her warm mouth. He sank back and felt the waves, one by one, taking him to pieces.

king tide

The signs of Hide-Away's industry took up the spaces of the humpy's corners and walls. He had sewn together large hessian sacks into a single piece he then looped and sewed onto a wooden frame to make a stretcher bed he slept on when Helen wasn't there. In the corner was a collection of carved and polished walking sticks, each one unique with different twists and knots of wood. He had made many of these since living in the dunes and regularly sold bundles of them to a gallery shop in Goolwa. Tin cans lined the window-sill where he had transplanted small clumps of dune grass and propagated fringe-lilies, coastal daisies and hardenbergia for Vivi's garden.

He collected materials to craft recreations of the bird nests he had seen in the dune scrub. He turned them into small sculptured works of art, blending in broken egg shells, seashells, dried leaves and feathers that identified the species which built each kind of nest: small blue feathers for a wren's loosely-woven grassy dome; black and white for the willy wagtail's twiggy nest that he felted with spiderweb and lined on the inside with his hair and strands of wool; a grey fantail nest he had moulded into the fork of a dry broken branch with grass and mud, shaped into a small grey cup that tailed like a wineglass at the base; a reed-warbler's nest that was a thick soft cup of reed sheaths woven around a stem of reed. The nests lined shelves and bench tops and the horizontal beams of the wall frames, so that Helen felt enveloped in a sweet silence of twitters, chirps and cheeps.

It dawned on her that Hide-Away must have been an artist before he discarded his identity. She sometimes wondered who he was in his life before and if the concentrated silence that he conveyed in the slow economical movements of his arms and hands had been cultivated to subdue the presence of war in his past. How did that peculiarly elegant walk come about? Sometimes he looked as though he was walking an inch above the ground. She had never seen a man with a gait like his.

With the randomness that the question had occurred to her, she once asked, *Do you have a wife?* He was feeding small pieces of wood into the fire, the flames a glassy film over the serious depth of his eyes. She waited, thinking she knew how he was going to answer – his casual but serious *Yes*. And then she felt the enormity of Hide-Away's loss – this wife was the beloved, the tragic loss. Helen was no one in this constellation. She wished she hadn't asked; she didn't want to know that there was another woman somewhere in Hide-Away's life. She wanted to swallow the question back down into her chest.

Hide-Away looked at her. *I don't have a wife.*

Helen smothered her relief behind a face of stone.

Hide-Away eschewed ownership, nor did he seem to recognise the laws of private property or government-owned land, laws – Helen began to see – that were designed to oppress his instinct for nomadism. Hide-Away had come to inhabit the humpy in the same way that some birds take over derelict nests. He had repaired the broken things he had found scattered around in the sand, often with ingenuity, to use for himself but he would leave them behind, Helen knew, when he moved on.

Hide-Away was lightness itself – from the absurd elegance of his walk to the rare signs of his presence in the dunes. The rangers had been looking for him for months, having heard rumours of a man living illegally in the national park, but were yet to find any trace of him. When they came to Lacedpede to ask Helen what she knew of him, she sent them twenty miles south of the humpy looking for a small tent, possibly orange or red. Later that day she went across and they covered the roof of the humpy with sand so that it was camouflaged from the air if a plane was sent over.

The birds sensed his lightness of being as well. He had become part of their community: the bristlebirds, the hooded plovers, the pied oystercatchers, the wrens and terns. He knew all their seasons, had watched their courtships and marriages, their fights

and ritual dances over territory. He had noticed couplings that were more erotic than procreative and several inter-species friendships. Conversely, they knew his routine, his presence, his temperament. They grew less afraid of him and were gradually reclaiming the cautionary space they had marked out around him. The same three pairs of oystercatchers waited for him each morning on the beach, in anticipation of the cockles they would snatch in the sand he stirred up into the backwash, almost from under his feet. *They share my table*, he said.

She found him fishing on the beach one afternoon and sat down to watch him until he realised she was there. He came over and sat down beside her and Helen heard a sweet twitter coming from inside his jumper. He placed his hand inside and when he pulled it out, revealed a spotted pardalote encircled in the large loose claw he made of his hand. It had been sleeping in the pocket of his shirt, warm in the close darkness under his woollen jumper. He had found it a few hours before, limp with shock and its eyes and feathers dull, its heart buzzing inside its body. Now the piercing black of its eyes were restored and the red on its tail was as bright as a spot of fresh blood. Helen reeled in his line and they walked back into the dunes where he had found the bird. It darted from Hide-Away's hands and dipped and swooped away towards the dense tea trees. Later in the night she was reminded of the gentle way he had handled the bird when she watched him massage his own arousal and smoothly join their bodies together.

She woke in the early hours of the morning and saw that Hide-Away was awake as well, a dark shine on his opened eyes.

Veins of darkness run through this place, he said quietly, *like that vein through the Coorong*. He was discovering an underlayer of violence to the sanctuarine stillness of the lagoon. Not far from the humpy he had walked into a deep interdunal corridor and came across human bones exposed by the shifting sand. They were older than his lifetime and very fragile. Helen told him there were ancient burial grounds all through the dunes. Hide-Away had realised that. But this skull had a square-shaped wound at the back: a white

man's weapon, a pick-axe. He left the remains alone to that lingering mood of murder and old anger that hung on the air.

There was a long hush between them.

This place breeds violence, he said, or it attracts violence or awakes some violent latency, I don't know.

Helen lay still and tense for a long moment. *Are you warning me?*

No. I'm trying to understand what brutalised you.

Don't. When she pulled away he tried to draw her back and she tugged herself free of him. She dressed and left the humpy door swinging in the wind as she stalked out and down to the beach, her arms crossed over her chest and her hands inside the loose sleeves of her jumper rolled up at the elbows.

A wreckage of memories was scattered before her like the smashed-up pieces of a boat caught in the surf. She stood in the backwash and felt the tumultuous energy eroding away at the edge of this known world. The freezing blast of the wind whipped around her body.

She felt Hide-Away behind her, his hands on her shoulders first and then the flat board of his chest against her back. He found her wounded hand and held it in both his hands. She looked down at them in the dark and could make out the outline of her hand – ugly and shrunken, her thumb and remaining fingers bent out of shape. A wounded claw.

An accident on an oyster farm, in Tasmania.

No. He enclosed it completely. *Someone did this to you.*

Helen leaned into the nook of his shoulder.

Hide-Away said nothing else.

Helen was thirteen when Galway reappeared. She watched from the window above the kitchen sink as his few pieces of furniture were lifted from the back of a ute by two black men and taken into the shack. The only other things taken inside were a suitcase and two small boxes. She barely caught sight of Galway: he had got out of the ute when it pulled up and gone straight inside. Helen didn't see him again for weeks, not until a nurse with a grey-haired bob pulled up and knocked at his door. He only stepped outside when the nurse was leaving a half hour later. He glanced Helen's way as she came up over the cliff bank, walking up to the shack.

She felt crushed. This couldn't be Galway. He was heavily swaddled in dark clothing, his beanie pulled low across his eyes. Despite the clothing, he seemed smaller. Helen could see the withered hunch in his shoulders. There was a distinct unfriendliness in the look he shot at her, his eyes narrowed and his mouth a hard and unsmiling line. It was an expression she knew from the black kids at school – it preceded a snarling *what are you lookin' at?* Helen looked away as though she had merely noticed him and, in that act alone, felt like she was no longer anything more to him than a faceless white girl.

How could she go over there now and tell him how much she had missed him? That the memory of his face was a memory she had loved all these years? That she remembered all the words he had taught her and the stories he had told her: about the silver bream and the bony bream, the pelican and the wren, the grandmother spider? He might want to snatch it all back from her, tell her to *go find your own fucking culture, fish-stink*. The words resounded often through her mind, as though it was Galway who had said them and not the black kids on her school bus when she had once asked them the Ngarrindjeri name for egret. She became their favourite target for spit balls and paper planes covered in lewd doodles that

made her burn with shame. She wanted to tell Galway about these things too – how she was bullied at school, how Tam drank too much and then started shouting at her that she was a deceitful and unnatural child, how that drunk creep Neil flashed his erect penis at her once when she walked past his shack on the way home from school. She hadn't shared these things with anyone and buried her various fears with the small birds and creatures she sometimes found dead in the sand dunes, covering their graves with wreaths she made of climbing *lignum* and *convolvulus* flowers.

She felt a painful diffidence now, a sense that she would sound and look foolish if she told him how his stories were still alive in her private landscape of Lacedpede. She knew suddenly that she could never tell him about the strange map of this coast that had formed in her mind over the years, drawn with Ngurunderi's storylines; her uncanny sense of knowing how far away the Granites were, what the bluff looked like, where his spear could be found in the river. She had an almost magnetic sense of which direction these places lay as well as others – Kingston, Victor Harbour, Kangaroo Island – though she had never visited them, hadn't in fact gone more than a few miles beyond any part of the Coorong in the last six years.

She could no more forget this map than her own name but she learnt not to think with it too often. It sank down through the sedimentary layers of her mind till it was in darkness, a cold and barren place like the old Coorong under the sea.

For three years, Galway rarely stepped beyond the threshold of his shack's front door. He spent the days seated in front of his window, overlooking the Coorong. He watched the water, the sand dunes and the sky and cursed at any human intrusions into the frame of the window. In the early evenings, he looked for the white egret that haunted the shadows of the dunes on the water. She was the kernel of reassurance in his day-to-day life. If she was there, then he was here, and the space around them was unfolded: wide-open and empty, hiding nothing. He felt safe on the bare promontory, living in the lee of stillness behind the wall of sand dunes. He could trust the low-lying flatness of the limestone and that the wind would keep the shrubs stunted and small.

One afternoon Galway couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone outside his shack. The birds seemed fidgety in the trees outside his window and there was the occasional sense of a soft shuffling movement against the outside wall. He checked out the window every so often, expecting to see a face in the foliage of the boobialla or a leg disappearing into the shrub. *Kids*. He dreaded them. It was the spring school holidays and two or three families had appeared at some of shacks further down the shoreline, disturbing his solitude with boats that maddened him like blowflies hanging around his head, loud country music long into the night and the distant strains of foul-mouthed kids. Tam had effectively scared the shit out of them when he caught them lurking around his shed – he didn't have to do much, he looked the part of a crazy old fisherman who might really be a psychopath with human body parts wrapped up in the chest freezer. Some parents had come charging over, *fuckin' rednecks*, Galway thought as he watched from the window the scene that had ensued outside Tam's shack.

Tam was impassive, arms folded over his chest, ordering them to keep their kids under control. They got feral. One man wagged a finger in Tam's face and nearly lost it. A brawl might have followed if they hadn't noticed the skill and strength with which Tam brushed the man off, sending him flying backwards to land on his backside. The man was shaken, surprised by the hard force those hands suggested. They were shouting back over their shoulders as they walked off the promontory back to their shacks: threats and insults that Galway knew was all piss and wind. Partway through the confrontation, he had noticed the girl just within the frame of his window, sitting on the ground in the shade of a boobiolla not far away from their shack, watching on with a deadpan expression.

Helen.

He opened the back door and it was her, in brown shorts and a singlet, sitting slumped against the outside wall and staring out at the space beyond the edge of the limestone. He saw bare limbs that had been burnished by the sun. Her hair was stiff with the salt and wind. He knelt down in front of her and tipped her chin upwards to examine her face.

She turned yellow eyes onto him. Galway pulled back, blinking.

Helen drew her legs closer to her chest. She had a faded bruise around her left eye and an old cut on her lip. For a fleeting second he had seen the blaze of Fae's fury.

He brought her inside and Helen sat at the kitchen table. She didn't want a cup of tea, or biscuits, or a mint, or a smoke. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, mostly silent.

Galway rambled. 'I've been hoping you'd come see me. Nukkun ya, all grown up, unna? I've often thought about you, wishing you'd come visit me. My niece told me you get a rough time at school, about some fat nasty bitch who's got it in for ya. She says you're real quiet, but smart. I got to thinkin' maybe you didn't remember me. There was a day way back when I called out to ya, you was walking home from the bus stop, you just looked at me and kept walkin'. I felt...I felt gutted. I often thought o' goin' over to talk to you,

but...figured I'd wait. You'd come 'round when you was ready. I'm glad you've come over. It's been a long time. Long, long time.'

He rambled on about the weather, the osprey and the blue wrens he had seen that day, the tourists he once caught with their eyes cupped against his kitchen window and peering into his shack. He gave her a performance of the volley of abuse he hurled after them. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, watching this girl who didn't smile. The bruise under her eye was a greenish-yellow tinge and Galway was reminded again of Tam throwing that man off his feet. He tried to work out how old she would be. She still caught the bus to school, though with less and less frequency, he had noticed. He thought maybe sixteen, but it was hard to tell with girls these days.

'Do you still feel pain where you were burnt?' she asked, suddenly.

The question quietened him. He nodded.

Helen was looking squarely at him, then over his bare scarred arms, the semi-circle of silk-smooth chest, the spider-webbed scars on the side of his neck and face. She didn't seem insensitive, merely curious. She didn't look at him the way others did. Adults were not so bad, they were quick to plaster over their repulsed fascination with awkward compassion. It was the wide-eyed gapes of passing children when he had ventured outside the hospital for a smoke that had made him feel grotesque. He had felt like a child himself at those moments. He had wanted nothing but soft arms to hold his head while he sobbed with the humiliation of his disfigurement, with how instantly his earlier life and his undamaged body had disappeared, the profound irretrievability. The loss was still too large for him to handle some days.

Galway lit up another cigarette and wouldn't meet her eyes.

'You never come outside,' she remarked. 'Sometimes I think you might die and I wouldn't know. No one would. Not for a while.'

He shrugged, 'That's how it's gonna happen.'

She looked grave, but said nothing.

‘Probably,’ he added; he had meant to sound casual before, not so dour.

‘I got the impression you wanted me to stay away.’

Galway nodded his head with nervous looseness; so he was going to have to explain about that. ‘At first I did. Not cos I didn’t want to see ya. I was nasty for a while – lot of pain, a lot of pain,’ he sucked on the cigarette, ‘I couldn’t promise myself that I wouldn’t be a bastard and hurt ya – with words, I mean. I’m still nasty sometimes.’

Helen chewed her bottom lip as she thought over his words. When she looked at him and spoke, Galway caught the switch in her voice: she was going to say something and changed her mind. ‘They look like the insides of shells,’ she was looking at his arms again. ‘Like mother-of-pearl.’

By early winter of the following year, Helen and Galway had established a tentative friendship. It lacked the easiness of the station days. Galway didn’t take as much care with his moods around her as he might have when she was a child but Helen could read him like the weather. She found subtle and hidden ways to look after him. When she saw the signs of a psychic break approaching – Galway mishearing innocuous things she had said as insults or accusations, insisting that he could smell the stink of his body on fire, seeing a woman standing under the gum tree where the grave was, feeling the presence of a grey man he kept expecting to see in doorways – Helen sought out his niece at school to pass the word on that Galway needed seeing to. An aunty or a brother would appear in the following days, sometimes taking him away to Adelaide for a spell at Glenside.

While Galway was gone and Tam was out, Helen went through his shack and washed clothes, bedding and dishes, cleaned down the kitchen and set mouse traps. When she remade the bed, she messed up the sheets and covers so it looked the way he had left it. He was usually too fuzzy to notice much when he returned home and by the time his mind had clarified the shack had fallen back into the alignments that reflected his presence.

A storm was approaching from the sea, turning the sky black. Only the Coorong seemed to hold light when Helen walked over to see Galway. He was slumped forward in his chair, his eyes closed as though he was asleep. Helen touched him and pulled away. He was cold and grey. His arm had the dull heaviness of a lifeless body. She stood before him, stricken, at a loss. She remembered there was one way to know for sure and she leaned in and placed her fingertips on the vein in his neck. There was the merest beat. She saw then that he was breathing, but barely.

‘Galway?’ she kneeled down and placed her hands on his shoulders, then gently pushed him back into his chair. Then she noticed it: the smell of rain. It was strongest next to his skin. He was a cocoon of cold rain-soaked air. She couldn’t stir him. She pulled the blanket from his bed and tucked it around him and then sat down against the wall beneath his window, watching over him while the storm raged over the shack, above them the roar of heavy rain on the tin roof. By nightfall the sky was cleared and the colour had come back into Galway’s face. His sleep was lightening with the odd twitch in his hand or a deep sigh. When he woke, she was standing by his side, waiting. She placed a mug of warm tea in his cold hands and left without a word.

‘I found a book in the library, about the blackfellas up north, near the border.’

‘Unna?’

Helen had persuaded Galway to move his chair outside by the back door where he could sit in the sunshine. She sat on a rock near him, close to the edge of the limestone. She didn’t tell him that it was so Tam could see them from his kitchen window.

Helen looked down at the bull ants on the ground, poking at them with a stick as she talked. ‘They used to trade things for sea shells. The Wati Mari treasured them for the

mother-of-pearl on the inside. To them, it was the essence of rain. You can see why...' she leaned forward and passed him a large piece of abalone shell she had found on the beach.

Galway rubbed the cold smooth inside: it was the silvery grey of sunlit rainclouds. He looked out at the wide empty sky on the water and then down at his scarred arms. 'You reckon my skin is the essence of rain?'

Helen shrugged and felt awkward with her face – she didn't know whether to smile or look solemn; 'It's just an idea.' She threw the stick away; 'It suits you.'

She could feel him watching her but wouldn't meet his eyes.

'See them two, circling like that?'

She turned to look at the sky over the water, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun, and watched the two pelicans gliding slowly in a wide upward spiral.

'They can't fly straight up, like shearwaters or terns, so they fly in a big circle, up and up. When there's a big group of them, there's always the big one, way above the others, way up in the sky, waiting for them. He's the leader. When they all get up there, they fall into a V behind him and fly away. It means they're going on a long journey. But these two...'

They watched the two pelicans still climbing the sky.

'They'll keep going up. Up and up. Who knows where they're going. They'll keep circling, up and up, till they disappear, into thin air.'

Helen heard her grandfather calling her name. Tam was by the front door of the shack; it was time to head out and cast the nets. She got to her feet but lingered, her eyes on Galway's face. His eyes, like hollows under a rock ledge in a cliff face, were pools of shadow under the beanie pulled low and the deep straight ridge of his brow beneath. She never saw him without his beanie; against the back of his neck were the curls of thick black hair she remembered from when she was a child. She was still too shy to tell Galway what she believed had happened to him during the fire. When she was in bed at night, she imagined how she would tell it to him.

While you were burning, an old weather god brought together cloud, rain and lightning and he condensed and fused them into your burning skin and flesh. To put out the fire in your body. That's why you ache and disappear when the rain's coming. Your body remembers all this. It wants to go back to being rain and storm.

'Go on,' he told her. 'Don't keep him waitin'.'

Helen caught up to Tam at the top of the path down the cliff bank. They walked in silence. As the boat sped over the water out to the first buoy, Helen glanced up to where the two pelicans were still spiralling upwards, so high now they were no more than dark flecks against the soft sky. Circling and circling, disappearing into the wilderness of pale air.

When storms were gathering, and if Tam was in Meningie drinking at the pub, Helen came over. She had a cassette tape with her one time which she slipped into his stereo. The sounds were eerie and not Galway's idea of music at first – there was a low soft drone, a rumble like thunder or a distant avalanche, thin echoing screeches like a bow grating on a string that melded into a sound like a haunted wind. Galway was twisting his face at it.

'What the fuck is this?'

'Sigur Ros,' she replied, nonchalant, 'A band from Iceland.'

'Iceland? As if there's a fuckin' place called Iceland.'

'It's north of Ireland, an island in the Atlantic. The Vikings found it.'

Galway shut up, sick of her being such a casual know-it-all. He knew it was the pain of the approaching storm that made him difficult and hostile.

Helen was sitting on the floor against the wall beneath the window, rolling herself a joint from his stash of yarndi. She made sure he was watching: the swift movement of her fingertips and a perfect joint. He had tried to teach her the technique the week before. It had ended with Helen storming off, fed up with his aggravated grabs at her half-rolled joints each time they started to go crooked or loose.

‘Bin practisin’?’

‘Taught myself, using Tam’s tobacco.’

‘What’d Tam think, seeing all his stash rolled up?’

‘Said if a was tha’ boored, then goo mend the fuckin’ nets like a arsk yer ta.’

She lit the joint and inhaled deeply, impatient to get stoned.

‘This music, Helen, it’s too...edgy, for me.’

‘Edgy. Elemental.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Elemental?’ She focused on the drag, holding down the lungful of smoke while she counted the seconds slowly. Her body was slackening towards softness. She leaned her head back against the wall with her eyes closed.

‘The raw hard nature of things,’ she listed them slowly, ‘Storms. Granite. Basalt. The Southern Ocean. Heathcliff. Oxygen. Rain. ...’

The music darkened. It filled out the shape of the shack and the space seemed to change. Galway felt exposed to an atmosphere full of storm. The wind-like music was carrying the distant sound of thousands of birds. Sea birds, he imagined. The sound felt like a path into a place of dark ice and frozen skies. Hadn’t Fae said something like that once? Called it something? He slipped his fingers under his beanie to massage his forehead, either to ease the memory loose or smooth it away, he wasn’t sure which. The sounds were weaving now with a high reedy voice that wheeled and fell and lifted like a gull on the tumultuous air.

‘Linnutee,’ she said, like an answer. Her voice had been soft, muffled with dream.

‘Helen?’ he couldn’t quite believe what he’d heard. He needed badly to hear her say it again. He wasn’t even sure it was Helen who had spoken.

‘Helen,’ he tried again. She sat in total stillness, her wrist resting on her knee and the joint hanging loose in her fingers, slowly extinguishing itself.

Galway could feel the cold sinking into his bones. His joints were locked with the ache and he could barely move. He fixed on her face and tried to read there the truth of her life with Tam. There was the faintest shadow of a handprint on her cheek, like a brand of ownership. She had gone to ground for a while. Weeks would pass when she didn't come to see him and when she resurfaced there was always a shadow of violence somewhere on her face: a yellowed graze on her chin or a black line under her eye.

Galway could not translate her blankness into any trace of sadness or resentment. She was a blank sky, the mirror stillness of water. He felt unbearably alone when Helen was like this, with him but gone, so far away. Gone into that aerie world of dark cliffs and sea birds.

When Helen woke, it was after nightfall and rain drummed on the tin roof of the shack. Galway was lying next to her on his side with an arm above her head as though he had gone to sleep watching her. She lay still for a long moment, still drugged, feeling no need to remember who or where she was. Her sleep had been black and dreamless.

Her eyes flew open in the dark. Tam. She sat up and Galway stirred, murmured something and fell away again. He had taken her boots off. She got down on the floor to feel around for them, inwardly cursing, *motherfuck, motherfuck*. She found them and pulled them on as she rushed out the door into the rain.

Tam was sitting at the kitchen table, his hands clasped around a mug. Helen stood at the doorway, drenched and breathless from running. He wouldn't look up at her, instead glancing back at the woodstove where mullet was sizzling in the pan. He got up and turned them over, then reached for the bread on the mantelpiece, dropping two slices into the hot oil. He sat down again, still not acknowledging her.

'I'm sorry, Seanáthair.'

She watched his hand clench around the mug and braced herself.

‘Where’ve you been?’ his voice was caustic.

‘Uncle Galway’s.’

He said nothing for a moment, a twitch in his jaw the only sign that her answer had caught him off guard; ‘You were inside his place? His lights were off. What have I told you about going round there?’

‘You weren’t home. It was too cold for him to be sitting outside.’

‘What were you doing with him in the dark?’

‘We weren’t in the dark – we only talk, he wo—’

‘You stay away from him,’ Tam said in a low growl, ‘He’s no uncle of yours. It’s not appropriate.’ He took a sip of his tea, ‘Fuckin’ pervert.’

She felt her face blanch but held her ground, ‘He’s not. He’s not like that. He’s my friend.’

Iron grey eyes levelled with hers. Helen felt the coldness creep from her head downwards. She knew exactly what Tam was going to do but, inexplicably, failed to get out of the way. Hot tea scalded across her face. Her nose stung with the vapours of hot rum. She pressed her hands where it burned, smothering the pain. Otherwise, she felt nothing – no hurt feelings, no urge to cry.

He moved to the woodstove and turned the fish over again and the bread. He set the kettle to boil to make himself another tea. When he glanced at her, Helen had not moved.

‘Go wash your face,’ he ordered her.

In the hallway she waited for the pressure around her to even out, for her mind to regulate to the slack lull that always followed a bout of Tam’s rage. For the rest of the night he would ignore her. She could handle that. It was just a mug of tea this time; she could almost see how it had looked like self-restraint. Last time he had lost it, she had been thrown around the kitchen like a rag doll while he cursed and swore.

She splashed handfuls of cold water where she had been scalded. When she lifted her head to look at herself in the mirror, the side of her face was blushed a dark red. Behind

her, the naked light bulb cast an austere light on the shabby decay of the tiles. She leaned forward till her face was cheek-to-cheek with her reflection. She turned her head slightly to let the light fall onto the mirror. She concentrated on her irises and waited.

Her body felt stiff from the chillness of the bathroom and her feet were numb on the cold tiles. After a long silence she heard the slight shift of movement, a gentle shake of the wings. She held her breath. The colour of her irises flattened out and dulled. Her eyes looked back at her – impassive, bristling with acuity. She waited. A translucent membrane blinked across the length of her eye.

Tam's nightly sojourns at the pub grew longer as the months wore on and Helen focussed all her thoughts on finishing year 12. She had giving up waiting for the night the police would come to tell her that Tam had smashed his ute into a tree and died. She figured if he had managed not to get himself killed by now, it wasn't going to happen. It was that perverse and undeserved streak of luck that the chronic drunks seemed to have.

She was stirred from a fractured sleep late in the night when his ute pulled up. She listened to the sound of shambling footsteps coming up to the shack. He took a long time to reach the door. There was a long silence and Helen guessed he had strayed off to have a piss. A bottle smashing on the rocks sounded like the sudden cracking of hard glass, a newly-formed weakness in the outer shell of her mind.

The door opened and closed but there were no more footsteps. Helen waited, straining to hear into the silence. She got out of bed, touching her feet lightly to the floor. In the passage she saw the dark hulk of her grandfather standing slumped against the wall, asleep. Worse than drunk.

She lifted his arm and draped it around her shoulders and circled her other arm around his waist. Tam shifted his weight sluggishly onto her and she half-pushed half-lead him, like a heavy boat over the water, down the hallway to his bedroom at the end. He fell heavily from her grasp onto his bed, landing in a sitting position with his feet flat on the floor. He opened his eyes from under heavy lids and dragged them up to look at Helen, following the line of her body up to her face. He swayed forward with sleep and then pulled himself back sharply, arching his head back to peer at her again.

He slurred something at her and Helen stood in silence. His glare smouldered as he waited for an answer from her. His brief glow of rage extinguished and he slumped

sideways, asleep. Helen bent down and lifted his legs onto the bed. She removed his boots and straightened his limbs out so he was lying comfortably. Then she kneeled down on the floor and leaned in close to his ear.

‘Die, Seanáthair,’ she whispered, imagining her words travelling on a shallow river towards a place in his mind that was vulnerably receptive, that could be surreptitiously poisoned with the cancerous seed of an idea. ‘I don’t like your stories anymore. Just die.’

In the dark puddles of shadow where Tam’s eyes were closed, larger and more nebulous eyes were staring back at her, wide open and unblinking. Helen stared straight back at them, curious more than unnerved. It could have been a trick of the moonlight. She spoke Tam’s name and nudged him but he didn’t stir. The eyes re-emerged. An Anubis-like being. Half-wild but devoted to his master. Helen backed away from him and shut the door behind her. She pulled on jeans and a jumper and slipped out.

The sound of the ocean was so clear that Helen felt as though the hidden periphery of her world had surged forward to envelop her. The promontory was shadowed by moonlight. The ground was a collage of pallid grey limestone and black. The dark shrubs seemed sentient, harbouring strangeness within their dense woody foliage. She could see the black fringes of club rush and sedges that grew in the cracks and holes of the limestone, whipping in the wind. She walked over the rough ground, hugging her body against the cold. She looked up to catch the sight of a night heron flying over, coming back from the freshwater soaks on the other side of the Coorong. She saw the pale white body and underwings. It wound away into darkness as though such birds were only to be glimpsed, briefly struck by a shaft of moonlight.

Helen loved the *Moonbird*. While the others in her class bragged about their P plates and the boys talked about their rusted bombs as though they were indecent girlfriends, Helen felt

privately smug about her wooden boat and the distinction it gave her, even if they didn't know about it nor would have cared if they did.

On cold grey weekends she would put on her long brown coat and row the *Moonbird* all the way south, through the Narrows and past Parnka Point to Tea Tree Crossing. The rhythm of the smooth arc and pull of the oars through the water mirrored the silent soar of the pelicans above her. When she reached Jack's Point one afternoon, the strong familiar stink of guano carried on the air but another stench trailed after, like salt-pickled putrefaction. Helen's skin crawled with prescience.

She stayed out on the water for a long time, letting the boat drift as she surveyed the reefs that made up the chain of small islands. Small humps of feathered bodies littered the exposed rocks. Feathers twitched in the wind. Crows lifted off the reef while others came swooping down, cawing. White down scattered the surface of the water and floated past her boat.

The pelican chicks usually came crowding and jostling along the edges of the islands to watch her row pass, riveted by the sight of her. She rowed up to the largest island and stepped out onto the reef. The smell hit her like one of Tam's backhanders. The entire surface was a mess of blood, feathers and innards. The chicks had been clubbed and stomped to death. Their large black eyes stared at nothing, covered in grey film and flies. All the eggs had been smashed and crows were flying off with embryonic chicks that had been reduced to gore under heavy boots. A layer of flies covered everything, leaving the smell of dead animal on her skin wherever they touched upon her.

Helen returned to Lacepede late in the afternoon. Tam's ute was gone. He had left mullet in the fridge for her, scaled and filleted. She knew she was on the edge of a precipice; she felt light-headed and short-of-breath, as though the air was too thin to breathe. Waiting for the kettle to boil grated on her nerves and she moved it back to the edge of the stove. She glared

around at the kitchen and hated everything she saw. Buoys and ropes were piled in the corner and reeked of brackish brine and fish. Tam's empty bottles of whisky and rum cluttered the benches and she could smell the stale stink of alcohol. The empty bread bags they used for rubbish bags were bulging with fish bones and mouldy tea bags. A week's lot of dirty dishes were scattered over the table and piled up in the sink, crusted with dried egg yolks and mashed potatoes. She was sick of the food they ate: the bland white bread, margarine and potatoes and the endless fish – mullet, flounder, mulloway, perch, callop, more mullet, more mulloway. The stink of fish was on everything. Her body stank of it. It was in her hair and in her clothes. It was the mucky stink of decrepitude.

She walked over to Galway's shack and let herself in. He was asleep. He lay almost on his stomach, his legs bent under him. An argument was flickering beneath his closed eyelids and there was a soft gravelly snore when he breathed a single deep breath from time to time.

The bedside table was covered in detritus. The ash tray overflowed with butts and roaches, the blackened bong exuded a faint acrid stench, lighters lay empty of fluids amid crumpled empty cigarette packets and loose cigarette papers. The sight of the mess made her angrier. More signs of the despondency that hung over this place like the stink of fish. Rubbish everywhere she looked. Slovenliness. A scream was bristling up her spine and neck.

She spotted the dime bag half-full of dried buds. She picked it out and held it to her nose. The plastic was permeated with the smell of marijuana. The buds were large. Hydroponic, Galway had told her, if they're large. Small buds usually came from plants grown in a hard-to-find-clearing in some local scrub reserve. You got a better buzz from the hydro-grown, he went on, but the organic stuff didn't give you the headaches afterwards. She fossicked about some more and found a pouch of cigarette papers. She left without Galway having stirred.

Back in the kitchen she lifted down Tam's half-full bottle of Drambuie from the mantelpiece. In Tam's room, she found the tail ends of two bottles of whisky that had rolled under his bed. Further back, she made out his old duffel bag and pulled it out. Old khaki clothes and a worn leather bandolier that had gone stiff-hard with time and salt. She unwrapped a wad of grubby white silk and found a necklace within – a thin black chain looped through the eye holes of a heron skull. The bone had been worn smooth from many years rubbing against skin. She stuffed the duffel bag back under Tam's bed and fixed the necklace around her neck, slipping the skull under her jumper where she could feel it against her sternum.

She put the whisky in her schoolbag with the marijuana, a half-eaten loaf of bread and a box of jatz biscuits and headed down to the reef. She waded out to the *Moonbird* sitting on the water and pushed it out where it was deeper before getting in.

In the sand dunes her mood started to ebb. At the humpy she got a fire going in the metal drum and poured herself a generous mug of Drambuie. Occasionally, Tam used to pour out a small glass for her, no more than a few sips, while they sat at the kitchen table long into the night while Tam re-wove the story about the egret-woman and the fire or the story of his selkie grandmother. They had not sat together in this way for years. The barley-sweet burn of the amber liqueur stung the back of her throat.

She swilled another sip and could feel her tastebuds shrivelling up with the burn. She wanted to cry but the tears that rimmed her eyes wouldn't spill over. She fed more kindling into the fire and the soft crackle of the flames was the most comforting sound she had heard in a long time. She rolled herself a fat joint, fatter than she ever permitted herself when she was with Galway. She always felt the need to show off her self-restraint to Galway; or maybe it was modesty, she wasn't sure. Or pride. Though the yarndi made her unbearably hungry she always declined the munchies Galway offered, insisting that she didn't feel like food. Stoned, the smell of a meat pie that Galway was warming in the oven

verged on divine but Helen only delved further down into the arcane fissure of her hunger, the pride in her silent asceticism reinforcing her like a secret knowledge.

By the end of her joint, Helen was numbed to the mood that had plagued her in the shacks. She could barely bring back the images of grubby rooms, unkempt clothes, unshaved faces or glazed embittered eyes. She poured another Drambuie and opened the box of biscuits, suddenly ravenous. She could barely taste them except for the salt, but the crunchy texture was so enjoyable she didn't stop eating till half the box was gone. She smoked another joint, this one for all the calories.

Her mind was turning lucid with the marijuana. She rested her back against the wall and stared at the deepening twilight in the opaque window, turning the heron skull over in her fingers.

I wish he'd just kill me.

She finished the Drambuie and swigged the whisky from the bottle. By the light of the fire and with her eyes now feeling scratchy and torpid, she rolled another joint. Her shoulders and back were aching with drunken heaviness and she felt a suffocating tightness across her chest. She slipped her bra off from under her shirt but felt only a little less constricted. She lay down as she smoked the joint down to the nub. The cold of the humpy floor crept into her spine and hips. The whistles of the wind in the gaps and cracks of the walls were shrill and plaintive. She was nowhere. Connected to no-one.

Her chest suddenly burst open, drawing down into her body a deep lungful of cold sea water. Heavy swells were tossing and crushing her, her ears pounded with the pressure of water. She caught glimpses of a starry sky sinking and bending with the waves above her.

She gasped in the dry smoky air of the humpy. The sand-dune hollow was a clear prism of sound with each hulking wave distinguishable from the next as they ruptured onto the beach. She became aware of the heron skull in her closed hand and realised she had known since the moment she found it that it was Eliina's. She closed her eyes and called to

her grandmother until she could no longer tell the thundering surf from her heart crashing away darkly into the night.

Tam came forward and reached into the front of the boat for the rope, then tied it to the picket. Helen didn't meet his eyes as she got out. When her feet found the hardness of the reef, the boat rocked under her balance and her head swam into a nauseating descent. She measured her movement carefully as she reached in for the bag.

'That's an expensive hang-over, Helen,' Tam said. His voice was mild. She couldn't hear though the fog of her headache if there was an undercurrent of danger.

'How expensive?' she asked, groggy.

'About fifty quid, all up.'

She nodded dumbly.

'Big drink of water first, and then go lie yourself down.'

She started to walk towards the bank, shading her eyes with her hand.

'Helen?'

She squinted over her shoulder.

'Don't do that again,' he looked sad. 'I don't want you to be like me.'

At the sink she stood and drank four glasses of water, concentrating on making the water go down the right way as she pressed out the vision and the feel of the sea engulfing her. Then she felt her way through the kitchen to her bedroom with her eyes closed, the light knifing into her headache. Her body capitulated to the softness of her bed after the hard floor of the humpy. As she started to sink into a calmer sleep she saw the chicks again, downy feathers twitching in the wind, their bodies unmoving. She felt for the heron skull but it was gone.

The woman was there again. She stood under the large shaggy gum tree in the paddock on the other side of the small bay on Galway's side of the promontory. The first time he saw her, when he first moved to Lacepede, he thought it was Helen, but Helen wouldn't be walking around on a cold wet day wearing nothing but a thin silk slip. The woman didn't move. She stayed by the pile of stones at the base of the tree, watching the promontory. Galway stayed away from the front door, the only place from which he could see across to the paddock, and tried not to think about her. It never augured well for him each time she appeared: she always brought the old fire with her, to haunt him with it.

Galway waited for Helen to come over. It had been weeks and the wait was making him the edgiest he had felt since he had come here. She was doing her exams so he tried to sit tight and be patient. And then one day the woman wasn't there. Galway was unnerved. This wasn't the usual pattern. Where was the smell of the fire? The smell of his body burning? That grey-white man in all his dreams?

He was asleep in his chair in the afternoon when he woke suddenly. On the water, two men were rowing a dinghy across to the sand dunes. He had seen them several days in a row now. An old man and a young man, father and son maybe.

She walked past the window. The woman in the slip. She gave him a sidelong glance and he caught the brilliant amber of her eyes. It was Fae. It was Helen. He leapt out of his chair, his body suddenly loose and spry with the fear that was unfurling in his stomach. He limped into the kitchen and reached for the sink, pulling himself up to the window to catch another sight of her. The promontory was deserted with only the wind sweeping across the limestone.

I don't like this. I don't like this. I do not like this.

He grabbed spare blankets and sheets and nailed them over the windows, shutting out the landscapes and the daylight. He spent the next week in a dark orange gloom, inducing himself into sleep with yarndi and painkillers, the orb of the sun suffusing the blanket with a garish glow as it slipped down behind the sand dunes.

Helen stepped into a lurid fug of smoke, sweat and fear. Galway was standing in the corner of his room, wearing only boxer shorts. She could see the full horror of what had happened to him. The scars covered his body, variously smooth, puckered into veins, discoloured, healed taut over his bones. She could see all the different ways he had burned, like a forest: the quick curling and shrivelling to ash, the deep licking flames across his skin, the long smouldering burn into his flesh. His hair was a wild bush of black frizz and curls. His eyes shone wide and haunted, his forehead glistened with sweat. He blinked at the sight of her, shook his head and pressed the palm of his hand hard against his temple.

‘Galway?’ she reached to touch his wrist but he shoved her hand away with a shudder.

‘Don’t. Don’t fuckin’ touch me.’

She stepped back as if he’d bitten her.

‘I’m sick of you,’ he hissed at her, ‘Sick of you creeping around me all the fucking time. Who do you think you are? Comin’ into my place when I’m not here and fuckin’ stickin’ your nose everywhere. Think I didn’t notice? I fuckin’ hate it. I can’t stand to have you near me anymore, Helen. I don’t fuckin’ need you. You just fuckin’ use me, just want me fuckin’ yarndi and me smokes, and then you fuck off. And then you don’t want nuthin’ to do with me till next time you wanna get hammered, and then you’re all sweetness and fuckin’ mystery. Well, I ain’t givin’ you nuthin’, Helen, so fuck off. Fuck off back to that kid-fucker.’

Helen couldn't trust herself to say anything. Her whole body was on the brink of a watery collapse. Galway was shivering, huddling further into the corner. He wouldn't meet her eyes now. He kept his head bent down, staring blankly at the floor.

'Just go,' he snapped, 'Fuck off.'

Helen felt her body unlock and she bolted out into the late sunshine, slamming the door behind her. She could hear the creaking wings of cormorants, disturbed from the rocks below by the sound of the slamming door. At the edge of the cliff she saw Tam on the reef, loading nets into the *Sadie*. He turned, sensing he was being watched, and saw her on the cliff top.

'Hurry up,' he ordered her before turning back. Helen walked slowly, her legs unsteady, down the steep cliff path down to the bank and out onto the sandbar where Tam waited, ready to push the boat off. As she approached, she could see the lines of a frown deepening on his face. When she stood before him, his eyes turned to steel.

'For fuck's sake, Helen.'

'I'm fine.'

Tam wouldn't listen, 'You're stoned.'

Helen glared at him, 'No. I'm not.'

He grabbed a sudden handful of her hair and pulled her back, 'I'm bloody *sick* of you lying to me. I can see your fucking eyes, Helen. Bloodshot.'

'I'm not lying,' she shot back at him, 'Valel on lühikesad jalad.'

Tam froze on her for an instant, then went off like a bomb. Helen felt the back of his hand smashing into the side of her face. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her back onto her feet, then belted her again. She felt a bone crack the second time. Her mouth was filling with blood. There was a throbbing under her left eye. Her teeth ached. Somewhere in her mind, a calm curious voice observed the injuries and the pain. *A bone in my face has cracked. I've bitten into the side of my mouth. And now my tongue too. I can feel out the shape of my teeth in the pain where I've bitten myself. My jawbone is fractured.* She could

feel another part of her mind trying to register the wounds, to feel out the full brunt of the pain.

The end of his boot crashed into her ribs and she felt them snap like twigs. She was lying in the waterlogged sand. She could taste the briny salt water in her mouth, mixing with the blood which kept bleeding from somewhere inside her mouth. She turned onto her side, hugging her ribs with one arm as she lifted herself with the other. She coughed out gobs of blood and saliva. The sand bar and reef and dark line of the woodlands were unspooling around her. She was gasping to breathe. She shut her eyes to stop the landscape disintegrating. *He's going to kill me, Eliina. At last.* She wasn't scared, just relieved.

She woke, propped up against the wall. Her head slid from one side to the other, stone-heavy, her skull filled with compressed pain. Her tongue felt foreign and ill-fitting in her mouth. The smeary gleam of the tiled floor came into focus. She was in the bathroom. She got to her feet and felt the ground give way beneath her. She caught herself on the basin. Her ribs creaked with pain as she tried to bring her body upright.

When she saw the face that stared back from the mirror, something broke inside her. Blood had dried from her nose and mouth over her chin. Her left eye was swollen shut: the bruise was an inky blue, veined in a deep blood-purple over the eyelid. She leaned in close and tried to see only the swollen eyelid, finding this one detail, in isolation, strangely beautiful. She touched the side of her face where her jaw ached and her face felt soft and spongy. Her bottom lip was swollen and she could make out the black cut-marks of her teeth. Blood and sand clogged up the back of her mouth. She tried to spit it out but her tongue was too swollen and in the way – she gagged on the sand. Finally she spat. The saliva was stringy and blood-stained. She wiped the rest of it from her mouth with the back of her hand.

Tam was standing at the doorway.

‘Dinnae torture yourself, lass. It’ll clear up.’

Helen backed away from the basin, stumbling back another step back when Tam came forward. He stopped and held up the small first aid kit.

She eased herself back down onto the closed lid of the toilet. Tam filled the basin with warm water and started to clean the blood away from her mouth with a cloth. He tilted her chin to see her face more clearly under the light. Helen closed her eyes, the closeness of Tam’s face unbearable. He passed her a glass of water and painkillers but when she tried to swallow the tablets, they caught in her throat and she was seized with coughing, nearly passing out. When the coughing subsided, beads of sweat were trickling down her temples. She was trembling uncontrollably.

She heard Tam sigh. He was standing at the basin, wringing bloodied water from the cloth. Suddenly he balled it up and slammed it at the wall above her head. She closed her eyes.

He began shouting at her. ‘Ye’re not...fucking natural! Why do ye go over th’air? Ye disobey me ev’ry fucking chance ye get. I didna raise ye to be so deceitful. A deserve more loyalty frae ye, Helen. A’ve earned yer fucking loyalty!’

He turned and wrenched the plug out of the basin, then hunched over it, gripping the rim with white knuckles as he waited for the water to drain away.

Tam turned to look down at her and stilled. Helen felt like her body was on fire, beads of sweat were sliding down the sides of her face. The naked light bulb was hurting her eyes. Tam reached for a clean washcloth and ran it under the cold water, then knelt down beside her and mopped the sweat away from her brow. He put his palm against her forehead. She felt her head fall heavily as he withdrew his hand and she half-opened her good eye, staring upwards at Tam. Tam beheld her for a moment, almost awestruck. Her eye blinked and for a brief moment she saw Tam through a thin opaque veil. Tam lunged forward and gripped her face in both hands; his face of disbelief took up all of her vision. She showed him again. A slow blink from the outside to the inside.

Tell me a story, Seanáthair.

The moon was once an island covered in forest filled with wild life. One morning, like every other morning, the shearwaters left the rocky cliffs of the island and went out over the ocean. And while they were gone, the island awoke and understood, at that moment, her larger destiny. She lifted out of the ocean and drifted into the sky where her forest and wild life perished to fine grey dust. At dusk the birds returned to find a great expanse of water where the island had once been. It was like a giant gash in the womb of the earth.

Now the birds were homeless and lost, but they knew their beloved island-mother was somewhere very close. They could feel her presence but what they felt now was her new-found power over all the oceans of the earth. Ever since this day, they have been criss-crossing the Pacific Circle in a figure-of-8 every year. They are still searching for her. Their longing is the cold silver light on the sea far below. They are the moonbirds.

Helen laid back with her arms resting along the rims of the bath tub, sliding down until her head leaned against the edge and the hot water covered her shoulders. Her eyes were level with the evening sun that shone through the line of nail holes in the corrugated tin. From time to time she found herself struggling with a deep breath; her breathing was nearly always shallow now and she would feel like she was gasping for air all of a sudden. Each time it happened, the dark water rushed in and flooded her mind.

Tam had not spoken to her all week. He left in the mornings to haul in the nets and in evenings to cast them again without her. He came home from the pub long after midnight and stumbled on into his bedroom. The swelling of her injuries had gone down and now she observed the gradual change in colour of the bruises that covered her body. They went black and then through gradations towards greenish-yellow. She had observed this process so often and still didn't know what gave rise to that colour. She wondered if maybe it was nothing to do with old blood and shrinking lesions but some atavistic shadow of nature, the strange power of an organic injury to generate an intense moment of vivid green growth.

She spent the days barely conscious, her mind engulfed in a deep silence. She heard the waderbirds arrive in their hundreds of thousands. The high-pitched trilling cacophony fell across the shack like a long shadow, entering her mind as a porous screen of darkness. She could feel the pressure of a fierce summer approaching. Some part of her was readying to leave the coast. Each time she closed her eyes, she surrendered to the pull of the Linnutee. Galway felt like a long time ago; the beatings almost irrelevant. She was almost not here anymore. The smell and the taste of the sea were so strong.

She opened her eyes. Eliina was standing at the mirror, pinning her hair back with one of Helen's hair clips. She wore the same pale-coloured slip she always wore; there were

strands of sea weed dried onto her legs and a graze down the outside of her lower arm where a wave had dragged her over the sand. She was bony across her upper chest and her arms were twig thin. She turned to look down at Helen. She had thin pale lips, almond eyes and sharp defined cheekbones. She had Helen's sallowish complexion and knotty brown hair. She sat down, perched on the edge of the bath, and motioned for Helen to sit up. Helen lifted herself upright and leaned forward. She held Helen's chin with one hand and brushed her hair back from her forehead, examining the swelling around her eye.

Helen twisted her head out of Eliina's hold and stared blankly in front of her. Eliina cupped handfuls of water over Helen's bruised back and Helen closed her eyes.

'I want to die, Eliina. I know how to drown: I wait for that reflex, when I can't hold my breath any longer, then I just breathe and let go.'

Eliina reached across to the drawer of the basin cupboard, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and an old lighter that Helen had never seen there before. She pulled out a smoke and lit it up, taking a long drag before passing it to Helen. Helen took a puff. It was nothing like the cigarettes Galway or Tam smoked. There was a strong mouth-hollowing taste to them. Mint, she thought at first, but that wasn't it. Menthol.

'Ma ei ole kunagi unistanud kohta uppumisohus,' Eliina said, running her fingers through the surface of the bathwater over Helen's legs.

Helen passed her back the cigarette and Eliina tapped the ash onto the tiles.

'Were you frightened? Down at the mouth.'

Eliina blew the smoke upwards towards the window and slowly shook her head. She took another puff, more hurried this time, then passed the cigarette back to Helen.

'Järgige lihtsalt linnutee, armas.'

Helen heard the familiar weight of Tam's footsteps in the hallway. His shadow filled the gap of the threshold and Helen sensed his hesitation. Then he turned back and went into the kitchen. She looked to find she was alone again. She finished the cigarette and stepped out of the bath.

He flicked a look at her as she entered the kitchen wrapped in a towel. Her clothes on the rail of the woodstove were warm and dry.

‘You smoking in the bathroom?’ he asked her as she passed him.

She shook her head; the taste of it had disappeared from her mouth.

Tam reached for the bottle of rum and poured a shot into his tea. His hands were trembling slightly and he laid them flat palms-down on the table. Helen registered the signs of his suppressed distress and her heart felt like a stone.

They went out in the *Sadie* early in the evening. The daylight was still bright and the heat stifling but beyond the dunes rain clouds were banking up behind, waiting on the hidden sea. On the inland horizon the sky was an eerie green. The Coorong was a dark metal blue with an oily sheen. Herons stalked the shallows in the shadow of the dunes, their grey forms barely visible. Lines of pelicans flew close to their reflections on the glass-still water.

Sea gulls had been waiting on the reef for the boat. When they reached the first buoy the gulls came down in one large flock. They bobbed up and down on the wake as Helen unwound the net into the water. Her body was still stiff and the boat rocked under her jerky movements. She reached for the edge to steady herself, ignoring Tam's scowl. She knew she should have gone to hospital but she could think of no plausible story for her injuries and she would have needed Tam to take her. It was better to have weathered the worst of the pain alone in bed.

She had found Tam the night before sitting in the dark in the kitchen, hunched by the woodstove, barely stirring when Helen switched the light on. She glanced at him as she walked to the sink, he looked as though he had aged ten years in a matter of days.

'When I'm better, I'm leaving,' she told him.

He gave no sign that he'd heard her. She took a glass of water and painkillers back to bed. The next evening she got herself down to the bank as Tam was loading the nets. He glanced at her and then flicked a look at the boat – Helen got in.

The first net was almost completely in the water. Helen heard the guttural croak of an egret and looked to where the far shore was lost in the shadow of the dunes. The egret was a pallid white in the shadow. The boat suddenly rocked violently under her. As she tried to steady herself, she was shoved and fell easily into the water. Her eyes opened into

the murky gloom of the Coorong, the salty water already burning through her sinuses and filling her mouth, sliding down into her lungs. She kicked her legs towards the halo of sunlight shimmering above her and broke the surface of the water, gasping for air. She spun around and saw the boat close by. Tam was leaning over the edge, watching her. She swam the few strokes towards it and grabbed hold of the edge of the boat. Beneath her the water was deep and the current strong; she could feel it pulling past her. Tam prised her fingers loose and shoved her back in.

‘Tam!’ she sputtered as more salty water gushed into her mouth. She grabbed hold again, as hard as she could, resisting Tam’s attempt to work her fingers loose again. He turned his back for a moment and Helen tried to use the few seconds to haul herself over, resolving to battle him once she was in the boat. She was going to grab the oar and swing at him as hard as she could. Pain flared through her sides where her half-healed ribs crushed against the side of the boat as she tried to lift herself up. She lost her grip and grabbed hold again as Tam turned back to her. His hand clamped down on her wrist and she saw the filleting knife in his other hand. She started to twist her hand, trying to prise it loose from his grip but he didn’t let go.

‘No, no, no, no, no,’ she said the word over and over, pleading, spluttering with the water that gushed into her mouth. She thrashed against the boat as hard as she could. But Tam never wavered, with grey determination he brought the knife down and hacked a finger off with brutal slashes, the blade crunching through bone.

Her throat opened like a sluice gate and the scream poured out of her, unbidden. She thrashed her legs in the water and slammed her unwounded hand in a fist against the side of the boat, fighting the pain and the terror within herself more than she was fighting Tam.

The scream was the strangest and easiest sound she had ever made. It kept welling up through her chest, rippling through her throat. She saw in the corner of her eye a finger being tossed into the water, and another. Gulls were going mad around her, diving and squabbling for them.

Helen grabbed onto the edge of the boat again with her free hand and started to rock it with as much violence as she could muster. Tam released her hand and yanked the oar out of the oarlock. He stood up, rising to his full height, forcing the boat into balance under him against Helen's rocking. She saw the oar upright against the sky, unable to pull her eyes away. It swung downward and the paddle smashed into the side of her head. Her arms went limp and she slid back into the water, the fight gone out of her.

Water and sky were reeling. She could feel blood pulsating out from the stumps of her fingers. She felt the blow of the oar again. But there was another feeling now, she was tangled in something. She struggled with it, slipping under water, trying to shake it off, but it only tightened. The net. She was entangled in the net. She writhed and kicked; a different, more desperate fight to free her body. The nylon threads were cutting into her flesh. She remembered the malloway. The ones that washed up on the beach, still wrapped in nets and mutilated almost to mush. She stopped struggling and felt herself beginning to sink. Her eyes were just above the waterline and she could see the Hummocks, brilliantly illumined under the dark greenblue sky. In the shadows, an egret was picking through the shallows.

Tam waited. Helen went limp and disappeared down into the darkness. The surface was still again. To the west, the sky was turning an ethereal green. He drove the boat hard upstream to the next buoy where he cast the next net and upstream again to cast a third. Then he turned and putted the motor back downstream, home to his shack which sat, hunched, like a sleeping sentinel on the promontory. Shuttered. Turned inwards.

On land, the net lost its power. It hung, lifeless and dead, draped and wrapped around her body like a primeval sea creature. The rest of it dragged along behind her, catching on the

serrated rock of the reef. She took small faltering steps and tugged hard with her whole body each time the net snagged on the ground. Her unwounded hand was clamped over the bloody stumps of her fingers; both hands were rigid and fused together. Blood oozed slowly through her clenched fist.

She stumbled through the samphire, seeing smudges of dark red and the harsh white beds of the crushed calcified remains of tubeworms and crabs. A tea-tree stood on the edge of the samphire bank, gnarled and bent back away from the sea. She leaned against the trunk. Her vision was blacking out and she blinked several times, slowly and deliberately. The sun was fierce, beating down on her head and shoulders. Yet she was shivering, she was cold in her bones. She could taste nothing but salt. It was like a demon inside her mouth, on her tongue, her teeth, the insides of her cheeks. Each time she tried to swallow through her clenched jaws, thirsting for water, there was only salt and sand, burning at her sinuses, grating down her parched throat.

She pushed herself off the trunk and started walking again. In the long dry grass she found the sandy wheel track cutting through it. She stepped into it unthinkingly. Quails were darting out from the grass in front of her, their wings clicking and whirring as they skittered, on wings and feet, over the wheel ruts. She followed them, closing her eyes for long stretches at a time as she walked. The land around her was incandescent. She came to a stop and stared. Golden grass. The green of the paperbarks as solid as oil paint. The grey-white papery trunks shimmered. The sand dunes were firelit honey, the water an unsettling green. She tilted her head upwards. It was the sky. The water was a perfect reflection of the sky. Dark green. Neither clouds nor sky. It was thick and opaque, like mist; charged with light.

She brought her eyes down level. Her vision was dimming again. The track ahead curled up around a low rise and disappeared. There was a black smudge on the track, rippling in the hazy heat of the air. She staggered a few steps towards it, afraid, yet drawn. A tunnel of darkness. *It's the way*, she thought. *The way is open*. The blur rippled into the

outlines of a man who was looking up at the sky over the Coorong. She strained to see him better, blinking through the long slow-beating wings that pulsed across her vision.

Show me your face. She couldn't find her voice. Consciousness was draining away like water through sand. *Show me your face.*

He rippled back into a blur and then melted away into the green veil of the storm.

By firelight and through the prism of exhaustion, Hide-Away explored Helen's feathered body. White down grew along the ridges of bones and in the hollows, a diaphanous layer that hid the faint scars where the nylon fishnet had cut into her. A fine white powder came away from her skin wherever he touched her; the scent of musk suffused the humpy and would linger for days afterwards.

He looked down on her face, luminous with sweat and firelight. She opened her eyes with languid slowness and her gaze floated along the line of his shoulder and up to his face.

She felt strangely weightless when he turned their bodies so that he lay beneath her. He was sure her bones had become thin and hollow. Her arms looked skeletal and impossibly long, a sail-like wingspan, but when he felt them to confirm what he was seeing, he was reassured to find she still felt human. He should stop now before this got any stranger; sleep was constantly tugging at his mind. On this night they had made love as though starved for one another. He had looked up from his wood carving to see her standing on the threshold, catching her breath from her run across the dunes, her eyes intent on him.

Neither moved now and the humpy darkened by degrees as the pieces of burning wood disintegrated into embers.

I didn't come here by chance, he ventured quietly, unsure if she had fallen asleep.

No. Her voice was a mere breath of air across his chest. *Not by chance*.

He waited and then thought that Helen might have spoken in her sleep. *I should explain*.

Helen shushed him. *It was ecology*.

ardea

Vivi felt a vibration through the shack, then heard the faint sound of something being dragged over the floor. It was coming from Helen's room. She reached across and flicked on the lamp to read her watch – it was two in the morning. She had barely slept with the night so warm and sticky and now she had a headache. She got out of bed and headed for the kitchen to get some paracetamol. Helen's bedroom door was half open and the bedside lamp was on. Vivi did a double-take as she glanced in. Helen was sitting on the edge of her bed in her singlet and underwear, absorbed in the human skull she held in both hands. A small suitcase laid open by her feet, white silk spilling out onto the floor. It contained bones. Many of them. Helen was caressing the skull with a thumb, as though smoothing away strands of straying hair.

‘Helen?’ Vivi intruded softly.

‘My mother,’ she said, unalarmed, still stroking the bone forehead.

Vivi didn't know what to say.

By mid-morning, Vivi knew the day was going to be a scorcher. She was in the garden rigging shade cloth over her plants. There was a sting in the sun's heat on the exposed skin of her neck and arms. She had lost many of her plants to an earlier heatwave in December, even the heat-lovers like the lavenders and salvias – she had watched on in dismay as they dried into spindly brown twigs while their roots baked in the hot sandy soil. In the same space of hours she saw the woodlands and the dune scrub dull from shades of distant green to a soulless olive brown.

Galway was standing at his kitchen window, lighting a smoke. Vivi waved. His wave back was perfunctory, his face grim behind the dirty glass.

She looked back to her failing garden and once again tried to quell a vague uneasiness, almost a fear, of this new kind of heat. She felt a keen vulnerability that was somewhere between physical and mental. When she thought about this heat, this new order of summer, she saw a nebulous swarm of dangers being shepherded into the landscape that surrounded her, infiltrating and undermining the fragile balance of life that included her own. Birds were falling from the air, limp and dead. Kangaroos stood on the dirt road, too weary to move out of her way; their fur coats had thinned to dried hides that clung to rib cages and Vivi saw dying delirium in their dark soft eyes. Dead snakes littered the roads like bloodied lengths of rope. The desert sun of her childhood had never been like this. Though intense and enervating, there had been a softness to its heat. It didn't cut like a blade or burn the moisture from her skin as though she was standing too close to a fire.

She straightened and wiped the sweat from her hairline. She looked over to Galway's shack again. The window was vacant. She walked over there and let herself inside. He was back in his chair.

'Galway,' she strode into his room, 'You need to talk to Helen.'

'I've bin talkin' to her.'

Vivi shook her head and crossed her arms. She took a deep breath and then looked away, realising she hadn't worked out the words yet.

'What, Vee?'

'Helen...has her mother.'

Galway tilted his head at her.

'She found her,' she could only speak in bits and pieces, 'Her remains. Helen has them.'

'Remains?'

'Bones.'

'Helen has Fae's...bones?'

Vivi nodded, 'She dug them up.'

‘You’re shittin’ me.’

She shook her head.

They heard the putting outboard of the *Sadie*. Helen was back from selling the morning catch in Goolwa. Galway lurched out of the chair and stormed towards the front door, his feet pounding an uneven rhythm through the thin shell of the shack. He wrenched a walking stick from the clutter in the corner of the passageway and flung the door open. He met Helen on the limestone as she came over the edge of the cliff path. He waved his stick at her.

‘You dug up your mother? You took her out of the ruin?’

Helen raised her eyes at Vivi who was coming up behind him, then turned back to Galway; ‘No, I unearthed her.’

‘How dare you.’

‘Dare me,’ she shot back.

‘Don’t give me your fuckin’ smart-arse. I’ll knock the fuck outta you,’ he was still brandishing his stick, ‘That’s your mother. Your mother.’

‘She belongs to me.’

‘She belongs in the earth. This is fuckin’ violation.’

Helen appeared unperturbed, her voice calm and controlled. Vivi felt almost reassured that Helen would capably smooth this all down. Almost, but something bothered Vivi – it was a glimmer in Helen’s face, her voice, the way she stood. A coldness. Something intangibly Tam. Helen was standing in a different space from them, moving with a different grace Vivi hadn’t seen before. She sensed the atmosphere that had closed around them. Old and well-worn like a family relic. She could feel it as palpably as she could feel the heat and suddenly she was afraid.

‘I don’t see it that way, Galway. I have more right to unearth her – and handle her – than some forensic fop bringing all his plastic and tape and protocols. No one is going to package her up into little plastic bags and fuck off to some laboratory where her cause of

death is going to be *extracted*. Like they're the only one with the authority to tell her story. Her story. This is *my* mother.'

Galway's voice tightened as it rose, 'You shouldn't have touched her. She didn't need no fuckin' investigating.'

'Really?' Helen was intractable, 'Why did she die?'

'I told you,' he neared her, pointing a finger in her face, 'I lost her in the smoke. She died in the fire.'

'There's not a burned mark on her bones.'

'You callin' me a liar?' He asked the question with such vehemence that Vivi knew it wasn't an expression of affront, it was intended to make Helen back down.

With Galway standing so close to her, his face as dark and mean as a gun, Helen's composure was eerie, 'Yes.'

Even Galway was unnerved. He backed off a little, then tried to reason with her, 'That smoke, Helen, wherever you were, you saw it. That was enough to kill anyone. She didn't have to burn to death. It was...' Galway's words snagged on the memory he was stumbling headlong into, '...so black.'

'You are so full of shit!' Helen blasted him, 'Why didn't you say anything, Galway? For twenty years? I didn't say nothing to Vivi about the ruin. But straight away you knew where I'd found her. All along, you knew where she was.'

Galway was registering his mistake. There were hints of panic in the way his face hardened, his eyes narrowed like he was on the verge of hurling an accusation at Helen.

'That was her place. *Our* place – hers and mine.'

Helen's voice was measured yet unmoored, 'You don't come before me, Galway. Not where my mother's concerned.'

Galway closed his eyes against the anguish that passed between them and shook his head as though he could make all this go away.

Helen was turning away to stare at the bright water. Vivi and Galway watched her, the stillness like a precipice beneath their held breath. The sun flared high above them. The heat was cruel and the air arid. From under his beanie, beads of perspiration were trickling down the gaunt lines of Galway's face. Vivi wanted to go to Helen and gather her small body into her arms, but she was afflicted with fear. She was sure of nothing about Helen's nature. She was frightened of all the things she might have left unpredicted, the things that had escaped her notice. If only she had that natural aptitude for analytical accuracy when it came to knowing these broken individuals, only then could she know exactly what she was supposed to do.

Galway was the one to finally move, approaching Helen cautiously like he might a wounded animal, dangerous with pain.

'Helen.' He laid a hand on her arm.

'Don't touch me,' she hissed. He dropped his hand and waited for the space around her to stabilise again. Helen stepped away from him; her glance across Vivi's face, and then Galway's, was liquid and unseeing. She walked away from them and into the shack.

When she stormed back out a moment later, she was carrying a suitcase. Galway thought she was leaving.

'Hey,' he stepped in front of her and grabbed her by the arm, 'This ain't no time for runnin' away. You gotta talk. And I gotta talk.'

Helen flung her arm out of his grip and walked on, then came to a halt on a large bare expanse of limestone. She lifted the suitcase in the air and then hurled it at the ground. It burst apart. White silk spilled out and brown-stained bones scattered everywhere. Helen kicked at a large piece – a shoulder blade – and sent it flying over the ground. She stomped on long bones that had been limbs and ribs, breaking them under her boot.

Galway was too aghast to move or say anything. He didn't know if it was real or a hallucination. This unfolding of what he was seeing: it felt like a lurch of the mind, like one

of those sudden violent twists in his thoughts when he went from a normal mundane moment into an otherworld. When Helen kicked the skull and it cracked against a rock, Galway found his voice, found himself screaming Helen's name. It was solid dark sound in his mouth.

Helen couldn't hear him, she was still kicking and trampling. Galway made a lunge at her, the walking stick dropping from his hand, forgotten. He had her by the shoulders and spun her around to look at him, 'Stop it! Stop it! That's your mother!'

'I don't have a mother,' she shot back, 'I don't have a family!'

'I'm your family!' Galway shouted into her face, shaking her.

Helen shoved him away and he fell back onto the ground.

'I just use you, remember, Galway?' she kicked at a pile of bones and sent them scattering at him over the ground. Galway recoiled with the urge to be sick. She stomped and broke more bones as she raged at him, 'All sweetness and fuckin' mystery when it suits me. Fuck off back to that kid-fucker, you said. I remember your little tirade – all the words, clear as a fuckin' bell. I lay in the sand like some spineless coward and let Tam beat the living shit out of me because of that. I goaded him – I tipped him over the fuckin' edge so he'd bash me so hard and kill me. I made him do it. I made him do it.' She smashed the pelvis under her boot. She aimed a kick at a broken half of the suitcase and her leg swung through the air. Long arms were clamped around her chest, twisting her body away from the mess.

Helen writhed and twisted to get free of Hide-Away as he drew her down to the ground. Galway sank back against the rock behind him, shuddering, watching on as Hide-Away rocked Helen, shushing into her ear, until she broke.

Vivi knelt down next to Galway and helped him onto his feet, putting the walking stick back in his hands. The silent tears streamed down her face in wide wet ribbons. Galway still

leaned on her arm, trembling, and she felt queasy from the feel of his shock against her body.

Hide-Away and Helen stayed on the ground, their backs to Vivi and Galway. Helen had fallen silent after the deep wracking sobs that had pierced Vivi's heart.

'Helen?' Galway addressed her. Helen didn't move.

'She loved you first. It's the only thing I know anymore.'

They were a frozen tableau on the edge of the limestone. Galway patted Vivi's arms to let her know she could let him go, then bent down and turned over a broken half of the suitcase. He rearranged the white silk inside it and picked up the broken fragments of bone, placing them inside. Vivi came forward and started to help him. She made her way over the ground towards Hide-Away and Helen and lifted a glance to Helen's face. She still sat within his arms, her head back against his shoulder and her eyes vacant and blank on the sky.

She met his green-stone eyes, 'Take her with you, Bojan.'

He rose to his feet and lifted Helen to stand up. She stared about her in a daze, then focused on Galway who moved slowly, his joints creaking as he bent down to pick up the broken pieces of Fae, his face grimacing with pain.

Her breathing turned shallow and panicky; 'My mother,' she whispered.

'Leave her,' Bojan told her quietly.

When they were gone, Galway sank down onto a rock and held his head in his hands. Vivi glanced at him from time to time as she scoured the limestone for any remaining fragments. He gathered himself with deep sobbing breaths and then picked up the broken suitcase and walked away without a word. He disappeared into his shack. Bojan's boat was on the water, too far away for Vivi to make them out clearly, to read the language of their bodies.

She walked back to the shack, feeling some relief in having been forgotten by the others, in the fact of her irrelevance. In the bathroom she bent her head under the cold water

tap. The water was lukewarm on her scalp. She tossed her head back, letting the water drip down onto her shirt. She glanced at the small window above the bath. She could see across the bay from here, to the track that ran along the edge of shoreline and the dispirited blanket of the scrub and woodlands.

The shack was muggy. She drew all the curtains closed to keep the rooms in darkness, if only to create an impression of coolness. In the kitchen she switched the radio on to the local station for the news that would come on in a few minutes, then sat at the table in the full blast of an old fan.

She closed her eyes and instantly her mind went back to the limestone, trying to access the extent of the damage. She felt a soft nose nuzzle her leg and reached down to bury her fingers in the deep soft fur of her companion. She wanted to weep, to cry properly, but nothing happened. She wanted the fan to blow their faces away like the wind would blow the sand from the flagstones that surrounded the homestead of her childhood; stones, she remembered, that still held the rippled surface of an ancient seabed.

The news theme was starting when it suddenly dropped out with a burst of static. Vivi got up and fiddled with the dial. The Pitlochry station had disappeared, replaced by fits and starts of static. In the distance, she heard a rumble of thunder, and guessed the power had gone out in Pitlochry.

She left the dial tuned to the missing station and sat down again. The static came in bursts like flames hissing and crackling through rotted wood. It sounded like something alive. She could smell ozone. She had searched the shack each time she picked up the smell, checking cords and power points, sniffing around power outlets and the corners of rooms to locate the smell. But then she often picked it up when she was outside in the garden or when she was driving along the track on her way home from work.

There was a long moment of silence, only the whirr of the fan as it swivelled from side to side and the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece as the minutes passed. There was another rumble of thunder, a little closer this time. Vivi rose again and went to the window

over the sink, pulling back the curtain to check the sky. Huge cumulus clouds looming on the horizon, like weathered sea cliffs. Where the sun touched them, they were a blinding white, pure elemental whiteness – of snow and ice and salt.

There was a renewed burst of static from the radio. Vivi let the curtain fall and the bright shaft of light was extinguished. The static continued, becoming peals of violent crackling. It was beginning to spook her. She contemplated everything that lay between this shack and Pitlochry, this distance that the radio was translating. All that land and empty space in between: the exposed salt pans, the woodlands and the ruin Galway and Helen had fought about, the barren paddocks of listless cows and languid crows. Heat was rising up from the earth, in spirals, getting caught on the wavelengths like birds in a net. An eerie translation. The land was speaking.

Galway woke to the sound of the shack's front door being scraped open; someone was stepping in. Outside the night was moonless and he couldn't make out the outlines of his bed or the door. Only the window in front of him was visible with its different texture of darkness. The footsteps were in his hallway, erratic and clunking over the floorboards, interspersed with a rattling wheeze. Galway reached across to the night table and felt around for the base of the lamp. He switched it on and Tam was there, his grey hair awry around his hollowed face. He stood in thin flannelette pyjamas and large heavy boots that flopped untied around the bottom of his legs. Instinctively, Galway checked Tam's hands to make sure he wasn't carrying anything, like a gun. His own was under his pillow, just out of reach.

Galway didn't move as Tam came into the room. He reached for the window sill and lowered himself against it, his breathing heavy. His head was bent as he slowly regained his composure. Galway sat motionless, watching him, silent. The skin of Tam's face hung from his cheekbones and in deep loose bags from his eyes. The shape of his skull was clear in the lamplight, its ghastly grin showing through the brittle skin of his mouth.

Tam finally spoke, his words slow and laborious; 'Helen's not coming back.'

'Unna? Vivi tracked her down then?'

He shook his head, 'She's never coming back.'

'Well, I don't blame her. I'm glad she got away from this shithole.'

Tam dragged for air, once, twice. 'I killed her.'

Galway stared back at him, waiting for more while he inwardly repeated the words over and over. As they started to mean something the words collided with the uncanny grin of pain that twisted Tam's face. Suddenly, Galway felt unanchored, disoriented.

‘Who?’

Tam’s balance teetered and he gripped the sill tighter. He swallowed and it made a sickening sucking sound through his throat. His voice was hoarse; ‘Helen.’

Galway gripped the arms of his chair, ‘Helen ran away. Because of me.’

Tam shook his head, angry. ‘I killed her,’ he growled. It brought on a bout of harsh coughing. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and spat out blood and sputum that Galway could smell. Tam already smelled like a corpse rotting on the inside.

Galway watched on but in his mind he was scrambling furiously for the certainty that had suddenly fled from him. He had been so sure Helen had run away. If she had died he would have felt it, like he had felt Fae leaving his world. Tam pulled himself back up and leaned his body into the window frame.

‘She could get me so wild. But that day she spoke Eliina’s language...at me,’ his breathing went shallow and agitated by memories. ‘Helen knew how dangerous I was. Why did she have to torment me like that? Why couldn’t she just run away?’ He fell deep in thought, trying to think of how to say more, but then shook his head, defeated.

He pulled himself onto his feet, clutching at the window frame and shuffled a few steps towards the door. ‘I know you’ve been waiting. You’re always watching the road. Thinking one day she’ll come back.’ He waved vaguely in the direction of the Coorong, ‘She’s under the water. All tangled up. In a net. Fish her out someday.’

The silence roared in Galway’s ears so he could barely hear himself when he asked, ‘What did you do to her?’

Tam hung his head and said nothing.

‘What did you do?’

‘I drowned her. She was unconscious.’

‘You fuckin’ bash her first?’

‘I’ve been waiting for her too, in a way.’

Galway strained towards Tam's voice as it slowed and drawled, 'Any day now someone will find some piece of her, washing up on the reef. A bone. She'd be only bones now. She's been so quiet. The three of them. They've gone. They just left. Left me all alone.'

When Tam fell silent, Galway turned his head towards the old man and realised there was no one there. He was alone, sitting in the pool of lamplight, his face in the glass porous like smoke.

'Just had to be a bastard to the very end, unna?' Galway spoke into the space where Tam had stood, his voice tight and vicious, a barbed wire that gashed through his grief.

The following days stretched out till they were as thin and brittle as Galway himself. He went over and over the conversation with Tam; each day the impact of Tam's confession hit him harder and harder until everything was unbearable: the chair he sat in, the silence of the shack, the static in his head, the empty loneliness of the days. Several times he picked up the phone to ring the police but paused midway through dialling the number. The act brought him up against a wall inside him each time. He knew he had spoken to Tam that night but he wasn't so sure that Tam had come in flesh and blood. Vivi had told him some weeks earlier that Tam was bed-ridden, covered in bed sores and refusing all food and water. And further down in his mind, Galway sensed a strangeness within him. He was full of bereft hollows like those the wind scoured out in the dunes, where those he had loved had taken up residence inside him while they lived. Their presences had been so enmeshed with his own, minds got entangled like plants in a thicket and bodies collided or flowed like mixing tides, but only by feeling out the shape of their resounding absence could he discover whereabouts inside him they had dwelled.

Since the day she died, Galway had lived in the hollow where Fae had been. He had nestled down in the sand, sequestered within the sea fog of morphine, and lain perfectly still

while the nurses unwound the bandages. Skin and flesh fell away in chunks and strips and Galway feared he was disbanding and disappearing. The impression of Fae's body had held him and contained him till he healed back into a single piece.

Each night after Tam's visit, Galway struck out from Fae's hollow and searched the lunar dunes for the absence of Helen. He stepped outside and stood on the edge of the limestone, looking out at the black water and the sand hills that were blue with moonlight and darkness. The ocean was clear as a bell.

Helen. Katjeri. He strummed the first string between them. Waited for a responding shiver. The cold made the air feel thick like mud.

Helen. Look up at them stars. That path up there, I'm standing here at the end of it. So follow it back to me.

The night stayed constant and unchanged. Against the limestone the tufts of rigid dianella looked like thick hair gone stiff with salt and wind.

I'm sorry, Helen. I didn't mean none of them things I said to you, them last things you ever heard come out of my filthy mouth. I'm so sorry, my katjeri.

He waited and waited for a sign, either a bird or some feeling inside himself.

Maybe it's been too long. I should have realised something wasn't right. I should have looked for you years ago.

He scanned the darkness, thinking suddenly of a night-heron. If he saw a night-heron at this moment, he would know Helen had died. She loved those birds. That's where she would be on a night like this on the Coorong: among the night-herons. But there was only silence, dumb silence against the undefined voice of the sea.

Galway watched Vivi as she wandered away from the promontory, appearing oblivious to the scudding drizzle that swept across the limestone. She had come by to tell him Tam was dead and Helen was alive. On an island, near Antarctica. Galway couldn't get this news of

Helen to lodge inside him and stay there. He was troubled still about Tam. The old man had sincerely believed that he had killed her. How did Helen survive an attempt on her life and disappear from Lacedepe without leaving any sign of things amiss?

Vivi drifted past the woman standing under the gum tree, not acknowledging or even seeing her. The woman turned her head slowly to watch after Vivi as she walked on and disappeared beyond another finger of land jutting out into the water. The woman turned back to meet Galway's eyes across the bay. He slammed the door shut and retreated to his room, bracing his mind to fight the encroaching madness her presence always presaged.

Day after day he checked from the front door and she was there. Though he could rarely bring himself to step outside, he started to feel as though he was imprisoned in his shack. All he could focus on were the stains on the walls where rain had leaked through one winter and the thin chipboard had turned soggy and buckled. The more he noticed the walls, the more it made him sick to look at them. Then he became preoccupied with the old pong coming from his rusted fridge. There was little food inside and he left bowls of bicarbonate of soda on the shelves, like Vivi suggested to him once, but it made no difference. He noticed how the cigarette ash had come to cover everything in his shack like a layer of dust.

He looked out of the kitchen window one morning a week later and saw Vivi step outside, wearing a black woollen dress and thick black tights. She was off to Tam's funeral. It would be no more than a short graveside service, she had told him. He went to the front door and watched her get into the car and drive away, disappearing inland.

The woman was still there.

Galway stormed outside and shouted across the water to the paddock on the other side, gesticulating wildly with his arms, 'What the fuck you want from me? The cunt's kicked the fuckin' bucket. What you hangin' 'round for? Why can't you fuck off with him?'

The woman stayed still for a moment and then she turned and sat down on a log at the base of the tree, facing his shack again. After all these years on Lacedepe, gleaning

nothing of this woman except that she was Fae's mother, Helen's grandmother, Galway was suddenly struck by the impression of a stubborn nature. Her silence communicated rebuke.

Galway was determined not to succumb this time. When the smell of fire and his burning body started to seep through the buckled stained walls of his shack, he tore the rooms apart looking for Helen's cassette tape. He had seen it not that long ago, some small forgotten thing left behind. That music would shield him with its arctic timbre, its cold icy winds and pristine ocean birds. Within this music, he would find Helen. He would find the Linnutee. He would go into that distant dark air into which Helen had disappeared. He needed her eyes, to stand in her gaze. The gaze that had transformed him into a weather spirit, the cold smell of rain in his sea shell skin the harbinger of winter storms.

First, they felt the burning heat on the air against their bare skins. Then there was the acrid smell of smoke. Galway and Fae looked up and saw a drift of grey smoke marring the pale sky over the ruin. There was a sound in the distance: a deep vibrating roar that was nothing like the ocean. Fae rose to her feet and stood naked in the centre of the ruin, reading each bird that flew overhead: two pigeons with a shrill note of panic in their cries, a black crow sounding a nasal warning. The sky was dimming with more smoke as they dressed, growing darker and thicker by the second. Hard gusts of hot air were whipping through the ruin, sucking all the oxygen and energy towards the huge breathing being that was moving towards them. A burning leaf dropped in front of them. Then there were more of them, and burning bits of twigs and glowing red embers.

Galway fell through the doorway of the ruin and out and out into the forest of sheoak trunks, Fae's hand clenched hard in his own. The trees made an eerie breathy wail as the dry mass of needles swooshed and whipped in the strong wind, but the roar he could hear was coming from further away, he could feel it stirring in the ground. A long ribbon of flame slowly licked the smoky darkness amid the trees and then vanished. Another flame appeared, closer, twisting like a sheet of silk in the draught. A large kangaroo came bounding out of the darkness and Galway's heart was in his mouth. The animal flew past them and he spun to watch it disappear. When he looked back, through the trees he saw it. A roaring wall of fire.

They ran. Branches lashed at them and tore their clothes. The fire was breathing against their back and they ran harder. Pain was stinging across Galway's face where the saplings, long thin whips of wood, clawed at him. Flames were starting to appear in front of them, twining up the saplings and leggy growth like vines. Galway could barely see in the

black smoke except where flames suddenly licked at him, hunting him through the suffocating blackness. Tears were streamed from his smoke-stung eyes. His lungs felt like a charred piece of sponge. He realised he was no longer holding Fae's hand. He had let go of her without knowing when he lifted his arms to shield his face from the saplings. He stumbled around in the smoke, groping wildly at the black air and feeling nothing but burning spears of wood.

Fae! He shouted her name till he felt it ripping his chest open, barely hearing himself over the roar of the fire. He kept shouting for her, her name reducing to a harsh cry of panic and anguish. The black heat had intensified. He was burning. He stumbled into a run and felt something gash deep into the skin of his leg. His boot was filling with blood. Dazed, disoriented, he had lost all sense of where the fire was coming from, if he was running away from it or towards it. He coughed and struggled to breathe; his chest felt like it was being crushed. He stumbled about, dizzy and confused, the ground moving under his feet like a seesaw.

Out of the darkness another kangaroo rushed past him, so close he felt the fur brush against his arm. He staggered after it, running again, putting all his trust in this animal's instinct. Glowing embers were raining down around him and small spot fires were appearing in the grass at his feet. There were strange thudding sounds near him, like many feet running alongside him. In the smoke ahead he made out the shadows of kangaroos and emus, rabbits and foxes, all fleeing ahead of him. Blacker billows of smoke were moving past him, enveloping him in airless carbon darkness. Curling back. Taking him in its amorphous embrace.

It was the strangest thing, Helen. I was stumbling through the darkness, my hands out in front of me, groping through nothingness. There were no trees or bushes or nothing. It was God-forsaken, this emptiness, in the real sense of that word. I could hear the wall of fire

coming up behind me. The sound of it rolling through the air like a didge, only so much louder, and deeper. And then I felt them stones. A wall. I didn't know what it was. I sat down against it, on the other side from the fire. Someone told me later it was an old chimney stack – just a chimney stack in the middle of some old paddock. I sat in total blackness, suffocating to my death – there's no other blackness like it. I can't compare it to nothing – not moonlessness, not some deep cave or mine, not blindness. This was...this was evil.

I hunched down and tried to see around the stones and the fire was there. It was the strangest most beautiful thing I ever saw. Like liquid, fanning out over the ground, like a shallow flood. Orange, tinged with bright blue where it touched the ground. And yet all around me it felt so still, like it wasn't moving at all. It's the last thing I remember.

It comes for me in dreams – this liquid fire spilling out all over the ground.

Bojan heard the sound in his dream, a smooth guttural croak in the thick blanket of mist that sat on the still water. He woke, still hearing it. The egret's call evoked no corresponding human sentiment. It was not a beautiful voice, not plaintive or sweet or melodious. It was a stark and incomparable sound, entirely its own.

He got up and went outside to relieve himself. The morning was early and cold but the air had softened since the heatwave, marking late summer. Back inside, he watched as Helen slept. In the weak light her face was pale against her dark hair. Her bare arm lay across the space where he had been sleeping, her damaged hand curled on his pillow.

She had been with him in the dunes for over a week now, silent and withdrawn. She stayed down on the beach during the days and he would look up from a moment sorting the pipis to find that she was already far away, disappearing into the washed-out distance. Sometimes she slept through the long summer day in the granulated shade of the tent he had made from wood and hessian sacks which flapped and whipped in the wind. She kept to the very edge, standing for ages in the swash or walking just inside its rim where the sand was firm; she was always looking out to the ocean, as though she was searching for something in the distance. At night, he waited for her to fall asleep before he laid down next to her, his eye next to her feathered spine.

Helen drifted awake and saw the thin black chain woven through his fingers. Hide-Away opened his hand and the long thin skull lay across his palm. She looked up to meet his eyes and for the first time in weeks he saw lucidity in her countenance. She was present, finally, here with him in this humpy.

She sat up and held her hand out in a wordless demand for the necklace. He let the skull hang in mid-air from the chain and then placed it onto her palm. He sat back and waited.

Helen stared at it as she spoke. ‘She made this when she was a child. It was from an egret in the suursoo. Many years later she ran away from the mountain camp in Tasmania. When she got down to the wharf at Hobart, she went from boat to boat, asking each skipper if he would take her to the mainland. Each one refused – a foreign woman, both haunted and hunted, she was bad luck. Then there was a fisherman with a trawler who demanded payment. Eliina offered her body for the duration of the journey. He asked for the necklace as well – worthless, in monetary terms, but then, Tam was perverse like that.’

She looked up at him, ‘Or maybe not. Maybe Tam had already recognised Eliina for what she was. He knew something. As Vivi might say, they harboured the same dark chord.’

‘Will you come back to me?’

She raked her hair back as it fell across her face, ‘Come back from where?’

‘I don’t know where you’re going.’

Helen slipped the chain over her head, pulled her hair out from underneath, and then met his eyes again with a slight nod.

‘I will live in hope then,’ he said to her, ‘I will place my trust in the seasons.’ But his heart was a dark shell, like an overturned boat on the water.

Helen was wearing something on a chain around her neck. A small bird skull. Galway glanced at Helen's face, she was watching him. His silence was a refusal to ask about it. He waited in return, watching for a fleeting look over his room, but Helen didn't ask about her mother's remains.

There was an unfamiliar lightness to her. She was in shorts and a loose white blouse of thin cotton, with plaited leather bracelets on her wrists and thin-strapped sandals on her feet. It was in her face as well: less-lined, sun-kissed. And in this lightness Galway felt that Helen had become more distant.

'Vivi's going to Meningie later. Do you want to send for anything?'

'Nah.' Then he changed his mind, 'Cigarettes. And them red sausages, the thick ones.'

'Savloys?'

'Yeah, them ones. Got a hankering for 'em.' He reached over for his wallet on the bedside table and passed her some money.

'She'll object to the cigarettes.'

'Yeah. She's good like that.'

'She is.'

'Slow-motion suicide, she keeps tellin' me.'

Helen's face stayed lax while the innocence of his throwaway remark dissipated. She said nothing and Galway knew they had come to the end of this particular conversation.

Helen was restless. The waderbirds were simply waiting now for the right wind. She went down to the reef and watched them in the afternoon. The flocks billowed through the sky like an ocean wave, testing the air as though it was a taut string that stretched for hundreds of miles. Day after day the winds were wrong. One had been a gentle silken breeze but neither Helen nor the birds were deceived. It blew east and clashed violently with a wind off the Pacific, causing electrical storms up and down the eastern seaboard.

A massive flock was taking to the sky now, moving as a single entity. It flattened out into a sheet of birds and then one edge began to lift like a page being turned and the rest of the birds followed until the cloud was reformed. A ripple flowed through, and then another. The flock billowed out and then contracted, billowed out again. They were being thorough, though the days for leaving were running out.

Helen closed her eyes to the wind. This was the wind. There would be a front of cool air in their wake, the first breath of autumn. A bird had taken the lead and slowly the others fell behind in bottle-neck procession. Another flock was now rising to test the wind for itself. More birds would leave the next day. By nightfall tomorrow, the reefs and mudflats of the Coorong and the lakes would be bare grey expanses of wind and silence.

Vivi stumbled on a chord: it was the C sharp – a particular dissonance in the triad that was Chopin's harmonic signature – in that one chord which she missed every time her concentration so much as flickered. Her fingers just wouldn't get the message. She took the stave apart again, playing first the right hand, then the left hand, then played them together slowly, over and over, the left hand stronger than the right, till she could feel the difference

in the way her left hand moved, till it was a groove in her mind like a watercourse. She went back to the *sempre più mosso* and started again at concert tempo. She reached the troublesome bar and mangled the chord completely.

For fuck's sake, she snapped at herself. She looked away from the music to clear the glitch in her mind. The surface of the Coorong was ruffled and sparkling in the afternoon sun. Helen was standing on the reef some distance down the shoreline, too far away for Vivi to see her face. She was watching the sky where the waderbirds were flocking.

I feel scared, Helen, she had told her suddenly, at breakfast.

Helen had looked across to her, a little surprised. *Of what?*

Vivi shook her head, *I don't know, exactly*. She traced out the grain in the wood of the table and it came to her. *I'm afraid for this place. For the Coorong. And the lakes. For the animals. For Galway and his people.*

Helen had listened with her eyes fixed on Vivi's face.

When I see the kangaroos, starving and weak and dying, because of us, it hurts here. She held her curled fist against the base of her sternum. *It really hurts. Did you feel that way for the albatrosses?*

Yes. But the drought will break, Vivi.

But there'll be another one. It'll be as bad, if not worse. The people – the men – who need to learn from this, the ones who have to change, they're not learning anything.

Helen mused for a while and Vivi watched the doubts that creased her brow.

I'd like to be comforted by some philosophical outlook, Vivi broke in, wanting to release Helen from any obligation to give her some kind of answer, *but it's not enough.*

You look after what you can, Helen said finally. *And you share your table with the plants and the animals that surround you.*

Vivi turned back to the music on the ledge and started again from the tempo change with a slower beat. She tried to focus more on her left hand and ran out of fingers in her right. She sighed, gripping the edge of the stool with her hands and tensing her arms to

straighten out her back and shoulders. She should get going soon, a quick trip into Meningie for a few things. She looked to the window again. The reef was deserted.